

"By doing this, you understand the amount of suffering there is in carving a piece of stone."

— Olivier Dumont

Rock artist chips in at Art Institute

Expert stone carver leaves a piece of himself in every job he does — sometimes literally

By Cynthia Dizikes
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Standing about 60 feet above the ground on a swaying metal platform, Olivier Dumont raised his pneumatic hammer and chisel to the smooth limestone face of the Art Institute of Chicago. One wrong move and the master stone carver would ruin an expansive outside section of the new Modern Wing, a \$294 million, 264,000-square-foot, 10-year-long project designed by renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano.

Dumont, hired to carve the museum's name and other engraved lettering into the otherwise finished architectural masterpiece, took a deep breath, turned his iPod to Led Zeppelin and tried not to look down.

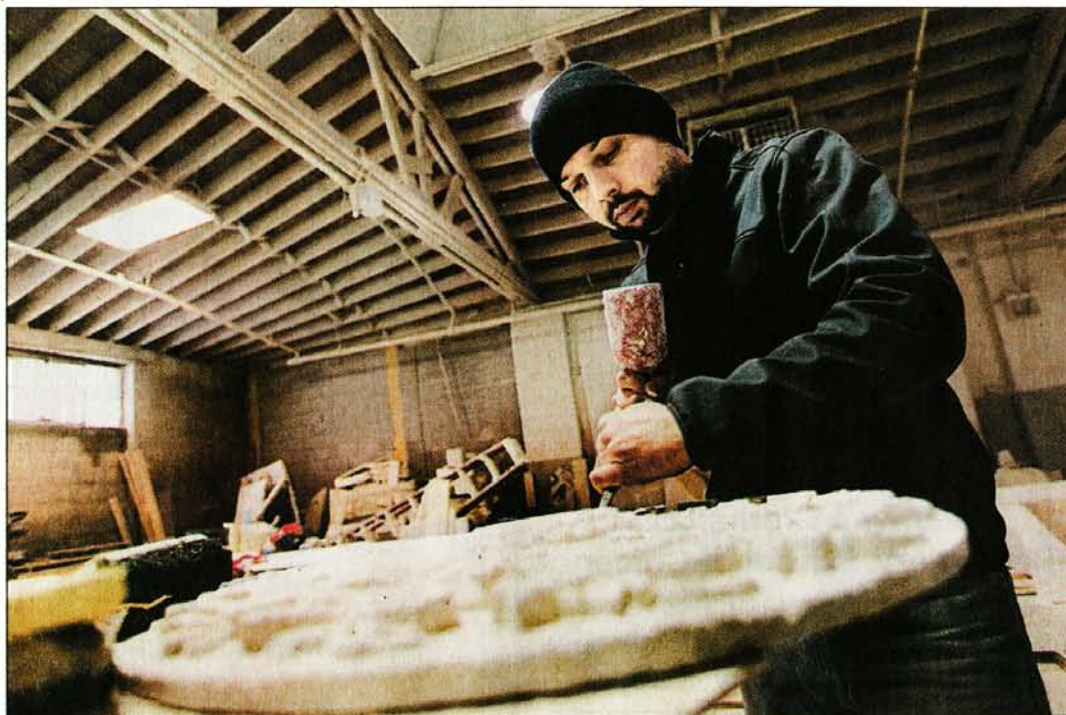
"Once you carve a stone, there is no way to go back," the South Loop resident said, "so there is a huge amount of responsibility."

Dumont, who at 35 has spent nearly half his life working with one of nature's most unforgiving canvasses, is one of about 100 professional stone carvers now working in the United States — a country built mostly of wood, steel and glass.

"It is a high-level craft, and there aren't many people who do it and do it well," said Gary Stemler, a subcontractor on the Art Institute project. The seemingly basic process of engraving letters took weeks, as a committee of museum representative and architects reviewed each stage of Dumont's work. Everything was mapped out, from the type style to the size of the letters and the depth of the stroke.

Originally, the plan was to paint recessed lettering darker to enhance the readability, but the team decided to shade the letters in with graphite.

"It is a softer methodology," said Charlie Young, a partner with Interactive Design, the Chicago-based



Olivier Dumont is one of only about 100 stone carvers working in the U.S. It is an art with no way to undo even a minor mistake. **HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO**

architecture firm that collaborated with Piano. "The problem is when you paint the letters, it is unnatural. In limestone, the beauty is in the shadows the given piece creates."

"We are very happy with the carving," said Erin Hogan, Art Institute spokeswoman. "It is clean and elegant and represents the goal of Renzo Piano for our building. We don't do stone carvings very often,

but if we do another carving in the next 100 years, he'll be on our list."

Dumont said that he was shocked that he was chosen to do the carving on a Piano building. Piano, a winner of architecture's highest honor, the Pritzker Architecture Prize, has designed the Pompidou Center in Paris — a museum and cultural center — the Kansai Airport Terminal in Osaka, Japan, and The New

York Times building.

Dumont, who with his wife, Sonia, opened Atelier Jouvence Custom Stoneworks in 2000, learned to sculpt rock in his native France. He grew up surrounded by Gothic churches and gargoyles, the remnants of an explosion of stone work during Europe's Middle Ages.

Please turn to **Page 4**

Art Institute's latest rock star a letterman

Continued from Page 1

Europeans grow up around ornate stonework, said Walter Arnold, president of the national Stone Carvers Guild, "but in our culture it is less prevalent, less valued and less understood."

Dumont said he was inspired by the extensive history of stone carving and enrolled in a stone-carving school near his hometown of Dijon.

"They gave me a raw block of stone and a hammer and chisel and they told me to carve a perfect cube," Dumont said. "It was, at the same time, the most frustrating and the most liberating thing to do, just hitting a piece of stone."

Dumont has worked on buildings in France, including the Cathedrale Saint-Benigne in Dijon and the Abbaye de Cluny in Burgundy, as well as the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel. But he mostly does residential commissions, such as fireplaces and mantels. Although the pieces are generally smaller, the work of carving stone still exacts a physical toll.

On a recent morning at his South Side studio — an unheated warehouse covered in a fine layer of tan dust — Dumont bent over a leaf-patterned limestone mantel piece, delicately chipping away pieces. Although the work went smoothly, Dumont said over the year he has pulled muscles, smashed his



Olivier Dumont carves a stone medallion out of Sireuil Limestone. HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

fingers and severely strained his back. He also said he worries about lung problems from his constant exposure to dust.

"By doing this, you understand the amount of suffering there is in carving a piece of stone," he said. "First, you have to get the stone from the earth. After that, you have to cut it into smaller pieces and put it on a table, then you have to cut the general shape and then you have to finish it. It is going to take a long time, and you are going to hurt yourself."

But Dumont said it is worth the risks, even though he knows many museum patrons on their way to see the Matisse and Picassos may not even notice his letter engravings.

The signs that now cover the Art Institute represent Dumont's most public carvings to date.

"There is a pride in building something and seeing the final result, even if you are only a small part of it," he said.