

Casino bets on local artisans

By RON BARTIZEK
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Significant creations by local artisans add to the appreciation of local history and heritage designed into the new Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs casino, which opened Thursday.

When visitors enter the newest building in Northeastern Pennsylvania, their eyes are drawn to a symbol of one of the region's oldest industries, coal mining. A sculpture celebrating the demanding labor required to extract coal from the earth and process it into the fuel of America's Industrial Revolution stands just inside the casino's main entrance.

Stretching 20 feet tall, "(the sculpture) looks like it's releasing energy from the earth," said Conrad Baut, one of its creators at the family-owned Baut Studios in Swoyersville.

Suspended randomly on 95 cables that stretch from floor to ceiling, 525 small chunks of artificial rock become more refined as they rise, changing from pure coal to diamonds in "a spiraling, vortex pattern," Baut said.

The cables emerge from a base that looks like a huge boulder of coal. But coal fractures easily under pressure, so the base is made from a foam resin that normally is used for small models of statues to be cast in bronze or crafted from another material.

The exposed surface is made of poured urethane, cast using molds taken from actual coal rocks containing the patterns of fossilized fern leaves and bark, the organic material that became coal over millions of years. Some of the master rocks came from a strip mine on the hillside across the street from Baut Studios.

The end result is "a surface of coal made from coal," said Gerhard Baut, Conrad's brother and another partner in the 81-year-old firm.

"This was kind of a step for us," both in working with a new material and in size, Gerhard Baut said.

Known mostly for its work in stained glass, the studio has branched out into other products and services, mostly for the ecclesiastical community. Some of its work is in the Vatican's collections.

Both Baut and the building's lead designer, Dallas Township native Brian Davis, credited the Mohegan Tribe with honoring a chapter in local history that often has been demeaned.

"It took these Native Americans to see it was what was in the ground and the people that made the coal turn into diamonds," Gerhard Baut said.

Placing the sculpture "in the very entrance to their home" shows that the Mohegans "respect the character of the people in this area."

The Bauts did not wait for the commission to fall into their lap; they contacted the architect after reading a 2005 Dallas Post article about Davis' involvement. Davis is glad they did; he was not aware of Baut's capabilities beyond stained glass and would not have commissioned them. But it didn't take long for him to be convinced by their "great energy, great talent."

Kathy Vinciarelli quizzed the brothers about the work as they waited to have photos taken Thursday morning.

"I live on top of a coal mine, so I was really excited to see this," she said, especially since her ancestors were miners.

She was the kind of critic the Bauts welcome.

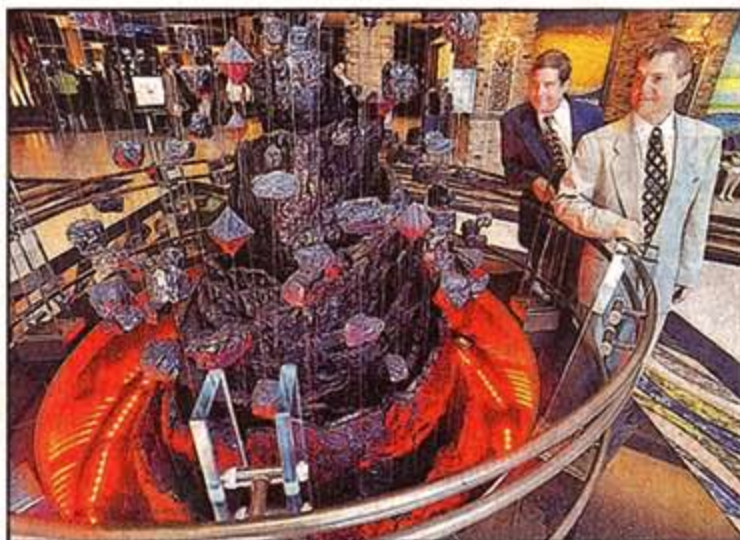
"You never know what people will bring to the artwork," Gerhard Baut said.

Four creations by Bear Creek master woodworker Eric Keil also receive prominent display inside the casino. Laminated from cherry, Keil crafted 64 "twisted sculptures 10 feet high" that are clustered in groups of 16 around columns at the two main entrances to the gaming floor.

Keil, who typically makes high-end custom furniture, enjoyed both the challenge and the freedom of the commission.

"Mohegan Sun has been really wonderful," he said, noting that was at least in part because quality and creativity were more important than pinching pennies. As a result, "you get to do what you're supposed to do. It was really fun."

MOHEGAN SUN AT POCONO DOWNS



S. JOHN WILKIN/THE TIMES LEADER

Conrad Baut, left, and his brother Gerhard, created the coal sculpture at the Mohegan Sun complex in Plains Township.



CLARK VAN ORDEN/THE TIMES LEADER

In a photo taken in May, Gerhard Baut talks about the sculpture that Baut Studio was creating for Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs.



CLARK VAN ORDEN/THE TIMES LEADER

Conrad Baut, left, and Gerhard Baut inspect a wax impression made from pieces of coal. The Bauts used coal they found on a hillside across the road from their Swoyersville studio to create impressions that became a part of the sculpture.

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Gerhard Baut
Co-creator of coal sculpture