

Caring for Outdoor Sculptures

Conservation results well worth the effort for insuring the longevity of a collection

By Rosa Lowinger

Outdoor sculptures are often thought to be the most durable of collectible artworks.

Typically made of materials like metal, stone, and concrete, they are indeed generally more resilient than paintings on canvas or works on paper. Yet their placement outdoors shifts the balance in their care, making them vulnerable to damage from sun, wind, rain, fertilizers, sprinkler water, and salty coastal air.

Placement is Key

When considering the installation of an outdoor sculpture, the first factor one needs to think about is placement. Are there trees overhead where birds roost? Is the artwork so close to the water's edge that it gets splashed by passing motorboats?

Responsible owners also take care to maintain proper insurance coverage and plans for protecting artworks in the event of fires, floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes. Equally important is understanding that the vast majority of damage to outdoor sculptures is a result of simple exposure to the elements. Corrosion of metals, fading, erosion, mold staining, streaking, and damage caused by prolonged contact with acidic bird droppings will happen even when no disaster takes place. These conditions can be costly to repair and often are not covered by insurance because they fall under the rubric of "wear and tear." For this reason, conservators of outdoor sculpture promote ongoing maintenance to clean, coat, and perform minor repairs to one's outdoor sculptures.

Monitor and Maintain

Maintenance programs can be as simple as rinsing artworks with filtered water several times a year, or having them washed with a conservation-grade detergent that will not strip their coatings or leave damaging residues on finishes. The key is insuring that one's maintenance program is designed by a professional. Like the care of any high-end possession, outdoor sculpture requires expertise to determine the methods and timing of the cleanings. Questions about what type of detergent and sponge to use for a particular type of dirt, making sure that cleaning products don't contain bleach or acids, or whether to wax or lacquer a sculpture can only be defined by someone with professional training in the care of outdoor sculpture.

Just like one would not have one's pool cleaner wash and wax a vintage Ferrari, so too should artworks, whose value and aesthetic are based upon their surface finishes, be cared for by experts.



Conservation of an 1883 monumental gilded bronze sculpture of King Kamehameha in Honolulu. Before work began, the sculpture was a muted antique green with a matte coating that was flaking and peeling. RLA Conservation's conservators used chemical patina and a hot wax treatment to restore the appropriate warm tone to the skin. The gilded areas were produced with 24-carat leaf.

Bronzes

The pitfalls that can occur in the care of outdoor sculpture are easily illustrated by outdoor bronzes.

Prized for centuries due to the material's ability to be cast, molded, carved, and chemically enhanced to produce a wide range of color effects, copper alloyed with tin or silicon, or bronze, continues to be a primary material in the contemporary art lexicon. Bronzes are typically colored chemically in a process known as patination and coated with wax or lacquer. Patinas can vary from the warm brown that people typically associate with "bronze," to a series of greens that mimic the material's natural corrosion drips, and everything in between. Knowing the difference between corrosion, which requires removal, and an intentionally applied patina requires expert knowledge of corrosion chemistry as well as fabrication. Many bronzes can appear damaged, when all they need is the application of a good coating to saturate the patina. Others can be overly saturated and become shiny because they have been slathered with waxes containing silicone.

Knowing the artist's intent and the artwork's history is critical to the performance of proper maintenance. It's important to consider whether a surface is supposed to be lacquered, saturated with wax that is heated into the metal, finished with a cold wax layer that remains matte, or additionally enhanced with pigments and paints that are burned into the surface. The conditions of a site — whether it is coastal and subject to strong salt burdens, whether frequent rains help remove the salts or strong sun strips the wax rapidly — help define the frequency of maintenance. Having maintenance performed by a professional conservator is the best way to ensure that small problems — peeling paint, lifting coatings, pinprick corrosion spots — are diagnosed and treated before they have a chance to become large problems requiring costly interventions.

Though preservation may sound like a lot of work, it is actually a straightforward process. The results are well worth the effort for insuring the longevity of an art collection and retaining a work's aesthetics and value.



Guest Contributor:

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