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## **PUBLIC ART ROCKS IN COLUMBIA (Published in the May 2005 issue of Inside Columbia) - 5/1/2005**

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### PUBLIC ART ROCKS IN COLUMBIA

COLUMBIA, Mo. – You see the artwork, and you react. You either like it or you hate it. Then you think, “What is it supposed to mean?” That’s the nature of art.

“Art is a personal thing; you will never have a case where everyone likes the same thing,” said Marie Nau Hunter, manager of cultural affairs for the City of Columbia and author of the book, *Show Me Sculpture*. “The most important thing is for people to become an informed viewer and, just like with anything, learn a little bit about it if you can. What is the artist’s intent? What does name mean?”

Recently, the decision to purchase artwork for Stephens Lake Park created some controversy. The work, “Look Out Point,” by St. Louis artist Carol Fleming, will consist of a series of a dozen stone-like clay pieces arrayed in a wavy line, reminiscent of prehistoric stone circles produced by the ancient Britons, on a hilltop that overlooks the park. The clay pieces grow progressively taller and end with a 12-foot-high obelisk. The work will cost \$18,500 to produce.

Each person experiences public art in his or her own way, Hunter says. One viewer might see in “Look Out Point” the advance of civilization or evolution. Another might reflect on life, or some personal, spiritual quest. A child might hop from stone to stone.

“The message in my ceramic artwork is to distill the qualities of nature and culture into one essence,” says Fleming in an “Artist’s Statement” dated December 2004. “The 12 forms would follow the shape of the land, moving journey-like from lower elevation to hilltop. At the start of the spiral path, the clay forms would be nearly level with the ground, but their height will increase nearly a foot at a time as the winding climb proceeds. The drama of the artwork will reinforce the drama of the site.”

Sometimes the message is more comic, like the animal musicians in Courthouse Square. Sometimes the message is a clear physical representation, as in “Taking the Plunge” at the Activity and Recreation Center or “Leap In To” at the Oakland public pool. Sometimes the message is abstract, as in “La Colomba,” or “the dove,” located across the street from the Columbia Public Library. The statue, dubbed the “Flying French Fries” by detractors, represents a bird in flight.

Even more abstract is "Cypher," the paired flaming yellow sculptures that serve as guardians at the entrance to the Library. The title of the piece refers to the complexities of language upon which any library is built. A viewer who looks closely may see tapered stylus-like elements and scroll-like forms that indicate the importance of writing implements.

Columbia's "Percent For Art" program, created in 1997, is responsible for several recent public art works in town. For a closer look at Columbia's public art, the City's Office of Cultural Affairs offers a brochure that will lead you on a self-guided tour of works around the city, from the traditional World War I "Doughboy" statue at the Courthouse to the glass block sculpture "Network" at Fire Station No. 8.

Hunter has no favorites amongst Columbia's public art and says it is very important to understand the difference between commissioning and buying art. "We are buying art, but we are commissioning artwork; we're not just saying, 'I'm looking at your catalog, and I want this one, and this one, and this one,'" she said. "What we do is we go to the artist and say, 'Here's our site. Learn about it. Understand it. Take into consideration the whole project, and the location and setting. And then come back to us and develop an idea for that site.'"

