

TAM's stone wave 'soul' will cross Pacific soon

Jen Graves

the arts

The "soul" of the new Tacoma Art Museum is about to board a ship from China.

A stone wave made of 700 hand cut pieces of 500 year-old Chinese pavement is being loaded onto a ship that will set sail this week.

If all goes well the patchwork of stones, arrayed to resemble a wave of water will "crash" against the mirrored glass walls at the core of the new building by the time TAM opens May 3.

Seattle architectural designer Richard Rhodes created the sculpture which he's informally calling "Stone Motion"

In his initial planning, TAM architect Antoine Predock had hazy ideas about a "mist moss garden" at the center of the museum, which is shaped roughly like a "P".

The museum's entrance on Pacific Avenue near 17th street is at the base of the "P" stem. The garden area covering 1,650 square feet and open to the sky, sits in the center of the "P" with the galleries curling around it.

Predock's first idea was to plant moss between flat stones inside the mirrored glass walls. But that wouldn't work - the moss would die in the summer. So he and former TAM board president Brad Jones talked with Rhodes whom Predock has consulted before.

Predock wanted the garden to be a quiet, spiritual focal point- "the building's soul"- incorporating only stone and moss. It allows no public entry. A removable panel will give access for cleaning.

Rhodes works only in stone. He said his claim to fame is being the first foreigner in 726 years to become a Freemason in Italy, where he trained. This is his biggest public project.

The prow of "Stone Motion's" wave at the entry to the gallery area will block a full view of it. It unfolds as visitors walk. Rhodes said the stone which he is donating and which was taken from roads in China that would have been destroyed in development has soft- looking, padded-upon skin in contrast to the building's modern stainless steel coat.

"My idea is that those 30-foot glass walls make that courtyard a fishbowl, so I've designed a liquid pavement that floats," he said.

"There's a sense that something happened that caused it to move"

Rhodes thinks the wave resembles an artist's consciousness manifested in objects that are judged in the fishbowl of an art gallery.

The museum has \$1.3 million yet to raise in its \$27 million capital and endowment campaign. Museum director Janeanne Upp said raising money, including the funding for "Stone Motion" will be easier now that prospective donors have something to see since it was test-built and photographed in China.

Rhodes isn't as enamored of moss as Predock. But a watering system will be installed to encourage moss to grow in winter. I am glad of that. Under a gray sky in a steel building enclosing ancient stones, furry green patches in winter will catch the colors in the galleries.

Without seeing it, it's hard to say whether "Stone Motion" will be a success. It sounds deeply thought-out, and the fact that it works on several levels is encouraging. Visitors don't need to consider an artist's consciousness to get the dramatic feeling that a glass of water has been knocked over then frozen in time.

We only have to wait 146 days to see TAM's secret heart.