A Makeover for the Philadelphia

As Related by Tamsen Fuller

PHOTO 1. The "Ram" as it was before the new work began in May 1997. As conservators and curators discovered, the statue was at this point the product of a 1940s restoration of Woolley's original reconstruction done in the late 1920s. In both of these incarnations, the front hooves of the goat did not rest on the branches of the flowering tree; however, close examination of the photograph of the piece as found made it clear that they did originally and should again.

"Ram Caught in a Thicket"

PHOTO 2. A rigid scaffolding encloses the "Ram" and its individually numbered fleeces before disassembly. Whereas Woolley's restoration progressed from the "inside out," Tamsen Fuller's proceeded from the "outside in." The decision had been made before work began to modify the silhouette of the goat's humped back. Fuller therefore created a jacket of balsa wood slats and short lengths of bamboo inserted in a reversible facing system of fabric impregnated with acrylic resin and over the fleeces. (It is critical that only chemically reversible substances come in contact with the actual object to ensure that no harm is done to the irreplaceable original materials.)

PHOTO 3. The materials Woolley had used to fill the cavities of white shell fleeces and dark lapis lapis locks were completely removed. He had created a mannequin from wax and "plastic wood," with copper rods inserted through the legs and into the belly area. Fuller softened this material with solvents and then carefully scraped it off. Looking somewhat like a lobster shell, the cleaned torso of the "Ram" without head or legs makes it clear that what survives of the object are only the casting materials, or what might be called its "exoskeleton." No vestiges of the ancient core remained.

PHOTO 4. The head of the "Ram" laid out on the workbench in "exploded" view—the horns above to each side of the brow line, one of the lapis and shell eyes visible near the center of the photograph, the beard below, cheek pieces in the container. From these minute and fragile fragments Fuller was able to re-create the expressive face of the goat.

PHOTO 5. The mosaic inlaid surface of the base is here being re-created piece by piece on graph paper. To the right is the underside of the mosaic as restored by Woolley. Fuller stabilized the top surface with the reversible polyester fabric and acrylic resin. She was then able to slip a heated spandrel underneath the tiles and bases and remove the mosaic all in one piece from the brown wax that Woolley had used to fix it to a modern silver-painted block. The circular gaps are where the goat's hind legs and the trunk stood.
PHOTO 6. Each of the pieces that make up the branches of the flowering tree are laid out on a full-size scanned image. The branches will be the most vulnerable part of the statue as the Ur exhibition travels to various museums around the country, so Fuller replaced Woolley's copper wire armature with a stainless steel armature securely soldered together and encased where possible with Teflon tubing.

PHOTO 7. The “Ram” seems to walk toward his hind legs in this photograph taken at a late stage in the reassembly. In earlier restorations, the two main branches had joined the trunk at right angles, directly opposite each other. Examination of the in-situ excavation photograph made it clear that the branches originally were inserted into the trunk at a slight angle, which would have been more stable, and that the ends would have slid past each other inside the trunk, rather than butting up against one another.

Stainless steel rods protrude from the gold foil-covered legs, which were filled with a mixture of glass microballoons and reversible acrylic resin. (The same mixture filled the head and front legs, and the flowers of the tree.)

PHOTO 8. The new restoration of the “Ram” is almost complete. Blocks of polyethylene foam were carved to fill most of the body cavity. The glass microballoon/acrylic resin mixture used to support and adhere the shell and lapis fleeces was painted black to re-create the look of the tarlike bitumen that was originally used to hold on the fleeces. The abdomen was faced with a thin plaque of epoxy putty (that could be easily “popped out,” if it were ever necessary to get access to the innards of the “Ram”) and then covered with silver sheet, as were the sides of the base.

PHOTO 9. By the latter part of April 1998, the new restoration of the Philadelphia “Ram” was complete. (It had taken a certain amount of delicate adjustment to bring the goat’s front legs into position on the tree branches.) The statue has been strengthened and supported; the gold foil gleams anew; the silver of belly and base is appropriately “distressed” to replicate the look of the silver bowls that will be seen elsewhere in the exhibition. The “Ram” is now prepared to go out on tour.

All photographs except Figs. 1 and 9 were taken by Tamara Fuller.

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