

Tall tales



Paul Cottle has carved many things – mantle pieces, staircases, even toilet seats and a stunning life sized gargoyle. His work includes an impressive variety of works that are proudly displayed by collectors in Canada, Japan, Russia, Europe and the United States.

Now this self-taught London artist is set to tackle, quite literally, his biggest project ever.

Cottle has been commissioned by the Philip Aziz Foundation of Art to carve a tree that will depict the 190 kilometre Thames River expedition taken by 17 artists this past summer. This trip commemorated a route paddled by London artists Paul Peel and William Lees Judson in 1877.

The tree, now called the Thames Heritage Tree, fell a couple of years ago on the Aziz property. It stands approximately 21 feet tall and is 8 feet around. The carving will be done in the Rona store on Wonderland Road North where public will have an opportunity to watch Cottle as he brings the journey to life. When the tree is done, there are plans to install it in the Covent Garden Market.

The inspiration for the scenes will come from the artists who took the canoe trip.

Says Cottle, "The journey will start from the Forks of the Thames. The river, which is the story, will spiral around the tree and end at the top with the lighthouse at Lighthouse Cove on Lake St. Clair. Included along its path will be images of wildlife and fauna that were observed along the route."

The style of carving that Cottle is using is called bas relief. The image at the bottom will be more easily seen and therefore the top must have greater depth and angle downward in order to be seen from below and at a greater distance.

"It is like a 21 foot high, 8 foot wide panel. The twist is that it is in a circle. When it starts curving, it gives it a different perspective and I have to take that into account," Cottle says. "Because I know the tree is ending up indoors, the style of carving used is slightly different than the carvings [I do] for outdoors because I don't have to worry about rain, heat or the freeze/thaw cycle."

Originally Cottle will rough out the design with a small electric chain saw and an angle grinder with a Lancelot blade. The majority of the design work will be done with a Dremel rotary tool for the detailing and sanding.

As for how long the project will take, Cottle estimates it will be about six months. But first, he must make the initial cut. "I am at once excited and nervous about starting. The hardest part is putting the tool to the wood ... In the larger carvings I tend to make lots of marks to find the starting point. Once I find it, everything expands from there. The starting point may just be a leaf and then that leaf is attached to a branch or a tree."

When completed the Thames Heritage Tree will travel to Ottawa in 2009 for the national celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Canadian Heritage River System.

Maridon Duncanson is a London freelance writer with a passion for art, theatre and music. She also likes cats.

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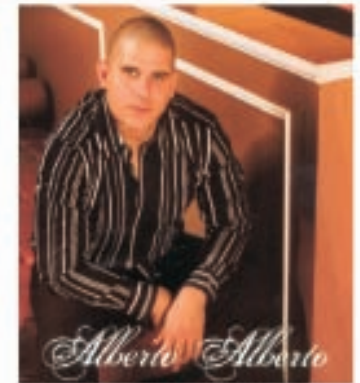
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