

Historian: Little-known statue may be a Michelangelo work

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NEW YORK -- A little-noticed statue of Cupid in the lobby of a building across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art may be a priceless masterpiece: a missing Michelangelo.

The 3-foot statue of a naked, curly-headed boy with a blissful expression and a quiver of arrows strapped to his back has been sitting in plain view since the building was completed in 1908.

But it is only in the past three months that art historian Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt has been sure that the sculpture is a Michelangelo.

"It's of monumental importance," said Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "You are dealing with one of the greatest creative geniuses of all time. And there are no other sculptures by Michelangelo in America."

Beyond the statue's value to art-lovers and historians is the irony that it had been seen by thousands -- including museum experts, renowned architects and many others -- before Brandt recognized it.

At a news conference Tuesday, she recalled walking many times past the Fifth Avenue building, which houses cultural offices for the French Embassy, before she noticed the lobby brilliantly lit for a party last October.

Peering through the windows, she saw the statue and was astounded. "It was clear we were dealing not with a garden statue, not an imitation, but an important work," she said.

A photo of the piece had appeared in a catalog for a 1902 sale in London, which described it as being from the school of Michelangelo. The sculpture wasn't sold and disappeared. Three years later, the building's architect, Stanford White, bought the sculpture in Italy for his Renaissance-style rotunda, thinking it was a newly unearthed antiquity.

The statue has been sitting on a stone pedestal in the lobby since 1908, encircled by 16 marble columns beneath a ceiling inlaid with carved trellises and pastel frescoes of cherubs. In 1952, the French government bought the building from the family of the original owner, financier Payne Whitney.

Brandt believes the sculpture was carved in about 1494, when Michelangelo was 20. About 3 feet high, with the calves and arms broken off, the figure appears to be in motion.

Brandt said Michelangelo left the figure unfinished, probably because he didn't like the way the quiver of arrows, shaped like a lion's paw, was turning out.

"The energy, the thrust of the pose, the delicacy of the form, the technique in which the marble was carved ... all the brilliance coherently fits together in a way only Michelangelo can do," Brandt said.

The Metropolitan has expressed interest in conserving the statue, authenticating the marble, and displaying it. France also may want it for the Louvre, but the embassy's cultural counselor, Denis Delbourg, said it will remain here for now.

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