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THE UPSIDE

The Florentine Lions will soon roar back into the spotlight at the Mann Center

by [Bethany Ao](#), Updated: May 10, 2019



JOEL FRY/BARTRAM'S GARDEN



Alexander Palumbo lowers his face shield, adjusts his welding respirator, and gently touches a whirring metal brush to the mane of the gigantic lion at his feet. A flurry of sparks appear as rust flakes off the sculpture, revealing mellow metal hues that catch the light for the first time in years.

Palumbo is among the team of conservation technicians at Kreilick Conservation who are restoring the Florentine Lions, a pair of once-grand bronze statues that fell into disrepair during the 43 years they stood on Crawford Circle — a forlorn drop-off spot for buses and automobiles outside the Mann Center for the Performing Arts.



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Conservation technician Alexander Palumbo (right) removes straps and padding in preparation for a restoration of two lion statues at Kreilick Conservation in Oreland.

That will change on May 13, when the reborn beasts will move to a more deserving location — the Mann’s main entrance — because they are undeniably majestic. Intricate whorls cover their heads and chests, and their mouths gape open, exposing fangs that, even dulled over time by the elements, still portray power.

T. Scott Kreilick, in whose Oreland studio the restoration is unfolding, says the process to clean, repair and apply protectant also involved fixing “a bunch of holes ... from casting defects.” Kreilick’s other projects include maintaining the LOVE sculpture and restoring the Old Mortality Sculptural Group at Laurel Hill Cemetery, but he has particularly enjoyed working on the lions because of what they represent: nobility and strength.

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The lions’ history is long and storied.

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They were cast at the Imperial Head Mechanical Works near St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1846, then brought to Philadelphia in 1849 by Andrew M. Eastwick, a Philadelphia engineer who had been building engines and cars for the St. Petersburg & Moscow Railroad.

The lions are replicas of the marble [Medici lions](#) that have stood at the 14th century Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence, Italy, since 1789. Before they arrived at the Loggia dei Lanzi, the lions were owned by Ferdinando I de’ Medici, grand duke of Tuscany.



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T. Scott Krelick, President/CEO of Kreilick Conservation, indicates which lacquer will be used to protect the statues once workers remove all the rust.

Upon his return to America, Eastwick, a wealthy businessman credited with the invention of the steam shovel, placed the lions outside Bartram Hall, his mansion near Bartram's Garden.

For decades, the lions calmly watched over the waters of the Schuylkill while the city skyline changed during a period of rapid growth. As immigrants swelled the city's population, Philadelphia became a leader in industrialization, rivaling New York in domestic commerce as the Pennsylvania Railroad expanded westward. In 1876, the city held the Centennial Exposition, the first World's Fair in the United States, in Fairmount Park. At the exposition, Alexander Graham Bell exhibited his telephone.

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After Eastwick's death in 1879, his wife donated the Florentine Lions to the Fairmount Park Art Association (now the Association for Public Art) as local philanthropists and civic leaders began efforts to beautify the park.

"They really wanted it to be glorious and full of sculpture and artwork, like other parks in the world," says Margot Berg, the public art director at the city's Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy. "It's why we have the extraordinary collection that we have now."

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A wire wheel is used to remove rust from the lion's side, which is made of iron.

In 1887, Eastwick's Florentine Lions were installed near Memorial Hall, which is now the Please Touch Museum, before being moved to their most recent site at the Mann, where they were eventually forgotten by the public.

About a year and a half ago, Mann Center President and CEO Catherine Cahill approached the city's Office of Arts about restoring the lions, fixing them up with new pedestals, and moving them to the pavilion's entranceway, where visitors could enjoy them, perhaps even to use them as a meeting point before concerts.



JOEL FRY/BARTRAM'S GARDEN

One of the Florentine Lions, prior to its restoration.

“It’s a blessing for the city of Philadelphia to have these two magnificent lions,” says Cahill, noting that about 30 similar replicas are located worldwide — from Cuba to Sweden. “They don’t exist anywhere else in the United States. These are it.”

The lions were moved to Kreilick’s workshop in March, where they’ve been undergoing a thorough cleaning followed by a protectant application of lacquer, pigment, and wax. The protectant will continue to be applied at regular periods to keep the sculptures gleaming well into the future.

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For public art director Berg, the restoration restores the Florentine lions’ primary function: to flank an entranceway, creating a sense of excitement for those who arrive.

Adds the Mann’s Cahill, “I genuinely think when people see them for the first time this summer, it’s going to be an ‘A-ha!’ moment. I’m sure a lot of people are going to say, ‘I never knew they were here.’ But the lions speak for themselves. Once you see them, they make you smile.”

