

# History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Michael E. Holland  
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## The City Art Collection

A look at the City's Cultural Affairs Dept.

**PART TWO**

Photos by Michael E. Holland

Summer has wound down, and I suspect that younger members of the Los Angeles family weren't ready for the new school year. But allow me a quick commercial for the Los Angeles City Archives in this space. Almost everything you read in this column comes from our records vault, and almost all of that exists in paper form only – very little digital content exists before 2005. **Students:** If you – or your parents – decide you need a leg up on that next research paper in civics or history, consider an email to the archives for

cessor, the Cultural Arts Department, to thank for it.

One of the missions of the original commission members in 1905 was to collect and display public art in an art gallery as well as adorning the public parks with statues and fountains to complement the natural beauty of their surroundings. The world-class museums with names like Getty and Hammer would come along later, but in the meantime, the City of Los Angeles began collecting art through donations and later by purchase.

The Municipal Arts department had

pieces on our walls. Buildings being renovated created the reverse situation. The collection was estimated to exceed 2,000 pieces of artwork, photographs and sculptures when the most recent inventory was completed in 2003. The fair market value exceeded \$13 million, and the replacement value was calculated at more than \$20 million.

The mayor has typically been the biggest donor to the art collection by virtue of his office. Dignitaries from around the world bring gifts that become property of the City due to laws aimed to prevent influence peddling in government. During his 20 years as mayor from 1973 to 1993, Tom Bradley received hundreds if not thousands of art pieces, commemorative souvenirs and unique gifts that can be found in the Special Collections of the UCLA Library as well as the City Archives and on loan to various institutions such as the California African American Museum in Exposition Park.

I want to highlight one such piece that stands today near the offices of the City Clerk on the third floor across from the Mayor's offices in City Hall. It is known as the Korean Turtle Ship and is identified in the art collection database as item number CAC.1998.236. It is a scale model of a Korean naval warship dated from 1593, and it has the distinction of

city in Korea. The model was housed in a glass and frame case 76 inches high, 109 inches long and 60 inches deep.

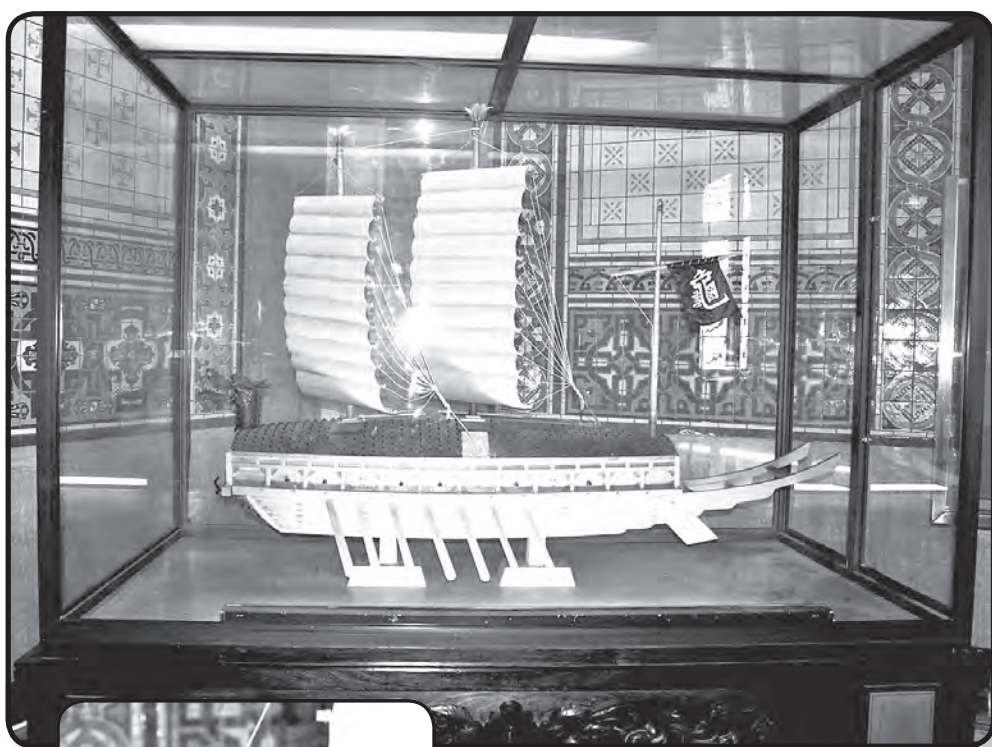
The mayor was given a much smaller copy of the ship and display case – 12 inches high, 18 inches long and 10 inches deep – at the actual presentation ceremony. This copy turned up in the City Record Center last month from among the various gifts stored at our location. The miniature is now stored in the Archive vault.

When the larger copy arrived shortly thereafter, the case had been damaged in transit. The mayor's staff ordered repair work to be done promptly to ward off vandals or theft. The General Services department performed the needed repairs and added a door and framing. The total cost was \$2,556.74. Although the original estimate for the materials included the note that the city of Busan would pay the costs, the final appropriation came from a General Services account that the council approved Jan. 5, 1983.

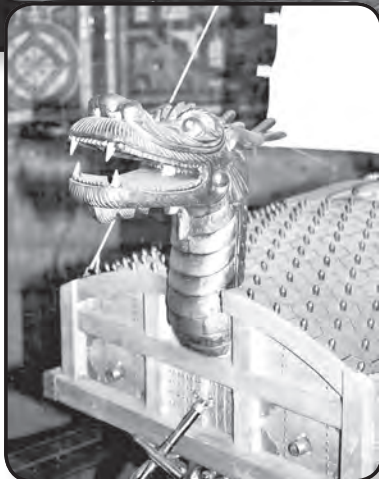
I have walked by the Turtle Ship display a thousand times and never noticed it, let alone wondered about its history. But all my questions were answered by one Council File located in the archive vault – Council File 82-2172, to be exact. Council File 00-1882 has the most recent inventory of the City art collection listing everything from the musical instruments on display in the Watts Tower Center, the Triforium standing at the Los Angeles Mall or the portraits of the City mayors in the Bradley Tower on the 26th floor of City Hall.

The new Cultural Affairs Department was interested in preserving historic buildings and landmarks, some of which predated the original commission in 1904. Achieving landmark status became a rallying cry for preservationists as the era of downtown redevelopment cleared away Bunker Hill and otherwise changed the look of Los Angeles in ways that

the original commission had never envisioned. That will be the focus of a future column.



The Turtle Ship in City Hall.



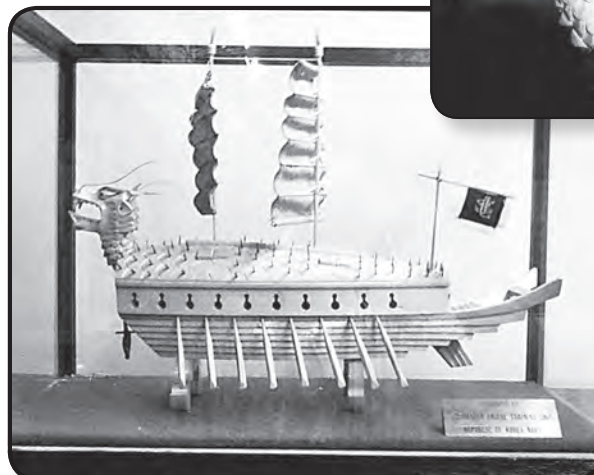
no budget to purchase art as late as the mid-1930s as shown in the annual reports at the time. It was up to the Council to approve and provide funding for display and maintenance of whatever the commission collected. The department was woefully underfunded – the 1936 total department budget was \$2,283 – and original commissioned works such as the murals in the Central Library involved a lot of councilmember wrangling over small amounts of money.

The Municipal Arts Department was re-named as the Cultural Affairs Department by Ordinance #153,893 on July 1, 1980. The art collection grew to a size that required storage space in the basement of City Hall. New office spaces provided some relief. The office of the Los Angeles City Archives at the C. Erwin Piper Technical Center has several framed art

being the first ship to use armor plating in warfare and was presented to the City in October 1981 to commemorate a century of diplomatic relations between the United States and Korea by the city of Busan, Los Angeles' sister



The Turtle Ship in the City Archives.



that unique document or bit of information that no one else will have. Thanks for the indulgence and now back to our regular feature!

The next time you walk into the lobby of a civic building such as a library or city hall, take a look at the walls. Odds are good that you will see some artwork on the walls or a statue or some other artifact that either belongs to the City or is on some kind of long-term loan. If you have never paused to wonder how that art happened to be there – you have the Municipal Arts Department, or its suc-