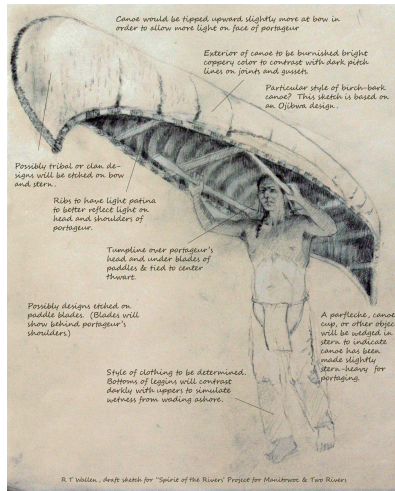


Canoe shows off strength, dependability

From Herald Times Reporter Website

Kerry A. Trask Published 1:20 p.m. CT March 21, 2015

<http://www.htnews.com/story/life/2015/03/21/spirit-rivers/25142995/>



The large, bronze birch bark canoe carried aloft by the figure of a young Indian man, at the very center of the Spirit of the Rivers sculpture, not only makes this work of art unique among public monuments of its kind but is also a powerful symbol of life in the Great Lakes region.

This canoe, which will be 22 feet long and weigh up to 1,500 pounds, poses some daunting artistic and engineering challenges. For example, this massive, metallic form must be safely secured against the fury of the winds blasting off Lake Michigan, while, at the same time, appearing light and portable enough for a single person to carry overhead.

But because of the importance of this structure to the overall purpose of the project, R. T. Wallen has called upon a lifetime of creative ingenuity to overcome the problems and design the canoe to metaphorically reflect important qualities of the Great Lakes region's distinctive history and character.

Unique to our northern waters, the birch bark canoe was born of the region's physical environment, fashioned from the natural elements of its forests, and superbly crafted to navigate our rivers, lakes and inland freshwater seas in graceful silence. An amazing achievement of human imagination and creativity, it seemed to possess its own spirit, responding as if almost alive to the currents, waves, winds and storms.

More than any other human invention, the canoe made life possible and even prosperous for the original people of this part of the continent. It provided them with easy access to its aquatic natural resources, and because it was strong and sea worthy, yet light and portable, it turned the region's superabundant lakes and rivers from obstacles into a network of highways through the wilderness, connecting widely dispersed people and enabling commerce to develop. Probably older than the wheel, the birch-bark canoe was the genesis of our long and storied maritime tradition.

Wisconsinoutdoorfun.com: [Read more about canoeing in Wisconsin](#)

For Europeans — explorers, traders, missionaries and eventually settlers — the canoe was the vessel of their age of discovery. It carried them into the heartland long before there were roads, canals, ships or railways. It was for this region what the horse was to the West, and it opened to the world the secrets of the interior while only minimally disturbing the natural environment.

Because cultures and peoples are so strongly shaped by their natural environments and the technology they employ, the canoe influenced who we became and what distinguishes us from people of other regions. Rather than solitary riders racing across the land in search of personal independence, people here moved to other rhymes, inspired by a different vision. Here everyone lived on the water and the motions of the canoe were decidedly unlike those of the horse or covered wagon. Those who propelled the great bark boats of our earliest history worked together, stroking harmoniously in time with one another, singing and moving in unison as their wondrous vessels rocked to the rhythms of the waters and the winds. All shared a common purpose and destination.

Indeed, the canoe itself possesses qualities we came to admire in ourselves: its strength and unassuming pragmatic character, its dependability and capacity to bear heavy loads, as well as a stouthearted determination in facing the fury of the rapids and the raging of the storm. All together this makes the canoe especially emblematic of who we are and where we live, making it a befitting symbol of our northern life and imparting a powerful eloquence to the Spirit of the Rivers monument.