

Worth Its Salt

From a 10-Ton Block of Salt Emerges a Piece of Art

BY MICHELLE F. SOLOMON
THE SUNDAY TIMES

Big riggings hoisted and pulleyed and tugged. Above the commotion, Richard Erdman coddled his latest creation — a sculpture made from salt.

Had it survived the rough-and-tumble trip from Carrara, Italy, to its new home in Clark's Summit?

This had been no easy feat, the transporting of an 11-foot-high standing sculpture. Carved from a 10-ton block of rock salt, mined from Akzo Nobel's Salt Avery Island (La.) mine, it had been chiseled, molded and formed.

Now it was time to get "Stanza" settled in.

After two years of planning and executing, the piece was ready to stand in Akzo Nobel Salt's atrium lobby.

Erdman climbed up on a ladder and stripped away the cardboard and packing foam that had protected Akzo's investment.

Dressed in khaki shorts, work boots and a T-shirt, Erdman got down into the thick of things.

He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. It is his practice to follow his art to the end. He dug right in.

HAD BEEN CHALLENGE

After all, this had been a challenge all the way through.

While his background is working in stone, especially marble, Erdman said he looked forward to creating something out of salt.

"The material itself dictated what I could do. Most of my work has always had very defined lines. Working with this was different," he said.

Erdman explained that the salt created demands because it was much softer to work with than stone.

"The salt material drew me to a very different style. The material had to be carved in a large, bulky, structural format," Erdman said.

Though the material dictated the lines of the sculpture, Erdman had ideas of what the form eventually would represent.

"Before I started the project I thought about the salt," he said. "Crystals grow underground and freeze. There is contrast in salt — the smooth and the rough," he said.



LEFT: The installation complete, Erdman still needs to doctor the piece. Moisture build-up from the salt requires a periodic sanding to remove excess salt.

COMMISSIONED ARTIST

His partnership with Akzo Nobel Salt started two years ago when Akzo's world headquarters office in Holland commissioned a European artist to create a sculpture for its office. The request for the salt came through the Clark's Summit headquarters and a large block of salt was ordered from the Avery Island mine.

"They had enlisted a European artist and they wanted the salt shipped to Holland. The artist was going to make a sculpture for them out of the block," said Catherine Bolton, Akzo Nobel's director of communications.

Akzo in Clark's Summit has a number of salt sculptures in the headquarters but nothing decorating the main lobby.

"We decided we wanted one. We went out and talked to corporations, especially PepsiCo," Bolton said.

When Pepsi built new headquarters just north of New York City in Purchase, N.Y., Donald M. Kendall, its chairman, wanted to establish a sculpture park.

In 1985, Erdman was contacted by Kendall, an unusual deviation for PepsiCo since the sculptures in the park were by already established artists.

Erdman's monumental piece for PepsiCo, "Passage," weighs 45 tons and is about 16 feet wide.

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LEFT: Erdman does the initial chiseling down of the salt to begin the transformation into the sculpture "Stanza."



RIGHT: Workers uncrate the massive piece as it arrives at Akzo Nobel Salt's headquarters in Clark's Summit.

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It is the largest freestanding sculpture ever cut from a single block of marble.

"We talked to the curator there and she contacted Richard Erdman.

He sent samples and we liked him," Bolton said.

Bolton wouldn't reveal the price of the work, but she emphasized Erdman's national renown.

"We think the art is worth the investment. And it will remain the property of the corporation," she said.

It was Erdman's association with PepsiCo that became the catapult for his success in creat-

ing corporate art.

In addition to his talent as a sculptor, Bolton said Akzo Nobel Salt was impressed with Erdman's way of translating emotion into his work.

"He came in and talked to Harry (Burns) and Alan (Graf). He visited the mine. He got to know us intimately. He was excited that he'd be working in a medium that actually represents the corporation. It was a chance for him to get totally involved," Bolton said.

WHAT IT MEANS

Erdman pointed to a small, foam model of "Stanza."

"The broken-off areas at the top, the rough areas there —

that's the rough part that's growing.

"The sides, of course, symbolize the finished crystal."

Erdman said the piece will represent growth, upwardness and positive energy — traits he felt were evident at Akzo Nobel Salt.

"When one walks into the lobby, they will be inspired by this feeling of upwardness," he said.

He became engrossed with the idea of unity.

"As crystals are bound together, so are people: The bottom line to all of this is creativity," he said.

Born in Princeton, the 41-year-old sculptor was schooled at the



The 10-ton block of salt arrives at Erdman's studio in Carrara, Italy, from Akzo Nobel's mine in Avery Island, La.



ABOVE: Artist Richard Erdman used a working model made from foam to help build the structure. The model was also used to give Akzo Nobel officials a rendering of the finished product.



Erdman performs "surgery" on the salt as it begins to take shape.

University of Vermont. He studied in Florence, Rome and Carrara, Italy, to be closer to the stone.

Soon after, he established a studio in Carrara, the stone capital of the world. His wife, Gayle, a sculptor and photographer, and 11- and 13-year-old children spend most of their time at Erdman's other studio and his residence in Williston, Vt.

It was the skill, and of course the stone, that drew Erdman to create his works in Italy.

"That's the source. That's where there is skilled labor, cutters and polishers. You can work out-of-doors all year 'round. There's dust flying ev-

erywhere and open air. In Vermont, I'd have to build a shed and work inside."

Always the outdoorsman, Erdman provided a parallel to two of his loves, skiing and sculpting, both highly kinetic.

"I grew up a ski racer and that was a very big part. One of the draws of sculpture was the physical activity and the challenge."

He motioned with his hands. "Cutting and carving and the sheer movement. It's like a mountain. My sculptures are balanced, delicate and risky, which portrays what flying down a mountain on skis is like — being on the edge. I try to

bring that into my work," he said.

"When you're skiing, you're on the edge all the time but you also need to have a sense of balance at the same time."

Erdman said there is something about stone that always drew him to it.

"The reason I work in stone is because I grew up outdoors. I swam in marble quarries. I couldn't work in steel or anything other than stone.

"I've tried a little of everything. It's just me. Stone is the shoe that fits."

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