

‘Orpheus and Apollo,’ Dismantled, May Be Gone for Years, Some Fear Permanently

by MICHAEL COOPER, nytimes.com

November 26, 2015



Richard Lippold's sculpture "Orpheus and Apollo" at Avery Fisher Hall in 1996. Credit Jack Manning/The New York Times
Photo by: Jack Manning/The New York Times

Will Orpheus return from the underworld this time? Will Apollo ever glitter again in sunlight? Is it possible that one of the largest works of public art in New York — a five-ton, 190-foot-long, 39-foot-high sculpture — could disappear with few people noticing?

Twenty-one months have passed since Lincoln Center announced that Richard Lippold's monumental sculpture "Orpheus and Apollo" — a midcentury Modern explosion of polished metal strips that floated, with the help of some 450 steel wires, for more than 50 years over the grand foyer of what was first called Philharmonic Hall and then Avery Fisher Hall — was being "removed temporarily for maintenance and conservation." Now the artwork's fate is in limbo.

After the sculpture was taken down in early 2014, Lincoln Center and the New York Philharmonic moved forward with long-delayed plans to renovate the hall, which was renamed for David Geffen this fall in recognition of his \$100 million contribution toward the project. Lincoln Center officials said in response to questions this week that they were unlikely to rehang "Orpheus and Apollo" before the start of construction, which is now planned for 2019, and that it was too soon to say whether there would be a place for the Lippold work in the renovated hall.

"At this point I think it's unlikely for it to be reinstalled before redevelopment due to the complexity of the installation," said Eric Gewirtz, a spokesman for Lincoln Center. He added that it would be "premature" to say whether it would be rehung once the renovations are finished.

Katherine E. Johnson, a spokeswoman for the New York Philharmonic, said that the orchestra would defer to the architects and designers who are selected for the renovation project, and that a final decision on the sculpture's fate would be made jointly with Lincoln Center.

Several curators and art experts said that they were appalled by the possibility that the work — the first major art project planned by Lincoln Center — might not return to the building it was created for. It glistened for decades over the escalators that bring concertgoers up to the promenade, and was clearly visible through the hall's windows from the plaza outside. It is considered one of the most important works by Mr. Lippold, a sculptor who died in 2002 and who created large works for Harvard; Jones Hall in Houston, home to the Houston Symphony; and the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, among other places.

But some concertgoers confessed they had not even realized “Orpheus and Apollo” was gone.

David Craig, a copy editor at Food Network magazine, said he had not noticed it was missing until last week, when he attended a concert featuring the pianist Daniil Trifonov. “I did not know the Lippold was AWOL until the evening I was there for the Trifonov concert,” he said, adding that he missed it. A retired physician who has been going to the hall since it opened, said, “Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen it in a while, though I can’t say I miss it.” And Charles A. Riley II, who wrote a book about the public art of Lincoln Center, said he had not noticed it was gone when he recently took some students on a trip there.

“I didn’t even look up when I went,” said a somewhat surprised Mr. Riley, whose book, “Art at Lincoln Center,” was published in 2009.

The sculpture was commissioned by the architect of the hall, Max Abramovitz, who asked Mr. Lippold “to create sculpture that would float in space and relate in a contemporary manner to the interior of the foyer just as the magnificent crystal chandeliers of a former day took command of their space.” It was not quite finished in time for the opening night of the hall in 1962, but was completed a couple of months later, that December, when an article in *The New York Times* said it “relieves the severely plain and unadorned character of the architecture.”

Curtis Carter, the founding director of the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University in Milwaukee, who mounted a 1990 exhibition on Lippold’s work, recalled how he would speak of his struggles to configure the seemingly abstract pieces of Muntz metal, a copper-zinc alloy, to evoke Apollo, the god of music, and Orpheus, the musician of Greek mythology who used song to try to bring his wife, Eurydice, back from the underworld. (Orpheus is, in some tellings of the story, a son of Apollo.)

“He conceived of the piece, as did the architect Abramovitz, as a part of the building and space and not just something ancillary to it,” Mr. Carter said in an interview. “Any work of art that’s conceived along with the building is going to be a much more important work of art. Richard was very proud of the finished piece, and so I find it frankly appalling to think that people there would want to take it down.”

Gianni Augusto Morselli, who was Mr. Lippold’s companion, said in an interview that the artist had considered the piece “one of the most beautiful he had created.”

“Only fools would put their hands on the work and take it away,” said Mr. Morselli, who questioned whether the sculpture had required maintenance in the first place.

Marc Roussel, a partner at Roussel Art Conservation, said in an interview that he made three-dimensional scans of the piece before he disassembled it in 2014 so that at some point it could be reinstalled. The main cleaning and maintenance work has not yet been done, he said, since a decision was made to postpone it until just before the piece was returned to Lincoln Center. That move, of course, has been delayed.

Mr. Roussel said that the flat pieces of metal used in the work had been wrapped in special tissue and placed in long crates that are being kept in an art storage facility in New Jersey.

Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, who worked in the 1970s for the Pace Gallery on public artworks, said the work’s removal — and the possibility that it could be permanent — raised questions about public art. “Would Italy allow Bernini and Michelangelo works of public art to be removed willy-nilly for ridiculous reasons?” she asked.

But the Lippold sculpture has had its detractors over the years. In 1966 Hilton Kramer wrote in *The Times* that “this huge construction has remained a symbol of everything that one’s taste as well as one’s sense of intellectual rigor quarrels with in the whole Lincoln Center enterprise.”

When “Orpheus and Apollo” was still in place, its metal strips seemed to tumble down over the escalators that anchor each end of the hall’s foyer, or promenade. From the upper levels, pieces of it seemed within reach, allowing for a vertiginous lean over the railing. If the architects who are selected to renovate Geffen Hall decide not to include the work — the space has not been declared a landmark — it will be difficult to find another place big enough to hold it.

Mr. Morselli recalled a warning from Mr. Lippold. “I remember Richard saying to me, ‘Don’t let anyone ever take this down,’” he said. “‘Because no one will know how to put it back together.’”

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