The Slater Museum’s Pergamon Frieze: Focus of Research, Restoration

In 1888, NFA Principal Robert Porter Keep, a noted classics scholar, convinced William A. Slater to fund the acquisition plaster casts of ancient sculpture in addition to Slater’s gift to construct Slater Memorial Hall. Thus, a museum was born. That Slater’s cast collection was acquired and installed at a secondary school is of singular historical significance. A 19th century phenomenon, the commission and acquisition of plaster collections of the great works of antiquity attributed legitimacy to academic institutions. At the same time, the Slater’s cast collection placed it among the great museums and research institutions of the Western World.

The Slater’s cast collection is also significant because it represents commissioned copies taken directly from original statuary. Cast by hand from the original pieces in Europe, the copies...
A Message from the Director

Winter is a great time to assess conditions of things indoors … like collections. Projects for the spring, summer and fall seem to have their genesis during the dark, cold days of winter. After the effort of the fall’s busy schedule, and during the holiday “break”, museum staff applied themselves to cleaning, organizing and re-housing collections in storage. Dirty, heavy work… but well worth it and satisfying (after the fact!). In this spirit, we are reviewing our progress on projects like the restoration of casts and re-installation of long-static galleries. As you will see within this issue, a new project is in the works. The structural and cosmetic restoration of the massive cast of the Pergamon Frieze is desperately needed and long overdue, but now in sight. Watch for more news on this soon.

Upcoming Exhibitions, Programs and Events

The 67th Annual Connecticut Artists Juried Exhibition

February 21, 2010 1:00 - Juried show opening and reception, Free with museum admission. All are welcome.

Notable Norwich Lecture Series

February 7, 2010 - John Fox Slater: An American Legacy
March 7, 2010 - John Denison Crocker: Renaissance Man

Details available on page 10.

116th Annual Saturday Morning Art Classes Exhibition

April 11, 2010 1:00 - Exhibition opening and reception. Free with museum admission. All are welcome.
were crated in small sections, shipped across the Atlantic, and transported up the Thames River to Norwich. Visitors flocked to the Slater (2,000 were recorded on Christmas Day, 1888) in part to see in perfect replica objects which had become known to them through newspaper articles. These objects include what has become known as the Pergamon Frieze.

The Great Altar of Pergamon, a massive stone podium, was originally built on a high bluff in the 2nd century BCE in the Ancient Greek city of Pergamon, (modern day Bergama in Turkey) in north-western Anatolia, 16 miles from the Aegean Sea. The Great Altar of Pergamon has been included in lists of the Great Wonders of the World. The front stairway alone is almost 20 meters wide.

It has long been assumed that the magnificently scaled and opulently decorated open-air altar was dedicated to the Greek god Zeus. The altar appears to be mentioned in the Christian Book of Revelation: “In Pergamos where Satan’s Throne is.”

In 1905, the Slater Museum’s second curator (after Henry Watson Kent), Miss Nancy M. Pond, expanded what she referred to as “a brief catalogue … compiled by Mr. H. W. Kent.” Included were floor plans and a hypothetical rendering of the Western pediment of the Parthenon drawn by then Norwich Art School director Ozias Dodge.

In the catalogue, Pond explains the mythology illustrated by the section of massive frieze copied in plaster in the Slater: “This unique altar was erected by Eumenes II, King of Pergamum [sic], upon a terrace near the top of the citadel, 700 feet above the surrounding plain. It was built upon a platform about 16 feet high and 120 feet square, the walls of which were encircled with a band of sculpture about 7 ½ feet wide. The frieze represents the battle of the Gods and Giants. Gea, Earth, the mother of the Giants, sends her sons, a dread-inspiring, monstrous brood, to scale Heaven itself. The gods met them, each with his peculiar weapon, and utterly routed them. In the Zeus group (of the frieze), the powerful and majestic Father of the Gods, does battle with three giants. One, struck through the leg with a thunder-bolt, which still quivers and flames, makes futile efforts to protect himself, while on the other side two mighty figures resist in vain the aegis held on high. In the Athena group, the goddess, in terrible vengeance, rushes along, dragging by his matted locks a struggling giant, who vainly braces himself to resist his fate. Meanwhile the agonized mother, known by her position half out of earth and by the fruits at her side, beseeches mercy from the pitiless goddess who is being crowned by winged Nike in token of her victory.”

Battle of the Giants, the Pergamon Museum.
Reading this, while gazing upon even the relatively small fragment at the Slater, what 21st century child could pooh-pooh the ancient World’s mythology over the video game monsters of today?

“Political considerations at Pergamon made it necessary to glorify the civic and religious center of the small city-state,” Herbert Hoffmann observed in 1952. “The high podium served to impress the exalted position of the altar, situated as it was on a high elevation, upon foreign visitors as they approached along the plain to partake in the biennial festival of Athena of Nikephoros.” The relatively small element of the altar’s frieze represented in the Slater Museum has the same effect on visitors today. Its massive height, width, and the motion inherent in the dynamic figures impress all viewers.

A second, smaller and less well-preserved high relief frieze adorns the inner court walls surrounding the actual fire altar on the upper level of the structure at the top of the stairs. It depicts in a series of consecutive scenes events from the life of Telephos, legendary founder of the city of Pergamon and son of the hero Heracles and Auge, a daughter of the Tegean King Aleus.

The main excavation of the original altar comprised two campaigns, of 1879 and 1904, and was shipped out of the Ottoman Empire by a German archaeological team. In 1878 the German engineer Carl Humann began the official excavations at Pergamon, an effort which lasted until 1886. His chief purpose was to rescue the altar friezes and expose the foundation of the edifice. The frieze element replicated in plaster in the Slater Museum is known as the Gigantomachy, or struggle of the gods and the giants, and was clearly installed before the second excavation at the original site.

In negotiations with the Turkish government, which participated in the excavation, it was agreed that all frieze fragments found at the time become the property of the Berlin, Germany museums. In Berlin, Italian restorers reassembled the panels comprising the frieze from the thousands of recovered fragments. In order to display the result and create a context for it, a new museum was erected in 1901 on Berlin’s Museum Island. As this first Pergamon Museum proved to be both inadequate and structurally unsound, it was demolished in 1909 and replaced with the much larger museum, which opened in 1930. Although it housed a variety of collections, including a famous reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon, the city’s inhabitants also named the new museum the Pergamon Museum after the friezes and reconstruction of the west front of the altar.

In the 7th century the acropolis of Pergamon was strongly fortified as a defense against the Arabs. In the process, the Pergamon Altar, among other structures, was partially destroyed in order to reuse the building material. The city was, nevertheless, defeated in 716 by the Arabs, who temporarily occupied it before abandoning it as unimportant,
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after which it languished until being re-occupied in the 12th century. In the 13th century Pergamon fell to the Turks. Travelers who visited Pergamon during the late 18th and early 19th centuries were mostly western European and English. Two sections of relief were brought back to England and remain there today.

Carl Humman came to Pergamon for the first time in 1864/65. Observing looting of elements accessible above ground level, he urged preservation of the antiquities, and in 1871, brought to Pergamon the Berlin classicist Ernst Curtius. Humman also sent fragments to Berlin to stimulate interest in preserving the frieze, but it was not until Alexander Conze saw these that action was taken. Conze, who was appointed director of the sculpture collection of Berlin’s royal museums in 1877, was first to connect the fragments with ancient historical texts and realize their significance. Established in 187, the German Empire, eager to compete with other great powers in cultural affairs, desperately wanted a work of ancient Greek art of a rank equal to the sculptures from Attica and Asia Minor in the British Museum.

The German government arranged for a license to dig in Turkey, and in September 1878 excavations began, headed by Humann and Conze. By 1887, large parts of the acropolis had been investigated and published. Through agreement between the Ottoman Empire and the German government, the relief panels from the Pergamon Altar along with some other fragments came to Berlin.

The pieces were placed in the crowded Altes Museum, where especially the Telephos frieze could not be well displayed. Individual slabs were simply leaned against the wall facing the altar. Inadequate exhibition inspired the construction of the first “Pergamon Museum.” Built between 1897 and 1899 and designed by Fritz Wolff, the museum opened in 1901 with the unveiling of a bust of Carl Humann by Adolf Brütt.

This building was used until 1908 but was demolished because of problems with the foundation. After the first museum was demolished, the Telephos frieze was set into the walls of the colonnade on the eastern side of a new museum, with windows allowing a view of the art objects. The new building, the new Pergamon Museum designed by Alfred Messel, presents the altar with the frieze fragments installed on the surrounding walls, but was not built until 1930, because of political and economic upheaval.

In 1939 the museum closed because of World War II; later the reliefs were taken down and stored elsewhere. At the end of the war, the hidden pieces of the altar fell into the hands of the Red Army and were taken to the Soviet Union as stolen art treasures. They were kept in storage in the Hermitage in Leningrad, until in 1959 a large part of the collection was returned to East Germany, including the altar fragments.

In 1982 a new entrance area was created which permitted a visit to the museum to begin with the Pergamon Altar. In 1990, nine heads from the Telephos frieze, which had been evacuated to the western part of Berlin because of the war, returned to the Pergamon Museum. War-related events, poor storage, and frequent moves had negative consequences for the remaining altar and frieze fragments. Earlier restorations created new problems. The clamps and fasteners that connected the individual fragments and also served to anchor the frieze and sculpture to the wall were made of iron, which had started to rust. As this rust spread it threatened to crack open the marble from the inside. From 1994 to
1996 restoration work on the Telephos frieze took place, followed by the Gigantomachy under the leadership of Silvano Bertolin and at a cost of over $3 million.

In June 2004 the completely restored original frieze was presented for public viewing.

Scholars assume that the entire structure was brightly painted in antiquity. After the Parthenon frieze (also represented in plaster in the Slater’s original collection), Pergamon is the longest surviving frieze of Greek antiquity.

The Slater’s cast of the fragment from the Pergamon Frieze is attached to the mezzanine of the building’s interior, a permanent architectural element. Some time around the early middle of the twentieth century, a large, long, flat display case was built and installed on top of the Frieze’s cornice along the mezzanine railing. The weight of the case rests upon the plaster cornice. The weight has slowly caused the frieze’s cornice to separate from the mezzanine and to lean forward into the cast gallery. A noticeable gap exists between its original position against an upright structural interior column and the finish plaster, suggesting, at a minimum, a risk to the piece, and at most, a potential serious hazard to visitors.

In the nineteenth century, plaster cast copies of ancient sculpture were fabricated in a variety of ways. All studios used molds (negatives) made from a three dimensional positive. All cast the copies with some quantity of interior void to reduce the weight and the amount of plaster. Armatures and interior structural elements and reinforcements varied from studio to studio (and even from craftsman to craftsman). In some cases these are wood, in others metal, and in still others, a combination of the two. In an age before fiberglass and wire mesh, burlap was used extensively as mesh to prevent fissures in the plaster. During casting, it was laid inside reliefs and wrapped around joints to fight gravity that would pull extended, cantilevered limbs, armaments and cornices down and away from the main body of the piece.

Since their original installation, Slater’s casts have had little professional conservation treatment. More recently, their conservation and preservation needs have taken center stage. With earlier funding from the David T. Langrock
Bob Shure at work at the Slater Museum

Foundation, the friends of Slater Museum, and the museum’s operating budget, preliminary work on seven casts has been completed by Robert Shure of Giust Gallery/Caproni Studio. Now restoration of the

Slater’s Pergamon Frieze copy has assumed a priority position in continuing restoration efforts. The initial project will encompass a condition and structural assessment, which may require some invasion of the walls surrounding the frieze. The total cost of the actual restoration of the frieze will not be known until the assessment is begun, or possibly, until actual remediation work will be deemed necessary and done during the investigation.

Once again, Shure’s work on the frieze will provide significant opportunity for the Slater to educate the public and Norwich Free Academy students about the process of and need for cast restoration. Robert Shure is an experienced and skilled lecturer. He will conduct his conservation work in full view of the public in an engaging and interactive environment that will extend the reach of the technical nature of his work and the necessity for it upon Slater’s cast collection.

Two Great Events

We are truly sorry if you missed two terrific events last fall. The first was held October 24 and celebrated the opening of the new permanent exhibition Around the World on the Yacht Eleanor: The Slaters’ Grand Tour. The party was presented in partnership with the United Way of Southeastern Connecticut and was a smashing success. Well attended, it included many longstanding old friends, and especially gratifying dozens of people from the region who had never before visited the Slater Museum. The event included music, great food and the new exhibition, of which we are extremely proud.

On October 30, the museum presented an auction sale of work by Slater benefactor Paul W. Zimmermann. Attended by a full house of devoted collectors (and some dealers!), the reception was most enjoyable, with good food, drink and the camaraderie of art lovers and collectors. The evening included a few tense moments while silent bidders stood sentry by their quarry, prepared to up the ante should a competitor make an overture. The event brought nearly $30,000 to support the museums care of collections and additional funds to support the accessibility project. The museum is very grateful to the staff of the NFA Foundation for its assistance with the event.
The Notable Norwich Lecture Series Continues

John Fox Slater: An American Legacy
February 7, 2010
Learn about the philanthropy of the man for whom the Slater Memorial Museum is named, as Ms. Zoë discusses the life of John Fox Slater and the result of his largesse in support of the education of emancipated slaves in the South.

John Denison Crocker: Norwich’s Renaissance Man
March 7, 2010
Paintings by Norwich resident, John Denison Crocker (1822-1907), document the town’s late 19th-century golden age. Discover the many sides of the man, the artist and inventor John Denison Crocker in this enlightening presentation.

For ticket information please call 860-425-5547.