

Gramercy Park Nymph Statue Has Vanished from National Arts Club

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Gramercy Park Trustees wanted to rescue the statue from the club, but now they believe they'll never see it again.

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MANHATTAN - Trustees of Gramercy Park have given up hope of ever seeing their beloved nymph statue again.

The 18-foot-tall zinc water nymph, built for the park in 1866, had graced the gated Gramercy Park for nearly 120 years before being entrusted to the National Arts Club for safekeeping in 1983 for repairs.

"It is a sad loss," said Rev. Tom Pike, a former Landmarks Preservation Commission official and current Gramercy Park trustee. "It is an important part of the history of the park."

It was also a rare example of a statue being created for a park, he noted.

The nymph was last spotted in badly damaged condition - missing both her hands and her scepter - in the club's basement in 2003.

When park trustees heard that their neighbor at 15 Gramercy Park South were cleaning out rooms that had become hoarding havens under former president O. Aldon James' leadership, they launched an "emergency effort" to find the nymph. In April, they sent a letter to the club's current president, Dianne Bernhard, to help them find the statue and restore it to the park.

The statue is nowhere to be found.

"We're working with the Gramercy Park Trustees and we're all just trying to get to the bottom of this," Dianne Bernhard, president of The National Arts Club, said in a statement Monday. She had told local weekly *Town and Village* last week that the "statue left this place many years ago."

Though Pike said the club had not officially informed the trustees yet about the statue's disappearance, but said he did not expect its return.

"What we're hoping for is some reasonable closure," he said. "I think the trustees want to exercise some fiduciary responsibility and clarify what happened and also underscore our commitment to preservation."

"I don't think there's any desire to be antagonistic," he added. "We just want to clarify the matter. We're waiting for clarification from the club and expect that will come soon."

The nymph, also called a naiad, had once stood over a fountain that had been the park's centerpiece until 1909, when it made way for a statue of the famed actor Edwin Booth as Hamlet, which is still situated in the exclusive green space.

The nymph was later moved eastward and put on a stone base next to a reflecting pool until 1983. She was unceremoniously removed from her perch just before the National Arts Club's 85th anniversary celebration, which included a dedication ceremony for another statue to take its place, Greg Wyatt's "Fantasy Fountain."

That 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.

Several neighborhood residents blamed club president Aldon James - [who is currently being investigated by the state Attorney General and Manhattan District Attorney for alleged financial misdeeds](#) - for ditching the nymph statue to make way for the new sculpture.

Now the trustees are angling to oust Wyatt's artwork with a new sculpture, on temporary loan from a world-renowned modern artist, expected to be installed this summer.

The new piece was "a significant piece of sculpture that will enhance the atmosphere of the park," Pike said, though he wasn't able to disclose the name of the work or the artist until the paperwork for its loan was finished.

"It will be a reminder that this is not just a relic of a park, but an organic, living thing," he said, explaining that there is room for art other than nude nymphs.

"It is not to cling strongly onto the past that we felt strongly about the nymph. It's that we wanted to be good stewards of the history of the park," Pike said. "The sadness for us, even if we got the statue in 10 pieces, we probably could have raised the money to have it restored."

In the late 1860s, Gramercy Park property owners reportedly 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.

Pike said it was difficult to determine the present day value of the nymph statue, though it was significant "in terms of [the] historic continuity" of the park.

Calls to James' lawyer were not immediately returned.