



Cite this article: Margaret Adler, “The Goddess in the Basement,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <http://journalpanorama.org/the-goddess-in-the-basement>.

The Goddess in the Basement

Margaret Adler, Amon Carter Museum of American Art

This is the tale of a cement goddess that has been in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art since 1981 without ever having been on public view.

I confess to a bit of a Diana fixation. I share one salient commonality with the expert ancient markswoman, that is, a history as a competitive toxophilite (lover of archery). As a seasoned archer but a fledgling curator, I would jokingly remark that my preference would be to work for an art museum whose collection included an Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) sculpture of Diana—usually a safe bet!



Fig. 1. Photograph of cowboy boots. Courtesy of the author

The Amon Carter Museum of American Art has at one point or another been home to three of Saint-Gaudens’s hunting goddesses, to say nothing of Frederick William MacMonnies’s version or other wielders of bows. I had not realized that I also share a commonality with sculptor Cyrus Dallin, a competitive archer whose Olympic career exceeded mine—he took home a bronze at the 1904 Olympic archery event, while I was a finalist for the 1996 Olympic team.

Although my archery career has given way to the more sedate enterprise of curatorial work, the vestiges of that part of my life are often still in visual evidence today. Because I am a New Yorker who has put down roots in Texas, the goddess now adorns my cowboy boots.

We are likely all familiar with one of the most talked-about nineteenth-century celebrities, the gilded nude goddess standing more than thirteen feet tall and illuminated by electric lights that topped the second Madison Square Garden (which existed between 1890 and 1926), designed by Stanford White.¹ The monumental weathervane depicting the Roman goddess of the hunt, Diana, was an innovation. Traditional classical sculptures of Diana were robust, but Saint-Gaudens sculpted a lithe version of the goddess, delicately balanced

on one foot as if interrupted mid-hunt. That Diana is now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Nineteenth-century Americans judged the sculpted goddess a major hit, and she quickly became the most famous nude in the country, despite objections from those seeking to exercise moral rectitude in public spaces.²

Tabletop bronzes of Diana proliferated, ensuring that many American art collections proudly display their intricate versions—one of which calls the Amon Carter home. There are several gilded half-sized versions of the work; perhaps most known is the 1928 cast at The Metropolitan Museum of Art that towers over their sculpture courtyard. One of those half-sized casts made it to Fort Worth, initially to the Amon Carter Museum. Subsequently, as a gift from Ruth Carter Stevenson (daughter of the museum's founder) to a friend, it left the museum to be celebrated as an icon of the city at Bass Hall, home to the symphony and other musical enterprises. For those keeping count, we are up to two Fort Worth Saint-Gaudens Dianas.

Imagine my shock when a basement crate inventory introduced me to Texan Diana number three. When the gilded copper *Diana* was installed at Madison Square Garden in 1893, White was so enamored of the tower topper that he asked his friend for a half-sized version for his own garden. Saint-Gaudens presented a cement Diana to him in 1894 for installation at Box Hill, White's estate in New York. There it resided in front of an amphitheater based on a Greek model that White had seen on his honeymoon. That remarkable cement Diana, a gift between best friends, has been part of the permanent collection of the Amon Carter Museum since 1981, but never on display here.

More than thirty years of garden life took a toll on the cement goddess. In 1927, the White family had the sculpture removed for a bit of cosmetic surgery. Many years of engaging in archery while balancing on a slender ankle resulted in a sports injury—craftsman Attilio Contini put her back into shape. While he was working on her, a mold was made of her body that was cast in bronze in Munich. The half-sized Dianas that we are accustomed to seeing are the results of that casting. In fact, the Amon Carter Museum's version is the "mother of Dianas."

Off she then went to the Museum of the City of New York, where she resided from 1936 until 1970, when she was returned to the White family and subsequently entered the collection of the Amon Carter Museum alongside her gilded bronze companion. At that time, her torso and legs, originally constructed separately, were no longer safely attached to one another. When the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa asked if she could come for an extended visit in the 1980s, she was temporarily put back in exhibitable condition.

After her visit to Oklahoma, she returned to the museum's storage vault in the 1990s in need of rest—her legs were tired and her torso had never been properly reattached to the legs.

Bringing the Goddess Back to Life

Adam Jenkins, a conservator of decorative arts and sculpture, was asked to investigate the feasibility of reassembly and safe display. Along with Adam, the help of a cement analytics

company was enlisted to peer inside the body of *Diana* using gamma radiography to inspect her internal well-being. This process was intended to ascertain whether the metal armature had suffered from any corrosion and to determine different material densities of her body to see which aspects of her form were later mends and not original material.



Fig. 2. Gamma radiographs of the interior of *Diana*. Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Adam’s prognosis was good. The internal armature (her spine and bones) of *Diana* is strong. We were surprised to see the continuous nature of the bent metal that formed her structure instead of a hodgepodge of disparate metal pieces. Areas of mend were as expected—calves reshaped with plaster, and plaster reinforcement at joints. Cracking was less structural than aesthetic. Because the cast metal versions of *Diana* had our cement sculpture as their origin, there is excellent reference material if there is the need to recreate original aspects of her form.



Fig. 3. Adam Jenkins and Amon Carter Museum preparators testing the fit of torso and base. Courtesy Amon Carter Museum of American Art

So, all signs pointing to go, Adam embarked on her treatment. This consisted of bringing her top and bottom halves together with a secure internal support. Metal rods that likely connected to an internal receptacle had been without proper connection for many years. Past campaigns of reassembly relied on adhesive and inpainting to stick top and bottom together. Adam devised an internal 3D printed form for the hollow torso that provides a safer long-term mode of connection. He also injected adhesive in various locations to ensure the safety of her leg.

While she has been in treatment, we have been engaging in fact-finding missions with the help of specialists in the work of Saint-Gaudens, including Thayer Tolles, who is the Marica F. Vilcek Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Henry Duffy, Curator of the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site. Three questions arose at the outset. What was her original surface treatment? What about a bow? And what should be done about a base?

Diana is currently gray—the result of a 1980s paint job to even out her surface appearance. Nobody had done a thorough inspection for evidence of a fleck of original paint somewhere

that would indicate whether she was gilded, or painted to look like plaster, or patinated copper or bronze. Perhaps this time around, we would find a fleck of green or a spot of white in a neglected nook or cranny. We had been skeptical about this, and inspection revealed no visible remnants.



Fig. 4. Photographer Unknown, [View of Saint-Gaudens's Studio], McKim, Mead and White/Museum of the City of New York.

In the meantime, I was delighted to be connected with Samuel White, a descendant of Stanford White. Simultaneously, our intrepid curatorial assistant Michaela Haffner delved into the archives of the Museum of the City of New York and found a stunning image of Saint-Gaudens's Thirty-Fifth Street studio with the *Shaw Memorial* and a clay version of *Diana* in progress, a trial attempt at a plaster string hand suspended from the ceiling.

Michaela discovered correspondence from the director of the Museum of the City of New York to the White Family in 1968 with a tantalizing nugget: the museum used a removable water-based paint to paint her gray to match original patches of her paint. They said that the original color was the green gray of unfired clay.

And then a curator's dream arrived in the form of a White family photograph from Box Hill—providing some evidence to address all three questions at once.

Taken sometime between her installation in 1894 and her removal in 1927, the image shows *Diana* on her cement base. Even though the photograph is black and white, it appears that

she is similar in color to the cement of the base on which she stands. Combining that visual evidence with the snippet from correspondence, and adding the lack of paint samples that would prove the contrary, we determined that a gray paint color was in keeping with her original appearance.



Fig. 5. View of Stanford White's Garden at Box Hill, between 1894 and 1927. Courtesy of the White Family Collection

As for the bow, in the photograph she does not hold one. I suspect she never did, even though her hand has a hole that can accommodate one. But, given that neither the clay version had one, nor did she have one when the White family photograph was taken, we did not make one for her. This also put to rest my concern that somehow it had been lost over the years in our possession. Again, based on the photograph, we have been able to create a painted wooden base with internal metal armature true to the original, but with all of the bells and whistles that ensure proper support and our ability to keep her upright while maneuvering her safely through our lowest doors.

Diana made her Amon Carter debut in March of 2018. We will keep delving into her mysterious journeys and the story of her life. Until the next juicy tidbit arrives, however, we will content ourselves with returning a treasured goddess, looking not a day over 124 years old, to public view!



Fig. 6. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Diana*, c. 1894. Cement and plaster, height: 79 1/2 in. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 1981.67; Gift of Stephen Goodyear, MD

Notes

¹ For an in-depth look at the multiple versions of *Diana*, see John H. Dryfhout, *The Work of Augustus Saint-Gaudens* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1982); John Dryfhout, "Diana," in *Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture*, ed. Jeanne L. Wasserman (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1975); Thayer Tolles, ed., *American Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 305–9; and Alain Daguerre Hureau, ed., *Augustus Saint-Gaudens 1848–1907: A Master of American Sculpture* (Toulouse; Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art, 1999).

² For more about *Diana* and censorship, see Paula Uruburu, *American Eve* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 66–67. See also Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).