

ART *of the* MOVE

After 80 years, sculpture emerges from WAM basement for restoration, display

By Nancy Sheehan
 Correspondent

RWORCESTER recently, the staff at Worcester Art Museum faced a dilemma: How do you move a rhinoceros?

The move needed to be done slowly and safely so the huge 1,500-pound marble statue — about the same weight as an adult rhinoceros — would not be damaged as it was wheeled and hoisted out of storage in the museum basement to the third-floor Jeppson Idea Lab, where a restoration project is set to begin.

The statue, “Shipwrecked Mother and Child” by Edward Augustus Brackett, was relegated to the basement about 80 years ago for unknown reasons. The sculpture, of Vermont marble, is dirty and stained and missing some parts. The cleaning and the replacement of those parts is expected to take 12 to 18 months, after which the sculpture will go on permanent view in the museum.

The statue of a drowned, or perhaps merely exhausted, woman and a baby is being roused from its resting place in the basement thanks to a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. The multiyear grant supports precontemporary American artworks that have been languishing in storage or needed conservation before they could be put on display.

The first of what will eventually be three grant-funded

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projects was the restoration of a pair of windows by stained-glass masters Louis C. Tiffany and John La Farge, which was completed last year. An exhibition of the windows is on view at the museum through Dec. 1. “Shipwrecked Mother and Child” is the grant’s second project.

“This sculpture has been in storage since the 1930s and has been in dire need of treatment,” Erin Corrales-Diaz, WAM’s assistant curator of American art said in an interview Monday as the delicate move of the heavy piece was just getting underway. “She’s quite dirty and she’s missing some fingers and toes.”

But the weight of the statue and the logistics of moving it were too much for the museum’s staff and budget to handle over the decades, she said, so the statue lay on the wooden pallet in the basement that’s been its hideaway home for some 80 years. “It was really through the generosity of the Luce Foundation that we finally have the means to undertake such an extensive move and treatment of this work of art,” she said.

Crews with the special skills required to safely move large museum-quality objects had to be called in for the job. They crated up the sculpture and pushed it through the corridors of the basement on a wheeled platform made just for the occasion. Then, the near-ton sculpture needed to make it over a bridge that had

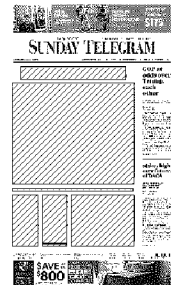
been specially constructed so the sculpture could safely cross a sunken mechanical room.

The most concerning obstacle was an HVAC vent that allowed just about a quarter-inch clearance as the sculpture was pushed along the bridge. There were some tense moments as the crew measured and remeasured the space before removing the platform’s wheels and easing the crate under the HVAC vent by sliding along it over wide strips of smoothly polished sheet metal. There were smiles and celebratory handshakes when that harrowing phase of the operation was completed.

But does any move ever go without a single glitch? It turned out an unexpected obstacle awaited.

The statue’s original route down into the basement likely was an easier one that has since been closed off by a series of additions to the building, said Gareth Salway, director of museum services. To get it back upstairs, the route would take the sculpture on an architectural journey through several of those additions, which had been built over many decades.

After the bridged machine room, the route then took it through a boiler room, the custodian’s break room and into an elevator. The move ended for the day Monday with the crate having cleared the HVAC hurdle and ready to continue Tuesday through the additional basement rooms



and into the waiting elevator.

The elevator, however, developed a concerning issue when members of the moving crew got into it to bring several sheets of plywood up to the third floor to protect the floor in the Sidney and Rosalie Rose Gallery through which the statue was set to traverse. When the elevator started, the cover of a mechanical box inside the elevator shaft fell off and clattered to the bottom of the shaft.

“It made a startling noise but did not affect the functioning of the elevator,” said Julieane Frost, WAM’s senior marketing manager. “We immediately called in the elevator company, and they found the lost box cover in the shaft and reinstalled it.”

Once repairs were completed, the elevator worked perfectly to move the sculpture up to the third-floor Jeppson Idea Lab, she said, finally arriving Tuesday afternoon. It was left in its crate overnight and Wednesday morning some rigging was installed so the sculpture could be uncrated and lifted onto a wooden platform where it will remain for the duration of the conservation work.

So, why would the sculpture have been removed from the galleries in the first place, only to later necessitate such a complex move?

“Probably because of space constraints, for one thing,” Corrales-Diaz said. “It’s a life-sized sculpture. It’s enormous. Also, I think there were factors of taste that played into this with various directors and curators of American art through the years being less interested in a neoclassical romantic sculpture like this.”

The piece is considered the masterwork of Edward

Augustus Brackett (1818-1908), Corrales-Diaz said. But art was by no means his sole endeavor. Born in Vassalboro, Maine, he lived in Ohio and New York before moving to the Boston area,

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where he lived until his death. Despite critical acclaim for his sculptures, he couldn’t earn enough income as an artist and began pursuing his interests in wildlife and conservation, eventually serving as head of the Massachusetts Fish and Game Commission.

“He was just this typical 19th-century Renaissance man who can do everything,” Corrales-Diaz said. “He was a rabbitier, so he had rabbits all throughout his house in Winchester. He added greenhouses and held numerous patents for either trapping game or harvesting fish and so forth. And he was also a spiritualist. He was really invested in that, had seances at his house, which was an octagonal house. He seemed to be able to do everything – the arts, and he also was a poet and an early preservationist. He really ran the gamut of all kinds of disciplines.”

The sculpture arrived at the museum in 1904 as a gift from the artist and at some point was on view in a gallery. It was assumed for many years that the sculpture depicted author Margaret Fuller and her young son, who died in a shipwreck near Fire Island, New York, on July 19, 1850, but it was later determined that Brackett began work on it before the tragic event made headlines. The exact source material remains a mystery.

Most critics of the day praised “Shipwrecked Mother and Child” for its the

skill evidenced in the lifelike depiction and its emotional impact. Brackett’s decision to render the figures in the nude, however, was uncommon for American artists at the time as it clashed with prevailing conservative sensibilities. Some people, citing the nudity in the work, recommended separate viewings for ladies and gentlemen.

The museum has only a single photograph of the statue on display at WAM, an image made around 1911, Corrales-Diaz said. She asked an intern to search the archives for any other photographs, but none were found. It went into storage at some point, possibly the 1930s, and there it has remained for about 80 years.

Now that it’s in the Jeppson Lab, museum visitors will be able to watch while Paula Artal-Isbrand, WAM’s objects conservator, works to make it exhibition-ready. It will be a painstaking process. To clean the surface, she will work mostly with scientifically formulated gel-based cleaning agents that gently lift grease and grime so it can be removed with brushes and cotton pads. Some parts may require further cleaning with lasers.

When the work is done, another move will be needed since the Jeppson Idea Lab is not the statue’s final location. In 2021, it will be moved into an exhibition gallery. “We had to make sure that the route from the Idea Lab down to the exhibition gallery has been thought out,” Salway said. “Then, also, that the floor in the exhibition gallery is going to be strong enough to take the weight of the sculpture, plus the carts that it’s mounted on, which is something like 5,000 pounds total weight.”

Moving the massive sculpture won't be quite such a big, complicated production after that, Salway said, with a touch of relief in his voice. "The permanent cart that it will sit on has wheels and can be maneuvered around fairly easily," he said. "So, if we do want to move it from that gallery at some point in the future, there'll be a fairly straightforward process and we can do it ourselves, in house."

Facts on the Brackett sculpture

- The sculpture is made of white marble quarried from West Rutland, Vermont.
- The artist carved it by hand from a single large block using stone carving tools such as hammers, chisels and rasps.
- It was then given a smooth surface finish by polishing it with abrasives.
- Most critics praised Brackett's "Shipwrecked Mother and Child" for its naturalism, dramatic narrative and emotional impact.
- The work instilled "a patriotic pride," for the Maine-born sculptor, who had never left the United States for artistic instruction.
- Although we think of stone as a strong and permanent material, it is actually vulnerable and fragile. Touching it can leave a deposit of dirt and oil from your skin or from the creams and lotions you use on it.



Professional mover Michael Deblasio hugs WAM's Sarah Gillis, upon the successful completion of the move on Wednesday.

[T&G STAFF/
CHRISTINE
PETERSON]



Detail of the sculpture, which will have missing parts replaced. [T&G STAFF PHOTOS/CHRISTINE PETERSON]



Jeff Stanford, an employee of Michael Deblasio Inc., works the winch, hauling the sculpture through a door in the basement of the Worcester Art Museum, on Tuesday.



The team moves the sculpture carefully under low ductwork and across a bridge in the museum's boiler room, on Monday.



From left, Jean-Louis Lachevre, of Jean-Louis Lachevre Objects Conservation, one of the specialized contractors; Sarah Gillis of the [Worcester Art Museum](#) and professional mover Michael Deblasio pull plastic off the sculpture "Shipwrecked Mother and Child" by Edward Augustus Brackett, which arrived Wednesday in the museum's Jeppson Idea Lab. View a photo gallery at [telegram.com](#). [T&G STAFF PHOTOS/CHRISTINE PETERSON]