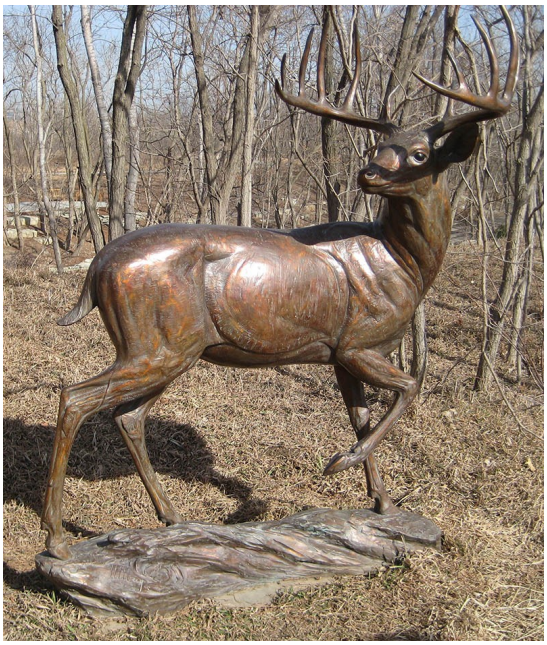
Caring for Outdoor Sculpture

2017

Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center

About Outdoor Sculpture



A sculptural work of art displayed outdoors can transform a space. Unfortunately, constant exposure to the elements and potential damage from living creatures (especially humans) makes outdoor sculpture far more challenging to preserve than a work displayed indoors. It is important to recognize that a sculpture displayed outdoors needs regular inspections and maintenance to ensure its long-term preservation. Listed below are issues to consider and basic practices that can be carried out to maintain an outdoor sculpture that is in stable condition. If you are unsure about any aspect of your sculpture's condition, consult a conservator.

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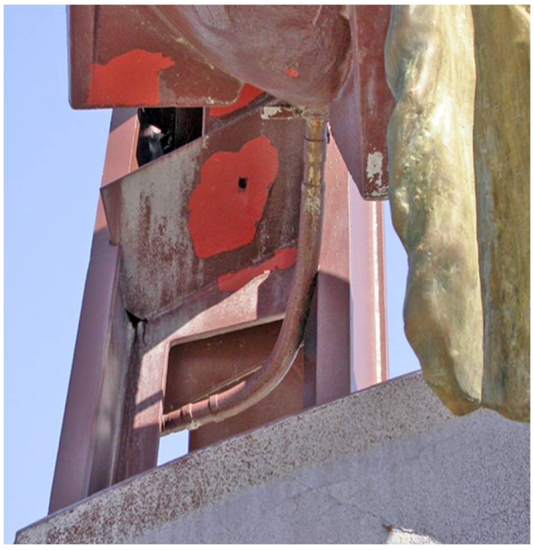
Documenting

It is important to collect and maintain written records relating to the sculpture that may be useful in the future care of the piece. This includes the materials used to produce it, the foundry or manufacturer (if the sculpture was not created solely by the artist), and information about surface coatings and their intended appearance.



The artist's intentions for his/her work may differ from those of other artists, the owner, or from the general public.

Without evidence and documentation, it is difficult to know what the artist intended. What aspect of their work does the artist value as its essence? What level of visual change is acceptable to the artist? Can a sculpture be repainted by a conservator if necessary? Did the artist intend for the sculpture to deteriorate over time? Did the artist know that the materials s/he chose could not withstand the stress of being outdoors?

Installing

"The sculpture should be installed in an area where its surroundings will not contribute to its deterioration."

It is always helpful, and often imperative, to have an experienced engineer examine the sculpture prior to installation. An engineer can recommend safe moving methods and advise on the best materials and dimensions for the base or support. A secure base provides a sturdy, solid surface upon which the sculpture may rest or to which it may be attached. Thoughtful design and attention to detail will help reduce the chances for structural problems in the future. The sculpture should be installed in an area where its surroundings will not contribute to its deterioration. Avoid installing sculptures below anything that may allow water, sap, or other materials to continuously drip on surfaces. Do not install sculptures close to a swimming pool because it is a source of chlorinated water that can accelerate corrosion.

Inspecting

Once a sculpture has been installed, it should be periodically inspected. It is helpful to keep a photographic record, with photos taken on the same day of the year, at the same time of day, if possible. Note spalling concrete, overgrown plants around the base, or settlement cracks. If you observe damage to the sculpture, be sure to note its location and extent. Watch for anything unusual and do not hesitate to seek advice from conservators.

Maintaining

Regular maintenance does not require an extensive investment of time, but is of great benefit for outdoor sculpture. Cleaning done at least annually can mitigate the dangers of outdoor display and help detect damage in its early stages. This allows for early action that can prevent catastrophic de-

terioration and the need for extensive and expensive conservation treatment. The instructions in this document are **not** appropriate for the following:

- sculptures that are not structurally sound (may exhibit cracks, loose components),
- sculptures with a coating or paint that is damaged,
- sculptures with developing corrosion on the surface, efflorescence, or discoloration

If a sculpture exhibits any of the above characteristics, consult a conservator for advice.

Cleaning

One of the simplest maintenance activities is cleaning. Cleaning can often be done with nothing more than tap water and a hose. Although this may seem simplistic, rinsing a sculpture with water removes soil, industrial particulates, bird droppings, and other pollutants. Sculptures composed of iron, steel, ceramic, stone, concrete, or brick should be cleaned by rinsing at least once a year. It is recommended that bronze sculptures be washed with a clear, unscented detergent and receive a new coat of wax at least once a year. Instructions specific to each sculptural medium are found below.

Iron Alloy Sculpture

Iron and iron-alloy sculptures should be regularly rinsed off with tap water from a garden hose and kept free of organic materials. If you live in an area with hard water, a final misting rinse with distilled or deionized water delivered through a clean garden sprayer will help prevent mineral deposits and water spots. If you notice scratching on your stainless steel sculpture, it is best to consult a conservator. The abraded surface can become electrically active and susceptible to rusting.

Some types of steel, such as ***core-ten steel,*** are designed to develop a patina-like rust film on the surface. Sculp-

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tures constructed of core-ten steel will continue to oxidize over time, and should be allowed to do so. They should not be painted, sealed, scrubbed with brushes, or otherwise manipulated. It is important to keep these sculptures clean so that oxidation develops evenly across the surface. Bird droppings, animal activity, and plant materials can aggravate the surface to react more quickly to the environment causing splotchy surfaces.

Ceramic, Stone and Concrete Sculptures

"Avoid using distilled or deionized water on materials such as stone, marble, or concrete, as it may result in etching of the surface."

Ceramic, stone, concrete, and masonry sculptures are primarily subject to damage through freeze/thaw cycles, impact, vandalism, and efflorescence of soluble salts. Keep them clean by regularly rinsing with tap water from a garden hose. Stubborn soil and algae films can be reduced with a soft brush and a weak solution of clear, unscented detergent rinsed thoroughly with tap water. A final rinse of distilled water applied using a garden sprayer can be used on ceramic sculptures. Avoid using distilled or deionized water on materials such as stone, marble, or concrete, as it may result in etching of the surface. In order to avoid damage from roots, biofilms, and suckering growth, keep nearby plant materials clipped back.

Bronze Sculpture

Bronze sculptures should be washed annually using a clear, unscented dish detergent. The detergent must be carefully and completely rinsed away with water to avoid spotting. Cleaning will also include the removal or reduction of biological materials, graffiti, staining, efflorescence, and the clearing of weep holes. Weep holes are placed at various places on many outdoor sculptures to allow small pools of water to drain away. They often become clogged with leaves and dirt and need to be reopened so the water can drain again. Paste wax can be applied to clean dry bronze sculptures and buffed out to protect the sculpture. This is best done on a warm, sunny day. The wax coating should be renewed on an annual basis as part of the regular maintenance schedule. Cleaning and waxing instructions are found in "Caring for Brass and Bronze" and can be modified for using on a larger object.

Consulting a Conservator

The cleaning instructions in this handout are appropriate only for sculptures that are structurally sound and do not exhibit any changes in appearance such as coating degradation or corrosion. If you are unsure about the state of your sculpture please consult a conservator. A conservator can help you determine whether additional treatment needs to be carried out before you clean and wax it. Calling a conservator early on can prevent further damage from happening which may necessitate costly treatment to fix.

Additional Resources

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Care of Metals.* Retrieved from http://canada.pch.gc.ca/eng/1453994182990

American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works. *Caring for Your Treasures: Metal Objects*. Retrieved from www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/resource-center/paintings.pdf.

Conservation Suppliers

Most of the materials mentioned in this handout can be obtained from hardware and art supply stores. The following are recommended resources that carry supplies needed for the care and long term preservation of objects.

Conservation Resources International
5532 Port Royal Road
Springfield, VA 22151
Toll free: (800) 634-6932
www.conservationresources.com
Archival housing/storage supplies, photographic supplies, general

Gaylord Archival
P. O. Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221-4901
Toll Free: (800) 448-6160
www.gaylord.com
General conservation supplies, housing supplies

Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.
6340 Bandini Blvd
Commerce, CA 90040
Toll Free: (800)-862-2228
www.hollingermetaledge.com
Archival housing/storage supplies

Light Impressions
100 Carlson Road
Rochester, NY 14610
Toll Free: (800) 975-6429
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
Photographic supplies, housing, matting and framing supplies

University Products
517 Main Street
P. O. Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041
Toll Free: (800) 628-1912
www.universityproducts.com
General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies

Talas
330 Morgan Ave
Brooklyn, NY 11211
Telephone: (212) 219-0770
www.talasonline.com
Conservation supplies, photographic supplies, general

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