

# GRANT AT WORK

SAVE AMERICA'S TREASURES

**LA BELLE SHIPWRECK** In 1684, when French explorer Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle set out on his last journey to the New World, little did he know that he, his crew, and their four ships were embarking on a trip to hell. While on their way to found a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi, pirates seized one ship, one ran aground and broke apart in Matagorda Bay, Texas, and one promptly sailed back to the safety of France. The last ship, the *Belle*, was left in the bay while La Salle and some of his small group set out on foot to find the river, 400 miles away. Along the way, he was murdered by his own men and the remaining ship sank, its crew succumbing to disease, dehydration, and Indian attacks. In 1995, the *Belle* was found encased in mud, remarkably preserved for over 300 years. Restoring its more than a million artifacts was a complex feat made easier with help from a \$300,000 SAT grant to the Texas Historical Commission. The treasure conserved includes cannons, firepots, and a “mystery chest” containing an assortment of items including carpentry tools.

**SOCORRO MISSION** The third time has definitely been a charm for the Socorro Mission in El Paso County, Texas, founded in 1682. Floods in 1740 and 1829 washed the church away the first two times it was built, and it looked like the third building, constructed in 1843, wasn't going to make it either. This time the culprit wasn't the Rio Grande, but the misuse of concrete in its repair. By the mid-1990s, its moisture-trapped adobe walls were at risk of imminent collapse. A “top to bottom” rehab, funded with help from a \$197,000 SAT grant, has ensured the structure will stay standing. The restoration included replacing the concrete with adobe at the base of the structure, stabilizing the bell tower, installing a new stone floor in the nave, replastering the interior with gypsum, and applying a good coating of lime wash to the exterior's plaster. The Spanish Colonial mission—known for its delicately painted wooden vigas—is now as good as new.

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## Plaza Theater >>

The city of El Paso always knew it would restore its beloved Plaza Theatre; due to budget constraints, however, it just didn't know when. Thanks in part to a Save America's Treasure grant, the 16-year wait is over, the magnificent splendor restored thanks to a three-year rehab. When it was built in 1930 for a million dollars, theatergoers did not simply sit and watch during its Depression-era heyday. Rather, the Plaza



was a complete atmosphere, created before such an experience of the senses became too expensive. As the lights dimmed, the blue-painted ceiling came alive with twinkling stars and floating clouds. And then a mighty Wurlitzer rose from the orchestra pit, ready to delight. “Patrons were transported,” notes the theater's website. Unfortunately, in the '50s the Plaza started a slow decline, along with theaters across the country. More and more people moved to the suburbs, watched TV, or opted for the drive-in. Over the years, programming became sporadic, the

Wurlitzer was shipped off to a collector in Dallas, and only the El Paso Community Foundation's raising of a million dollars in 1986 saved it from becoming a parking lot. Given the hefty pricetag of restoration, the Spanish Colonial Revival-style building sat empty until 2002 when a partnership between the city and the foundation got a rehab underway. A \$198,000 SAT grant went towards expanding the stagehouse, modernizing the theatrical systems, and building a multi-use annex to attract a wider variety of productions—as well as restoring elements such as decorative plaster, tile, and lights. New wall fabrics, cushions, and curtains, with help from old photographs, were matched to the originals. The Wurlitzer, fully restored, is also back, along with the ceiling, designed to give the feel of being in a Spanish Courtyard. “It's true to its original state,” says Bryan Crowe, assistant general manager of the El Paso Convention and Performing Arts Center, which runs the theater. Since its grand reopening, the Plaza is once again the “Showplace of the Southwest,” and a showplace for the city.



LEFT, RIGHT DAVID SABAL





## << *Ney Museum*

There aren't many 19th-century sculptor studios left in America—but the only one that belonged to a woman is undergoing an SAT-funded rehab. Both rustic and classical, Formosa was the heart of inspiration for German-born Elisabet Ney, as she created life-size statues of Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston for display in the Texas State Capitol. Built in 1892, the neoclassical structure—now known as the Elisabet Ney Museum—was a happening spot for influential Texans. When Ney wasn't sculpting a *Lady Macbeth* or *Bust of Christ*, she gathered visitors on her secluded lawn (now sur-

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rounded by bustling Austin) for “stimulating discussions of politics, art, and philosophy.” Engraved on the studio facade is the word *Sursum*, a Latin word meaning “to uplift your heart,” the philosophy by which the charismatic artist led her life. Today, water damage has taken a toll on the

structure, to be ameliorated with the help of a \$203,000 SAT grant. A grounds restoration is controversial—its goal returning the site to Ney's vision—including replacing a stone wall added in the 1930s with chicken wire fence and felling some of the formal plantings including Ashe junipers and crepe myrtles that aren't original. In turn, the native prairie grass, wildflowers, and post oaks she loved are being re-planted. Although the entire restoration, still in the funding stage, won't be finished until around 2015, the completed studio work and demonstration landscaping have gotten rave reviews. “Comments are glowing,” says Mary Collins Blackmon, the museum's curator.

ABOVE AL BRADEN, RIGHT COURTESY OF ELISABET NEY MUSEUM, AUSTIN, TEXAS