



The Polymer Sculpture

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When the Goodyear Polymer Center was completed in April 1991, it became clear to me that the grass in the circle was uninteresting and needed a dramatic piece to add to the campus landscape. I talked with a few donors and sculptors and was about to propose a fountain or other art piece when suddenly, one spring morning, the Geography Club began to place a shrubbery and white gravel garden, depicting the earth's globe, in the traffic circle. The UA Physical Plant people told me that they don't usually consult the academic units about landscaping and that the Geography Club was granted permission to do the two-dimensional globe. This was dismaying, but we tolerated it

for a year before the plants died and it became messy. From ground level, no one could tell it was the earth.

I volunteered for a campus and community committee called Art in Public Places. Several projects were proposed, and I proposed a sculpture be placed in the Circle. I also volunteered to raise the money required. It was accepted.

Now, an important person enters the picture. She was among many on the committee, but perhaps the most important, Mary Myers. She had endowed The Myers School of Art at the University and was a patron of the arts. She became enthusiastic about the project and proposed a competition among well-known artists around the country. We did that, but after many submissions, presentations, and scoring of prospective public artists, the winner was rejected by the president (and me), for various reasons, including the exorbitant cost. We then were in a hiatus.

A fortunate event brought Chihuly to our attention. Christina DePaul, director of the University of Akron School of Art was with Mary Myers at a Chihuly exhibition in Cleveland. There was a conversation among Chihuly, Mary, and Christina about a project to be in front of the polymer building at UA. Chihuly told them he had begun to work with polymers, in addition to his trademark medium, glass, as well as abstract painting.

Chihuly expressed interest and Mary persuaded him to drive to Akron to see the site. He arrived in his wild clothes (peacock shirt and canary yellow trousers) and began talking.

He asked what our budget was, and I answered with a naïve guess: \$300,000. I saw Christina flinch. His sculptures go for millions. He looked all around, to the top of the building and down to the ground. He then left. I had little hope that we would hear from him. I thought a polymer sculpture would be fantastic, although I hadn't thought that it was a likely choice for anyone else on the committee.

A week later, one of Chihuly's assistants called and wanted pictures covering a 360 degree view outward from the circle. His eventual bid to do the job was \$315,000, providing, of course, that we supplied the materials. The supposition was that he would access the polymer expertise of the Polymer College and "go to school" through working on the project; hence the low price.

The design was Chihuly's. There were no other designs at this point. Many others had been proposed earlier in an aborted competition, but they were not made of polymers. I had spoken briefly with Chihuly saying that polymers consist of long chain-like molecules of repeating units, like beads on a necklace.

There was no intent to ask for a molecular model sculpture; I wouldn't insult a world-class artist by doing that. The only thing I mentioned was that he might consider length rather than thickness and random repetitiveness, in the abstract. The design would be totally up to him. The design was his idea. I supported it, and the committee agreed.

Of course, I had to raise \$315,000 and try to get a very expensive, optical-grade rigid polyurethane donated from a big company. The cost of enough material would have been about \$100,000. We agreed to do a certain amount of scientific testing to be sure it would stand up to years of weathering and abuse. A thirty-two-caliber bullet was fired into a test polyurethane rock, and it did not shatter. It just swallowed it. Weatherometer testing was done by Americhem Inc. in Cuyahoga Falls. The Polymer College analyzed materials and set the curing schedule for the special, rigid polyurethane.

I believe Chihuly's goal was to complement the world-class polymer science program at UA with a world-class polymer sculpture, while learning the pros and cons of a new material class. His primary medium, glass, which is fragile, would not be good for outdoor, permanent public art. He duplicated it in two similar sculptures in his hometown Tacoma, Washington, on the Chihuly Bridge of Glass.

Make no mistake: the idea of a Chihuly polymer sculpture was Mary Myer's, not mine. I have a copy of his first sketch on a menu from a restaurant where we had dinner on Main Street in Akron. We visited Chihuly and his staff in Seattle several times. We toured his fabulous home, massive studios and warehouses, and watched his crew blow glass as well as assemble huge sculptures.

Bayer Materials Science Company donated the material (polyol and isocyanate chemicals). We had a six-month delay because of a new company computer system, and I had to

come up with another \$28,000 to buy it from a California aerospace company who already had some of the material. We almost lost the project after raising the money. Mary Myers became a major donor. The major donors are listed on the plaque on the wall surrounding the spiral planter.

I had someone make a stop-motion motion picture of the assembly on site.

There are sixty-two "Rocks" averaging about sixty pounds each attached to a stainless-steel armature. The beautiful spiral planting base was built through a proposal from Vice President Ted Curtis's office to the Ohio Arts Council for another \$125,000 grant.

The sculpture has survived Akron weather and vandals for at least eighteen years (as of 2016). It has been covered by security cameras ever since someone was observed throwing rocks at it. He didn't hurt it.