

Missing Gramercy Park Statue Hunted in National Arts Club

April 20, 2011

Gramercy Park trustees are on a mission to get back a nymph statue that's been hidden in the National Arts Club since '83.



To view a slideshow of the nymph statue when it was in Gramercy Park and then when it was photographed by a National Arts Club board member in the NAC basement on February 2, 2003, go to the following link:

<http://www.dnainfo.com/20110420/murray-hill-gramercy/missing-gramercy-park-statue-hunted-national-arts-club/slideshow/popup/71873>

By Amy Zimmer
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GRAMERCY PARK - Trustees of Gramercy Park have mounted an "emergency effort" to save a rare 19th-century statue of a nymph that graced the park for nearly 120 years before being entrusted to the National Arts Club for safekeeping.

After hearing the club was cleaning out rooms that former president O. Aldon James used to hoard papers, art and debris, the park's trustees sent a letter to acting president Diane Bernhard asking that the statue, which was taken out of the park by the National Arts Club in 1983, ostensibly for repairs, be returned.

"We understand it may have been damaged and in need of repair when it was removed from the park," Rev. Tom Pike, a former Landmarks Preservation Commission official and current Gramercy Park trustee, wrote in the letter dated April 14. "We need your help in restoring this statue to the trustees."

The statue is an important part of the park's history, Pike said, calling it a "rare example" of sculpture built for a park. "This is an important artifact from the 19th century."

The 18-foot-tall zinc water nymph, built for the park in 1866, once gazed down at a young Theodore Roosevelt playing in that park as a child, Pike said. But years after she was removed from the park, she was photographed in shoddy condition - missing both hands and her scepter - hidden inside the basement the club's landmarked building at 15 Gramercy Park South, according to published reports.

Now park trustees are pushing to get the statue back from the club, calling it "an emergency" in light of the current dumpsters full of junk being cleared out of the club.

"We want to hold the National Arts Club responsible for their care of the statue. We're doing it for our concern of the historic fabric of the park," Pike said, wondering if the statue has been destroyed or sold.

Property owners around Gramercy Park paid \$5,300, or the equivalent of approximately \$1 million in today's dollars, to build the naiad to stand over the park's fountain.

The fountain was removed from the park's center in 1909 to make way for a statue of the famed actor Edwin Booth as Hamlet, which remains there to this day. The nymph was later moved eastward and put on a stone base next to a reflecting pool, where she was "cherished" until being removed in 1983, Pike explained.

The nymph left the park just in time for the National Arts Club's 85th anniversary celebration, which included a dedication ceremony for another statue, Greg Wyatt's "Fantasy Fountain."

The sculpture of giraffes frolicking around a moon was rumored to have been rejected by Central Park's children's zoo before it was gifted to the National Arts Club, and some members blamed club president Aldon James for ousting the nymph statue to make way for the new sculpture.

The zinc nymph was supposed to be recast and spruced up, according to a 2003 article in the local newspaper *Town & Village*, which said workmen broke her off at the ankles to get her out of the park.

Instead, the statue was last seen in 2003 when *Town & Village* obtained secret photos of a damaged nymph stuffed into a corner in the club's basement - that reportedly had been flooded several times. Her hands were cut off and her scepter removed.

National Arts Club board members told DNAinfo that everyone was on the lookout for the statue, explaining there is a lot of space to cover in the building, including sub-basements that workers - who were not around in 1983 - are just uncovering.

"It could take a couple of days with all of the spaces they're uncovering in the building," a board member told DNAinfo.

"One would reasonably expect that an arts club would respect a statue," Pike told DNAinfo. "But now it's come to light that the club may not have been good stewards. If our statue was threatened or destroyed, it raises questions about the rest of the artwork there."

Sources familiar with the club's massive collection have been asking about several important works that may be damaged or have gone missing, including candlesticks made by Paulanship, the sculptor of Rockefeller Center's Prometheus, and a bust of an Indian boy holding a bow and arrow by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

Alex Rosenberg, a National Arts Club member and former president of the Art Appraisers Association, is taking stock of the Club's massive inventory of artwork in storage and on display. His team of 17 appraisers has been combing through the building from the basement up. They're expected to have an overview of the 100 most important pieces in the club's collection by the end of May.

Disgraced club president Aldon James is currently being investigated by the state Attorney General and Manhattan District Attorney for alleged financial misdeeds in running the club, and he stepped down temporarily last month for a "vacation" of unspecified length.

National Arts Club board members are now encouraging people who have donated art or have an institutional memory of works from the club to contact Rosenberg through the club to help him chronicle the current state of the club's art collection.