

Tacoma Art Museum

A sea of stone is at the heart of the new space

by Peggy Anderson
The Associated Press

TACOMA- At the heart of this city's new art museum is a courtyard surrounded by a mirrored two-way glass and open to the sky- a storeroom of natural light that spills into the galleries spiraling around it.

In the weeks before the Tacoma Art Museum's grand opening May 3, stone artisan Richard Rhodes is installing a sculpture on the courtyard floor- a heaving sea of stone, with a cresting 7- foot wave at the corner marking the entrance to the galleries.

The stone is Chinese granite, hand-chiseled five centuries ago into 24-inch square pavers for a road. Over the past 500 years, the crystalline surface of the slabs has been worn to a soft patina by animal and human traffic in the Pearl River delta.

"They have this fantastic texture....you get almost a sheen to the stone from the wear," said Rhodes, pulling a slender edge piece from one of dozens of wooden crates stacked outside the building.

Each piece was trimmed for the sculpture using a computer generated paper template. The work was pre-assembled alongside a rice paddy in China, and then numbered, color-coded by section and packed up for shipping - a blend of 16th century stone, 18th century handcraftsmanship and 21st- century information technology, Rhodes noted.



In February, Richard Rhodes was surrounded by crates holding the paving stones that would be transformed into the museum sculpture

The courtyard covers about 2,000 square feet, but is not square by any means. The sides measure roughly 56 feet by 50 feet by 38 feet by 25 feet. The stonework, diagrammed in Rhodes' laptop computer forms a "warped hyperbolic paraboloid" he says - not a shape offered routinely in geometry class.

Rhodes sees respite for visitors in the stone's subtle colors and textures.

"I wanted to create something that was thoughtful but didn't require your attention, didn't demand your attention," he said.

The sculpture's impact "didn't necessarily have to occur to you instantly - it's something that could grow on you and maybe you came many times to the museum before you really fully appreciated it."

Museum's architect Antoine Predock of Albuquerque wanted "a spiritual space" at the museum's center - a tall order, Rhodes noted.

"I think that's something that the audience has to decide, they have to bring that," he said. "What I wanted was a space that was suitably blank."

The walls of the museum itself "have to be suitably blank so we can bring our hopes and expectations and our dreams to it," Rhodes said. The 60 tons of granite are among hundreds of tons of granite that Rhodes' Seattle company, Rhodes Architectural Stone, has shipped to the United States over the past 5 years from a region of southern China destined for flooding by the Three Gorges Dam project.

The \$22 million museum will open with three primary exhibits: of recent gifts to its collection; a selection of works by Northwest mystics Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson called "Immeasurable Spaces and Incalculable Energies" and a permanent installation of Dale Chihuly glass.

The new TAM officers are already occupied. Hanging of the exhibits is to begin March 10.



Rhodes, of Rhodes Architectural Stone, in the Tacoma Art Museum courtyard where he installed a heaving sea of stone. The stones were imported from China, where they were hand-chiseled five centuries ago



The granite sculpture was first assembled in China by Richard Rhodes, left and his team of experts, seen there in November of last year.

This is a 700-piece, 60-ton jigsaw puzzle - you don't want to get it out of order," he said with a smile. "And what we know from having constructed it once is, if you're off a quarter inch down there, you're off two inches up there - and all these lines converge to there's no way to hide that."

The stones will be mortared onto shaped pieces of plastic foam - required as a base material due to weight concerns- with rainfall seeping through to rubber matting and drains at floor level.

Visitors will follow a gently rising ramp counterclockwise around the four-sided courtyard with the museum's five galleries and occasional bursts of light from surprising windows - ascending to the right as they circle Rhodes' piece. "It's a completely three dimensional experience," he said, and "you wind up a full story above it, so your view is always changing."

And the rising swell represents a fluid microsecond at sea, so there's a fourth dimension at work as well - the dimension of time.