

# Opus 40



Saugerties, New York

# Table of Contents

Overview of Opus 40..... Team Pink



Lesson Plan..... Nicole

Guidebook ..... Felicia & Liz

Bibliography..... Michelle

Website Links..... Jackie

# Overview of Opus 40

Opus 40 is a cross between a flowerless garden and an artless gallery. It is often referred to as an environmental sculpture. Opus 40 started as a bluestone quarry. During the 19th century bluestone was used as paving material and for sidewalks which are still used today in Saugerties, New York. Bluestone quarries could be found in abundance in and around the Saugerties area. At the end of the 19th century cement was discovered as a more efficient paving material and bluestone was abandoned. The town of Rosendale, New York was discovered to have cement. As a result, bluestone quarries were abandoned and Opus 40 remained untouched until Harvey Fite's passion for sculpture turned it into an artistic masterpiece.

Harvey Fite, the architect of Opus 40, was born in 1903 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Throughout his youth, Harvey's family struggled financially, forcing them to move Texas where his father worked as a subsistence farmer. At twenty-one years old, Fite began attending Houston Law School. Shortly after, he realized that he did not want to become a lawyer. As a result of speaking with his priest, Fite moved east to study the ministry at St. Steven's School of Divinity located in Annandale-on-Hudson. He soon realized that he had an interest in the theater and went to Woodstock. There he was part of the Maverick Artist Colony before settling on his true passion in life, sculpting. Soon after this epiphany his former divinity school, now Bard College, called and offered him a job to create their Fine Arts Department. After accepting the position, Fite found an abandoned bluestone quarry in the woods of Saugerties, New York (Opus 40, 2007, p. 1). Fite began to clear away the rubble of the quarry to smooth the area for sculpting. He named the quarry Opus 40, assuming that it would take a total of forty years to complete his work. Unfortunately, Harvey Fite died tragically in 1976 at seventy-three years old when his lawnmower got stuck in gear and he tumbled off a cliff into the quarry. Fite had been working on the construction of Opus 40 for thirty-seven years.

# Overview of Opus 40

Harvey Fite was influenced by ancient Mayans when he began to sculpt Opus 40. Soon after he purchased the property for Opus 40, Fite was asked to go to Honduras and work on restoring Mayan sculptures. Fite was intrigued by the "dry keying" method that was popular among the ancient Mayans. This method consists of placing smaller stones around larger stones so the larger stones remain in place. Fite was also influenced by the ancient Egyptians when it came time to position his nine-ton monolith. As a result of his influences, he used very basic hand-tools, such as a hammer chisel, boom, block and tackle. No machines were used in creating Opus 40.

The flora and fauna of Opus 40 is typical of the Catskill Mountain area but most of Opus 40 is made out of stone and rock. The Pennsylvania Bluestone used holds its color and does not break or decay like most stone. The combination of bluestone and dry stone makes a beautiful landscape. Henry Fite was influenced by the Mayans and built statues and walkways for display. There are many animals that live in and around the garden, such as pond mosquitoes, insects and birds. Small animals such as raccoons, skunks, ground hogs, frogs, and squirrels as well as larger animals such as deer and bear are not uncommon. Oak, maple and birch trees surround Opus 40. Seasonal flowers grow and there is a clear view of the Catskills from Opus 40.

Opus 40 is located in Saugerties, New York. It lies between Kingston and Woodstock. All three of these towns have unique attractions as well as many links to one another. While in Woodstock you may be tempted to visit the site of the Woodstock Festival, however, no such site exists! Woodstock '69 actually took place in Bethel, but was originally scheduled to take place in the Town of Woodstock and the name stuck. Saugerties is home to Opus 40, but the Historical Society of Saugerties has information on other attractions in the area. Kingston also has a number of historical and entertainment attractions including the Old Dutch Reformed Church, where New York State's first Governor, George Clinton is buried, and the State Senate House, where New York State's Constitution was written!

# Lesson Plan

Before taking fourth grade students on the field trip, call for reservations to visit Opus 40 and request that tour guides have plenty of brochures available for students before they enter the site. The contact number for Opus 40 is (845)246-3400. Additionally, reservations should be made for a school bus to bring the class to and from Opus 40. The bus driver should be told the departure time from school as well as from Opus 40. Prior to the field trip a permission should be sent to parents. The permission slip can ask parents to volunteer their time and sign up to be chaperones on the trip.

## Sample Permission Slip:

### Parental Permission Slip for Opus 40 Field Trip

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

This is to certify that my child \_\_\_\_\_ has permission to attend Opus 40 on \_\_\_\_\_.

I understand that the trip will be supervised by adults, and that my child will be responsible for all his/her expenses connected with the trip. I hereby give my child permission to ride on the school bus that will be provided by the school.

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

I **WILL / WILL NOT** be available to volunteer my free time as a chaperone on this trip.  
Please return this permission slip to school with your child by \_\_\_\_\_ and leave your name and a number where you can be reached on this form. Thank you!

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

Teacher Name

# Lesson Plan



**Topic:** Opus 40

**Time:** 90 minutes for the activity, 30 minutes for the discussion

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, colored pencils, crayons, water colors, paint brushes

**Objectives:**

- 1) Students will see the intricate work of the stone arrangements at Opus 40.
- 2) By viewing the arrangements, students will appreciate that Harvey Fite created all of these arrangements without the use of any machinery.
- 3) Students will be asked to use their creativity to complete group work activities.

**Procedure:**

- 1) Provide the students with an introduction about how Opus 40 was created. Tell students that Harvey Fite, without using machinery, completed all of the stone arrangements at Opus 40.
- 2) Students will work in groups and walk around Opus 40 with a chaperone and a tour guide.
- 3) While touring the grounds, each group will be asked to carefully observe each stone arrangement and pick which one is their favorite.
- 4) Each chaperone will carry a bag of small stones. Once the group has finished the tour, they will build their own stone arrangement that would add to the site.
- 5) Once they have created their masterpiece with the stones provided, students will be given paper and art supplies to draw their stone arrangement. Once they have completed this task, they will share their creation with the rest of the class.
- 6) When sharing, the class will discuss the guided questions in a group discussion.



# Lesson Plan



**Closure:** The purpose of this lesson is to stimulate the creativity of students, learn how to work successfully with their fellow peers, and observe the architecture of the stonework shown throughout Opus 40. The students will become aware that this garden was focused on stone arrangements, rather than the typical flora and fauna showcased in many other gardens.

## **Guided Questions:**

- 1) Which arrangement found within the Opus 40 site influenced your group's own stone arrangement?
- 2) What did you find particularly interesting about this stone arrangement?
- 3) If Henry Fite was still alive today, do you think he would allow your arrangement to be added to his garden?
- 4) Before visiting Opus 40, did you think it was possible to have a garden fixated around stone arrangements rather than flowers? Why or why not?

# Visiting Opus 40

**\*Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2001\***



**Schedule:** Opus 40 is open 12 pm -5 pm every Friday through Sunday, from Memorial Day Weekend to Columbus Day Weekend. Some days are reserved for special occasion, for an up-to-date schedule, visit:

<http://www.opus40.org/concerts.htm>

or call: 845-246-3400.

**Time Frame:** You should allow at least one hour to view and visit Opus 40.

**Attire:** You should dress for the weather, but be sure to bring/wear a pair of rubber-soled sneakers for easy walking through the garden.

# Touring Opus 40

## The Quarryman's Museum



Once you arrive at Opus 40 you will start your tour off with a visit to the Quarryman's Museum located on the premise. The museum was built by the architect, Harvey Fite, in the early 1970's as a place to display the tools he used to create his landscape garden. All of the tools are hand tools that were used by Fite in creating Opus 40. They include traditional quarryman tools such as hammers, chisels, drills, and a huge hand-powered boom with a flat wooden tray for moving rocks. You will also see tools used by local workingmen throughout history to give a sense of the history of the area and skills of locals. These include tools for blacksmithing, carpentry, and farming.

In the museum you can also view a short film about the life of architect Harvey Fite, his vision, and creation of Opus 40. The film is complete with pictures of Opus 40 as it developed and a comprehensive look at its history. The film will also help you recognize key features of Opus 40.

# Touring Opus 40

## The Garden



After leaving the museum the guides will bring you to the main entrance of Opus 40 to explore the garden as you please. Start by walking up the stone bridge. From this point you will notice Overlook Mountain, part of the Catskill Mountains, that overlooks Opus 40. As you walk up the stone bridge you will see many different levels of stone work complete with staircases to explore each level. The site of Opus 40 was a Bluestone Quarry before Harvey Fite bought the property and began using the ground as his canvas thus providing him with an on site source of stone for his work.

One specific type of rock found scattered throughout the garden is Pennsylvania Bluestone. "Pennsylvania Bluestone is a unique sand stone found only in Northeastern Pennsylvania and mostly in Susquehanna County. Pennsylvania Bluestone derives its name from its typically blue color" (Janoski). This rock comes in dimensional and flagstone. Opus 40 contains mostly flagstone which is used for walkways and patios. The rock is made as sediments fossilize. Minerals are carried by groundwater through rock deposits which creates blue, green, earth tone and lilac colors. Pennsylvania Bluestone is a very strong and stable stone that does not discolor or crack. "Landscapers use Pennsylvania Bluestone to create walls, steps, sidewalks, patios and as a complimentary material in building facades" (Janoski). Other stone includes the indigenous bluestone mined at the site.



# Touring Opus 40



Another aspect of this garden that you will notice is the different shapes within the garden. In creating Opus 40, Fite did not take down trees or fill in the natural springs. Instead he chose to include the landscape in his garden. His fitted bluestones curve around quarry springs, trees, and natural shapes without the presence of any cement.

Fite was very interested in sculpture, yet he never was formally taught any techniques. Opus 40 was his learning ground where he taught himself which is why the back of Opus 40 is not as clean and precise as the front. Fite worked from back to front, getting better with each structure. He used the Mayan technique of dry keystone masonry.

Fite bought the land that would become Opus 40 when he accepted a teaching position at Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson. After a year of working at Bard, Fite traveled to Copon, Honduras as part of a team excavating Mayan Ruins. In Copon he learned of the Mayan technique of dry key stone masonry. He was fascinated by this technique and wanted to find a way to adapt it to his bluestone work in Saugerties. When he returned to his quarry in 1939 his official work on Opus 40 began.

Using the dry key stone masonry technique he began building a series of pathways, staircases, and pools by carefully selecting and fitting bluestones atop one another using no bonding material. Instead, as prescribed by the technique, Fire placed larger stones at irregular intervals in the walls of stones. The larger stones are called keystones and they draw the other stones to them. That is how they "bond" or stay.



# Touring Opus 40

## The Monolith



One of the most striking features of the garden is the monolith that sits atop of the garden's center. The monolith is one solid stone weighing nine tons! Before the monolith sat atop of Opus 40 one of Fite's earlier sculptures, "Flame" did. Fite had planned on "Flame" being the focal point but as his garden developed, some of his earlier sculpture pieces began to shrink into the major work. For instance, the two-ton "Tomorrow" and the four-ton, "Quarry Family" were holding their own but the main figure, "Flame", disappeared in the scale. Once Fite found the monolith he knew he could replace "Flame" but there were ownership issues he needed to settle first.

Twelve years later the stone finally became Fite's and presented him with the challenge of raising the nine-ton monolith into position. Fite used an ancient Egyptian method to position his monolith. First, Flame was removed and a four foot hole was dug to establish where the monolith would stand. Next, the stone was brought to rest flat and tilted into the hole, elevating the larger end and a crib of wood blocks were placed beneath it. The crib was then built up until it rested at a forty-five degree angle. Next, it was pulled into a vertical position by wires fastened to a winch in a truck, and held into position by countering wire. A massive A-frame was then made in order to life the monolith into position (Frisbie).

# Touring Opus 40

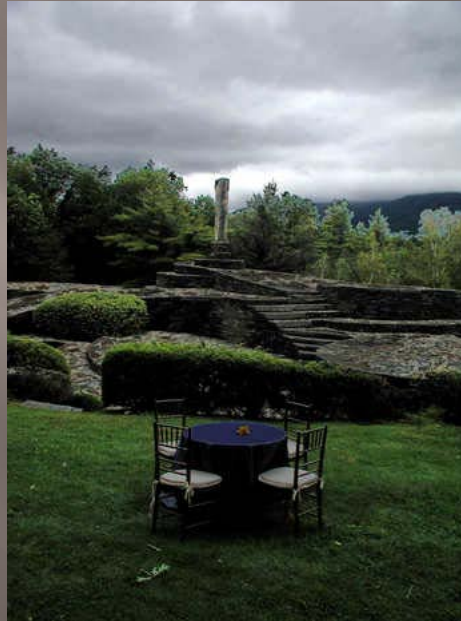
## Sculptures and Pools



While at Opus 40 you should investigate the sculptures that are scattered around the edges of Opus 40. These are sculptures that Fite created when he was just started to sculpt. He originally envisioned Opus 40 as a place he would create to display independent statues. As he worked, it became obvious to Fite that what he was constructing was not a "simple series of pedestals" for sculpture but an atmosphere to set off a compilation of work. It was complete expression in which the carved figures would serve as individual statements (Frisbie). One of these sculptures, "Flame" used to stand where the monolith now stands. Currently it is on the western edge of the garden. You may also want to check out the two-ton sculpture, "Tomorrow" and the four-ton sculpture, "Quarry Family." The sculpture, "Quarry Family" depicts Fite and his wife and stands on the eastern edge of the garden. You will also notice many of the pools that Opus 40 encircles. These are naturally occurring springs that Fite chose to build around as oppose to fill them in. Every few years the local fire department comes and drains them out so they appear clean for visitors.

# Touring Opus 40

## Flora & Fauna



You may want to bring a picnic lunch to Opus 40 because it provides a wonderfully calm place to relax with your family and enjoy the beauty that surrounds you. There are many animals that live in the garden, or visit frequently such as mosquitoes from the ponds, insects, birds; small animals such as raccoons, skunks, ground hogs, frogs, and squirrels. Larger animals such as deer and bear are also not uncommon. Evergreens, oaks, maples, and birch trees surround Opus 40. Seasonal flowers such as daisies grow around the grounds and there is a clear view of the Catskills.

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# Website Links

<http://www.opus40.org/>

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