

JAMES TELLEN WOODLAND SCULPTURE GARDEN

an art environment by James A. Tellen

SHEBOYGAN, WISCONSIN

Hidden in the woods surrounding a simple log cabin is a treasure. Shafts of sunlight stream through the trees, and the shadows of leaves dance and dapple Tellen's magical vision of life.

WELCOME TO TELLEN. Beginning in 1942 and continuing until his death in 1957, James A. Tellen created over 30 historic, religious and mythic figures within the woods surrounding his family's summer cottage in the Black River area of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. An assembly of both life-size and miniature characters, the sculptures are arranged in lifelike tableaux, using the natural environment as a kind of ready-made stage set, with the actors turned to stone. Collectively, they take on a magical, almost surrealistic relationship with their natural surroundings — and provide a window to the artist's soul.

history / biography

According to most reports, Tellen's first major work in concrete began with "Fallen Log," his 65-foot-long *trompe l'oeil* masterpiece of weathered logs, an immense bear, two clambering bear cubs, and the dramatic figures of a Native American man, woman and child.

These first sculptures — like most of Tellen's work — are distinguished by their surprising degree of realism. Strongly influenced by the popular notion that representation skill is the true sign of artistic ability, Tellen was obsessed with creating a faithful portrait of his subjects. Struggling in particular with the difficulties of anatomy, he worked and reworked the features of many of his major figures until they finally met his exacting standards for realism. Because he reportedly could not bring himself to destroy any of his own works, Tellen often buried the remnants of his many early attempts in his yard, enjoying the idea that, at some time in the future, his eerie collection of cement heads might be unexpectedly unearthed.

Curious visitors who ventured through the outer gates came upon a number of other tableaux that depicted scenes from early frontier life: among them, a male figure on horseback leaning forward to engage the friendly but shy attention of a farm woman drawing water from a well.

Many of Tellen's historical characters aspire to the conventions of traditional nineteenth century genre painting that deposed the heroic and favored everyday human actors and "universal" domestic themes. It was with a seemingly similar intent to humanize the heroic that Tellen added a major historical figure to his site — a full-size likeness of Abraham Lincoln, portrayed not as a solemn statesman but as a young rail-splitter.



timeline/chronology

1880

It is believed that Tellen is born in 1880 in the town of Houghton in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Adopted early on, Tellen moves to the small city of Sheboygan, Wisconsin with his new family.

FORMATIVE YEARS

Tellen attends parochial school in Sheboygan until the eighth grade and later attributes his strong religious beliefs to his Catholic upbringing.

WORKING YEARS/ ART STUDIES

Tellen works for most of his life in a Sheboygan furniture factory where he paints stripes, curlicues and other fine decorative detailing. In his spare time, Tellen begins to experiment with oil painting, which he studies under the tutelage of a well-known local art teacher. After many years of laboring on his realistic painting technique, he turns to other mediums.

Tellen created a tavern scene whose cast of characters conforms to common themes within the genre tradition. As if to imitate the vernacular images of jovial peasants and coarse, frolicking villagers so popular during the nineteenth century, Tellen made small-scale figures that satirize the high-spirited, garrulous nature popularly attributed to such county folk, then added a replica of an old country mill, animated by a real stream of water.

Other miniature historical scenes by Tellen included a prehistoric world filled with tiny Stone-age actors, a small-scale depiction of the Grand Canyon, and a recreation of a silver-domed cathedral and surrounding courtyard that featured tiny figures of the twelve apostles and a group of monks.

Tellen's forest environment was also populated by mischievous elfin characters often found within the popularized tales of woodland lore and legend. And like Nick Engelbert and his Grandview sculptural environment — also preserved by Kohler Foundation — Tellen fashioned a monument to the legendary Seven Dwarfs with the inscription: "We whistle while we work." In this instance, though, the gang of dissolute elves appears to be a parody of the more wholesome characters that starred in the 1937 Walt Disney movie "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," from which that musical quotation was adapted.

Tellen also used his realistic technique to create a final group of more serious religious figures placed deep in the woods near the end of the path: the thorn-crowned head of Christ and a stature of the Virgin of Fatima. Although Tellen's sculpture of the Blessed Mother was intended to recreate the holy vision that appeared to the three peasant children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917, he died before completing the additional figures.

preservation

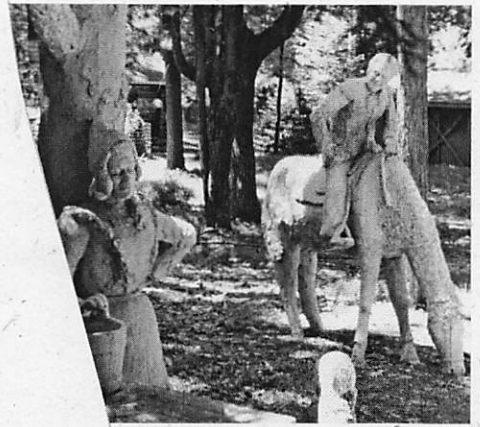
Kohler Foundation, Inc. purchased Tellen in 1988 as part of an ongoing commitment to the preservation of outdoor sculpture environments by self-taught artists. By that time, most of Tellen's sculptures had deteriorated severely. Historic photographs gathered from family and friends proved to be an invaluable preservation tool, furnishing documentation and crucial information about individual sculptures, as well as the life of the site over time.

The historic integrity of Tellen was restored with cooperation and assistance from an extraordinary cadre of professionals and volunteers. Art conservators and curators, area contractors and historians, architects and designers all worked together in a unique collaboration. Kohler Foundation, Inc. orchestrated a preservation plan that incorporated conservation, reproduction, and some replication of sculptures, as well as the re-creation of landscaping, and the restoration and rehabilitation of structures, including the Tellen log cabin, the garage/studio, the brat fryer shelter, and the Boy Scout House.

The James Tellen Woodland Sculpture Garden was gifted to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in December, 2000. The oversight of the Tellen environment is a collaboration of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, the Black River Advancement Association and Kohler Foundation, Inc.

KOHLER FOUNDATION, INC.

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1930s

Slowdowns at the factory during and following the Depression reduce Tellen's work schedule, allowing him time to pursue his hobbies. He becomes a skilled woodcarver and faithfully attends industrial art classes at a local night school for six years. The family's summer cottage serves as a showcase for his wood and metal pieces.

1942

At age 62, Tellen lies in a hospital bed recovering from an illness. He is inspired by the cast concrete statues displayed within the churchyard across the street.

1942-1957

Working in the basement of his Sheboygan home during the winter months, Tellen begins major figures by making a clay model, a plaster mold, and a concrete casting of the head. In summers at the site, he mounts the heads on metal armatures with wire mesh skeletons and completes the bodies with dishpan loads of cement.

1957

Tellen passes away. An obituary in *The Sheboygan Press* acknowledges that Tellen's "hobby of sculpture cement had brought words of amazement from thousands of visitors" and that the sculpture environment is "one of the finest exhibits of outdoor art in the state."