

Artist employs calming effect of stone

By SAM BENNETT
Journal Staff Reporter

For Richard Rhodes' largest public commission, he decided less was more.

Given the chance to fill an atrium in the new Tacoma Art Museum, the Seattle stone artist came up with a solution to calm the soul: a "wave" of granite blocks cut 500 years ago to serve as the spiritual center of the museum.

"The architect's vision of this was to be the soul of the building," said Rhodes. "I decided that was a tall order."

The architect, Antoine Predock, surrounded the space with 30-foot glass curtain walls. Rhodes responded with a work which, at the base of the glass curtain, becomes a focal point for reflection -- a chance to assess the museum's other art work.

"At the center, we needed a place to rest the eyes and cleanse the palate and visually calm ourselves," said Rhodes.

The sculpture, spanning 60 by 50 feet, is made from 60 tons of 700 hand-cut antique stones from southern China. In his Seattle studio, Rhodes created full-scale paper templates for each 250-pound ancient granite piece. Stone carvers then laid the templates out and cut the stone to the exact specs. The piece was pre-assembled in China.

"I hope it will be a powerful contrast to the reflecting glass and the stainless steel, angular quality that the museum presents," said Rhodes.

The piece is untitled, but for \$1 million a donor can have naming rights.

The installation is a departure from Rhodes' typical private commissions involving architectural stone work. His Seattle company, Rhodes Architectural Stone, offers antique and hand-crafted building products.

"I've done a lot of private commissions down long, shady driveways," he joked, referring to his low-profile projects. A recent commission will be Rhodes largest: a 40,000-square-foot home in Greenwich, Conn., on 60 acres, with formal stone gardens. He expects to use 20 tons of stone for the job.



Pre-assembled in China, Richard Rhodes' granite sculpture is a metaphor for water.

Washington commissions have included collaborations on a waterworks garden in Renton and two projects in the city of Ephrata. Rhodes collects the stone from around the world, including China, Indonesia and India.

For example, Rhodes has been collecting tons of stone from buildings that were condemned following the 2001 6.8 magnitude earthquake in India. The Greenwich home will use antique firebrick from Indonesia for its 11 fireplaces. "It really is a great recycling story," he said.

At Tacoma Art Museum, scheduled to open May 3, Rhodes' piece is about 75 percent complete. Workers placed the stones on extruded polystyrene foam to ease the pressure on the concrete floor.

Rhodes founded his other company, Rhodes Masonry, 18 years ago. He founded the current incarnation of Rhodes Architectural Stone five years ago.

Doing business around the world, Rhodes said he has the satisfaction of employing foreigners while also shipping a product to the U.S. that has found an increasingly enthusiastic customer base. He emphasized that the stone work does not come from historic structures, and instead comes from earthquake-struck areas like India or villages soon to be submerged due to dams in China.

"When stone is in the human landscape it evolves and gets better," said Rhodes. "It gets worn and becomes something different. It has an emotional richness that is very exciting to customers."

Sam Bennett can be reached at (206) 622-8272 or by e-mail at sam@djc.com.