The sculpture “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” by Pietro Francavilla has been restored back to a working fountain in Avery Court at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford on Monday, May 6, 2024. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)
The hushed voices of visitors to Avery Court at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford now have a new backdrop: the playful, splashing of water.

The fountain at the foot of the Italian Renaissance sculpture “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” — the colossal centerpiece of Avery Court since the 1930s — is now flowing again after a dry spell of nearly two decades.

A complete overhaul of the fountain’s plumbing system was part of a top-to-bottom refurbishing that started simply enough with a plan for a thorough cleaning of the 445-year old marble statue, the Roman goddess Venus its central figure.

But 15 months later, water spouts from the snouts of dolphins at the foot of the sculpture, and the Wadsworth is still in the midst of a deep dive into the dramatic — and sometimes startling — back story of a statue carved in 1579 in Florence by renowned Franco-Flemish sculptor Pietro Francavilla.

When the sculpture first arrived in Hartford in 1934, it had journeyed more than 5,000 miles over the centuries, spanning two continents. In its history, Venus — flanked by a mischievous satyr and a joyful nymph — was sought after by European royalty.

But the marble goddess of love and her companions also suffered the indignities of vandalism and were discarded by being buried not just once but quite possibly twice.
In recent years, the Wadsworth wondered, too, whether “Venus” was even being noticed by visitors passing by the sculpture.

Water streams out of the two dolphin figures on the 1579 fountain sculpture “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford on Monday, May 6, 2024. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

“It’s not just set dressing for the museum,” Jeffrey N. Brown, the Wadsworth’s chief executive, said. “It’s a very significant work of art. I think it being in place for 90 years, people just walked by it, and we’re trying to draw some attention back to it.”

The water, turned on a month ago, seems to be having the desired effect.

“We’ve all been noticing the difference,” Cecil Adams, the museum’s director of facilities, said. “You see people sitting, just listening to it.”

‘Ticks a lot of boxes’

The refurbishing project also has drawn the attention of art circles far beyond Hartford.

The Wadsworth’s project was awarded a $27,000 grant from the TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund. The fund, established in 2012, supports restoration and research around significant museum artworks. This year, the Wadsworth was one of two museums to win a competitive grant. The other went to the National Gallery of Ireland for the restoration of Ludovico Mazzolino’s “The Crossing of the Red Sea” from 1521.
The sculpture "Venus with a Nymph and Satyr" was first brought to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in 1934. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

Rachel Kaminsky, a New York art dealer who specializes in old masters and 19th-century work, was a founder of the museum fund and was on the selection committee that chose the Wadsworth project.
Kaminsky said "Venus" is a striking example of the Mannerist style of which there are few examples in the United States. In sculpture, Mannerism, which reached its zenith in the 16th century, tends to exaggerate the human form for dramatic effect. In “Venus”, the style is particularly evident in the elongated neck, arms and legs of the goddess.

“The projects ticks a lot of boxes for us,” Kaminsky said. “We thought it was a great artwork, something that would really look wonderful once it was conserved and have a major impact on the museum and on the museum’s audience.”

The museum wouldn’t say how much the refurbishing project cost, but it ran into the “hundreds of thousands” of dollars, Brown said. In addition to the grant, the project was largely paid for by two benefactors and longtime patrons of the museum, Mary P. Gibbons and Emilie de Brigard. Gibbons is a former museum trustee, and de Brigard is a current trustee and is vice president of the Amistad Center for Art and Culture at the Wadsworth.

On Sunday, the Wadsworth’s director, Matthew Hargraves, will be discussing the project at a TEFAF exhibition in New York. Hargraves oversaw the project and the background research, which could eventually be turned into a book.
The sculpture "Venus with a Nymph and Satyr" is perched on a pedestal surrounded by a pool in Avery Court at the Wadsworth Museum of Art in Hartford. Coins are visible in the pool. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

"I thought the back story was great," Kaminsky said. "There's no question that the work has a really interesting provenance."

‘Battle scars of 400 years’

"Venus with a Nymph and Satyr" was commissioned in 1575 in the twilight of the Italian Renaissance.
“Venus” is believed to have been completed in 1579 but is mysteriously stamped with a date of 1600, perhaps signifying when all the figures were finished.

Right from the beginning, the sculptures drew the admiration of society’s wealthy upper-crust, first in France and then in England. Attempts to purchase the sculptures from Bracci’s heirs were unsuccessful until the middle of the 18th century when Frederick, Prince of Wales, sealed a deal.

Frederick died before the sculptures arrived in England, and his widow wasn’t particularly fond of them. They sat in crates for years in a garden shed and were later moved around a bit but fell into obscurity.

In 1826, “Venus” and eight of the sculptures reappeared in a park near Windsor Castle to dress up Roman ruins relocated from northern Africa. This is where “Venus” and its companion sculptures were vandalized by the visiting public.

An illustration based on research by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art shows how the existing “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” differs from the original vision for the sculpture by Pietro Francavilla.

Venus lost her original toes, some fingers and most likely, her nose. The nymph’s right leg, which once swung over to the left, was broken off. And the satyr suffered worst of all: he lost his entire head and genitals.

The sculpture became so decrepit that in the 1830s King William IV ordered that it be discarded along with two others. The trio were buried in a park near the castle.

A little over a decade later, a woodsman discovered a half-buried “Venus.” Queen Victoria’s
These dramatic changes raised a thorny, philosophical question during the Wadsworth's recent project: how far should conservation go?

“It’s had a hard life,” the Wadsworth's Brown said. “We certainly wanted to improve its presentation and make it more reflective of what it originally was. But you also wanted it to wear the battle scars of the last 400 years.”

The head of the satyr was replaced on the sculpture “Venus with a Nymph and Satyr” in the 1850s after the sculpture was vandalized while on display in a public park near Windsor Castle in England. A fine line can still be seen where the repair was made. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)
Nod to past and future

After the sculpture's restoration in the 1850s, it was displayed for two decades at a botanical garden in London before it went bankrupt. Then, the timeline starts to get fuzzy because there is no mention of the sculpture for 30 years, until 1919 when it comes up for sale by a London art dealer.

"Venus" had allegedly been unearthed in South London.

The art dealer had hoped to sell the sculpture to a museum at Harvard and had actually shipped it across the Atlantic on approval. But the museum deemed it too erotic, though it remained at Harvard until 1933, relegated to a lower-level corridor near the men's lavatories.

But to the south, in Hartford, Arthur Everett "Chick" Austin Jr., the now-legendary former director of the Wadsworth, saw a place that would honor "Venus" in the recently completed Avery Memorial wing, with Avery Court at its center.
“Venus with a Nymph and Satyr,” a Renaissance sculpture, is secured before being lowered back on a pedestal in Avery Court at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. A refurbishing that included starting up a fountain that was dry for two decades was completed earlier this year. (Courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

Avery Memorial was the first expansion of a museum in the United States with an interior rendered in the International style, with its straight lines and lack of ornamentation. The expansion provided a stark contrast to the Wadsworth’s Gothic Revival facade facing downtown Hartford's Main Street and inspired modern museum design.
Austin saw the opportunity to push boundaries again, combining the centuries-old sculpture as the focal point of the new wing with its modern surroundings, a nod to both past and the future.

“One difficult discovery after another”

The intervening decades had taken a toll, however, and became even more apparent when the 6,000-pound sculpture recently was lifted off its pedestal. In addition to a smoky film, there was evidence of where chips in the sculpture had been filled. In the project, that damage was again repaired, this time filled using coloring that better matched the original marble.

One of the nymph’s missing fingers also was replaced, Brown said.

Restarting the fountain presented perhaps the biggest challenge for the project. What began with removing the snouts of the dolphins soon led to the realization that problems were deeper than could be solved without using a crane and scaffold to remove the sculpture.

“It’s a 90-year old building so there was one difficult discovery after another,” Adams, the museum’s facilities director, said. “We really replaced all the plumbing and all the pumps and the recirculating system.”
The copper pipe from which water will flow out of the "Venus with a Nymph and Satyr" sculpture is threaded through an opening at the foot of the 1579 sculpture at the Wadsworth Atheneum of Art in Hartford earlier this year. (Photo courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

Before the water could flow again, there were tricky water pressure adjustments. Too slow and the water would build up around the sculpture. Too fast and water would splash forcefully into the pool and onto the marble floor around it, causing a potential slipping hazard.

“There are six different outlets for water, “ Adams said. “Two out of each nostril of the dolphins and one out of each mouth. Each of those six can be individually controlled so it makes it interesting.”
Already, there is plenty of evidence in Avery Court of the age-old tradition of tossing coins into fountains. Hundreds of coins have sunk to the bottom of the pool.

For the most part, the practice is harmless as long as those tossing aren't aiming for Venus, Brown said. But Brown said there is a concern if tokens other than coins find their way into the pool.

"It can cause actual damage," Brown said. "We had to pull some pieces out last week that were not real money. They were game tokens and they rusted and they were staining the pool. They can cause damage to the pipes. So that's something we have to keep an eye on."

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