



Bending Sticks into Sculptures



Roundabout towers over the stone buildings nearby.

Artist Patrick Dougherty has turned his love of nature into a career in art.

By Dale-Marie Bryan

Outside an art museum in Topeka, Kansas, a child peers from the window of what looks like a giant hobbit house. Other kids scamper through the house's woven archway into a twisted twig tower. The house, made entirely of sticks, is a sculpture built by Patrick Dougherty. Most people call him the Stick Man.

Dougherty has created more than 200 of these stick sculptures all over the world. "I design my sculptures to look like they've always been there," he says.

And Dougherty likes people to get "into" his work. If they arrive during the three weeks he takes to build a sculpture, he lets them build, too. "I want my work to help people enjoy nature."

From Forts to Sculpture

As a child, Dougherty learned to love nature while tramping through the North Carolina woods. He'd work for hours bending sticks into forts and

hideouts for his brothers and sisters. When he grew up, he studied art and learned to sculpt with clay. But it was too heavy to make the lines and shapes he imagined.

One day, he watched thin, young trees waving in the wind beside his driveway. The saplings reminded him of the sticks he built forts with as a boy. Soon after, he began his first creation made out of sticks.

Birth of a Sculpture

To begin a sculpture, Dougherty digs holes and buries tall saplings in the ground for support. Then he weaves smaller sticks around them. He uses twine to hold and bend the twigs while he's weaving. When he removes the twine, the sticks stay in place. "If you drag a stick behind you," Dougherty says, "you see how it snags other things."

The strength of this "grabbing power" keeps the sticks in the sculptures together.

It takes four tons of sticks to build a sculpture, and Dougherty chooses materials that would otherwise be wasted. For example, he often selects finger- to wrist-sized saplings from sites where the young trees would be cleared anyway for new building projects.

He also likes to use wood that grows naturally in the area. He has used bamboo in Japan and strawberry guava in Hawaii. In places like Kansas, he may use maple or willow. "I like to use wood that bends well," he says. But getting native saplings isn't always easy. In one area, biting ants attacked him. In another, he had to watch for alligators and poisonous snakes.

But Dougherty likes solving these problems. "Maybe it snows, or we have to change where we're

going to build," he says. "Or we have to check the sticks for bugs or treat them to prevent fires."

Back to the Earth

Dougherty also likes getting to know his helpers. Anyone who wants to help is welcome, and Dougherty chats with the students, passersby, and businesspeople who may volunteer. "My sculptures are friendly. While people work, they tell me their own stick stories."

Dougherty's sculptures last two to four years. But even after that, they serve a purpose. When the wood begins to rot, it is shredded into tiny pieces called mulch. As mulch breaks down, it makes soil rich and helps new plants grow.

So if you happen to see a giant pile of sticks taking shape in a neighborhood near you, it might just be the Stick Man weaving his magic again. 🪄

The Stick Man called this creation *Running in Circles*.

