

Contested 'Wounded Indian' sculpture heading back to Boston after quarter-century dispute with Norfolk's Chrysler Museum

“These ragtag guys up in Boston aren’t going away,” said the president of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association. “We’re a small organization compared to the Chrysler, but we were dead serious that we wanted this back.”

By **Malcolm Gay** Globe Staff, Updated August 9, 2023, 8:11 p.m.



Peter Stephenson's sculpture "The Wounded Indian" has been at the heart of a decades-long ownership dispute between the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association and the Virginia-based Chrysler Museum of Art. STEWART GAMAGE/CULTURAL HERITAGE PARTNERS

QUINCY — Peter Stephenson's sculpture could not have been more ambitious: Modeled on the "[Dying Gaul](#)" of antiquity, it presented a wounded Native American warrior bent over the arrow that felled him. Expertly carved, the neoclassical work was said to be the first major work cut from Vermont marble — an unmistakable statement in both material and spirit that the America of 1850 aimed to rival Europe.

"The Wounded Indian," thought to be destroyed in the late 1950s, arrived some 30 years later in a Virginia museum, setting off a decades-long dispute between the museum and the sculpture's true owner, the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, an old-line Boston organization that traces its 1795 founding to none other than Revolutionary War patriot Paul Revere.

Now, after nearly a quarter-century of wrangling — and a recent visit from the FBI — the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk has agreed to return the sculpture to the charitable organization, perhaps as soon as the end of the month.

The MCMA says it plans to publicly display the artwork in or around Boston, a potentially fraught plan as some critics argue that such 19th-century works, which depict dying or wounded Indians, perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Native Americans as a vanishing race.

“We’re pleased they’ve seen their way to allow it to come home,” said Chuck Sulkala, president of the MCMA, adding that the group’s sustained pressure made it clear “these ragtag guys up in Boston aren’t going away.”

“We’re a small organization compared to the Chrysler,” he added, “but we were dead serious that we wanted this back.”

In a statement to the Globe, Chrysler director Erik H. Neil said only: “The Chrysler is pleased with the amicable resolution, and we wish the best for the MCMA.”

The charity today operates out of an office building in Quincy, where descendant Paul Revere III sits on the board and serves as general counsel. The organization provides grants to help train disadvantaged people in the mechanical trades.

For much of its long history, the MCMA was a high-profile organization, whose members are said to have helped build the USS Constitution, the Bunker Hill Monument, Trinity Church, and Symphony Hall. It also ran a trade school and held exhibitions at Mechanics Hall, its hulking building where today the Prudential Center stands.



Mechanics Hall, the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association's former home, once stood on land that is now part of the Prudential Center. THOMAS O'CONNOR/GLOBE STAFF

The MCMA acquired numerous cultural objects over the years, including paintings by Jane Stuart, a Leyden Jar used by Benjamin Franklin for electrical experiments, and the first pocket watch made with interchangeable parts, serial number 001.

“It’s a very eclectic collection, because it’s an organization that really had no intention of having a collection,” said Peter Lemonias, a past president who also led the most recent effort to recoup the artwork.

In 1893, the group also acquired Stephenson’s “The Wounded Indian,” part of a broader artistic movement that saw white artists produce romantic depictions of dying Indians in the context of westward expansion.

The works, which include [“The Dying Tecumseh”](#) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and [“The Indian: The Dying Chief Contemplating the Progress of Civilization,”](#) a version of which adorns the US Capitol, often have a reverential air. But

they are also criticized for portraying Native Americans as an extinct, or dying, forerunner to American civilization.

“It’s this notion that there was a broad and empty continent, sporadically inhabited by wandering tribes — that’s the language of the early 19th century, not mine — that provided a foundation for what would become the American republic,” said David Penney, associate director for museum scholarship, exhibitions, and public engagement at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. Such works “play a very specific role in the history of American art that really doesn’t have much to do with American Indians.”



The Dying Tecumseh, carved in 1856 by Ferdinand Pettrich, is one of numerous works by white artists that depict wounded or dying Native Americans.

As for “The Wounded Indian,” it was exhibited at Mechanics Hall for some 65 years.

In 1958, however, the organization sold the building, and the all-volunteer group had to coordinate the removal, shipment, and storage of all manner of objects from the 300,000-square-foot facility. Though much went into storage, many of the more valuable

works ended up at museums such as the Smithsonian Institution or the Newport Historical Society.

When it came to "The Wounded Indian," however, the MCMA was informed that it had been damaged beyond repair during the move and its pieces disposed of.

"We've gone through all of our notes," said Lemonias. "We never got anything more about its loss. We're surprised that there's not more, but that's all we can say."



Peter Lemonias, former president of the MCMA, led the current effort to retrieve "The Wounded Indian." ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

That's where matters stood for the next four decades, until 1999, when a researcher informed the MCMA he'd seen the sculpture on display at the Chrysler. MCMA leadership soon contacted the museum, which responded by describing the MCMA's work as a "version" of the sculpture in the Chrysler's collection.

“Perhaps further research by one of your members in Boston can unravel the mystery,” wrote former Chrysler director William J. Hennessy.

For its part, the Chrysler had acquired the sculpture in 1986 as part of a larger acquisition from James Ricau, a collector the museum describes in one of its own publications as having “little concern for documentation.”

Ricau told the museum he’d purchased it from Boston’s Vose Galleries on Newbury Street. But when Chrysler curator H. Nichols B. Clark called the gallery to confirm, it had “no record of such a transaction which is very unusual for them,” according to a letter Clark sent seeking to fill gaps in the work’s ownership history.

With few resources at its disposal, the MCMA didn’t take up the cause again until recently, hiring an attorney in 2019 and employing a researcher to more fully document the work’s provenance and exhibition history before approaching the Chrysler again.

“The idea was that we would do it on an amicable basis,” said Lemonias. “Our feeling at the time was that we could leave it there, but we would like to have it displayed in Boston.”

The two sides nearly reached an agreement in 2020, but negotiations foundered when the Chrysler declined to cover approximately \$200,000 in legal fees on behalf of the MCMA.

“They basically said, ‘To hell with you,’ ” said Sulkala, who’s retired from his auto body repair business. “ ‘You’re just a couple of Yankees that don’t know what you’re doing, and we’re smarter than you are.’ ”

In the intervening years, the museum has updated the work’s provenance to include the MCMA, a de facto admission that the sculpture is one and the same.



"The Wounded Indian" sculpture by Peter Stephenson, completed in 1850, seen in its nook at the Chrysler Museum of Art. JOHN C. CLARK/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Nevertheless, negotiations remained contentious.

Earlier this year, Neil, the Chrysler director, told The [Washington Post](#) that he felt the museum had an “ethical and legal right” to the sculpture. He added the MCMA wanted the sculpture back after having “disposed of it as damaged.”

“I get that. But it doesn’t mean that it was illegal or unjustified or anything nefarious,” he told the paper.

Now, following the MCMA’s continued pressure, including filing a police report and asking the FBI to get involved, the museum has shifted course.

“Works of art hold a special place in our society, and FBI Boston is proud to have been able to help facilitate the return of this 19th century statue to its rightful owner,” Boston

Division spokesperson Kristen Setera said in a statement. “This case also highlights the important role the public plays in assisting our recovery efforts.”

Attorney Greg Werkheiser, whose firm Cultural Heritage Partners represents the MCMA, said they were already in contact with shippers to bring the work home.

“Ultimately, the leadership of Chrysler did the right thing not just for the MCMA and their own institution, but also for the art field as a whole,” he said. “A visible return like this, after so many contentious years, will inspire other institutions that it’s rarely too late to correct a historic wrong.”

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