

Let the Waters Flow: Ringling Museum Fountain Restoration

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Abstract

The Ringling Museum of Art Conservation and Facilities Departments worked together to restore the historic Fountain of the Tortoises and the Oceanus Fountain; both of which had been inoperable for over twenty years. The estimate for using an outside contractor/engineer specializing in this type of restoration was \$600,000. The project was completed using internal resources at a cost savings of over \$564,970. Additionally, the internal water delivery system of the Fountain of the Tortoises was reengineered and redesigned so that future repairs can now be made without the costly expense of dismantling the entire fountain and risking damage to the historic fountain. Visitors have stopped commenting, "Water running from the fountains would be nice". The aesthetics of having working fountains have significantly enhanced the beauty of the Museum courtyard and value of the fountains. This project is the only successful restoration of its kind in the nation and is expected to last one hundred years.

Introduction of the Organization

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and The Center for Performing Arts are affiliated with Florida State University.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the largest museum/university complex in the Nation. The 66-acre estate is the legacy of John Ringling (1866-1936), one of the great business tycoons of his day. The Museum of Art, recognized as the State Art Museum of Florida, includes 21 galleries of internationally recognized European and American art with paintings by Rubens, Van Dyck, Poussin and other Baroque masters. In addition, the estate encompasses Cà d' Zan, the recently restored 32-room Ringling mansion; the Circus Museum, the Original Asolo Theater; the Rose Garden and beautifully landscaped grounds overlooking Sarasota Bay.

The Center for Performing Arts is the home of the professional Asolo Theater Company performing in the Mertz Theater, which was brought to Sarasota from Dunfermline, Scotland. The Center is also home of the Masters in Fine Arts Degree program FSU Conservatory for Actor Training. Their performances are held in the intimate Cook Theater. And finally, the Sarasota Ballet conducts training classes and holds performances in the Mertz Theater.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

- The Ringling Museum's historic massive marble fountains were inoperable for over twenty years.
- The estimate to repair the fountains by outside contractors was approximately \$600,000 for which there were no funds allocated.
- The preservation of the historic fountains was of high priority.
- Huntington Park in San Francisco hired an outside contractor, "Rocket Science", an engineering firm, for its project and the fountain crumbled during the dismantling process.

Design

The design of the new fountain water delivery system developed by Facilities staff uses "space age" technology and a manifold system, which independently feeds each spout. This system is patentable. The top basin of the Fountain of the Tortoises weighs 3,500 pounds and the pedestal that holds it in place weighs about 4,500. A crane was used in conjunction with a specially designed cradling platform to lift and dismantle these marble fountain components. The internal bowl was cleaned and preserved by the Conservation staff in accordance with prescribed restoration protocols. Adhesives and mold were removed, the bowl was sanded, and a new fiberglass preservative was applied.

Implementation

- The fountains were dismantled.
- A platform for the crane was designed that would serve to brace the basin of the Fountain of the Tortoises in order to provide more support. It weighs 3,500 pounds, but due to its fragile condition could have easily crumbled. This in fact happened to the fountain in California's Huntington Park when it was being restored.
- The internal bowl was cleaned and preserved by the Conservation staff in accordance with prescribed restoration protocols. Adhesives and mold were removed, the bowl was sanded, and new fiberglass preservative was applied.
- The internal water delivery system was completely redesigned and fabricated by the Museum staff. Previously, there was a single pipe that brought water to the four fishes in The Oceanus Fountain.
- The base of the fishes were core drilled and five separate lines of flexible pipe as opposed to the one copper line were run from the center of the Fountain to a manifold that is located south of the fountain.

Benefits

- The two historic fountains were restored and are now operable. This is particularly significant as there are only three known replicas of the European originals in the United States. John Ringling commissioned the Museum fountains to be made by the original foundry around 1926.
- Aesthetics of the working fountains have significantly enhanced the beauty of the Museum courtyard and the value of the fountains.
- This project is the only successful restoration of its kind in the nation and is expected to last one hundred years.
- The savings resulting from doing the restoration with internal staff resulted in saving of \$564,970.
- Future maintenance costs are expected to be minimal due to the unique manifold design. If one line breaks a new line can easily be rerouted and repaired without dismantling the entire fountain.
- The restoration was recognized by Florida Tax Watch and received the Davis Productivity Award – Team Award (Plaque) – June 2004
- Visitor satisfaction and enjoyment has been enhanced. Visitors have stopped commenting, “Water running from the fountains would be nice”.