

# A Grand “Passage” Comes to PepsiCo

A. Richard Erdman, *Passage*, 1983-85. Roman travertine marble, 25' x 15.5'. PepsiCo Sculpture Garden, Purchase, NY.

B. In the Estraba Quarry, 750 tons of cut travertine about to fall;

C. an assistant rough-cutting the block with a diamond saw;

D. 110-ton block being trucked out of the quarry.



B

A

For his first large-scale commission, 33-year-old Richard Erdman took a 750-ton block of marble from an Italian quarry, chiseled it to a graceful 45-ton sculpture, escorted it hundreds of miles on land, crossed the Atlantic, and delivered it—still in one piece—to the PepsiCo Sculpture Garden.

For both Erdman and PepsiCo it was a gamble that paid off.

Sculptor Richard Erdman, once an All-American skier at the University of Vermont, could not have imagined that skiing would indirectly land him a major commission for the PepsiCo Sculpture Garden.

In 1983 Donald M. Kendall, PepsiCo's chairman and one of the nation's preeminent corporate collectors, chanced to visit the Hickory & Tweed ski shop in Armonk, NY. Store owner Jim Ross, an art collector, happened to have Erdman's 36" marble *Venture* in a skylight area. Kendall asked about the work and took home a catalog of Erdman's previous pieces. He was interested in purchasing a large stone work for the company, but few artists were working on a monumental scale in that medium.

Erdman sent slides of his largest sculpture, the 5'10" *Belladonna*, and Kendall bought it immediately for the PepsiCo executive offices. On a visit to PepsiCo's Headquarters in Purchase, NY, Erdman presented his idea for a large marble work, *Passage*, originally conceived for an Alaskan competition. "I told him matter-of-factly—with confidence, not arrogance—that the sculpture would someday be realized." Kendall asked him to develop a proposal for a larger-scale *Passage* to be included in the sculpture garden.



C



D

After presenting Kendall with a plaster maquette of *Passage*, Erdman went to his Carrara, Italy, studio to sculpt a working maquette in Roman travertine marble. Though he had studied marble sculpting at the University of Vermont under artist Paul Aschenbach, he learned most of his craft in the school of life. "I learned from doing, and from working alongside the Italian master stonecutters."

Upon returning to Vermont, he made a full-scale disposable wire version of *Passage*. Though still without a commission, he met with the late Russell Page, landscape architect for PepsiCo, to site the mockup in the garden. Kendall viewed the piece and, after hearing Erdman describe the entire process, commissioned him to make *Passage*. Kendall was taking a considerable risk giving a young artist such an expensive commission, yet he allowed Erdman total artistic freedom.

With the green light on, Erdman headed for the Estraba Quarries in Tivoli, Italy (near Rome), to cut the 750-ton, 30' x 30' x 8' block of travertine marble needed for *Passage*. Estraba was the only quarry that would attempt to cut a block that large. The tension in the stone was extreme during cutting. Two days after the first block was cut, Erdman discovered a hairline fracture running through the back. They had to cut another piece.

E & F. Erdman working on fine carving;



E



F

G & H. *Passage* being crated in Italy and unloaded in America.



G



H

He and several assistants then rough-cut the block in the quarry for three months, reducing it to 110 tons. Still, the cranes had trouble lifting it to the trailer bed for transport north to Carrara. "When one of the two cranes couldn't quite lift its end of the block, my Italian assistants had nightmarish visions of spending the winter stonecutting in the bottom of a cold Rome quarry. But we got it." The 330-mile journey from Rome to Carrara took six days, with police escorts directing traffic on the small Italian roads. The truck took up the whole road much of the time.

Throughout the next year and a half of fine carving, Erdman and two assistants chipped and smoothed *Passage* to 45 tons, 25' long x 15.5' tall. "Turning the sculpture from its side to its feet and back again was extremely tricky," he says. "We used two cranes—one to lift and pull, the other to catch the stone if it went too far and rocked over during movement."

To protect *Passage* in shipping to the United States, Erdman built a crate—"a small house"—around the sculpture. It was rolled rather than lifted into the hold of a RO-RO vessel (Roll On-Roll Off, different from a standard cargo ship). In early June, after 15 days crossing the Atlantic,

*Passage* arrived at the Brooklyn docks where it was loaded onto a lowboy flatbed truck. It almost rocked over when the truck crossed some railroad tracks. On right turns the sculpture's sheer weight pressed the bed against the tires, sending smoke clouds into the air. Erdman directed *Passage* through Manhattan from 1 a.m. to daybreak and installed it safely at PepsiCo.

In June, he worked on touch-ups and final on-site carving of the support stones. The dedication on October 22, 1985, coincided with a major exhibit of his works at the Weintraub Gallery in New York and with the premiere of a 30-minute Dutch documentary film of the two-year project. *Passage*, located near the garden's entrance, is the 36th work to be commissioned for the PepsiCo Sculpture Garden. It is valued at approximately \$750,000 and is considered to be the largest sculpture in existence carved from a single block of marble.

The meaning of *Passage* is both literal and figurative.

"The literal passage one experiences," Erdman says, "is that you pass through, in, around, and on the sculpture as with every physical space encountered. So you're learning, growing, experiencing all the time you pass from one place to another."

The figurative meaning refers to passing life.

"Life's passage is the reference through the sculpture and like the sculpture, it is what you decide to make of it, the beauty of abstract art...The sculpture beckons the viewer, gives all sorts of feelings, yet always remains on its own, seemingly eternally happy, full of integrity...The experience opens your senses and lets you walk away all the more tuned in, aware of your surroundings, and glad to be alive.

"It's my expression of the grandeur of life."

Though the commission was a windfall for Erdman ("I was a nobody when Don Kendall first saw my work"), it was also a first for PepsiCo. The company's sculpture garden contains works by master artists commissioned during their creative prime. Erdman was a newcomer with no experience in large-scale commissions. As Kendall remarks, it was "a great thrill to be able to take a person who was 31 years old and unknown and take a gamble and have it turn out the way it has." □

*The PepsiCo Sculpture Garden is open to the public 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, NY 10577.*

-KENT KISER