Discoveries: Museum of History in Granite

Border-area history museum is built to last – on granite

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* [**Story**](http://www.sacbee.com/entertainment/living/travel/sam-mcmanis/article13818665.html#tabs-b0710947-1-tabPane-1)
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FELICITY

Empires rise and fall, whole civilizations flourish and fade, great mountain ranges erode over time, so only a fool deluded by hubris would be presumptuous enough to believe he has created something of permanence.

And [Jacques-Andre Istel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques-Andr%C3%A9_Istel) may be many things – thinker, autodidactic student of history, mayor-for-life, former stock analyst, parachute designer, recall candidate for governor in 2003, loving husband – but he’s certainly no fool.

But, for the sake of argument, let’s say you wanted to erect an elaborate, lasting monument of and for humankind, firm of foundation and with the solidity and mass to repel the elements. What material would you choose?

Istel’s answer: granite.

His art installation-cum-museum, straightforwardly called [Museum of History in Granite](http://www.historyingranite.org/), lies along a particularly arid stretch of Imperial County, just off Interstate 8. Spread over 2,600 acres, 922 granite panels are set 3 feet into the ground with reinforced concrete and rise about 5 feet in geometric patterns, weighing, by Istel’s calculation, 4,865,378 pounds. Engraved on most of the surfaces – the project is ongoing, and also includes a pyramid and a church on a man-made hill – is nothing less than the history of the universe, from the Big Bang and Genesis to the invention of the TV remote control, replete with timelines, reproduced etchings of great artworks and what Istel deems epoch-making events.

So, if this was your all-consuming undertaking, wouldn’t you, too, opt for a rock of such substance?

“It is intriguing in the digital age, writing in granite,” Istel, 86, muses in his upstairs office just to the east of the monument. “An atomic explosion can wipe out the (Internet) cloud (storage system) and cause a certain amount of embarrassment. But this’ll be here. It’ll stay.”

Then, he paused and raised an index finger. He acknowledged the museum’s impermanence with a sly smile.

“I’m asked, ‘What about a major earthquake burying it?’” Istel said. “I have a very good answer for them. It’s this: Think how happy future archaeologists will be with the rubble!”

Istel refrained from laughing at his own witticism. You can tell, by his smooth delivery, that this is not the first time he’s used that line. He’s well-accustomed to entertaining the press and telling the story of the museum, the town on which it sits, and his adventuresome life and times that, if Hollywood bigwigs had any sense, would be made into a biopic starring George Clooney or somebody equally as dashing.

Actually, volumes could be written about Istel’s life, but since he wants you to focus on the museum, this will have to do in terms of background:

Son of a distinguished financier who was a confidant to Charles de Gaulle, Jacques and his family fled France after the Nazi occupation, arriving in New York in 1940, whereupon he hitchhiked across the country before heading back East to attend Princeton. After an eventual stint in the Marine Corps and a dull stretch as a Wall Street analyst, Istel circumnavigated the earth in a twin-engine plane. He then parlayed his love of flying and skydiving to open three parachuting schools and develop a modern parachute in 1957. Sports Illustrated profiled him, and he ended up marrying the writer, Felicia Lee. A few years later, he bought some land in the California desert, which sat fallow for decades.

Then, in the mid-1980s, he turned that parcel of land into a town named for his wife, [Felicity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felicity,_California), became its mayor in a landslide victory (with both ballots counted) and set about turning the beige landscape into something memorable and, yes, lasting.

At the south end of “town” he built a 20-foot marble-and-glass pyramid that he cheekily called the Center of the World, and at the “north” end a church called the Chapel on the Hill, having employed men in bulldozers to move 150,000 tons of dirt to create the hillock. Standing as a sentinel, 25 feet high, at the entrance is part of the original Eiffel Tower, a nod to Istel’s Gallic roots. “Jacques saw they were auctioning it off and wanted it as a souvenir of his childhood,” Felicia said.

But Istel doesn’t like anyone to dwell too much on that whole “Center of the World” hooey, thinking it detracts from the serious work of the granite panels of history. In fact, Istel wrote a scathing letter to the New York Times Magazine because, in an otherwise laudatory [4,000-word profile of him in 2014](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/magazine/a-journey-to-the-center-of-the-world.html?_r=0), it detailed the pyramid and “relegated a fine museum to a roadside attraction.”

Istel is serious about his scholarship and mentions several times that he does not advertise his site, though visitors are welcome. Felicia, it seems, has few qualms about having a little fun with the, in her words, “whimsical” pyramid. She takes you inside the pyramid and stops in front of a circular brass plaque embedded in the marble floor, saying “Official Center of the World.” She takes your picture standing on it and then hands you a certificate authenticating that you stood at the “center of the world.” Said Felicia: “Really, the center is wherever you are at any time, but we got the (Imperial County) Board of Supervisors to make it official.”

But enough about that, for fear of incurring Jacques’ written wrath.

The historical slabs of granite are what matters, he insists. It’s his life’s work to chisel (he actually hires artisans to do the installation and etching) history, trying to explain the world in all its complexity to future generations. He considers himself a discerning editor and writes the text himself, Felicia doing the proof-reading – important to have no typos when putting text into granite. There’s a wall dedicated to the state of Arizona, another (in progress) about California, to be dedicated on March 19, 2016. Istel proudly shows letters of congratulation from dignitaries, including recent missives from Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and University of California system President Janet Napolitano.

A 60-panel “History of the United States” was dedicated in February 2014, in a ceremony that included a Marine color guard, the U.S. flag arriving by parachutist and the ringing of a half-to-scale copy of the Liberty Bell. As big an accomplishment as that was, it pales compared to the ongoing 461-panel “History of Humanity,” about 30 percent completed, from the dawn of time to the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Lots of history remains. How does Istel decide what to leave in, what to take out?

“You put your finger on the difficult job we’ve had,” he said. “Remember, I’m not a historian, although modestly speaking, I’ve now published three books of history. Call me a half-assed historian. When I started history of humanity, we took three immense books, all 1,200 to 1,500 pages, one translated from German, one in French and one in English. I took the number of pages, by average, they allocated to each segment of history and then applied that percentage to my 400 or so panels.”

Yes, but by what criteria does he decide an event if worthy enough to be etched in granite?

“The only answer I can give you is, one does the best one can,” he said. “Look, when I did the history of the U.S., you have to treat certain subjects whether you want to or not. Watergate. Civil rights. Sports. Food. I got a great quote on the American food and beverage panel. It’s from (humorist James) Thurber: ‘The most dangerous food is … wedding cake.’”

Istel’s wry humor is evident on many panels. In a History of Humanity panel titled, “Man Evolves: Homo habilis to Homo erectus to Homo sapiens,” he had an artist engrave the classic New Yorker cartoon of a mother ape complaining to her offspring who stands ramrod straight, “How many times must I tell you, stoop.” The next panel over, though, “The Creation of Adam,” by Michelangelo is reproduced with exactitude.

Not only choosing a mix of world-changing events, but sussing out the veracity of events, can be a challenge, Istel said.

“It’s caused me to lose some sleep,” he said. “In the U.S. (monument), I really felt I’d bitten off more than I could chew. You see, when you write about what occurred 3,000 years ago, no one really knows what went on. Can you imagine writing about the last 50 years and putting that in*granite?* Now that was serious.”

Though he says he adheres to the facts, there is a point-of-view expressed in some panels. He mentions on the “Food and Beverage” panel that “soft drinks … caused concern about obesity in the 21st” (century.) One panel titled “Still Living Above Our Means: 1980 to 2012” features the “Sesame Street” character Elmo standing before a bar chart comparing U.S. debt per capita to income per capita, with the caption: “Elmo asks, ‘Can you tell which one is growing faster?’”

Most of the panels, however, are straightforward recitation of events, everything from the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center to the moon landing to how the continents formed starting 65 million years ago.

Istel knows he has opened himself up to criticism from “those with an agenda.” He does not care.

“You’re talking to an old Marine,” he said. “We welcome controversy. Don’t put that in. Just say we do the best we can. If you find three people who say you’re an idiot, you can find three people who say you’re a genius. But I must tell you, when we got done engraving the text (on the U.S. panels) and it couldn’t be changed, I sent (photographs of it) to a famous historian, who chaired the Princeton history department, and I got, in writing from him, the only A-plus of my life.”

Istel then rose to shake your hand and usher you out. He had history to write, but you could tell he was concerned about what you would write about the museum.

“Look, PBS was here for a serious story; so was French TV,” he said, then broke into another sly smile. “We’ve gone from kooks in the desert to partial kooks in the desert.”

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MUSEUM OF HISTORY IN GRANITE

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More info: [www.historyingranite.org](http://www.historyingranite.org/); (760) 572-0100

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