

North Carolina Museum of Art Receives \$149,500 Matching Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to Complete Conservation Project on Statue of Bacchus

Raleigh, N.C.—The North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) has received a \$149,500 matching grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to complete a multidisciplinary, 10-phase conservation project on a work of art that has been in the Museum’s collection for almost six decades: the composite marble *Statue of Bacchus*. The project, which includes a derestoration of the sculpture and research on its history, will culminate in a special exhibition and public programming.



The *Statue of Bacchus* comprises a beautifully preserved ancient torso; a head from a different ancient statue; and limbs, berries, leaves, and locks of hair, all of which were assembled in the late 16th or early 17th century to form a single statue.

A derestoration project to separate the two antiquities from the postantique historical core was begun 30 years ago but never completed; only the head was removed and derestored. The [Bacchus Conservation Project](#) includes completing the derestoration and undertaking scientific research to understand the sculpture’s history and how it was put together more than 400 years ago. Once the ancient torso has been freed from the historical core, a replica will be made of it and the ancient head. These replicas will be used together with the base, tree trunk, limbs, hair, berries, leaves, and a newly sculpted right arm to re-create Bacchus in full.

As the final phase of the project, the Museum will host an exhibition featuring the head, newly freed torso, and re-creation of Bacchus, which will be displayed along with digital experiences to engage the public in the conservation project. Behind-the-scenes interactive programs will explore how the scientific method is used to solve real-world art challenges.

“The derestoration was proposed in the early 1960s, shortly after Bacchus was donated to the Museum,” says Caroline Rocheleau, the NCMA’s curator of ancient art. “However, at the time the NCMA had neither the staff nor a conservation lab for this major undertaking. Back then, NCMA Director Justus Bier preferred to leave the project to a future generation, when the Museum would have staff expertise and access to advanced conservation techniques and new technologies. This time is now, and we are the future generation!”

During the Renaissance and later periods, ancient statue fragments were combined with other ancient sculptural pieces or newly created ones to create whole sculptures, which were more attractive to art collectors at the time. The NCMA’s *Statue of Bacchus* is wonderful example of this practice. The project focuses on the following sculptural elements of the statue:

- **The head of Dionysos (pictured below, right):** The head once perched on Bacchus’s finely muscled body is from a now-lost Roman marble sculpture of a Greek Dionysos, dated to the 1st–3rd century. It is currently on view in the Classical Galleries in the Museum’s West Building, without its postantique berries, leaves, and locks of hair (which were removed in 1990).
- **Torso of a youth (subject of the conservation treatment):** The torso of a now-lost Roman marble copy of a now-lost Greek bronze statue. It does not actually represent Bacchus, the Roman god of wine; instead, it
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most likely represents a youthful Greek athlete, perhaps in his moment of greatest glory, crowning himself as victor with his wreath in his raised right arm. The torso is dated to the 2nd century. Only four other Roman imperial-period torsos of this type are known to exist, and the NCMA's is the only one in the United States.



- **New re-creation of Bacchus (to be completed as part of this project):** A composite statue comprising modern, newly made replicas of the ancient torso and head added to the existing postantique historical core: legs, left arm, tree trunk, base, berries, ivy, and locks of hair. The re-creation will also include the now-missing right arm, sculpted specifically for the new *Bacchus* and inspired by an 1830s drawing of the sculpture. "Those postantique fragments are an important part of the history of the sculpture and, ethically, we could not simply discard them," says Rocheleau. "With this re-creation, we are paying homage to the late 16th- or early 17th-century sculptor who created Bacchus using different fragments. And we are bringing Bacchus back to life, albeit in a slightly different version."

The Bacchus Conservation Project is a spin-off of the ongoing systematic research on the entire classical collection, begun in 2013. The ancient marble sculptures were the first to be studied, and some scientific research has already been conducted—including [ultraviolet-light examination and imaging](#), marble sampling, and gamma radiography. Explains Rocheleau: "We realized very quickly that Bacchus was special. The gamma radiography helped us understand how he was put together. It will also help us take him apart." This initial study and future research conducted as part of the IMLS-funded conservation project will be featured on the Bacchus Project's dedicated website, along with behind-the-scenes photos and blog posts: ncartmuseum.org/bacchus.

"We're incredibly grateful to the IMLS for the matching grant that will allow us to complete this very important conservation project," says Lawrence J. Wheeler, director of the NCMA. "Not only will the Museum gain rare works of classical art from its own collection, but it will also provide an extraordinary opportunity to create new and innovative programming for our visitors beyond traditional art-historical concepts. Our educators are eager to continue their focus on behind-the-scenes experiences and to present the community with a unique, in-depth exploration of our collection."

Adds Wheeler: "The Bacchus Project is exciting, and we are counting on patrons who love ancient art, conservation, and new technologies to help us match the IMLS grant. This is an incredible opportunity for the community to make a major impact on the Museum's permanent collection and interpretive programs." Contributions to the Bacchus Conservation Project can be made [online](#).

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About the North Carolina Museum of Art

The North Carolina Museum of Art's permanent collection spans more than 5,000 years, from ancient Egypt to the present, making the institution one of the premier art museums in the South. The Museum's collection provides educational, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural experiences for the citizens of North Carolina and beyond. The 164-acre Museum Park showcases the connection between art and nature through site-specific works of environmental art. The Museum offers changing national touring exhibitions, classes, lectures, family activities, films, and concerts.

The Museum opened West Building, home to the permanent collection, in 2010. The North Carolina Museum of Art, Lawrence J. Wheeler, director, is located at 2110 Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh. It is the art museum of the State of North Carolina, Roy Cooper, governor, and an agency of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. Susi Hamilton, secretary.

About the Institute of Museum and Library Services

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is celebrating its 20th Anniversary. IMLS is the primary source of federal support for the nation's [123,000 libraries \(link is external\)](#) and [35,000 museums](#). Our mission has been to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. For the past 20 years, our grant making, policy development, and research has helped libraries and museums deliver valuable services that make it possible for communities and individuals to thrive. To learn more, visit www.ims.gov and follow us on [Facebook \(link is external\)](#), [Twitter \(link is external\)](#) and [Instagram \(link is external\)](#).