

Once-missing statues restored, back in La Salle's St. Hyacinth Church

Tom Collins Feb 1, 2017 Updated 5 min ago



Scott Anderson

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After Restoration. The long-missing statues, which were donated to St. Hyacinth's last summer, were restored recently by Daprato Rigali Studios, the Chicago fabricator that originally produced the plaster-and-horsehair statues in the early 1900s. Daprato Rigali Studios not only scraped away the peeling paint and smoothed out some of the nicks in the angel wings, but they restored the formerly blue and gray statues to their original white and gold.

Michele Waters visited St. Hyacinth Church last week to see two refurbished angel statues. She had donated one in memory of her father and wanted to see if restorers had done their work well.

What she saw moved her to tears.

"I cried so hard," the Dimmick woman said. "They are the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

Since the statues arrived Jan. 23 from Daprato Rigali Studios in Chicago, the priests of La Salle Catholic Parishes have been besieged with compliments on the statues that now flank the church's tabernacle.

"You know that they were gone for 47 years," the Rev. Jacob Valle said, "but to look at them now, you'd think they were fresh out of the manufacturer."

Last summer, both statues appeared almost magically (miraculously, even) after the church underwent an interior remodeling.

Mendota florist Jerry Prokuski abruptly donated back the angel statue that he'd acquired in the late 1960s and then Waters followed suit. Both statues needed a little TLC and were sent to Daprato Rigali, the Chicago firm that had fabricated the statues more than a century ago.

The bill came to \$6,800 to restore the statues; but Valle said a consensus is emerging the finished product more than justified the investment. Both statues had been repainted in blue-gray tones but now are a brilliant gold and white, their original hues.

Elizabeth Rigali-Galvin, a co-owner and head of Daprato Rigali's design department, said the company has catalogs from the turn of the century, giving her and the other artists some guidelines for how to refurbish the plaster and horsehair statues.

It took the better part of three weeks to restore the statues; but Rigali-Galvin said it was enjoyable and gratifying work.

"It's awesome," she said. "It's like finding a treasure."

And it's a growing part of their business. Rigali-Galvin said the family business was booming in the 1920s as Americans built new churches by the hundreds but then waned significantly by the 1960s, when elaborate statuary and altar pieces weren't in vogue anymore. Today, Rigali-Galvin said, they're busy helping churches restore pieces of their past.

"Restoration has been kind of a regular thing for us," she said. "The Daprato statues are one of a kind, and when people find out how rare they are they want them restored."

"We feel kind of like a hospital for statues. They don't make them like this anymore."

And many statues are in private hands, which was the case for the Waters and Prokuski statues. Both pieces were relinquished by St. Hyacinth's in the 1960s and simply left outside for the taking. Prokuski held onto his for decades until he one day felt the nudge to bring it home.

Over the weekend he visited his refurbished angel at St. Hyacinth's and, as with Waters, was moved to tears.

"I sat down in the pew and couldn't keep my eyes off the statues," Prokuski said, "and it made me feel really good inside because so many friends asked why I gave up the statue, and I had second thoughts, too."

"But after I saw them I thought, 'They belong here. I'm glad I did what I did.'"

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