

The Vietnam War Memorial: How Maya Lin Revolutionized Memorial Design

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Group Website

Senior Division

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Choosing our Topic

When we heard that the 2023 theme was “Frontiers,” we dove into the stories of people who are less known and whose identities we could relate to. One of the first topics we considered was the ancient Chinese pirate Zheng Shi, but in doing preliminary research, we realized that her life was scarcely documented and possibly inaccurate as much of it relied on legend. While searching for a person closer to the present day for more accurate information, we discovered Maya Lin. Living in New Haven, we were familiar with her design of the Women’s Table at Yale, and further research led to the story of the Vietnam War Memorial design. She fit perfectly into the theme—she broadened the frontier for women and Asian Americans in the field of design while redefining what makes a memorial powerful.

Our Research

To begin our research, we looked at Maya Lin’s website, as well as articles about her and the Vietnam War memorial. We found many reliable sources online documenting Lin’s early design and her more current pieces. Her 2000 *Academy of Achievement* interview, a primary source, not only provided us with her personal perspective, but gave us a chance to present it on our website. These online sources also contained lots of great photos to include on our website. We visited our local public library and found Lin’s own book and a historical volume on the Memorial. We also dove into newspaper archives and magazine articles. As we researched, we collected sources that focused on the evolution of memorial design, the Vietnam War Memorial, and Lin’s significance. It was important that we also witnessed the memorial itself in order to understand its impact firsthand.

Creating our Project

We opted for the website format to include the many photos of Maya Lin's art and architecture while also having a less restrictive word limit. We began by familiarizing ourselves with how to use the website system and then separated our research into categories to correspond to the pages on our website. As we researched and added to our website, we edited sections so they were more understandable and compiled quotes and images to visually and verbally introduce a variety of perspectives. As we approached the subsequent competitions, we incorporated the judges' suggestions and rearranged our material accordingly.

Historical Argument and Significance

While we had a basic understanding of Lin's story when we began, the more we researched and narrowed in on the Vietnam War Memorial, the more we understood the significance of her vision and recognition. Frontiers are about breaking boundaries, which is exactly what Lin did—not only as a female and Asian American designer, but also with her revolutionary ideas on the purpose of memorials themselves. The diversified design world we see today, the pensive, unfrilled memorials that move us—these are marks of Maya Lin's legacy, and these are traces of the frontiers she broke into and the result of the frontiers she established.