

Art in Plain Sight: Nature Spiral

Written by Bruce Walters

Thursday, 06 October 2011 08:17



Nature Spiral is a circular arrangement of limestone boulders situated near the Mississippi River in the Illiniwek Forest Preserve, near Hampton, Illinois (just north of East Moline). Ideally suited for a park named after the regional Native American tribes, the artwork blends in with its natural environment and is reminiscent of Native American and Neolithic earthworks. The spiral can be reached by Illinois Route 84, or the Great River Trail for hikers and bicyclists.

The site was chosen in 1995 by a community-wide partnership led by Quad City Arts and River Action. Public meetings were arranged for the community to express ideas for an artwork that improved awareness of, appreciation of, and access to the Mississippi River. In all, nearly 50 historic preservationists, river activists, and members of the community contributed to the project led by area artist Kunhild Blacklock, who designed the work and supervised its installation.

Completed in 1997, Nature Spiral is primarily made of 65 boulders, with outlined images of native birds, fish, insects, animals, and plants cut into the surface of many of the stones. Among the flora and fauna is a bald eagle, channel catfish, mayfly, deer, silver maple, cattail, and waterlily. Approximately 800 feet in circumference, the spiral also includes planted trees and wildflowers. A nearby informational sign provides a map of the spiral and a key to the iconic images on the rocks.



Art in Plain Sight: Nature Spiral

Written by Bruce Walters

Thursday, 06 October 2011 08:17

The placement of the boulders gradually spirals towards a center dark stone that has a map of the spiral cut into its top surface. This center stone is a glacial erratic, meaning that it was deposited by glaciers in the last ice age.

In this aspect, the work is like a labyrinth – a spiritual pathway that leads to the center. The outer rings of the spiral are composed of boulders, trees, and wildflowers native to this area. Yet at the core of this familiar world is something unexpected, something mysterious.

The spiral also evokes a sense of past cultures. The purposeful, geometric placement of boulders on an open field is reminiscent of Neolithic standing stone circles or earthen mounds created by people and communities lost to us through the passage of time. Even knowing that this is a recent work, it creates a sense of place – a place that is at once in the present and ancient.

The stones aren't overwhelming in size; only a few are too high to sit on. This human scale gives them an intimacy – an inviting quality. One feels comfortable walking among them.

As Blacklock said about the artwork: “My hope is for visitors to relax at the site and contemplate how enriched we are by the environmental gifts of the Mississippi.”

Bruce Walters is a professor of art at Western Illinois University.

This is part of an occasional series on the history of public art in the Quad Cities. If there's a piece of public art that you'd like to learn more about, e-mail the location and a brief description to BD-Walters@wiu.edu.