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Rocky Is Back on Top

It’s been half a century since the Stallone movie. Better late than never.

By **Randy Maniloff**
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A Rocky Balboa sculpture outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art, June 16, 2025. MARCO GALVÃFÂEO/ZUMA PRESS

The city of Philadelphia has permanently installed an 8½-foot bronze sculpture of Rocky Balboa outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is about time.

This is an underdog story worthy of Rocky, the boxer portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in the film franchise. The sculpture first appeared in 1982’s “Rocky III,” when the character was world heavyweight champion. Philadelphia paid tribute to its fictional hometown pugilist by placing his image at the top of the 72 steps that he ran up in a memorable scene from the inaugural film in 1976.

Mr. Stallone gave the bronze, by the sculptor A. Thomas Schomberg, to the city. It remained at the museum for a short period. But the museum and the Philadelphia Art Commission wanted Rocky gone. They feared that having a former movie prop close to the museum could damage its reputation. Rocky was exiled to South Philadelphia and installed outside the Spectrum arena, where the 76ers and Flyers played until the 1990s.

In 2006 Rocky returned to the art museum as part of a mayoral effort to revitalize public spaces, but in a much less prominent perch—at the foot of the steps.

Even installing it near the museum proved controversial. Two members of the city’s art commission voted against it. One said it was “not a work of art,” another that it didn’t “raise the standards of the city.”

Mr. Stallone spoke at the 2006 ceremony on the museum steps to commemorate the statue’s return. “All you want is a slice of the American dream,” he said. “That’s what Rocky was about.” He said the sculpture wasn’t about him. “It’s about you,” he told the crowd. “Because inside of every one of you, there’s a real Rocky.” Rocky was back, albeit at the kids’ table.

In 2024 an identical Rocky statue, owned by Mr. Stallone—also made by Mr. Schomberg—was placed at the top of the museum steps as part of RockyFest, a weeklong celebration of the franchise.

This year, city officials approved the famous location as the original sculpture’s permanent home. “This location on the Rocky steps is inseparable from the story of the statue,” Philadelphia’s chief cultural officer and public art director wrote in a letter. They described their decision as “an opportunity to lean in to the evolving conversation about what is considered ‘art.’ ”

About four million people annually visit the Rocky statue. If they are looking for inspiration, they have come to the right place.

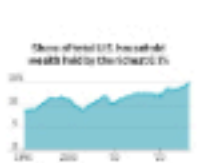
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