

Posted: 10:00 p.m. Saturday, April 25, 2015



Returning Mizner's vision: Memorial Fountain restoration turns corner



Courtesy of Clifford Restoration

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By David Rogers

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In locations more than a 1,000 miles apart, Palm Beach's beloved Memorial Fountain is being reborn.

In Ontario, Canada, the staff of Clifford Restoration has brought back the muscular features of the north hippocamp's face and torso, removed cracks and is giving the horse of the sea a new pair of legs.

Clay added to its face, mane and torso effectively erases the damage that water and metal corrosion have created over the years. These temporary "mock-up" features will soon be cast in a concrete and keystone (cut coral) mixture and applied or—in the case of the legs, attached.

This week, fountain restoration leaders will visit Clifford Restoration offices to review the progress, with others participating by video conference.

The north hippocamp has been reviewed by Mark Rabinowitz, senior conservator with Conservation Solutions Inc., to ensure that the changes match historical renderings and photographs.

Leg molds complete

"The molds for casting the new legs are completed. We are in the process of casting material at the moment," said Donovan Pauly, conservator and project coordinator for Clifford Restoration. "So, we've turned the corner now. We're getting to the point where we are starting to put things back together," he added, speaking from the Toronto suburb of Scarborough.

The hippocamps that have faced the east, west and south sides of the fountain since Addison Mizner created it in 1929 will be clones of the north hippocamp, since the molds created to make segments for the north hippocamp will be used to do the same for the other hippocamps.

"We chose the best set of legs out of the four to model the detail back onto directly in a nonstaining clay to try to give it the kind of appearance it had originally but without significantly changing the overall appearance of the horses," Pauly said.

"We want any new parts that we put on them to sit well with the existing eroded surface. It's a fairly involved process," he said. A key focus was getting the musculature right. "There's been a lot of material loss, particularly on their lower jaws and on their noses. A lot of finer detail is missing."

The face of the south hippocamp is far more eroded than the others, so a larger section of its jaw and cheek area will be replaced.

'A continuum'

The team reviewed equine anatomy to give the horses the sharper, more vigorous look they had originally, but the driver behind the hippocamps' restoration is historical accuracy, according to restorer Carlos Nunes.

"What's important is that the eye does not see a change, that there's a continuum within what we've been given to the historical reference," Nunes said.

The job has a far wider scope than simply restoring the mass and shape the horses had in 1929.

Mizner added a reddish-brown pigment to the original hippocamp molds to give them the look of solid keystone. The colors became apparent after the team cleaned the hippocamps prior to full inspection. "They were quite soiled," Pauly said.

The pigments added by Mizner more than 85 years ago reach about a quarter of an inch below the surface of the hippocamps. The team will replicate the process used by Mizner, Nunes said.

How to age a hippocamp

The team made rubber stamps of a section of the hippocamps' surface and will use the stamps to give additions the rougher, indented texture of original sections. Before freshly molded sections have time to fully harden, the team will also use micro-sand blasting to give them an aged appearance, Pauly said.

"Wherever we are repairing — whether its being modeled directly on (the hippocamp) or being cast and then physically attached — the piece will match the host material in texture and also color," Pauly said.

He wouldn't say exactly how long the restoration should last, he the added materials could endure for the life of the original material. "This should go a long way toward keeping them around for a couple more generations," Pauly said.

Nunes said his research revealed that the lines feeding water to the fountain had been changed at some point. That altered where water fell on the hippocamps and might have contributed to their deterioration, he said. So, for the sake of the hippocamps' longevity, the town should periodically monitor the flow and origin of those water lines, Nunes said.

Firm re-creating bowls, stems

Much closer to home, workers with Premier Stoneworks in Delray Beach has gone from creating miniature models of sections of the fountain's small, upper bowl; large lower bowl; and stem pieces to producing full-size models.

The sections are being reviewed by the project team — which includes town engineers, Conservation Solutions senior conservator Mark Rabinowitz and construction managers — for historic intent, size, scale and water flow, according to Premier Stonework president Gary Arkin.

"They are in the final tweaking of that right now," Arkin said.

Premier Stoneworks has created models to show the team how water will flow over the fountain's bowls before those sections are cast in a concrete/keystone mixture that precisely matches the mixture Mizner's workers used in 1929 to create those elements.

In Mizner's time, keystone could simply be cut from quarries in the Keys. That's prohibited now, so workers with Keystone Products pull it from existing foundations when property owners renovate or rebuild, Arkin said. Foundation blocks are cut into slabs and the waste is used to make concrete/keystone aggregate, he said.

"When we were given the specifications (for the project), they had actually done a chemical analysis of the original mix design," Arkin said. "We have to use a mix design that's consistent with what was done previously."

Demanding process

Arkin called the fountain restoration team the most professional — and demanding — team he's ever worked with. Constant feedback and input from the team on model accuracy have been valuable, he said.

"When there are people who are adamant about historical accountability, then you end up with the best product possible," Arkin said.

Dave Smith, a Hedrick Brothers project superintendent, said the two firms are relying on historic documents and images to guide the restoration/reconstruction process. No artistic license is allowed, he said.

"The whole project team has a dedication to the original intention," Smith said. "No one is going off on their own designing things." The only goal is to return the fountain to Mizner's original vision, he said.

The team expects to have the fountain's components assembled in Memorial Park in July.

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