

Embedded Objects Find a New Home in the New Museum

As the opening of Princeton University Art Museum’s new facility draws closer, the space has begun to transition from construction site to museum—capable of housing the many extraordinary works of art from the collections that have been off view since 2020. The first pieces to grace the interior of the new building include a number of works being physically embedded into the architecture of the facility. Their installation marks the culmination of years-long collaborations between teams of specialist conservators, art handlers, curators, registrars, and more.

Michael Jacobs, senior gallery designer and manager of exhibition services, recently spoke about the steps taken—beginning with the deinstallation of the artworks that had previously been embedded in the former building—to ensure the smooth incorporation of objects such as a sixteenth-century Mallorcan staircase and a medieval stone window from the Vaucluse region of France, as well as a series of ancient Roman mosaics, into the fabric of the new Museum. “We saw plenty of opportunities in the newly designed spaces to bring back a lot of these objects to enable easy visual access to them,” notes Jacobs. Over the course of about a year, Museum Director James Steward, Jacobs, subject-area curators, and other Museum staff took part in conversations with the architectural design team to consider how space and artwork might match up to create compelling sites for some of the Museum’s most important objects.

As those conversations were taking place, all the works previously embedded within the architecture of the old facility had to be removed and then conserved by dedicated teams of external conservators and specialists working in close collaboration with Elena Torok, the Museum’s associate objects conservator, and Bart Devolder, chief conservator. Kelly Caldwell, senior conservator and director of conservation at EverGreene Architectural Arts, and Adam Jenkins, conservator at Adam Jenkins Conservation Services (AJCS), both emphasized the importance of having been involved in the project from the time of deinstallation to the return of the conserved works to the new Museum. By understanding how works such as the Mallorcan staircase and the Roman mosaics had been fitted together and embedded into place decades ago—sometimes using techniques that would be regarded as outdated today—Caldwell, Jenkins, and their teams were

able to build conservation treatment plans and create road maps for the objects’ future reinstallation. Alexia Hughes, chief registrar and manager of collection services, was involved throughout the process and worked to ensure the safe journey of numerous large, heavy, and fragile works of art to various conservation studios across the Northeast.

The process of returning the works to the new Museum facility and laboriously and safely re-embedding them in the new architecture began in September 2024. In recent weeks, as these works were transported into and installed in the new building, Museum photographers Jeffrey Evans and Joseph Hu documented the specialist installation teams at work.

Mallorcan Stairway

The Museum’s sixteenth-century Mallorcan stairway was previously a mainstay of the galleries of medieval art, where elements of it were installed across the galleries, including as a functional staircase leading to the former Works on Paper





Study Room. Once deinstalled—and after meticulous cleaning by the EverGreene team at their studio in District Heights, Maryland—the stairs were fully rebuilt over nine months to “better understand the spacing and updated engineering” necessary to install the piece in its eventual new home, according to Caldwell. As the piece was studied during its removal and conservation, including by Alexandra Letvin, the Duane Wilder, Class of 1951, Associate Curator of European Art, and then prepared for its reinstallation, special attention was paid to aligning curatorial goals, design, conservation, and engineering, allowing the team to “reconfigure the stairs to a more historically accurate reinterpretation.” Jacobs noted that he looks forward to seeing the installation of this piece the most among the works being embedded throughout the new

facility: “The staircase’s composition, nested within the environs of the Museum’s Grand Stair in a dramatic double-height space, will have a lasting impression on visitors.”

To reconstruct the stairway on-site, more than sixty heavy stone pieces of varying shapes and sizes were painstakingly moved into the building in travel cases through the new Museum’s large pivot door. On coordinating such logistics, Hughes said: “I want to acknowledge the people who maybe aren’t always seen—not just the Museum’s registrars, but also the preparators and conservators, our contractors, people in the facilities department, and the security staff. We can’t do any of this work without them. It takes everybody and all their professionalism to do these big jobs.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Alexandra Letvin, Duane Wilder, Class of 1951, Associate Curator of European Art; Silvia Callegari, conservator at EverGreene Architectural Arts; and Elena Torok, associate objects conservator, discuss the installation of the Museum’s stone works from Palma de Mallorca, Spain: Balustrades and columns probably from the Can Ayamans (Ayamans House), 1549; Stairway probably from the Carrer de l’Aigua (Water Street), 15th or 16th century. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Baroness Cassel van Doorn. Photo: Joseph Hu | ABOVE: Installation team members fit together two large stone pieces of the stairway. Photo: Jeffrey Evans

Vaucluse Window

The Museum's fifteenth-century stone window from the Vaucluse region of France, formerly housed in a connecting space between galleries of the old Museum, has found a new home in the reception area that will greet users to the Museum's future object study rooms. An updated design approach results in visible industrial framing that enables the window to be examined more fully from both architectural and historical perspectives.

The large steel frame holding the window provides opportunities to gain valuable insights into the materiality of the stone and its numerous mason's marks, and viewers will be able to understand better how the piece once fit into its original architectural context.

Caldwell explained that in its new installation "the window is completely independent from the surrounding walls; the steel for this piece was custom designed." Additionally, the conservators at EverGreene, masonry contractors, riggers, and engineers worked to create an installation plan that prioritized minimal interventions into the original elements of the monumental window: "No new attachment points were made; we utilized all of the existing old pinholes or the existing shapes of the stones," Caldwell noted.

Caldwell spoke highly of her experience with the project: "From our perspective, this has been a fantastic opportunity. It's been great to work with the Museum's curators and conservators to piece together the history of the window and to see how a better understanding of that history fueled decision-making in terms of the new display."

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Installation of the window from the Vaucluse, France, 15th century. Stone, 223.5 × 228 × 68.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Baroness Cassel van Doorn. Photos: Joseph Hu

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Conservators from Adam Jenkins Conservation Services finalize details of the installation of the mosaic pavement depicting Apollo and Daphne | BOTTOM: Roman Imperial Period (ca. 30 BCE–476 CE), Asia Minor (Turkey), Mosaic pavement depicting Apollo trying to assault Daphne (detail), late 3rd century CE. Stone, 190 × 592 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of the Committee for the Excavation of Antioch to Princeton University. Photos: Joseph Hu

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Ancient Roman Mosaics

Among the most highly anticipated moments in the process of returning these monumental works to the new Museum have been the placement of several of the Museum's ancient Roman mosaic pavements, excavated in the early twentieth century near Antioch, in present-day Turkey, as part of a multinational partage excavation project. To accommodate these works in the new building and allow visitors to understand them in their original settings, cavities were built into the building's floors in different locations to house three of the mosaic fragments. Once the mosaics are placed into the cavities, and the works are cleaned one last time, protective glass flooring is installed above to allow for viewing. Visitors will be able to stand above these ancient pavements and have



direct and powerful viewing experiences. Museum Director James Steward noted that inspiration for this approach was drawn from locations within the Musée du Louvre in Paris, where some of the building's ancient antecedents are exposed to visitors in similar fashion. Jacobs pointed out that a key element in approaching such work is a commitment to reversibility: "Everything we install can be reversed." Adam Jenkins and his team of conservators at AJCS—who managed the deinstallation, conservation, and reinstallation of the mosaics—also emphasized this approach, noting that often the installation of such objects is done without the possibility of future removal in mind. For Princeton, Jenkins and the

team worked to assure that reversibility was prioritized at every step of the treatment and installation of the mosaics.

The required conservation treatments performed by AJCS for these mosaics were overseen by Torok, Devolder, and Associate Curator of Ancient Mediterranean Art Carolyn Laferrière. The treatment of the *Drinking Contest of Herakles and Dionysos* was particularly complex. In this case, a new aluminum honeycomb backing was adhered to the mosaic to provide much-needed stabilization for the ancient tesserae, the tiny square elements that constitute the mosaic. The pavement fragment comprises several sections, each weighing hundreds of pounds, that had to be separated from one another and later reassembled like puzzle pieces. Specially designed low-profile casters were mounted to the underside of each section's aluminum backing so that once lowered into the floor cavity, the segments could be wheeled together and tied in place. Of the complicated engineering and conservation decisions made while handling the *Drinking Contest*, Jenkins said, "For me, that problem-solving was the most rewarding part of this. We presented innovations not already extant in the field and found good solutions at every stage that were reviewed by engineers and then implemented successfully."

With installation of the remaining embedded objects nearing completion, Hughes commented: "To see these architectural pieces in place, it does feel right. The building is so different from what it used to be . . . we've been disconnected from the old building for four years now, and with the return of these amazing pieces it's starting to feel like the Princeton University Art Museum once again."

