

Installing a Ceramic Fountain

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROBERTA WAGNER

I am passionate about gardens; some might even say obsessive. For many years, I have made note of landscape architects whose work I admire and sent them portfolios of my work, hoping to interest them in ceramic art for gardens. I usually include an actual 2" x 2" tile on the cover of the portfolio so they are more likely to save it for some future project.

Having followed this practice for years, I was thrilled when Rodney Robinson Landscape Architects of Wilmington, Delaware, the recipient of a portfolio several years earlier, called. One of their clients, The Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens in Richmond, Virginia, wanted a one-of-a-kind ceramic fountain for their main courtyard.¹ This was a dream come true—to work in such a beautiful public setting with landscape architects whose work I admired.

The Design Process

The courtyard and fountain had been previously designed by Rodney Robinson Landscape Architects with a central fountain that would shoot water upward, letting it fall into the center cylinder and then drizzle over the edge, allowing 3 inches of water to stand on the floor of the fountain. Having just finished a 9-foot waterwall in The Plains, Virginia, where I was responsible for making sure the water flowed correctly (no small task), I was relieved not to have responsibility for the water.

My job was to incorporate Virginia flora, preferably seven different leaves of Virginia natives, into the tile design for the walls and floor of the fountain. This was challenging to me because I never like to be overly literal in my artwork. Instead, I prefer to have the work arouse unique connotations or associations for each person.

I envisioned the design of the fountain to be graceful and soothing; meditative in effect. One day I was working around my magnolia tree and struggling with ways to incorporate Virginia flora

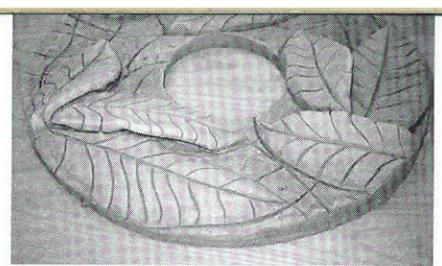
into the design of the fountain, when the idea came to me. In a frenzy I went to work: did drawings, made a maquette and finally a prototype. I made the prototype so that I would understand the construction process and the clients would have a better idea of the final product. I later discovered that *magnolia virginiana* is the plant in the garden's logo.

One of the real gifts of this commission was working with the executive management of the Botanical Gardens, Frank Robinson and Holly Shimizu. Their artistic sensitivity is reflected in the beauty of the gardens, the new visitors' center, and all the little details that are so important in creating a unique and special experience for visitors. When they came to my studio to review and approve the design, their interest in the details and process, and excitement about the design, further inspired me.

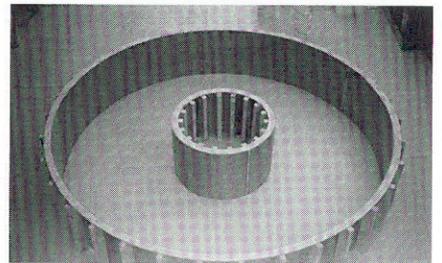
Construction Begins

Eager to move forward, I had a wooden form constructed in my studio (see second photo from top) that was 8 feet in diameter, plus 10 percent for shrinkage. Detailed mechanical drawings were still needed to show the exact placement of drains and lights, and while I waited for the drawings, which took nearly three months to receive due to a series of changes, the form sat in the middle of my studio.

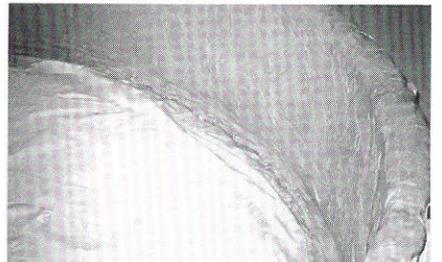
With the help of Allan Summers of the Rodney Robinson firm, with whom I was fortunate to work on the project, I was able to read the detailed drawings. My first step was to drape a 1 inch thick layer of clay over the entire form, rolling in magnolia leaves and using some leaf stamps I made while waiting for the drawings. I used my own clay body that has a very low viscosity so that I could be sure the finished tiles would withstand freeze and thaw situations. Because I wanted the floor and sidewalls of the fountain to look like a deep pool the leaves were floating in, the surface was



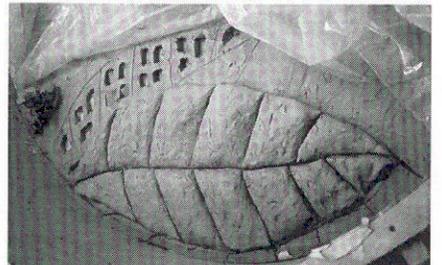
Maquette, 18" in diameter.



Form used to build the piece.



The form is covered with paper and 1 inch of clay. The clay is wrapped over the top edge to hold it in place until it is ready to cut.



The leaf pattern is traced into the base and clay is removed so it isn't too thick when the leaf sections are added. Here the side walls are removed because they were drying too quickly.



Wagner measures to cut holes for the lights. The sidewall tiles are cut and will be removed to dry.



The center of the fountain dries before bisque firing.

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Tips for Installing A Ceramic Fountain

- Get involved in the design process as early as possible so you will have the opportunity to influence the overall appearance of the commission.
- Discourage having to cut holes for lights and drains. It can present so many opportunities for error. For those that are necessary, decide if you will cut the holes on-site or off, and how you can ensure that they will be installed accurately during the construction process.
- Arrange a meeting with the general and sub-contractors in advance to be sure you have similar expectations. If possible, be on-site when forms are poured.
- With thick, architectural pieces, bisque fire for 8 hours at 200° F.
- During installation, make sure you have a good tile saw and someone who really knows how to use it.
- Lay the tiles out in the space they are to fill before you begin installation so that you will know exactly how the piece will fit ahead of time.
- Double your estimate on the cost of installation.
- Expect delays and surprises. You are working with a lot of different people!
- Count your blessings when you have a great client and landscape architect!



Wagner uses a wet-vac after the installation is complete.



Wagner is using Thin-set to adhere tiles.



Water will shoot up from the central pedestal, fill the granite cylinder, drizzle over the edge, and cover the leaves with 3" of water.

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made rough to catch the glaze.

To copy the leaf pattern onto the fountain floor, I sketched the nine leaves on drawing paper, cut them out, arranged them on the fountain floor, numbered the leaves (since they weren't all the same size and shape), traced them into the clay, and began the construction process one by one. Then, almost 2,200 pounds of clay later and with much trepidation, I cut the holes for the drains and lights.

As tiles dried and were removed from the form, they were laid on a sheet of plastic, traced and numbered to create a "map" for future reconstruction. Because the pieces were so thick, I let them dry over the course of five weeks. Still, a few exploded in the bisque kiln. I am forever grateful to the potter (whose name I unfortunately do not know) who told me to bisque fire below the boiling point for eight hours. (I kept it under 200° F.) As a result, I was able to re-create the broken pieces and bisque fire them two weeks later with no delays in the process. Multiple layers of glaze were applied and the pieces were fired to cone 10 over a period of several weeks.

Installation

Finally, it was time to begin installation. I packed the pieces into 75 old clay boxes and, with my husband's help, loaded them into the back of our pickup and drove to Richmond on a cold, rainy day in October. We unloaded and unpacked the boxes, laying the tiles on the plastic map. Thankfully, Suzanne Stewart, a master potter who has also done lots of complicated commercial tile installations, was available to help for a few days.

My first look at the fountain site was a horror. Every hole I had cut for lights and drains was in the wrong place. Despite all of the

detailed plans, the electricians and pool contractors didn't understand how important those locations were. As I spent more time at the site, I also realized that the interior was off diameter as much as 5 inches and off level as much as 2 inches. I was even more thankful for Stewart's expertise as we spent the next two, very long days cutting tiles to adjust for the changes. In the future, I would either request a site meeting with the general and sub-contractors to discuss the specifics, be present during the construction of critical elements, or not cut any holes in the clay and plan to adjust with the tile saw. While the latter option may sometimes be preferable, the overall piece would lose some of the "designed just for this space" feel.

Ultimately, we were able to complete the installation, and the design only suffered slightly from the changes. Seven days after I started the installation, it was complete. My projected costs were accurate for most of the commission, but I underestimated the cost of installation. Fortunately, the Botanical Gardens worked with me on the extra costs. In the future I will be much more cautious on fixed-price installations, particularly when travel expenses are involved.

In the End...

It was a thrilling project to work on and I am pleased to have my work serve as even a small part of such wonderful botanical gardens. I will always remember the curiosity and delight many visitors showed during the installation.

¹ *If you ever have the opportunity to visit The Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens in Richmond, VA don't miss the chance. They are already absolutely wonderful and are undergoing a major expansion that will make them one of the finest Botanical Gardens in North America. ■*