A ‘Venus’ with a Dramatic Back Story Rises Again, in Connecticut

The 445-year-old marble has journeyed far, lost fingers and been buried. Now, with help from TEFAF, the goddess of love has been restored to glory.

By Ted Loos
Reporting from Hartford, Conn.

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It was two weeks before Valentine’s Day, and divine intervention seemed to be made literal for a moment: Venus herself slowly descended from above, flanked as always by her two adoring attendants. She was temporarily enshrouded in protective padding, adding a layer of mystery.

The Roman goddess of love and her companions, all 6,000 pounds of them, had been sculpted in marble by the French Flemish artist Pietro Francavilla in 1579.

The lowering into place of the work, titled “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, came courtesy of a chain pull attached to a huge gantry. The platform was surrounded by a dozen people who were eager to get the sculpture’s placement right.

“That’s pretty good,” said the Wadsworth’s director, Matthew Hargraves, when the sculpture looked to be well situated on its base atop a basin that will soon be filled with water once again. “Venus” was originally created as a fountain, with water spouting out of the carved dolphins below the nymph and satyr.
The work had not been operational as a fountain since 2010. In addition to plumbing repairs, it needed a cleaning and other fixes, which it recently received, in part because of 25,000 euros (around $26,983) from the TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund, donated by the European Fine Art Foundation.

“It’s a riveting object, so we were thrilled,” Mr. Hargraves said of the grant.
The New York dealer Rachel Kaminsky, who specializes in old masters and 19th-century work, said that “Venus” was “an important piece of Mannerist sculpture, of which there’s very little in America.”

Ms. Kaminsky was a founder of TEFAF’s museum fund in 2012 and was part of the selection committee that awarded the Wadsworth grant. (The other grant this round went to the National Gallery of Ireland to restore a painting, Ludovico Mazzolino’s 1521 “The Crossing of the Red Sea.”)

Mannerism, which hit its high point in the 16th century, prized stylish artificiality over realism, and its figures tended to have exaggerated proportions, seen in Venus’s elongated neck, arms and legs.

“It’s colossal and impressive and beautiful,” Ms. Kaminsky said. “It ticks every box. It’s in a prominent place in the museum where a lot of people get to see it.”

She added, “I love the back story.”
Matthew Hargraves, the Wadsworth Atheneum’s director, inspects the bottom of the sculpture. The conservators hoped to get an impression of it before the statue was replaced. Jillian Freyer for The New York Times

The details of the back story abound, including the fact that the sculpture was believed to have been buried in the ground not once but twice, for reasons that are not clear. Eventually, it took a journey from Italy to the royal collections of England to Harvard, finally ending up at the Wadsworth.

The main figure lost some fingers and toes along the way, as well as her nose, but as Mr. Hargraves put it, “Venus is surprisingly intact, considering the life she's had.”
Francavilla was commissioned in 1574 to make the piece as part of a group of 13 sculptures, for Abbot Antonio Bracci of Florence, Italy, for his gardens at his villa at Rovezzano. “Venus” was inscribed with the date 1600, possibly indicating the completion date of the series, Mr. Hargraves said.

“Venus” was sold to Frederick, Prince of Wales, in the 18th century. It was then moved around to different locations and mysteriously interred. In the 1850s, Mr. Hargraves said, the statue was unearthed and, at the behest of Prince Albert, sent to the sculptor and engineer Thomas Thornycroft for restoration.

The head of the satyr had been vandalized, so Mr. Thornycroft replaced it, and made other, additional repairs. The work was re-plumbed as a fountain and displayed at the Royal Horticultural Society in London. But when the society went bankrupt, “Venus” was believed to have been buried yet again.

“Sometimes it’s easier to bury a sculpture than to dispose of it,” Mr. Hargraves speculated, noting that this part of the timeline is hazy. “It might have been to protect it.”

Regardless, in 1919, “up it pops again,” he added.

“Venus” ended up in the hands of a London art dealer, who hoped to sell it to the Fogg Museum at Harvard. It was shown there, but the female figure’s lack of clothing was deemed too spicy for the museum at the time, and in 1933 it was finally purchased by the Wadsworth’s director, A. Everett Austin Jr.
Conservators prepare materials to make an impression of the bottom of the statue.
Jillian Freyer for The New York Times

The Wadsworth, founded in 1842, is the country’s oldest continuously operating art museum. Mr. Austin’s ambitious tenure there included the construction of the International-style Avery Memorial building, with the Avery Court as its
centerpiece, opening in 1934. “Venus” anchored the court and was placed facing an entry.

Time took its toll on the sculpture. Some of the previous repairs did not wear well, and coal heating left a smoky film on the work. A $33 million overhaul of the Wadsworth, completed in 2015 — which replaced roofs on its five connected buildings and made other major repairs — did not address the state of “Venus.”

By the time Mr. Hargraves arrived in 2021, initially as interim chief curator, “it looked sad and unloved,” he said. “You only saw the problems. We wanted to restore the visual coherence, without disguising the fact that it had a tough life.”
“Venus with a Nymph and Satyr,” after being replaced on her pedestal. The basin beneath her will soon be filled with water once again. Jillian Freyer for The New York Times

That’s why the reinstall was “a great big day” in the opinion of Cecil Adams, who started working at the Wadsworth in 1979 and is now director of facilities and capital projects.
He is the only staff member who was around the last time the sculpture was picked up, in 1986, when it was reoriented to face the opposite direction, so that visitors would see it when entering from a connecting building.

“There is something really nice when the fountain is running and you hear the sound,” Mr. Adams said about a change he was most looking forward to. “It’s a subtle detail that’s so important to the experience.”

Mr. Hargraves noted that when the fountain stopped working in 2010, “It was emblematic of the things that weren’t working at the museum.”

Two independent conservators, Michael Morris and Sarah Nunberg, had been working on the sculpture and were on hand for the big day. When the sculpture was off its base, they had attended to various problems and “retoned” the work with easily removable watercolor, to even out its appearance.

That morning, they had the idea to get a physical impression of the bottom of the sculpture before it was replaced, since decades or centuries could pass before it is seen again. But it proved to be tricky.

“Does anybody have Saran Wrap?” Mr. Morris asked the assembled staff members at one point. A forklift operator raised a bed of epoxy covered by plastic wrap to meet the bottom of the sculpture, hoping to create a clean impression. It didn’t work, so they tried the same move with plaster. No dice. “It was worth a shot,” Mr. Hargraves said.

At one point, Ms. Nunberg was trying to arrange the mold underneath the 6,000-pound piece and reminded the forklift operator to pause. “My fingers are still in there,” she said. In the end, Ms. Nunberg’s digits fared better than Venus’s once did, remaining attached and unharmed.

Mr. Hargraves said that a “working object” like a fountain sculpture sometimes got short shrift from the public. “People think it’s purely decorative, and they’ve tended to walk right past it,” he said.
Once the work was back in place, the covering was removed, and Venus was again seen looking off to the side. She did not seem likely to be ignored — not that it would faze her. As it has for 445 years, her expression remained perfectly serene.

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