Bringing ‘The Joy of Learning’ to life

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LAS CRUCES - NMSU students bring ‘The Joy of Learning’ back to life

In its spot on a patch of lawn behind New Mexico State University’s Branson Library, a threatening cycle of ice, heat and calcium-rich sprinkler water has gradually worn away “The Joy of Learning” sculpture.

“The bronze sculpture has become very corroded over the years,” said Silvia Marinas-Feliner, director of the Museum Conservation Program in NMSU’s College of Arts and Sciences. “Corrosion due to water and salt makes the surface very porous. If we don’t do anything about it, eventually the corrosion is going to start creating holes and then the metal will start to disappear.”

The sculpture, created in 1988 by Grant Kinzer, former chair of the Department of Entomology, Plant Pathology and Weed Science, depicts a cowboy reading to a child. Before this fall, the large statue had not received any conservation work since its installation.

To preserve the work of art, Marinas-Feliner tasked students in her advanced museum conservation techniques class with restoring the sculpture. This assignment, however, wasn’t something that could be completed in one afternoon – or even one semester.

“The treatment process must be applied over a period of time,” said Marinas-Feliner. “It’s impossible to ‘cure’ a bronze sculpture due to the nature of the materials interacting with the environment. Still, with continuing treatments, it should be possible to extend the sculpture’s life by slowing down the corrosion. It’s never going to look perfect – but it will look much better, especially as the patina forms after each treatment.”

The patina, she explained, is a stable coating that develops naturally on some metals due to oxidation. The group’s goal is to assist the sculpture in developing this patina, which will help protect the metal from corrosion.

“Think of the patina as the skin of the statue,” Marinas-Feliner said. “Our skin protects us from the environment, and the patina is kind of like that.”

To start this process, the group removed as much of the existing surface corrosion as possible, cleaned the sculpture and then applied a film of microcrystalline wax. This wax layer will isolate the metal from the environment and deteriorate before the underlying sculpture.

Once a year, over the next three years, a new set of museum conservation students will repeat the treatment process until the entire sculpture is covered with a new and more stable patina.

Working on “The Joy of Learning” introduced students to large-scale outdoor metal restoration techniques; these students then spent the remainder of the semester working on the University Art Gallery’s large and unique collection of religious retablos, or Roman Catholic devotional paintings from Mexico.

Although not an alloy like bronze, Marinas-Feliner explained that the retablos consist of a sheet of iron, which is very corrosive, covered with a thin layer of more-stable tin. If the tin is scratched and the iron is exposed, the retablo becomes vulnerable to corrosion.

Metals are also very sensitive to temperature fluctuations, so years of subtle expansion and contraction can cause the paint to crack and flake off, she said. To best understand these processes, museum conservation majors must take and pass one year of both general and organic chemistry.

To satisfy other degree requirements, students in the Museum Conservation Program apply this knowledge of object restoration and preventative conservation to independent studies or internships with local and regional institutions. Relatedly, in order to be accepted into a graduate program in art conservation, students must have completed a minimum of 450 hours of work on conservation and restoration projects.

“When my students go to intern, they are already trained – they know the best procedures to take care of collections. The only thing they need is to actually apply that knowledge,” Marinas-Feliner said. “For the students, it’s wonderful, because they have a place where they can learn how to apply what they learn in my class. For the museums, it’s perfect...
because they have people helping them who are already trained. It's a good combination.”

Marinas-Feliner’s students have worked with several local institutions, including the City of El Paso's Museum of History and Museum of Art, various units of the City of Las Cruces museums, the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, the Paul and Mary Taylor State Historic Monument, NMSU's Kent Hall Museum and the privately-owned Institute of Historical Survey Foundation.

Outside the region, NMSU museum conservation students have interned with the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum and other prestigious institutions.

On average, the Museum Conservation Program enrolls 30 students each semester. It is one of only three programs nationwide that prepares students for graduate work to become art conservators.

Information: NMSU Museum Conservation Program, https://artdepartment.nmsu.edu/museumcons/

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Students in NMSU's museum conservation techniques class restore the “Joy of Learning” sculpture.