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Gramercy Park trustees ask NAC to return nymph statue, last seen in '03

By Sabina Mollot

With the National Arts Club currently being cleaned from top to bottom and each work of art in the landmarked building's massive collection being inventoried, there's one piece that's of particular concern to neighbors at the moment.

That would be a historic statue of a nymph that was removed from inside Gramercy Park in 1983 and placed in the care of the club, presumably to be restored and eventually returned. Over the years, the trustees of the park have asked for the statue's return on a couple of occasions and were ignored and then rebuffed, said Rev. Dr. Tom Pike, one of five trustees.

Pike, the former longtime rector of neighborhood parish, Calvary/St. George's, is also a former city landmarks commissioner, and said he believes the removal of the statue was done improperly. Like Gramercy Park itself, the 19th century nymph is landmarked.

"That statue is part of the historic fabric of the park," said Pike. "It's a matter of historic preservation for us."

It also, said Pike, belongs to the 39 lot owners the park trustees represent, as they're the ones paying for the maintenance of the gated park (and in 1844, funded the creation of the statue).

The trustees, meanwhile, have feuded with the National Arts Club on and off for years.

However, with its longtime president, O. Aldon James having stepped aside amidst recent allegations of hoarding, animal abuse and money mismanagement, and the club undergoing a massive spring cleaning, Pike said he wants to know the whereabouts of the statue as soon as possible, for fear someone might throw the zinc sculpture in the trash.

The reason someone might do that is because the last time the statue was even seen by the community was in 2003 - and that was because it was on the front page of this newspaper in a photo someone snapped from inside the club. The photo showed that the nymph, which had been cut off at the ankles when removed from the park, was being stored in a basement, leaning against a wall rather than in a protective box, and appeared to be badly damaged.

How it happened is a mystery, but Pike said he believed the club, which is led by a board of directors as well as its president, should be held accountable.

An attorney representing James, Gerald Shargel, did not return calls for comment. When asked for Steven Leitner, an attorney and club power player for years, an employee at the Arts Club said Leitner, who lives in the building, was no longer involved with NAC. Meanwhile, insiders say the club's new regime, led by acting president Dianne Bernhard, is attempting to conduct business as transparently as possible and cooperate with ongoing investigations being conducted by the district attorney and attorney general. On May 3, the club will hold an election - a process seen as a sham for years - for its unpaid leadership positions. This time, organizers are hoping to make it fair.

As for the current status of the statue, earlier this week, Alex Rosenberg, a fine art appraiser overseeing the work being done at NAC, said he has no idea where it is. But, he added, if it is in the club, the 17-person team working on cataloguing the art collection will find it.

"Nothing is being thrown away," he said. "These are arts people. No one will take a piece of sculpture and throw it away."

Rosenberg added that the team was working as quickly as possible, but with the club's huge collection of paintings, glass, furniture, books and other items (not to mention the former president's penchant for hoarding things), the project probably will not be finished until the end of June. The appraisal work also entails figuring out which pieces belong to the club - and most things in the official collection are marked - and which do not.

Hillary Weldon, a spokesperson for the club said, "We're keeping our fingers crossed" about the statue, but added that there is more than one basement in the club as well as sub-basements to go through.

The club's board had seen a letter from the trustees on Tuesday asking for the statue back, and "We hope to return it," said Weldon. She also said if anyone has any

information about the piece, or other works of art that various individuals have been inquiring about, he or she should call the club and ask for Rosenberg.

If the statue is still in the club, Pike said he hopes to get it regardless of the condition it's in, saying the trustees would raise the money to restore it if they have to. The decision in 1983 to have the statue removed was authorized by the chair of the park's trustees at the time, Constance Gibson. This was done, said Pike, at the suggestion of James, who was then the club's vice president. James told Gibson the statue was in bad condition and ought to be removed and restored and in its place, the club arranged for a modern statue called "Fantasy Fountain" by artist Greg Wyatt to be placed in the park.

That statue, depicting a moon with a face and frolicking giraffes, is now partially obscured by surrounding bushes. The nymph, meanwhile, said Pike, "has historical significance. It was placed there by the trustees at the very outset of the park."

As for Gibson's blessing for James to remove it, Pike said, "Our predecessor acted in good faith. She thought it was a good thing to put it in the care of the National Arts Club."

He noted that the statue's predicament was not unlike that of the larger club and Gramercy Park community, and how with James gone, there was an attempt to regain control of what was lost during his 27-year reign as NAC president.

"In some ways the story of the statue is the story of the community," said Pike. "It's a real betrayal of trust."

As Town & Village reported last month, for years, James and his twin brother John James were said to have used scare tactics like frivolous lawsuits and harassment to stay in power there and keep members quiet. Any stories published by this newspaper about controversy at NAC were swept under the rug - literally. As the cleanup was underway, a source reported seeing stacks of T&V still wrapped up in twine that had apparently been hidden over the years from potential readers. But after James' went on a well-publicized "vacation," employees who'd been fired from the club were allowed to return, and, as T&V's police blotter has noted, two individuals have come forward with complaints of harassment against John.

Originally put in the center of the park in 1966 above a fountain, the nymph sculpture was later moved to another section, when the statue of Edwin Booth was placed there in 1909 and then again in 1918 to another section 50 feet away. There it remained

until 1983. There is not much documentation on its origins, but a leaflet produced to celebrate the park in 1948 credited Frederick W. MacMonnies as its sculptor.