

Close Read

Separated yet Together:
A Roxbury Love Story

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Roxbury Love Story is a mural painted by street artist Rob Gibbs in 2020.

It depicts Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife Coretta Scott King calling one another.



Rob “ProblaK” Gibbs is a Roxbury native and has been creating his artworks since 1991.

Gibbs finds power in the art of graffiti. He finds purpose in highlighting Boston's black and brown communities, and its historical figures.



Located at 431 Melnea Cass Blvd. in Roxbury, Gibbs' art draws inspiration from the Kings' relationship and their connection to Roxbury.



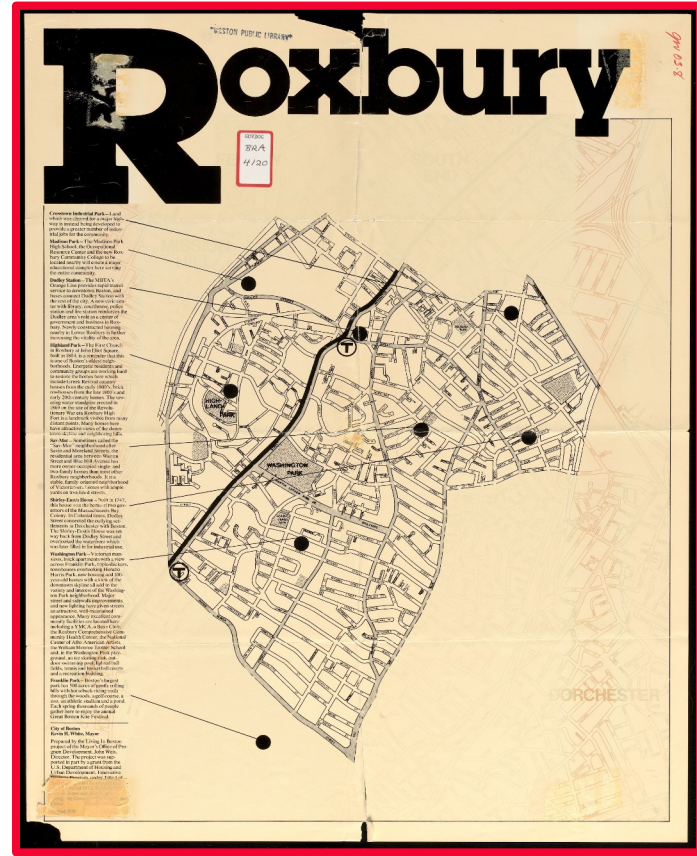
Gibbs chose this spot for a reason.

The artwork stands above the former Twelfth Baptist Church where MLK served as an assistant minister.



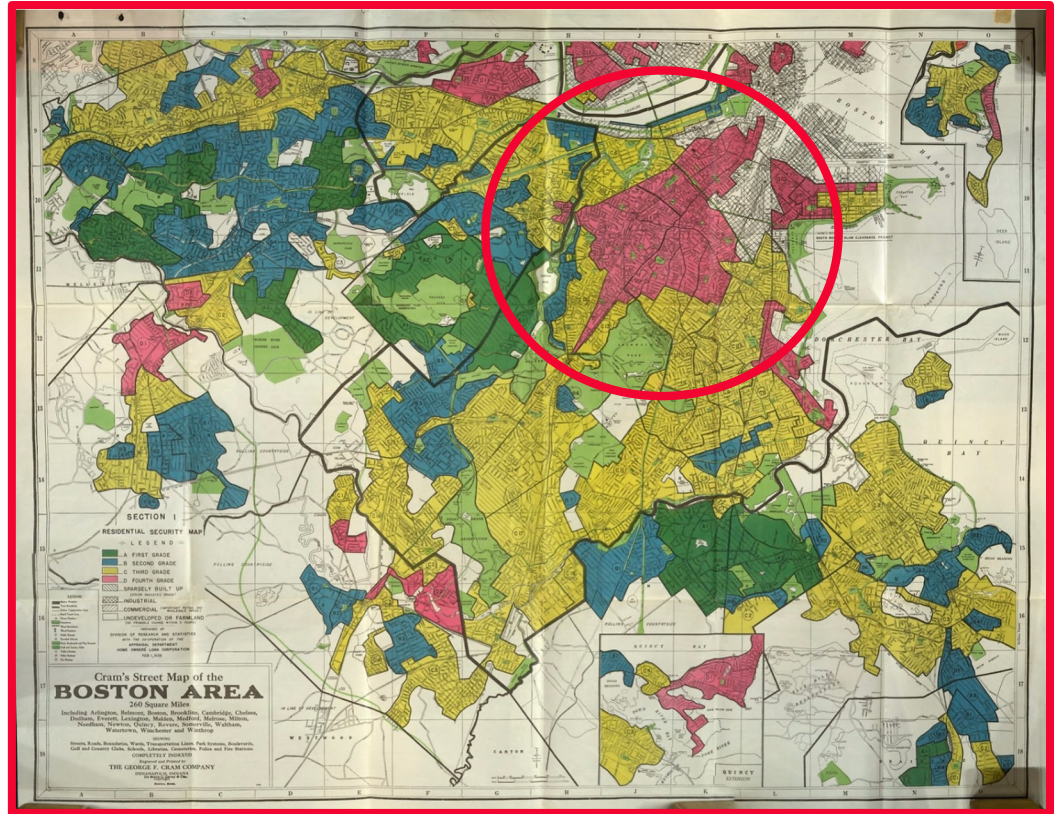
Let's look at Roxbury's history.

It was incorporated in 1630 and, today, the neighborhood stands as one of Massachusetts' oldest communities.



The community's history with redlining (the disproportionate distribution of resources due to an individual's race or ethnicity) runs deep.

As of 2020, over 40% of the community identifies as Black or African American and 54% of housing is income-restricted.



MLK and other community members noticed the lack of resources given to the neighborhood.

As these disparities grew, MLK's desire for change intensified.



It's only suitable to erect a monument that showcases Roxbury's history—especially when the two figures shown represent the neighborhood's true culture.

Just like MLK and Coretta, the people of Roxbury know when to stand up for themselves.



Now let's look at the people who fought for these justices.

What is their story?



Their history was one of chance, hardship, and love.

MLK was introduced to Coretta through a mutual friend near the Twelfth Baptist Church.

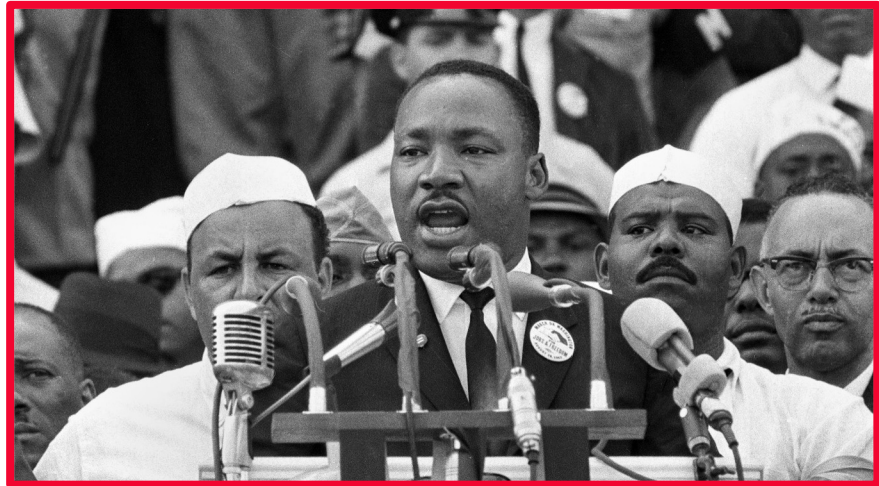
He was studying at Boston University and she was pursuing music and education at the New England Conservatory of Music.



One year later, they married, marking the beginning of a relationship not only between themselves, but to civil service and American equality.

MLK became the forefront of the civil rights movement, enrapturing crowds with his mastery of rhetoric.

Coretta expressed the same sentiments and even incorporated music into her cause.



Since the eyes naturally read left to right, starting with an analysis of MLK will be most appropriate.



MLK's recognizable profile stands out.

At a glance, he appears to be calling Coretta, who is likely miles away.

Even though he's ensconced in civil work, he finds time for her. This shows how the Kings' love had no true distance.



Looking closer, the viewer can note that MLK is in the middle of speaking.

This iconography implies his restless nature; he rarely relaxed between his battles.

Either traversing the country or tirelessly talking, he was never still and never let his cause become idle.



Take his lips for example.

They're in the middle of an utterance. Like he's giving one of his famous speeches.

The words he spoke were not only thoughts, but projections of himself and his views.



Gibbs exemplified how MLK never laid back in his fight, and how he never looked back.

The expectancy in his eyes shows this quality best.



The eyes look onward,
symbolizing his vision for a
brighter future and better world
for everybody.

The countenance of his gaze
conveys aspiration and desire;
it's not the stare of one man, but
the stare of an entire people.



MLK always knew how to present himself for people to truly understand his messages.

When advocating for justice, he proclaimed his urgency and determination.



The firmness of his grip demonstrates these qualities.

Thick, rigid lines and dark shadowing create a foreshortening effect that amplifies his grip and brings him to life.

These techniques symbolize his inability to loosen the grip his mind had on equality and justice.



MLK refused to back down.

And it was impossible for him to be deaf to the injustices that shouted at him.



The artwork perfectly represents who MLK was.

He stood in front of millions and made them dream (just as he did) of fairness, equality, and hope.

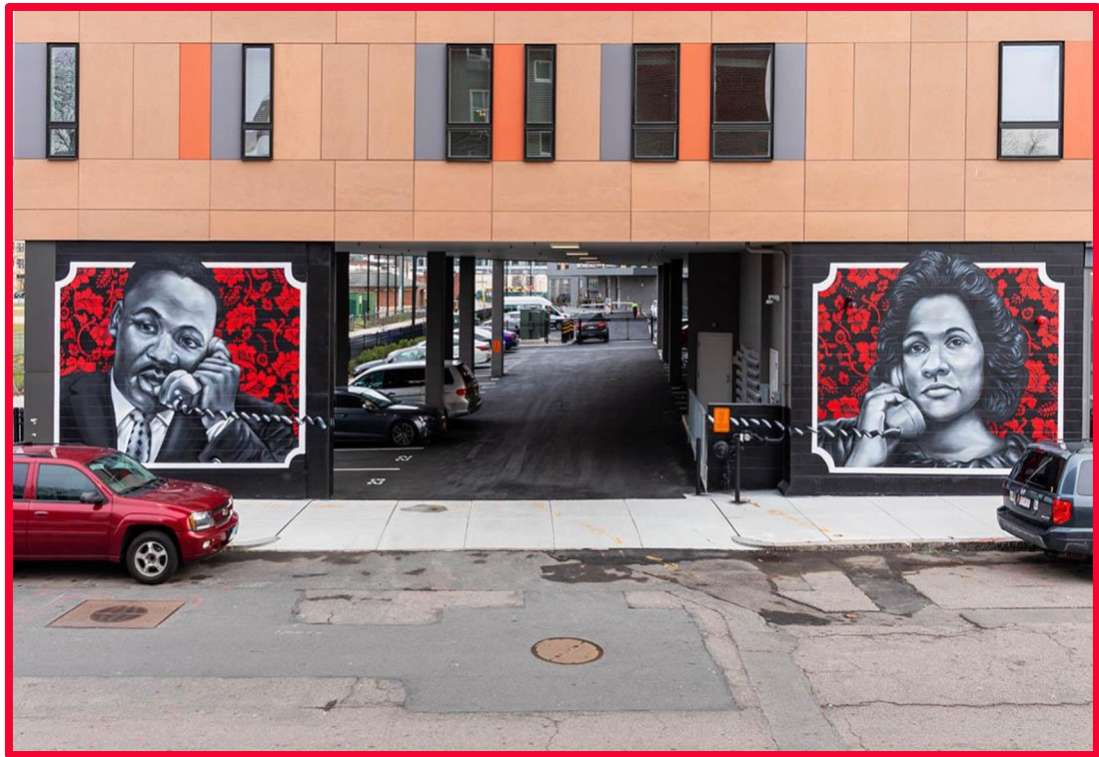
Not only does this artwork provide a glimpse into MLK as a person, but it also spreads his message for future generations to see.



Though MLK may be gone, his ideas are as alive as ever.



Now on the other side of the mural, a figure shows just as much vigor and heart.



Coretta Scott King was more than a partner in social justice.

She was an ardent advocate for disenfranchised voices. Her story continued long after her husband's passing.



Tasked with not only preserving but continuing Dr. King's legacy in the fight for civil rights, Coretta performed this with excellence until her death in 2006.



Her face alone encapsulates the extraordinary power and impact she had on American society.

A surface-level, peaceful, yet sure expression serves as a testament to how serious she was about advocating for social equality.



Corretta saw everything around her: justice, injustices, and constant battles.

Her gaze is unfocused; she appears to be looking away and, symbolically, at something else...

Perhaps the future.



Corretta's contemplative gaze looked out for *everybody*, not only African Americans.

This included marginalized groups like women, other people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Her gaze signifies her vision of a world where every person is equal.



Coretta knew exactly how to reach those in need.

Despite the stigmas, she used her matriarchal role for the expression of greater virtues.

With *her* position, she could reach more voices—ones that couldn't be provoked by men alone.



This is shown through the phone.



Note her grip is looser than MLK's. Soft lines paint the curvature of her fingers as they rest lightly on the phone.

These curves seemingly reflect Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii*.



Elements of Rococo art, like soft curves in the subjects, signify feminine weakness and the gentle nature society expected from women.

Coretta's curvatures illustrate this exact stigma.



Coretta's focus was divided between her family, passions, and relationship.

Thus, she was unable to fully involve herself in the fight for equality.

Coretta was often overlooked due to these characteristics.



But contrary to society's beliefs, Coretta's many roles did not put her at a disadvantage.

Instead, they gave her the ability to connect with disenfranchised people.



Coretta Scott King made monumental impacts on par with her husband.

Up until her death, she never faltered in the fight for equality and constructed a platform of justice that millions still fight for today.



The most glaring aspect of the art's composition though, is the area with no artwork at all.



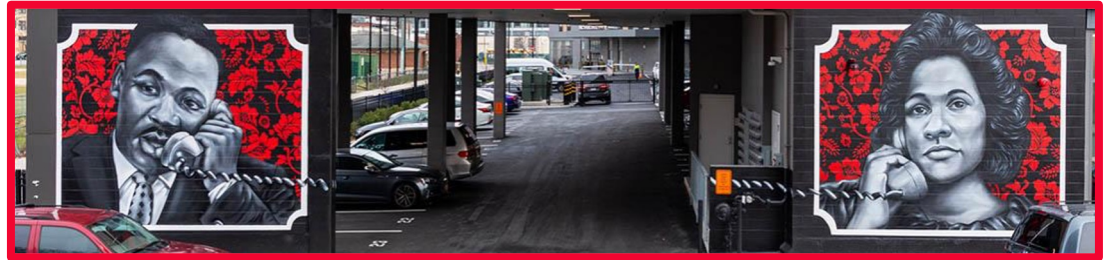
The physical division is symbolic of the physical distance between the couple during their marriage.



Oftentimes MLK went away to promote their cause.

Although physically disconnected, the phone cord creates an illusion, appearing to be continuous through an invisible line.

This continuation represents their loyalty and willingness to sacrifice.



It's not only the faces or the
division that capture attention.

The art's colors grab the eyes.

They leave the viewer pondering
its hidden meaning.



Take the background.

The bright red starkly contrasts with the black and white figures.

Just like the colors juxtapose one another, MLK and Coretta lived in a juxtaposed society.



In *their* America, society preached equality, but failed miserably at achieving it.

This anger at such hypocrisy is expressed through the fervent, blood-like red.



What the colors make up is even more significant.

Different flowers trace the background. The most observed are daffodils and periwinkle.

Associated with cultural practices used by African Americans around the Civil War, the flowers lined the graves of enslaved individuals.



Today, the flowers signify the endurance and legacy of enslaved Americans.

The flowers also symbolize the individuals, living and dead, who supported the Kings' efforts for racial equality.



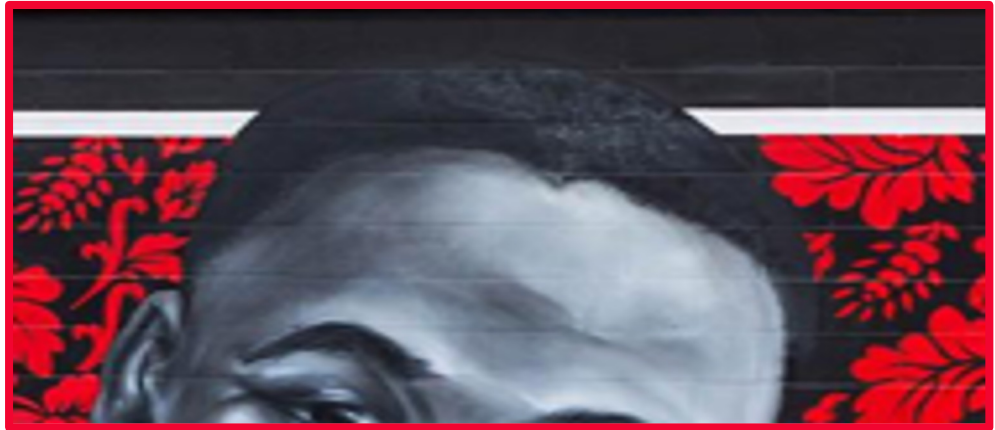
It's also important to note the line separating the Kings and the colors from the darkness outside.

A sharp white border attempts to entrap both of them, however, they escape beyond it.



The subjects seem to break out of the mural, cross its border and step into reality.

Gibbs' techniques create a perspective that reflects the Trompe-l'œil effect.



And just like the sharp laws
forced onto African American
communities by white,
authoritative figures, the
entrapments ultimately failed.



Escaping over the white border
pays homage to the Kings'
efforts and signifies their
victories in the civil rights
movement.



Overall, this artwork is a pillar of the community. It honors the memory of two individuals who not only called Roxbury their home, but fought for it as well.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King belong here, and it's only right to serve them that honor.

Just as they served us in their time.



Images: City of Boston, via Twitter; Morgan Rousseau, Boston.com; Historic New England, 12th Baptist Church Description, Boston Office Program of Development, via Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center; Roxbury Crossing Historical Trust; Camille Ofulue, Boston Political Review; John Blake, CNN; Amy Tikkanen, Encyclopedia Britannica; Wikipedia; Maddy Roberts, Classic FM; Georgia Slater, People; Ryan Sit, Newsweek; Speakola; Margo Gabriel, Boston Art Review

