

The Art of History

snowshoeing at Michigan Legacy Art Park



Field Trips

by Alex Rossman

With their Up North scenery and sensibility, it's hard to imagine Traverse City or Cadillac as major metropolises, but sometimes it's nice to get away from even the most moderate bustle.

Just a short drive from both cities, the Michigan Legacy Art Park at Crystal Mountain provides a place to do just that. Crystal Mountain is already known as a premier Michigan recreation destination, but the Art Park provides a more leisurely alternative to schussing down the slopes.

The Michigan Legacy Art Park began in 1991 as the brainchild of Novi sculptor David Barr, who is now the park's Artistic Director and a continual contributor. He envisioned bringing Michigan's character to life in nature, art and history for visitors to experience. His idea sparked the interest of Jim and Chris MacInnes and the Petritz family, owners of Crystal Mountain Resort, and they donated a portion of land within the resort's boundaries to establish a non-profit park independent of the resort.

The Michigan Legacy Art Park officially opened in 1995, and today draws thousands of visitors annually. It has succeeded in educating people on Michigan's way of life in an interactive and innovative way. The park can be viewed by foot, or by cross country skis in the winter months that draw so many visitors. But for the ultimate immersion in Michigan's past, to truly walk in the footsteps of our forefathers, the Art Park is best experienced through the same backcountry means of the

earliest settlers, trappers and traders—snowshoes. The sculptures also seem to gain an added authenticity in winter under a dusting of snow.

Set within a pristine 30-acre forest, a 1.5 mile trail transports visitors back in time as the whirl of chair lifts and the echoing whoops off the slopes grow fainter with each crunching step. More than thirty sculptures await discovery along the path, each an interpretation of, and in its own way, a piece of Michigan's history. All



of the elements of Michigan's natural heritage are encapsulated in an artistic timeline on the grounds.

"Tribute to White-Tailed Deer," "Frog" and "Fairy Ring" (named after the mushroom that grows in a circular pattern) pay tribute to the northwoods wildlife, while "Red Demon" reminds of the trepidation unknown forests can hold.

The three "Clan Symbols" pieces, "Serpent Mound" and "Inside a Historical Mystery: Mounds" explore the culture of Michigan's original inhabitants, the Native Americans.

The four installments in the "Saw-path Series," "Logging Camp," "Voices of the Lumberjack" and more explore Michigan's lumbering heritage, and remind of the underlying lesson to not overuse our natural resources. "Five Needles" is easily one of the most visually moving pieces in the park, with massive swaths of canvas stretched against towering pines like giant sails suspended in the forest. It is designed to honor the few remaining virgin stands of white pine in the Lower Peninsula.

Seafaring themes are also explored as part of the Great Lakes State, from the nautilus-shaped "Unravel" and "Secret Passion," to "Stockade Labyrinth," which seemingly could've been the site of a major battle for control of the Great Lakes. Though closed during the winter months, its inside walls bear French words that whisper of missionaries and fur traders, and an array of images that evoke the impact of man on nature.

Michigan's history is deeply rooted in agricultural as well, represented by "Reminiscent Barn" and "Barn Chair," which also serves as an oversized homage to the role of furniture design and construction in Michigan's history. The giant chair is placed overlooking the beautiful Betsie River Valley because, as the artist states, "it is a view to be framed and . . . contemplated." The landscape is stunning, and the experience is reminiscent of plopping a diapered posterior in Grandpa's rocking chair on the cabin porch.

Other characteristic themes are examined, from additional occupational endeavors like masonry, mining and industry, to more personal connections to northern Michigan like the nearby 45th parallel and Ernest Hemingway's literary inspiration. Many other works conjure a more introspective exploration of the important balance between man and nature.

The pieces keep pace with modern day, adding commentary to our daily lives here in Michigan. "Table and Chair" contemplates the notion of family through the dining room table, which is partially buried in the ground (and by snow cover). "Satisfaction From Nature" consists of a wooden bench perched a few feet from a metal square encased in wood. Mimicking the modern entertainment ritual of television with the materials and programming of the past, it's a unique statement about the appreciation of nature that evokes relaxation and stifles the need to change the channel. The bench is specifically raised to provide a comfortable resting spot that accommodates cross country skis and snowshoes.

Michigan Legacy Art Park is truly a unique experience, managing to exemplify urban culture in the most rustic of settings. It is a park, a nature center, an art gallery and a history museum. And just like the nature of Michigan,

it is continually changing and expanding. New pieces are constantly being added, and the senescence of the man-made sculptures under the elements of Mother Nature perhaps provides the most poignant statement of all—nature shall always endure.

Snowshoes can be rented at the Crystal Mountain Nordic Shop, and the resort also provides guided snowshoe tours of the park during the winter weekends. For more information on the Michigan Legacy Art Park, including photos of the sculptures and artist biographies, visit www.michlegacyartpark.org or call 231-378-4963. 🏠

Alex Rossman combines his passion for writing and the outdoors working as a freelance writer in Lansing.

The "Five Needles" sculpture by Michael McGills was photographed by Alan Newton.