Nearing Her 100th Birthday, Alma Mater Receives A Much Needed Makeover

By Jason Hollander

Unveiled in 1903, Alma Mater has been the most photographed woman on Columbia’s campus for nearly 100 years. But like every aging figure, she too needs a little help to look her best.

The statue’s last major restoration came more than two decades ago, but fortunately, a gift for refurbishment was recently presented to Columbia. The grant is from the estate of Francis Goelot, a descendent of Hartiet Goelot, who originally commissioned the statue in memory of her husband, Robert, Columbia College Class of 1886.

Sarah Weiner, Columbia’s curator of Art Properties, then recruited Martin Weaver, director of the Center for Preservation Research at Columbia, to assess the statue’s needs. Based upon his research, she set out to find just the right people for the job.

Enter Joseph Sembrat, of Conservation Solutions in Maryland, and Mark Rabinowitz, of the Conservation and Sculpture Company of Brooklyn. The two experts have managed to give the weathered statue an especially subtle, yet effective makeover. The treatment involved improvements made to both the bronze sculpture itself and the marble and granite base the statue sits upon. First, a substantial layer of dark pigmented wax was removed from the statue and certain areas were chemically painted in order to unify and lighten the surface. Then, repairs were made to the granite base by inserting small blocks of the same stone as needed. The marble was treated to inhibit further deterioration of the stone.

“I’m extremely pleased with the results of their work,” says Weiner. “Alma Mater occupies a central place on this campus and has become an important symbol for the University.”

Weiner notes that the seated female figure sits with her arms extended, in a gesture that is both authoritative and nurturing. This is a departure from many public statues, in which the position of the figure conveys aloofness or emotional distance. “Her gesture is unique because it manages to be both regal and welcoming at the same time,” says Weiner. Columbia’s Alma Mater was designed by sculptor Daniel Chester French, who carved the marble statue of Abraham Lincoln’s body on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and produced more than 100 statues and memorials during his 60-year career. French came highly recommended by Charles McKim, of the architecture firm McKim, Mead & White, which designed the Morningside campus.

In 1901, President Seth Low told French that the trustees unanimously approved of his model and the finished work was eventually unveiled during a formal ceremony on Low Plaza in the fall of 1903.

Trustees Rescind Bancroft Prize

Columbia’s Trustees have voted to rescind the Bancroft Prize awarded last year to Michael Bellesiles for his book, Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture. The Trustees made the decision based on a review of an investigation of charges of scholarly misconduct against Bellesiles by Emory University and other assessments by professional historians.

The Trustees considered the report of the Emory investigating committee and Bellesiles’ response to it. They also considered assessments by professional historians of the subject matter of that report. Ultimately, they concluded that Bellesiles had violated basic norms of scholarship and the high standards expected of Bancroft Prize winners.

In making their decision, the Trustees emphasized that the judgement to rescind the Bancroft Prize was based solely on the evaluation of the question of the plausible scholarly work and had nothing to do with the book’s content or the author’s point of view.

The Trustees voted to rescind the Prize during their regularly scheduled meeting on December 7, 2002 and have notified Bellesiles of their decision.

Libraries Launch John Jay Papers

(Continued from Page 1)

Only retrieve all correspondence to or from specific individuals, and search through document abstracts by keyword, they can also step through each day, week, month and year of John Jay’s life to study his and his correspondents’ writings in context and in sequence.”

Davis said of the technology used in developing the tools for the project, “The Jay Papers project has also provided us our first opportunity to use the newer ‘mrsid’ image wavelet compression technology. This was particularly important because of the wide variety of handwriting styles and document sizes involved. Using the multiresolution, zoomable image display provided by ‘mrsid’ technology, readers can themselves adjust the size of the page as needed to display and analyze individual documents.

These files, collected under the direction of the late Professor Richard B. Morris, were maintained as sources for items to be used in a planned four-volume letterpress series entitled “The Selected Unpublished Papers of John Jay. “Four essays, in addition to a biographical essay, introduce Jay: “The Jay Treaty,” “Jay and New York,” “Jay and Slavery,” and “Jay and France,” in addition to a biographical essay. The original documents from which Morris made his copies are located at more than 50 repositories in the United States, Britain, France, Spain and around the world. Approximately 23,000 pages of the nearly 12,000 documents have been scanned as images that are linked to the collection’s index, enabling researchers to examine the handwritten texts online. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and The Florence Gould Foundation, The Papers of John Jay, 1745-1829 make available to students and researchers primary resources that have in the past been difficult to find or link to one another.

Among the topics that may be explored are: farming, building, philanthropy, legal practice, the courts, education, political intrigue, health, and what might be called “memorializing the revolution” in the early nineteenth-century. The Papers of John Jay, 1745-1829 is available on the Web without restriction at: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/libraries/archives/jay/