A FILTHY, UNCLOTHED boy reaches out, desperate for a bath. A few miles away, Director of Public Works Edward Manning Bigelow, dressed impeccably in a double-breasted suit and open overcoat, surveys the city park donated by Mary Schenley.

Pittsburgh at the end of the 1800s? No, these are bronze statues in modern Pittsburgh, where there is a flurry of activity surrounding the late nineteenth-century sculpture of Italian artist Giuseppe Moretti. Moretti would be surprised that his art, created for enjoyment and relief from the grind of life in the smoky, crowded city, is the subject of much interest in a much-changed Pittsburgh.

The smoke and crowded neighborhoods have thinned, and today’s Pittsburghers are talking about Moretti’s work — titled Hygeia, Edward Manning Bigelow, Panther, Panthers, Sphinxes, Stephen Foster, Horses, and Welcome — in connection with issues that range across the spectrum, from revitalization of parks to racism. Volunteers have stepped in to help save the city’s treasures, and some well-known pieces have been moved, while others carry on beautifully in their original locations.

Moretti was born in 1859 into an influential family in the Tuscany uplands village of Siena, about 35 miles south of Florence. He grew up in a time of regional wars fought to unite the peninsula in the Kingdom of Italy, expel the Austrian rulers, and absorb the Roman Catholic Church.

With a Catholic cardinal and art patron for an uncle, Moretti’s formal training began at the tender age of 9 with the monks of San Domenico and sculptor Tito Serrochi in the cloister of the church in Siena. His extensive, excellent training was capped at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence.

Moretti worked on the Rothschild Palace in Vienna at the zenith of both the Rothschild’s and Vienna’s wealth, before immigrating to New York in 1888. In addition to well-known public monuments in six eastern states, Moretti was highly regarded internationally, winning silver medals at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and the St. Louis exposition in 1904.

Moretti created much of the turn-of-the-century bronze for the new parks in the East End while working in Pittsburgh between 1895 and 1923. Brought here from New York by the energetic Bigelow, Moretti decorated Schenley and Highland parks with glorious, uplifting neoclassic figures that complemented the landscaping of William Falkner. He aspired to match the best of Europe’s cities — not to mention New York and Chicago, which were decades ahead of Pittsburgh — and fulfilled the parks’ mission of ministering nature’s controlled beauty and peace to overworked residents.

The initial adornment of the parks ended with Bigelow’s departure in 1906, and Moretti
Among the accomplishments of Italian sculptor Giuseppe Moretti is this 1895 bronze statue of Pittsburgh Public Works Director Edward Manning Bigelow which looks out across Schenley Park. The bronze was restored last summer with help from volunteers.
found himself in demand locally for a brief period following World War I, finally returning to Italy where he died in 1935 in San Remo, a Riviera village just east of Monaco.

Two of Moretti’s park statues have undergone recent restorations that removed the grime and stopped the decay. The restored Bigelow (1895) at the entrance to Schenley Park was completed and rededicated at the same time, in July 1994. Bigelow looks as if he’s just removed the price tags from his new outfit and is strolling in autumn to review his tree-planting program. Hygeia (1922), at the entrance to Phipps Conservatory, with her torch and slightly raised left foot, is as supple and graceful as Frederic Bartholdi’s early models for Liberty Enlightening the World.

Moretti was able to produce the heroic bronze as his mind and hands were able to conceive and construct it, while Bartholdi had to modify his colossal statue in order to provide a support structure. The result is that Moretti’s figure has grace of movement under thin drapery, in contrast to Liberty’s heavier, flowing robes over a more upright body. Graceful Hygeia is known to detain many orchid-minded Phipps fans on their way to the conservatory.

Visitors to Schenley Park can thank volunteers, who were the driving force behind the restoration of both Bigelow and Hygeia. Partners in Parks works with the city’s Adopt-A-Monument program to select projects and secure funding. The Hunt Foundation sponsored the restoration of Bigelow, and the American Medical Association picked up the tab for Hygeia. Partners in Parks concentrates its efforts in Schenley Park, and with good reason: there are 16 major sculptures in Pittsburgh’s most celebrated park.

Bigelow faces west in the direction of Panther, housed at the University of Pittsburgh, one of many big cats that demonstrate Moretti’s prowess in depicting animals.

Panther (1897) climbs a granite outcrop behind glass in the Grand Lounge of the Pitt Union, formerly the Schenley Hotel. It has been there since Pitt acquired the hotel in the 1950s for use as a dormitory, and is the original mascot of the school, chosen in 1909 by a group of alumni and students headed by George Baird. It was selected for five reasons, one of which was the gold hue of the coat, matching the school colors. The lustre remains, and the statue has never needed repairs or restoration.

That’s due partly to good care and partly to good luck. A favorite fraternity prank of the ’60s and ’70s was to steal the panther during homecoming weekend. When Schenley Hall dormitory was renovated and became the William Pitt Union in 1983, Panther was moved from its vulnerable, free-standing trophy case to the base of the Schenley Hotel’s original Windsor Clock Co. lobby clock.

Freshman orientation sessions take place at the clock and statue, and are intended to evoke a sense of pride in the university’s tradition and achievement. It’s a bit tough to see the entire statue through the reflections of lobby lights in the glass, but a close examination reveals clear details of the golden coat. Pitt Union building supervisor Chris Chergi notes that parents take more interest in the statue than the new students, but freshmen can be forgiven for assuming that every college has for its mascot a
century-old, golden bronze statue created by a famous sculptor in an historic hotel.

The four Panthers (1897) that glare at pedestrians and guard Panther Hollow Bridge are sometimes confused with the real mascot of the university. These realistic statues display glossy tan coats after enduring eight decades of green tarnish from the harsh, industrial weather of Pittsburgh. Panthers were extinct in the region long before the bridge was built, but it's easy to imagine them climbing the rocky ravine.

Four more of Moretti's big cats — the lions in Sphinxes — were moved at the end of July 1994. They're now marking out hillside territory at the new Syria Temple in Harmarville, above the site of the old Gulf Research Center. Two Sphinxes (1920) grace the main entrance as they did in their previous Oakland home, which was razed in October 1991. The other two (1943) adorn side entrances.

Their interim home was at the Shriner's temporary headquarters on Baum Boulevard. Two Sphinxes reclined in the glass entrance and were visible from the street. On the moving day, it poured rain and workers took a break with a sphinx protruding from the doorway. This drew attention from passing motorists, who stopped to talk to the movers and read the names of the temple's World War I veterans on the base of the statues.

Lovers of Oakland consider the statues a part of Oakland and would have liked to see them stay. "The sphinxes were the lipstick on the kiss of Oakland," says one fan. "I would like to see two of the four stay here," says another. However, the Shriners are not keen to split their pride: Sphinxes are an attraction at the new temple, dedicated during an October weekend last year. The statues are reunited with the stained glass windows, bronze mirrors, and nearly three dozen chandeliers saved from the previous mosque. Two gold domes are above the main entrance, with a third dome over the side entrance. The chandeliers are hung in the ornate, three-tier ballroom. After three years, the sphinxes' silent message is again, "You're entering a classy place."

Stephen Foster (1900) on Forbes Avenue near the Carnegie has been the subject of debate about treatment of African-Americans in Pittsburgh, beginning with a demonstration there in early July 1994, fifty years to the week after the statue was placed there to save it from vandals in Highland Park.

Demonstrators from the African-American Coalition for Justice, who have organized several high-profile demonstrations around Pittsburgh, say that the statue is an accurate representation of how African-Americans are treated in Pittsburgh, with the black man at the feet of the white man. Foster is regularly visited by residents and out-of-towners with varied opinions of the statue.

Pitt students, headphones on, study in its shadow. Visitors pose for photos after leaving the Carnegie, and families gather in front, small children climbing up to sit next to the banjo-strumming man variously known as "Old Black Joe," "Uncle Ned," and "an old darkey," as a member of the committee that commissioned the statue described the figure.

Julius Redd of Wilkinsburg observes that people sometimes put a cigarette in Joe's mouth and pose for photos. Otis Johnson, 67, of Pittsburgh, goes to the Foster statue "to relax and meditate. It's peaceful here" in the colorful flower garden and the shade of the sycamores. Johnson completed high school in 1945 in Johnstown, and says the controversy is all smoke. "I was one of nine black graduates. Back then, we didn't have a fair chance at an education. Now everybody's got the same chances." He peppers his observations with quotations from Melville, Twain, and the Bible. When asked if he doesn't agree that the image is a negative one, he says, "That was then. This is now," though he admits to not having looked closely at the statue.

That's not going to cut it with Julius Redd. "If you really look at that statue," says Redd, "I mean really look closely, you'll see how negative it is. The problem is, people look but don't observe." Redd says his thoughts, and a letter to the editor published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, were prompted by the
unveiling of the Roberto Clemente statue at Three Rivers Stadium last summer.

"I got to thinking about it, and I realized, where can I take out-of-town visitors to show them a statue of African-American contributions to Pittsburgh? Look throughout the city, look throughout Allegheny County, and before Clemente, I had nowhere to take them except to see Old Black Joe."

Some fans of Foster believe that the statue is the wrong target. Others, like Deane Root, curator of the Foster Hall Collection at the Stephen Foster Memorial, defended Foster in an essay as a man who was anything but a rascal. A woman in her 30s who works in Oakland passes by on her lunch hour to have a closer look. "Well, the truth is that it is a very negative image. However, I believe that it shows historically how we were treated. This is an accurate representation, and we have to have it here so we can look at it and say, 'Never again.'"

High school student Shawnica Smith, 17, of Pittsburgh, catches the bus nearby after work at her summer job removing grape vines that strangle trees in Schenley Park. "At least they didn't put the white man up there by himself. It's surprising that they recognized the black man at all and included him."

Beyond the discussion, the statue needs a lot of work. Foster's pen is missing. One really needs to peer through the heavy streaks and green and black discoloration to see the subjects and fine touches, like the lyre made of bull horns and tortoise shell. J. S. Bach, in front of the nearby Carnegie Music Hall — who used to be in a similar condition and now sits in clean, deep brown comfort — could be thinking, "Pay no attention to those ill-clad musicians to my left."

Across the East End, in the Foster statue's original Highland Park home, public art designed to uplift the spirit of workers is now a rallying point for a community organizing to preserve its art treasures. A movement has begun to have Welcome (1897), the dramatic entrance into Highland Park, restored.

Cooperation on the project is a boost to a neighborhood which wants to remain strong in its third century. Many of the stately brick homes that line the streets date from the same decade as Moretti's perhaps most inspiring monument. Six bronze figures adorn granite balustrades and two sets of four Ionic columns at the terminus of Highland Avenue. Those visitors who aren't already gasping from the jog up the long hill find themselves catching their breath at the sight of the 56-foot high, bronze-topped columns.

Admirers of Moretti's treatment of the human figure in Hygeia shouldn't miss Welcome. Two voluptuous female sentries hold their torches high; each column is topped by a woman and two young children. Two screaming eagles with open wings beckon visitors to enter. It's possible that Bigelow, comparing his plain image in photographs to the attractive figure in Schenley Park, believed Moretti capable of anything. Bigelow took it upon himself to design Welcome for Moretti, and clearly the civil engineer gave in to his desires on this one.

The dark stains left on the granite by the smoky city — the orange night skies of the Monongehela River Valley were visible
from this hilltop into the '70s — were scrubbed off about 15 years ago. Until then, children growing up in the neighborhood thought that black was the original color. The state-funded scrubbing and masonry repair fell short of cleaning the bronze adornments and served to highlight that the figures are in desperate need of restoration.

Attempts to have the entrance restored have been around since 1988, when Councilman Jim Ferlo requested capital funds from the mayor. Now longtime resident Debbie DeAngelis has 250 signatures advocating a new approach: the community is requesting that the money gained from the sale of nearby King estate — about $150,000 — be put towards the beautification of Highland Park, in order to duplicate its early 1900s' splendor, gardens and all. At the center of the garden's pond would be Child With Shell, the original, pink marble fountain by Moretti.

DeAngelis runs an art restoration business in the neighborhood, and her area of interest, combined with a can-do energy level, is enough to see the movement carried through until the statues are again a rich, lustrous bronze. However, the immediate danger is that the damage, much deeper than the surface, may eat all the way through the hollow statues of Welcome. The pitting and corrosion is so deep that the proud, graceful figures seem almost to be crumbling, in pain, and ready to climb down.

One problem was almost unavoidable. All outside bronze statuary has drainage holes at the base, to keep the corrosive elements in rainwater from being trapped inside. Over time, these drains naturally get plugged with debris and need to be kept open. A climb to the top of two 56-foot columns is not on the normal schedule of the park's maintenance crew, and first-class maintenance has not been possible with a public works department that has taken a high percentage of budget cuts, particularly for maintenance. Less maintenance money inevitably translates into more capital money down the road.

The cost of cleaning the eight bronze figures — including the two figures in Moretti's Horses (1900) at the park's Stanton Avenue entrance — is from $50,000 to $100,000. A committee formed to "Save our Statues" (S.O.S.) is accepting donations and planning fund-raising events. The community's hope is that the grime can be dropped like a worn green and black smock, revealing eagles that will gleam and Cinderellas with Olympic figures and Aegean suntans. "It's a bit more time-consuming than that, of course," says Boris Brindar, Director of Conservation and Restoration in DeAngelis' company.

The first step will be to inspect the statues, determine their condition, and plan the restoration work. All of the corrosion must be removed. Next, the pits will be filled and smoothed with a bronze that matches the original. A new patina — a thin layer of corrosion controlled to give a bronze statue its color — will be color-matched to the artist's original wishes. Finally, a coating to protect the patina will be applied.

Brindar hopes that everything can be done in time to save the bronzes. The goal is to rededicate the entrance on its 100th birthday. With all the work needed, "we might be lucky to see the work started by the birthday" in 1997.

The figure at the center of all this activity is the sculptor,
Moretti, of whom relatively little is actually known.

"I've looked everywhere, and there's nobody who can tell us about him," says art historian and author Marilyn Evert of Pittsburgh. After exhausting a search for living sources, Evert collected what was written about him and included a one-page biography in a book which she co-authored, Discovering Pittsburgh's Sculpture.

"It's going to take a visit to Siena and Florence to find out anything more about Moretti," Evert says, adding that he was "a wonderful sculptor. We were lucky to have him." He was one of the best and last classically trained sculptors to produce so much outstanding work in the classic style.

As times change, the function and perception of art changes as well. Today's people and actions are much different than those who milled around these bronze statues a century ago. The statues continue to pique the interest of people today as they move and restore them, debate their validity, or just observe them. It seems that Moretti's bronzes will continue to play a significant role for years to come.

Sources:
Evert, Marilyn and Vernon Gay, Discovering Pittsburgh's Sculpture (Pittsburgh, 1983).