

Hearthwarming DESIGNS

Stonemason extraordinaire turns ancient ruins into one-of-a-kind fireplaces

by Paul Lee Cannon

READY TO TURN YOUR FIREPLACE INTO A CONVERSATION piece? Then put your hearth in the hands of Richard Rhodes. Skilled in the fine art of "masonry media" (stone selection, project design and custom creation.), the accomplished stonemason and Seattle-based company Rhodes Architectural Stone, scour the globe to salvage exquisite materials for their masterpieces. Antique terra cotta has been recovered from French countryside homesteads, and 600- to 1,000-year old Yangtze Limestone rescued from bulldozers digging China's Yangtze River Valley Three Gorges Dam Project.

In 2001, "Lahdi", a limestone breed native to Gujarat, India, was removed from the site of a devastating earthquake. While the tremor destroyed hundreds of ancient palaces, the catastrophe provided a rare opportunity to preserve, from the ruins, literal pieces of history. "We were able to buy up a lot of the stone that would have gone to a landfill or beneath asphalt," says Rhodes, who with his army of highly skilled craftsmen was able to resurrect this antiquated stone and transform it into rustic, soothing creations.

To produce such masterful works, Rhodes often turns to Ankar and Silk Road Sandstone, popular alternatives to the firebrick commonly used in most fireplaces. Ankar, a volcanic material from the islands of Indonesia, is most striking when fashioned into a herringbone or basket-weave pattern. The beauty of its greenish - gray hue and rough texture surpasses that of the standard yellow firebrick. "The style is versatile," shares Rhodes. It's a very carvable, fine-grained stone that blends well with interior finishes," he says. "And the color is neutral yet very warm. Stone can be cold if the color's not right."

It's meticulous attention to such details that's snared the attention of some of the nation's wealthiest homeowners. Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey and Courtney Love have utilized his unique talents. So has a Silicon Valley CEO, who commissioned Rhodes to reproduce a 15th-century Japanese summer palace, and a wealthy Seattle coffee executive wishing to morph his residence into an Irish cottage-inspired stone mansion

Whether creating a custom home or one-of-a-kind fireplace, Rhodes Architectural Stone works diligently to preserve the art of stonemasonry, a trade whose origin dates back centuries. "We're really one of the few firms doing original work in fireplaces," says Rhodes. "It's a specialized niche among a small group of artisans."

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