Artwork on table tops

Snakes on Tables

Land of Extremes

The art in residence summer program at the Desert Museum has been an incredibly successful program since its inception in 2012, twice winning a Sidney Stern Memorial Trust grant for funding, of the focus of a conference session at the American Alliance of Museum’s annual meeting in Atlanta, and this year winning a grant funded by the San Diego County Supervisors for an art project in Jacumba.

Snakes on a Table — Lucas’ original

In November 2016, the Desert Museum responded to a request for proposals from the Jacumba-Border Revitalization Alliance, who had received a Community Enhancement Grant funded by the San Diego County Supervisors for a project in Jacumba Park.

The request was to complete an art project using new picnic tables that had been made at Centinela Prison. Lucas Hitch, an architecturally-trained student at Judson University, and a 2013 graduate of Southwest High School, submitted a concept sketch, and the museum forwarded his proposal.

The design called for six table tops to be covered in a ceramic mosaic. Separately, each table would stand alone as art, but taken together they would form a single image. The combined image becomes three rattlesnake. ‘The snakes are not necessarily meant to be photographed and passed together by the public’ Lucas explained.

The art is experienced by looking at the image and looking out the various tiles. It’s more like a scavenger hunt. Custom ceramic tile had to be made to form the snakes. The Rainforest Project was instrumental in providing their expertise and knowledge in this area to the museum.

They are completing large mural installations in public instruction in the project called ‘The Desert. A few visits to their facility for instructions in the method used for making the tiles successfully. Every custom tile was then made this summer by Lucas and a few additional museum staff.

For about six weeks, a production line was set up at the museum and tiles were produced, dried, and then fired in a kiln at the Rainforest Lab. As part of the grant, students in the Jacumba After School program also learned how to make the snake tiles.

The junior high students learned the snake tiles and setting the tiles in thinset mortar. At the high school, tiles were made for two whole tables.

‘They can bring their parents and their friends to the park to show off their work’ said Lucas. ‘It gives the students, and through them the community, a real sense of ownership of the project. Some students even wrote their names on the tiles.’

Students from the Jacumba After School program learned about the venomous snakes, the importance of designing and planning ahead when building a mosaic, and enjoyed building up ceramic tiles that become the sandy background for the snakes.

Snakes in the Desert

Lucas’ design was inspired by a sculpture of a rattlesnake in Jacumba Park donated by sculptor/ artist Linda Byrd, a life-size rattlesnake in California’s only native venomous snake — the rattlesnake.

When people think of snakes in the desert, they usually think of California’s only native venomous snake — the rattlesnake.

On the snake tiles had to be pizzazzed together using numbers scratched into the bottoms of the tiles before they were fired. The red snake tiles sit within a field of broken floor tiles. The tan color of the floor tiles create a background that mimics the desert, and sets off the red on the custom snake tiles.

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You can see the mosaic by taking a trip to Jacumba. Three of the tables are easily accessible in Jacumba Park next to the library. There is also a fantastic new BBQ restaurant for the tables for what they were made for, then you take some pictures of the artwork.

Shake, rattle and... warm?

The sound of a rattlesnake rattling its tail is a sound everyone knows and hopes they never hear in person! Like the growl of a dog or the hiss of a cat, the rattle of a snake is your warning to back away slowly.

With snakes, it is probably the easiest way to tell a rattlesnake from a more ‘innocent’ snake from a safe distance. The rattle doesn’t have anything to do in its distinctive sounds, the sound comes from the rattle shaking against each other when the snake shakes its tail. Rattles are made from a fibrous protein called keratin just like your fingernails and more rattles are added to a snake’s tail every time it sheds its skin.

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