

Bringing a Smile (Well, a Shine) to a Burdened Statue of Atlas

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Of course, he's angry. Of course, he's disheartened. The weight of all the heavens has been on his shoulders for 71 years and, according to the mythological timetable, he has exactly forever to go.

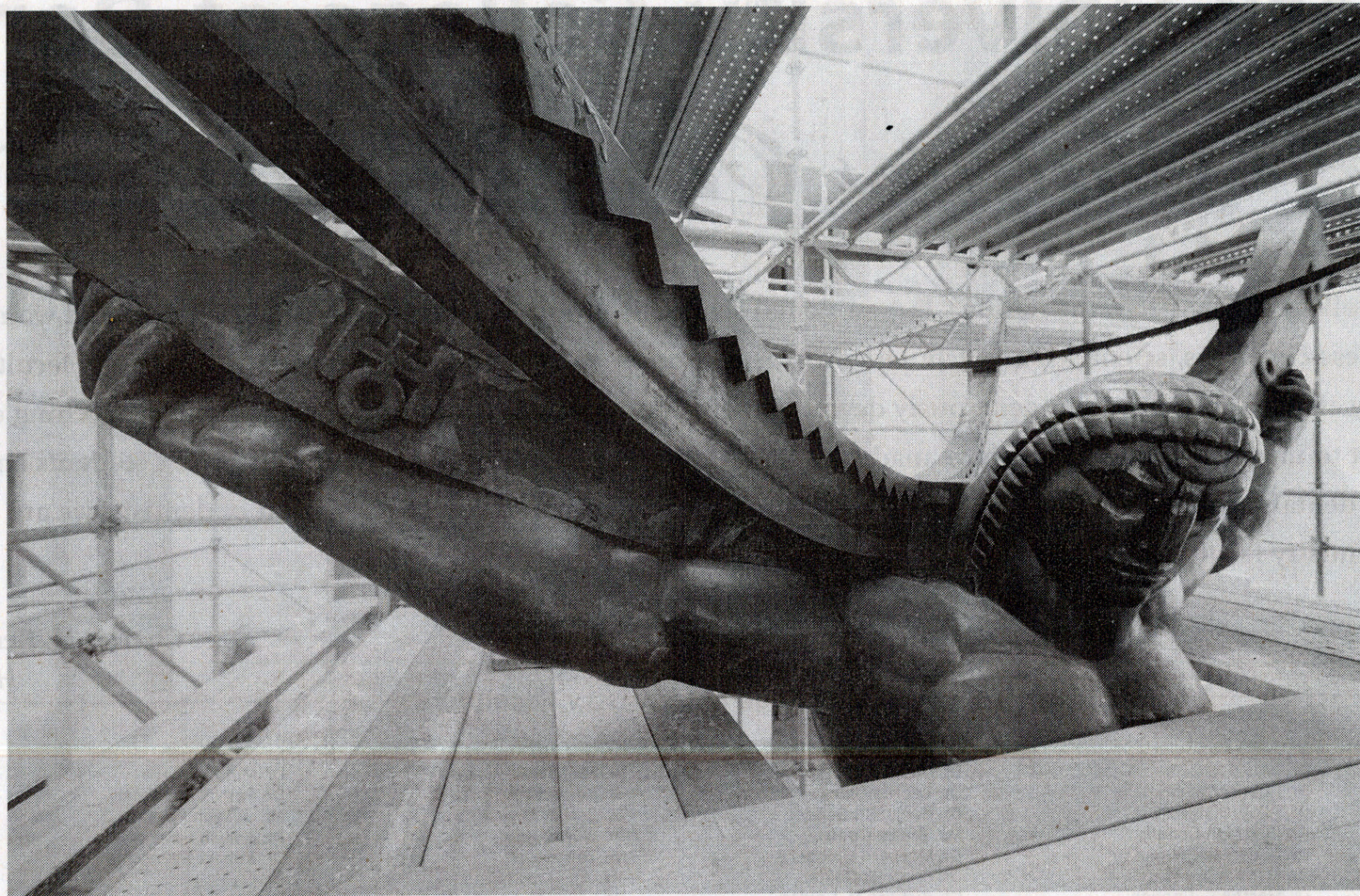
But only a close-up view of Atlas, at the base of the International Building in Rockefeller Center, reveals the powerful paradox of strength and despondency created by Lee Lawrie and Rene Chambellan, the artists behind the four-story-high, seven-ton bronze.

That is because the statue, though structurally sound, has been caked over the decades with so much lacquer and wax that its surface has darkened and deadened. And so, therefore, has its character.

"Everyone reads the substance of things through the surface," said Jeffrey Greene, president of EverGreene Painting Studios, which is about to begin a six-week cleaning of Atlas, down to the original patina. Mr. Greene believes it is the most ambitious conservation effort for the statue since it was installed in 1937, although it was regularly washed and waxed at least through the late 1980s.

Tishman Speyer, one of the owners of Rockefeller Center, would not disclose the cost of the latest cleaning.

A snapshot staple of any visitor's souvenir New York album shows Atlas and the 21-foot-diameter armillary sphere on his shoulders (representing the heavens with which he was burdened by Zeus as a member of the losing Titan team), silhouetted in front of the twin spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral across Fifth Avenue. From that vantage, he appears none the worse for wear.



FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The bronze Atlas at Rockefeller Center has years' worth of lacquer and wax, in addition to the weight of the heavens, to bear.

But examined as closely as the scaffolding that now surrounds it will permit, the statue's surface is flat and dull. Details like the zodiac signs in the armillary sphere are flaking scabrously. Yet, it also becomes clear how much could be revealed with a cleaning.

"There is all this detail in the sculpture that was brought out by the patina," Mr. Greene said. "It would have accentuated the

chiaroscuro and shown the artists' tool marks. It had a kind of luminosity." And its muscle contours were in higher relief than they now appear to be. In terms that would make an art critic cringe, this guy's six-pack abs are made of 18-ounce cans.

On Monday, Mr. Greene said, a translucent scrim will be wrapped around the scaffolding. After that, the statue will get a

low-pressure steam bath. Any residue will be cleaned with a gel solvent. A clear acrylic protective coating will be applied and the statue will be hand-waxed to a sheen that is more polished at sculptural highlights and flatter in the interstices.

One block south, Atlas's popular brother, Prometheus (by Paul Manship), was restored nine years ago.

"What we try to do is keep track of the condition of the artwork and what needs tending to," said Jerry I. Speyer, the chairman and chief executive of Tishman Speyer. "It's a fascinating piece of what nobody sees but what you really have to do if you're going to be a fiduciary for a place like that," he said. And if you don't take care of it, it's going to show the effects."