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Fountains & Water Features

A 100-year-old fountain is returned to life at the New York Botanical Garden.

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By *Eve M. Kahn*

Nothing can match the sight and sound of water in motion for capturing the attention of passersby -- and engendering a sense of peace and serenity. That's why the ancient Romans, masters of civic architecture, filled their cities with public fountains. And part of Rome's continuing hold on the world's imagination is the magnificent collection of public water features that still adorn its piazzas and parks.

No groundskeeper at the [New York Botanical Garden](#) ever takes any chance of suffering drought. The priceless millions of plants there get direct feeds from the Croton Reservoir, a slightly silty but very reliable water source. So what better spot than this 250-acre garden, a 115-year-old and constantly self-improving icon in the Bronx, for an allegorical monument to water?

A circa 1905 fountain, now the Lillian Goldman Fountain of Life, flows at the foot of the Neoclassical 1899 library alongside a century-old tulip allée. The sprays cascade into marble basins past real and mythological sea creatures in bronze. A putto and a laughing nymph try to rein in a team of webbed-footed horses. Another putto swings a tiller while riding a dolphin poised in a headstand on a globe. A cantilevered seagull tags along for the bumpy ride. Muscular and half-submerged, a merman and a mermaid gaze up at the spectacle amid scuttling crabs. On the marble pedestal, grotto and two tiers of pools, some of the edges of the stones are scalloped, of course.

"It's a work of civic beauty in the great European tradition, part of a Beaux-Arts composition on axis with the allée and the library's front door, with water as a dynamic, activating element," explains Raymond M. Pepi, president of New York City-based [Building Conservation Associates](#) (BCA). The firm has led teams of artisans in a \$2-million fountain restoration. They've brought back its 1905 appearance, down to the water-spout pattern and bronze patina hue that the original sculptor, Carl Eugene Tefft (1874-1951), called "light sea green."

Maine Blueblood

Tefft, a Maine blueblood, began studying sculpture in New York as a teen-ager. His family had realized his calling early on, the Bangor *Daily News* reported in a 2005 profile of Tefft; he would take over the house's front parlor for months at a time, to mold figures out of river clay. His relatives called him Charles, but he used Carl professionally (perhaps because it sounded more continental). He was an avid gardener and fly fisherman, and themes of maritime struggles with nature clearly interested him. Among his major civic works are portraits of Maine loggers riding timbers in a river and Revolutionary War soldiers scaling a New Jersey river bank's cliffs.

In 1903 he won the botanical garden's \$20,000 fountain-design competition with a three-in.-tall model of his proposal, called "The Fountain of Life." (Robert W. Gibson, architect of the library, had already designed a rusticated pedestal out of gray-veined marble, with a blank plinth and elliptically lobed pools.) The competition jurors included such luminaries as sculptor Daniel Chester French and architect George B. Post. Tefft became friends with French, and with the equally prominent Augustus Saint-Gaudens. But their works were more classicized, idealized and drapery-veiled than Tefft's. He once told a reporter that his favorite hobby was gardening, while "taking time to study life as expressed everywhere in nature." Brooklyn, NY-based Roman Bronze Works – a favorite supplier to Saint-Gaudens and French – cast Tefft's life-size plaster models by lost-wax methods. When the fountain debuted in 1905, the *New York Times* lauded its "departures from classic types" and "sea life in fullest action." Pepi observes that "the more you look at it, the more detail you see." Tiny grimacing mascarons spout water, and the horses' webbed feet have low-relief swirls evoking sea foam. Fingernails and ribs are visible on the mer-people. And the foliage "looks a lot like native Maine plants: water lilies, purple-flag irises, and pickerelweed," says Maine-based sculptor Glenn Hines, who, along with his wife, Diane, has healed a major wound in the fountain.

The botanical garden had made a few misguided maintenance judgments over the years. BCA's preliminary study in 2002 pointed out exposed PVC pipes feebly pumping water to clogged drains, acid-rain streaks on pitted and black-corroded bronze, chipped and displaced marble, failing mortar and some unattractive bands of sealant and parging.

The landscaping didn't suit Tefft's visions either. He'd laid out a neat row of pines behind the fountain, but overgrown hemlocks had taken their place and were shedding leaves into the basins. Still, the BCA report called Tefft's work "essentially intact." It added, "No major architectural elements or carved pieces are missing" except four: the mer-people and two adjacent crab claws. They were last documented onsite in 1938. Current whereabouts: unknown.

Historical Research

Glenn and Diane Hines based their mer-replicas on huge enlargements of vintage photos, including images of Tefft's models. (Those sepia pictures survive in the files of the Art Commission of the City of New York, now called the Design Commission, but the actual models were probably destroyed when Tefft's Maine studio burned in 1987.) The Hineses also scrutinized an 1890s fountain at the Library of Congress, with bronzes of Neptune, Triton and nymphs, to determine the era's taste in mythological aquatic statuary. Tefft, Glenn Hines notes, was a realist to the point of anatomical correctness on the Bronx merman "The fountain's brazen nakedness," he says, "shows he was exploring the limits of propriety in the post-Victorian era."

The [Modern Art Foundry](#) in Queens, NY, cast from the Hines' plaster models. Kreilick Conservation of Oreland, PA, applied layer after layer of patina-inducing chemicals onto the mer-people. The vintage bronze was treated to match, and the same "light sea green" recurs on the patinaed copper dome of the library (which BCA helped restore in 2001, just before starting the fountain analysis). New copper pipes have been threaded behind the mascarons and grotto; plumbing technicians can enter the statue through a hatch just behind the laughing nymph's shoulder. Marble blocks for Dutchman repairs were cut from Royal Danby. On the basins, crews (led by Queens, NY-based contractor A. Ottavino Corp.) stretched a Kemperol membrane, surfaced with some gray-white urethane and marble dust to match the stone. Submersible and wet/dry lights create misty beams and dazzling water reflections at night.

Behind the fountain, the botanical garden has planted graded rows of emerald arborvitae. As the trees outgrow their spots, they'll be transplanted. "They can't just have their tops trimmed. They'd get too wide, flat-topped and leggy," explains Michael Adlerstein, the garden's architect and vice president for capital projects. "We've put the fountain back into the same landscape it was in 100 years ago, except now the tulip trees are mature."

The only noticeable upgrade is a bronze book face down on the lower pool's rim. A 2005 sculpture by Stephen Doyle, it's inscribed in memory of Lillian Goldman, a real-estate

heiress and philanthropist who helped fund the restoration. Perhaps because of Tefft's extraordinary naturalism in the background, many passersby reach down to touch the spine of the book, to see if it moves, to see if it's real. **TB**

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