

Bear facts, bare site

Last summer the “Macchi Bears” – cherished Berkeley icons for the past 14 years – were temporarily removed from the comfort of their pedestal just outside McLaughlin Hall and taken to a bronze foundry in Berkeley for a much needed make-over.

A gift from the late 1936 CE alumnus A. John Macchi, these twin Russian black bears were cast in 1915 by New York artist Edmund Schulte Beckum, one of a skilled group of sculptors and metal workers whose art was essential to the elegant Beaux-arts architecture of the early of the 20th century. Beckum’s commission, from the Russia Insurance Company of what was then Petrograd, was to create a set of bears for the entrance to the Russian company’s new U.S. headquarters in Hartford, Connecticut. Using variations of an old technique popular in Russia, called “repoussé,” Beckum applied thin sheets of hammered copper to form the stylized bears in relief. Though they look massive and heavy, the bears are actually hollow and quite light.

Years ago, when the Hartford building was slated for demolition, Macchi made up his mind to rescue the bears from a similar fate and arranged to bring them to the engineering quadrant of the Berkeley campus. After being restored by the Department of Art, the bears were ceremoniously installed outside McLaughlin on a rainy November day in 1987, with the dramatic words of then-Dean Karl S. Pister who signaled the unveiling with “*Fiat ursae!*” (“Let there be bears!”).

But a total of 86 years out in the elements had taken a toll. “The bears were deteriorating badly and were extremely fragile when we got them,” says Tom Schrey, production manager at Artworks, the largest fine art bronze foundry in the Bay Area, where the bears have been shepherd through their current restoration. When completed, a brand new set of cast bronze



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TOP TO BOTTOM:
Foundry workers carefully removed the bears from their McLaughlin lair last summer.

This bear is resting up at the foundry, after its first molds were completed.

Artworks production manager Tom Schrey displays the mold taken from a Macchi bear leg and paw.

bears will emerge – exact replicas of the originals – but much more durable. (After minor repairs, the original pair may reside in an indoor setting at the Richmond Field Station.)

The meticulous and time-consuming process, funded by the John Macchi Trust (John and his wife Kay passed away last year) began last summer. Artworks technicians began by removing old fiberglass resin patches, evening out the damaged surface of the bears, and filling in holes with clay to restore the surface to prepare the bears for casting. Then they began the process of making molds, taking a series of negative impressions, one small section at a time. Each mold is used to make a wax replica, which is then encased in a ceramic shell surrounding the wax, and kiln-fired melting the wax away, like lost wax techniques used to make jewelry, but on a much larger scale.

Foundry technicians next poured

molten bronze into the molds. Once the bronze cooled and set, the ceramic shell was sand-blasted away, cleaned off, and the connecting tubes that delivered the molten bronze cut and ground away. Finally, all the sections were welded together, the surfaces artificially weathered to match what passersby have seen (and stroked) for

years on the original Macchi bears.

“When we’re finished, the campus will have two brand new, beautiful bronze bears that are very strong,” says Piero Mussi, Artworks owner. “Like ancient Chinese bronzes, the new Macchi bears should last thousands of years.”

The bare bear site will soon be graded and prepared with a new granite platform and paving, and fresh background planting in preparation for the much anticipated reinstallation in a few months. **F**