**Deep in the California desert, artist etches tribute to mankind in granite**



Jacques Andre Istel points to his Museum of History in Granite in Felicity, Calif. (John M. Glionna/Special to Las Vegas Review-Journal)

Jacques Andre Istel walks near his Museum of History in Granite in Felicity, Calif. (John M. Glionna/Special to Las Vegas Review-Journal)

**By JOHN M. GLIONNA  
SPECIAL TO THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL**

FELICITY, Calif. — Jacques-Andre Istel is on the move again, nervously roaming the town he founded in this dusty corner of the southwestern desert, a place that features his grand monument to mankind: the Museum of History in Granite.

At 87, Istel is a stocky, square-jawed French native whose restless imagination has spawned a spirited appraisal of the human race — including its highest art, lowest wars, foibles, oddities, miracles and misdemeanors — etched on hundreds of chalkboard-size slabs of brown granite.

Normally, this outdoor blend of museum, library and art gallery near the U.S.-Mexico border is a place for quiet introspection for passers-by who pay a small fee to wander the grounds.

Yet this day is different: Istel is preparing for his annual spring celebration and open house, when he will host hundreds of friends, fans and well-wishers for a day-long ceremony.

But first, there is work to do.

He breezes past imposing stone panels depicting the history of the Big Bang, American Slavery, ancient Indian empires, scoundrels of early Arizona and a summary of Viking death rituals; his movements punctuated by a nonstop sweetly lilted commentary.

“Don’t you think that’s fun?” he asks of one before moving on.

“That’s fascinating,” he says of another. “That’s interesting stuff.”

Istel has painstakingly researched and written all of the text, with many panels literally 50 paper drafts in the making, each edited by his wife, Felicia, a former Sports Illustrated reporter.

In all, this desert project is a very personal summation of one-man’s education, a haiku of humanity, compiled with the brain of a scientist, heart of an engineer and soul of an artist. For Istel, each new empty space begs the question: What to put in? What to leave out?

He points to a panel entitled “Our Earth,” which includes a Bible quote, Pablo Neruda poem, Vincent van Gogh etching and words from William Blake.

“I really thought that was a pretty good one,” he says.

But space, science and political thought are not always so easily distilled.

“How do you capture the moon in just one panel?” Istel asks, standing before some lunar-inspired words and images. His solution: Combine seriousness and whimsy, matching technical description with an image of a cow jumping over the moon.

**FROM SILK TO HARD ROCK**

Placing this personal stamp on an otherwise worthless tract of desert marks the latest chapter of a nomadic life that would defy description in any single granite panel.

Istel arrived in the U.S. in the late 1930s unable to speak a word of English. Even then, he bore the testy, outspoken character that would come to mark his later life. As the story goes, Istel as a boy threw a rock at a column of advancing German soldiers, hitting one in the helmet.

In America, his life seemed shot from a cannon: He hitchhiked across the U.S. as a teen and later circumnavigated the globe in a twin-engine airplane, taking time out to circle Mt. Everest. He studied economics at Princeton University, worked on Wall Street and once ran a long-shot campaign for California governor.

He is best known, however, as the father of modern parachuting, an innovator who made numerous safety breakthroughs in a highly dangerous singular endeavor he taught himself.

Istel imposed order on jumps that had been head-over-heels chaotic. In 1957, he trained U.S. Army paratroopers in the stabilized free-fall technique, perfecting an exercise the military had previously forbidden as too reckless.

He later opened a civilian parachuting center in Orange, Massachusetts, promoting the burgeoning sport by wearing a helmet-mounted camera to record images during free fall.

In 1957, only a few hundred Americans had ever strapped on a parachute for fun. Five years later, thanks largely to Istel, some 15,000 jumpers had racked up 80,000 descents.

“Jacques took what had been very dangerous and turned it into a safe sport,” said Elizabeth Foster, who trained under Istel in 1960. His March gathering included numerous free-fall jumps and a salute to early women parachutists.

Eventually, Istel introduced such regulations as limiting jumps in winds over 25 mph or when the cloud ceiling dropped below 2,500 feet.

In 1959, he was profiled in the New Yorker and in 1965 told Time magazine his newfound sport was easy as falling off a log.

“There are few activities today that legal, moral, unfastening and habit forming,” he told Time. “Parachuting is one of them.”

Back then, Istel was known as a often cantankerous perfectionist with a habit of firing people.

“One day, he was looking for one of his instructors. He said, ‘Where’s Darryl? Where’s Darryl?’” recalls Nancy Gruttman-Tyler, another female jumper who trained under Istel.

“Somebody said, ‘Jacques, you fired him yesterday.’

“Well, I didn’t mean that,” Istel responded. “Get him back.”

**INTO THE UNKNOWN**

In 1986, the longtime parachutist took perhaps the biggest leap of his life. He invested in 2,800 acres of barren desert just west of Yuma, Arizona. Then he and Felicia sat down and plotted what to do with it.

Little by little, Istel let his muse run amok. He established the town of Felicity, declaring himself mayor for life. He built a 21-foot-tall marble-and-glass pyramid and, with tongue firmly in cheek, declared it the Official Center of the World. He moved 150,000 tons of dirt to build a Hill of Prayer, on which he built the Church on the Hill, which can be seen from nearby Interstate 8, its imposing staircase resembling steps to an ancient Mayan temple.

Later, he paid $100,000 for a 25-foot section of winding stairway that was once part of the Eiffel Tower.

“In Felicity,” he says, “we do things without a template.”

Istel declines to talk total project cost.

“I’ll give you my standard answer,” he says. “More than a hot dog but less than the space shuttle, period. How’s that?”

Still, the old sky-jumper has spent years convincing curious passers-by the relevance of his temple of knowledge, that he’s not some kook out in the desert running a cult or building monuments to himself, but a man with a true vision. In recent years, local schools have sponsored field trips to Felicity, were a delighted Istel entertains them like a doting grandfather.

“Of course,” he says, “I’m a kid myself.”

But Jim Beard, a museum tour guide, said the school outings are a major milestone for Istel.

“He sees it as a turning point — that people are taking it more seriously,” Beard said.

Istel, of course, insists he never second-guessed his instincts.

“This is going to sound half-conceited and half-nutty,” he says, “but we never had any doubt somebody would like it.”

**A STYLE ALL HIS OWN**

Istel spends the afternoon greeting well-wishers and fielding phone calls in his second-floor office. The exchanges reveal his sharp-edged humor.

“Welcome,” he says to one woman. “Now tell me who you are.”

Always the gentleman, he insists the men remove their hats in the presence of a lady. As he prepares to utter an expletive, he instructs her to cover her ears.

He calls his wife to bark an order. She hangs up on him.

“I have a way with women,” he smiles.

Still, he acknowledges that he could not have accomplished his dream without the help of the sometimes taciturn Felicia. Once, he remarked that she had not given him a compliment in 40 years. Her response: He hadn’t deserved any.

Yet the two see eye-to-eye here. Felicia knows her husband likes to insert humor into his work, allowing himself “a little joke in granite.”

He has included an Elmo figure on a panel about economics. On another listing major U.S. historical moments, he included the invention of the TV mute button between the discovery of the polio vaccine and the end of segregation.

But there was one disagreement. On a literary panel, Felicia didn’t like this quote from Groucho Marx: “Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.”

The quote stayed.

“Felicity is a democracy,” Istel says, “and Felicia gets 49 percent of the vote.”

The pre-celebration afternoon is drawing to a close and Istel is doing what he loves most, walking among his panels. They include advice from chef Julia Childs — “If you are afraid of butter, use cream” — located not far from a panel detailing the 100 Years War.

Intel smiles, pausing to admire his work.

“We want things that will interest people in the long-term future,” he says as a parachutist glides overhead, ready to land. “But if it doesn’t, we won’t know it.”

Yet his granite dreamscape remains unfinished. In one area he plans several panels on the extinct animals.

“The kids will like that one,” he says, passing several other blank slates. “What goes here? I haven’t a clue.”

The man whose life was once marked in parachute silk and nylon and later in granite is asked how wants to be remembered. “I don’t even want to think about it,” he says. “I’m too busy.”

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