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TOP STORY

(VIDEO) Rodin sculpture uncovered in Madison town hall

By CHRISTINE LEE Staff Writer Oct 11, 2017



Local officials were stunned in 2015 when Mallory Mortillaro, the curator of collections for the Hartley Dodge Foundation, discovered a marble bust of Napoleon on display in the Madison Council Chambers for some 80 years was a 'lost' work by French sculptor Auguste Rodin. Photo by Christine Lee

MADISON – It isn't every town hall that can claim a Rodin in its council chambers.

Madison can, and what's more the near-priceless sculpture had been watching the borough do its business unnoticed from its corner in the back of the room for nearly 80 years before a sharp-eyed young curator uncovered its roots.

The large marble bust of Napoleon Bonaparte by the famed French sculptor Auguste Rodin was long known to be "lost" to the arts community — until the efforts of Mallory Mortillaro, the curator of collections for the Hartley Dodge Foundation, confirmed the sculpture sitting on a pedestal in a corner of the chambers was, in fact, the "lost" Rodin sculpture in 2015.



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"It is Madison's King Tut moment," Hartley Dodge Foundation Chairman Nicolas Platt said, adding the piece is worth anywhere from \$4 million to \$12 million.

The sculpture, along with most of the artwork in the council chambers, once belonged to Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge and has adorned the council chambers since 1942.

The Rodin sculpture is part of the collection of artwork of Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge (1883-1973), daughter of William Rockefeller and an heiress to the Standard Oil fortune. It was Mrs. Dodge who donated the Hartley Dodge Memorial building at 50 Kings Road to the Borough of Madison. It was dedicated in 1935, in memory of her son Marcellus Hartley Dodge Jr., who was killed in a car accident in France in 1930. The stately granite and marble building serves as the public offices for Madison.

"From my early days on the council, I had some level of awareness of there possibly being a Auguste Rodin sculpture in the chambers," Mayor Robert Conley remarked.

The public has a chance to see the sculpture for themselves from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 21, and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 22, at the municipal building at 50 Kings Road before it is loaned to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for a year. A banner to be hung from Borough Hall proclaiming "Madison's 'Lost' Rodin" is on order.

Platt, a Harding Township Committeeman, added the sculpture's loan to the museum could be extended to three years and beyond, noting the sculpture could return to the Hartley Dodge Memorial building. The Hartley Dodge Foundation has no plans to sell it, he emphasized.

Going On Hunch

In 2014, Mortillaro, then a graduate student earning her master's of arts degree in teaching at Drew University at 36 Madison Ave., was hired as an archivist for the Hartley Dodge Foundation, which is charged with preserving the historical and architectural integrity of Madison's 1935 town hall. The Whippany resident, 26, began inquiring into the large marble bust of a man, garbed as a Roman, that sat on a pedestal in a corner of the council room.

The piece is so heavy, in fact, that during the recent, extensive renovation of the Hartley Dodge Memorial building, the contractors simply built a plywood box around it and left it in the middle of the Council Chambers rather than try to move it out of the building. For two years it was surrounded by jack-hammers and building debris, protected only by the plywood box.

While there had been suspicions that the sculpture could have come from Rodin's studio, Platt noted there were no records and no follow-up to establish its authenticity. There also was no paperwork that had been passed down within the Hartley Dodge Foundation Board of Trustees on any of the artwork in the building.

The artwork in Madison's town hall is owned by the foundation, with the exception of the portrait of Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge hung above the seats occupied by Mayor Conley and Borough Clerk Elizabeth Osborne at council meetings.

Adding more to the intrigue, according to Mayor Conley, was that Rodin wasn't known to sculpt political figures.

Platt said the fact that the sculpture depicted Napoleon made it difficult to verify its authenticity as one of Rodin's works.

"No one was aware he sculpted a political figure," he said.

Determination

When the trustees gathered for one of their regular quarterly meetings in December 2014, Mortillaro inquired, "So what are you going to do with the Rodin?"

Her inquiry, Platt added, brought the meeting to a standstill.

After online searches, visits to archives, phone calls to museums and looking through every book on Rodin, Mortillaro got in touch with the world's leading Rodin expert, Jérôme Le Blay from the Musee Rodin in Paris, in July 2015.

"I felt like I was walking into a Nancy Drew novel," she recalled of her work confirming the sculpture as one of Rodin's. "I was determined to see it through."

Mortillaro sent Le Blay a photo of the piece, and he immediately wrote back stating he would have to fly from Paris to see the sculpture, which he did in September 2015, Mortillaro said. Although Le Blay knew of this piece, the art world had lost track of it decades ago, according to the foundation.

Le Blay explained that it was once owned by industrialist Thomas Fortune Ryan. That lead allowed Mortillaro a bit more information to work from.

Eventually three pages from a 1933 Parke Bernet auction catalogue were sent to Mortillaro by the late Lillie Debevoise of Harding Township, a descendant of Thomas Fortune Ryan. The catalogue confirmed not only the name of the piece, but also that it had been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1915 to 1929. There it was, literally in black and white: "Napoléon Enveloppé Dans Son Rêve," along with the description.

Then LeBlay came to inspect.

"When Le Blay walked into the chambers, he turned and said, 'Hello my friend, so is this where you have been hiding?'" Mortillaro remembered.

Mortillaro, who majored in art history as an undergraduate student at Drew, added that confirming the sculpture was the work of Rodin was "incredibly exciting."

"It's what every art history major dreams of finding," she remarked.

The confirmation also came as a surprise to borough officials, Mayor Conley observed.

Mortillaro received a photo from Le Blay at the holidays confirming the statue's origins.

"All it said was 'Merry Christmas' and attached was a picture of the sculptor with the statue," Platt recalled.

Storied Past

The marble bust, entitled "Napoléon Enveloppé Dans Son Rêve," or "Napoleon Wrapped in his Dream," was conceived by Rodin in 1904 at the bequest of New York collector John W. Simpson, according to Platt.

While it is unclear why the commission wasn't completed, tobacco, insurance and transportation magnate Thomas Fortune Ryan saw the unfinished piece in Rodin's studio and acquired it prior to its completion in 1910, the foundation noted. Ryan was a known collector of Rodin's work, Mortillaro pointed out.

From there, it was shipped to Ryan's New York home until he loaned the sculpture to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1915 to 1929. Ryan's estate took back the loan after his death in 1928 and the bust was purchased by Geraldine Dodge in 1933 at a Parke Bernet auction, according to Platt.

"It is hard to determine if the people who have worked in or visited the building over the years ever took more than a moment to steal a glance over at the back corner of the room to look at the marble bust sitting on a large bronze base," Platt stated. "After all, it has been there for over 80 years."

Mayor Conley remarked that the sculpture "reinforces the generosity of Geraldine Dodge in not only building the Hartley Dodge Memorial building, but also leaving the artwork to the Hartley Dodge Foundation.

"It allows people to appreciate it," the mayor added.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art will accept the piece on loan in November and the bust will be displayed as part of the museum's commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Rodin's death in 1917, a loan Mayor Conley supports.

"More people can see it and appreciate it," he said.

For Platt and the rest of the foundation to keep the Rodin a secret for almost two years shows how serious the issue of security and insurance for the masterpiece is.

"Do we want something so valuable in a room where everyone has a key and where public meetings are held?" Platt asked. "The insurance company said 'hell no.' The Philadelphia Museum loan allows us to delay our long-term problem. The New York Metropolitan will also take it back. That might be the next step. Keeping it in the building might prove difficult.

"We can extend the loan or it can go to France. It is much in demand and now the cat is out of the bag more museums will reach out."

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