

VIRGINIA

Norfolk museum agrees to return ‘Wounded Indian’ statue to Boston



By [Gregory S. Schneider](#)

Updated August 9, 2023 at 6:02 p.m. EDT | Published August 9, 2023 at 11:26 a.m. EDT

The Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk has agreed to return a historic sculpture called “The Wounded Indian” to a Massachusetts organization that had owned it but believed the work had been destroyed in the 1950s.

The agreement, signed Wednesday morning, resolves a decades-long effort by the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association to be recognized as the rightful owner of the once-missing statue.

“The Chrysler is pleased with the amicable resolution, and we wish the best for the MCMA,” Chrysler Museum Director Erik H. Neil said in an emailed statement.

“The impending return of this exquisite statue to Boston is a triumph not only for MCMA, but also for all Bay Staters and Americans who appreciate that this outstanding work of art was created in Boston, by a then-Bostonian, given to a Bostonian civic organization, for a Boston-area audience,” the MCMA said in a news release.

Created by the Boston artist Peter Stephenson in 1850, the marble figure of a dying Native American warrior who has just pulled an arrow out of his chest has been a signature piece at the Chrysler since 1986. But its ownership trail was murky.

The statue had won fame in the 1800s for its beauty and for being the first major piece carved entirely from American marble, but Stephenson struggled to establish a career and died young. “The Wounded Indian” passed through several owners before being donated in 1893 to the MCMA, a Boston trade group founded in 1795 by Paul Revere. Today, the association awards grants to help people get vocational training.

For 65 years, the MCMA displayed “The Wounded Indian” in its vast hall in downtown Boston.

When it sold the hall around 1958, the association lent some of its extensive collection of art and artifacts to museums and put the rest in storage. During the chaos of the move, workers told the MCMA that “The Wounded Indian” was damaged beyond repair.

It endured only as a photograph in a binder cataloguing the association’s holdings.

In 1999, a visitor to the MCMA’s offices in Quincy, Mass., saw the photo and exclaimed that he had just seen the statue in the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk. That kicked off a long, slow process of association members researching and piecing together what happened.

It turned out that the Norfolk museum’s benefactor, Walter P. Chrysler Jr., had obtained the statue from an eccentric collector named James Ricau. After the MCMA surfaced with its claims, the museum defended its ownership but quietly began trying to track down how the late Ricau had obtained it.

Even as the museum suggested that the MCMA’s version might have been a copy, a curator was contacting Boston institutions and galleries in a futile effort to find Ricau’s footprints.

By 2020, the association had retained a law firm — the Richmond-based Cultural Heritage Partners — and nearly reached agreement with the Chrysler to have the MCMA’s ownership acknowledged and get the statue temporarily returned to Boston for a brief exhibition.

But when the MCMA requested \$200,000 to help cover legal fees and other expenses, the Chrysler balked.

The association then took its case to the FBI, reasoning that the initial disappearance of the statue amounted to theft.

On Wednesday, a spokeswoman for the FBI’s Boston field office thanked the agency’s Art Crime Team in Philadelphia and Washington for assisting in the case.

“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. This case also highlights the important role the public plays in assisting our recovery efforts,” FBI Boston spokeswoman Kristen Setera said in a statement.

Greg Werkheiser, a lawyer for the MCMA, said the statue — which is still being exhibited in Norfolk — could be back in Boston in the next couple of weeks.

“We’re in the process now of making final arrangements with a vendor that will crate, pack, ship and insure,” he said.

The MCMA will not sell the statue, Werkheiser said, and is negotiating with several institutions to find it a home for public display. “The Wounded Indian” will go into storage while plans are made for an unveiling celebration.

Werkheiser said resolving the provenance of the statue speaks to the broader issue of integrity in the world of art and museums, which has wrestled in recent years with questions about rightful ownership.

“Verifying ownership matters,” he said, “not just to the respective parties but as a way of killing markets for looters and thieves.”