

Wired: Preserving the Installations of Richard Lippold

By EVE M. KAHN JAN. 8, 2009

Richard Lippold, an abstract sculptor, spent decades stringing wires across rooms. In office lobbies, churches, hotels and performance halls he dangled shimmering metal rods from webs of filament. But his architectural installations, mostly made in the 1950s and '60s, turn out to be hard to maintain: their strands collect dust, sag and snap.

Lippold, who died in 2002 at 87, often filled spaces designed by famous architects. Philip Johnson hired him to suspend a forest of bronze rods along the ceiling of the Four Seasons restaurant in Manhattan. Walter Gropius recruited him to string a hollow bronze globe from gold wires in the Vanderbilt Avenue lobby of the Pan Am (now MetLife) Building in Manhattan.

In the last year some of Lippold's most complicated constructions have undergone nimble-fingered repairs costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. Artisans at Newmans Ltd., a metal-restoration outfit in Newport, R.I., and at the Richard Lippold Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Locust Valley, N.Y., have been clambering around scaffolding to untangle, dismantle, polish and restring sculptures on miles of wire.

"Lippold was an engineering genius, but we've been dealing with a piece that had reached the threshold of catastrophe," said Howard Newman, of the Newport company. Working with a budget of \$475,000, his staff is now rehanging a Lippold work called "Trinity": about 215 aluminum bars on four miles of gold wires, spanning from floor to ceiling at a 1960s Benedictine chapel in Portsmouth, R.I.

"People's mouths fall open when they see it going back up, like they're

watching a spider spin a web of blazing gold," Mr. Newman said. "The more that goes up, the more exquisite it gets."

Newmans Ltd. brought in a yacht-restoration company to sandblast corrosion off the aluminum sections and has wholly replaced the original filaments, which were cracking. The deterioration was partly because of miscalculations by the original construction team, led by the modernist architect Pietro Belluschi, said Michael J. DeMatteo, a senior associate at Newport Collaborative Architects, which is overseeing a \$4 million restoration of the chapel for the owners, a monastery and a boarding school (Portsmouth Abbey).

The chapel's wood frame and stained-glass stripes were not engineered to withstand Rhode Island coastal conditions, Mr. DeMatteo said. "The building has leaked and twisted in the wind since the day it opened," he added, causing uneven stress on the Lippold sculpture.

Gianni Augusto Morselli, the president of the Lippold Foundation, regularly checks on and conserves the Four Seasons rods. This fall he spent two months reattaching unstable strands and replacing missing parts at the MetLife installation, which is titled "Flight." He would not disclose the cost of the job, which required six restorers and is not quite finished.

"The lighting needs to be adjusted so that it doesn't just shine right in your eyes," Mr. Morselli said. "It should be angled to highlight the spiritual presence of the sculpture, as Lippold and Gropius intended."

He receives calls for maintenance advice not only from owners of public spaces but also from a few private collectors who have smaller Lippold pieces, which are typically a few feet tall and sell for less than \$10,000. In 2006 a 30-inch-tall cluster of gold wires titled "Bird of Paradise #3" brought \$2,280 at a Christie's auction in New York.

In December a six-foot-tall mobile of metal rods, with an estimate of

\$30,000 to \$40,000, went unsold at a design and fine [art auction](#) at Los Angeles Modern Auctions in Sherman Oaks, Calif. (Bidders gave out at \$12,000.) “Kids seemed to love it, but I didn’t get any serious buyers,” said Peter Loughrey, an owner of the auction house. “People who looked at it must have been put off by the thought of where they’d ever hang it. You’d have to devote a whole corner to it, or hang it down from a 14-foot ceiling to be able to walk under it.”

Lippold never much promoted his work. “He was very humble and not interested in publicity,” Mr. Morselli said. Lippold, a Milwaukee native, trained as an industrial designer and only started wiring metal together in the 1940s, around the time he moved to New York. In his heyday he tailored works for major American cultural institutions — including Avery Fisher Hall, a rugs gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the lobby of Jones Hall, a performing-arts center in Houston — as well as unlikely spots overseas like a conference room in Riyadh and a casino and airport in Iran.

Critical reaction in his lifetime was mixed. In 1962 John Canaday of The New York Times praised the “sheer optical dazzlingness” of Lippold’s work. But Hilton Kramer, writing in The Times in 1968, called him our “foremost public decorator” and dismissed “the glittery superficialities of Mr. Lippold’s constructions, with their pretensions to cosmic ‘meaning.’ ” Lippold’s last major show was held in Milwaukee in 1990. “Two generations now of art connoisseurs don’t know about him,” Mr. Morselli said.

The foundation has two major works stored in boxes, awaiting funds for restoration and new homes, including “The Sun,” a 1950s spray of gold wire commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum. “The Met has loaned it to us for total replication, since the original can’t be restored,” Mr. Morselli said. “The company that supplied the original wire absolutely cheated Richard — they sent him gold-plated instead of the gold-filled material he’d ordered. The corrosion from the chemical reactions between all the different metals is causing the piece to fall apart.”

Mr. Morselli estimates that "an enlightened patron" would have to set aside a room at least 30 by 30 feet to accommodate "The Sun," and spend at least \$500,000 on new metal components. "But that's nothing considering the values in today's art market," he said. "This masterpiece should be an object of contemplation in a room by itself. It should be brought back to life."