

Collections Conservation

Lila Katzen belonged to a generation of artists who saw potential in industrial materials to create outdoor sculptures. While her male minimalist counterparts made hard-edged geometric shapes, Katzen explored the qualities of rolled steel to produce fluid, inviting forms that mirrored the natural world and encouraged viewers' direct interaction. The Stanley Museum purchased *Oracle* from Katzen and installed it by the Iowa River in 1976. Katzen fabricated the sculpture with enormous ribbons of Cor-Ten steel, a material whose beauty and strength only increases as it weathers and rusts. But she also lined the central curve with stainless steel, offering a startling play of contrasting colors and textures—the deep, velvety brown Cor-Ten surrounds a silver ring of brittle light. The stainless steel lining makes a smooth and inviting interior, perfectly shaped for a curious child or playful adult. Even in the midst of a pandemic, we still see people studying or simply resting there, cradled by the sculpture, fulfilling the artist's generous vision.

However, though the sculpture was designed for the outdoors, the elements have proved challenging to the integrity of *Oracle*. The joints that connect the different parts of the sculpture have worn away over time. The stainless steel lining of the central opening is also tearing away from the Cor-Ten exterior because the two materials absorb and disperse heat differently, shrinking and expanding at different rates. The sweltering heat of Iowa summers and the intensity of the winters



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exacerbate stress points in the sculpture. Damage is especially acute at the discrete welds that hold the interior and exterior together, which are weakening or have cracked altogether.

In spring 2019, Lara Bampfield, a senior majoring in Art History with a deep interest in archaeology, was part of a cohort of students from the School of Art and Art History who secured competitive, funded internships at the Stanley Museum of Art. Though the museum has few antiquities in its collection, her desire to understand the science of materials and their impact on artistic process made her perfectly suited to examine the condition history of *Oracle*. Through careful study of archival materials and the sculpture itself, along with correspondence with institutions that hold related works by Katzen, Bampfield compiled a meticulous dossier that conservators went on to use later that fall to better understand problems of and possible solutions to the sculpture's condition.

Oracle is part of a suite of outdoor sculptures that will be conserved in time for the new museum, through the generosity of Don and Cheri Stock. Lara Bampfield is looking forward to returning to see the sculpture restored in its new home. Since graduating in 2019, she went on to work as a field technician at the Office of the State Archaeologist, and is currently on an Erasmus fellowship funded by the European Union to work on cultural heritage sites in Cyprus and later in Santorini.



Lila Katzen (American, 1926–1998)
Oracle, 1974
Cor-Ten, stainless steel
132 x 204 x 60 in.
Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and matching funds contributed by Mr. and Mrs. William O. Aydelotte, Edwin Green, Sylvia and Clement Hanson, Mr. and Mrs. Melvin R. Novick, and William and Lucile Jones Paff, 1976.88
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