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Art

How to Install 20 Tons of Sculpture in Venice, the Floating City

First you have to get the artworks into the city. Getting them onto the “ground” is a whole other story

By [James Tarmy](#)

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Six giant sculptures by the American artist [Ursula von Rydingsvard](#) stood in the newly renovated [Giardino della Marinaressa](#) in Venice. Guests in cocktail attire—there for the opening reception of the park, which coincided with the opening of the [Venice Biennale](#)—mingled on freshly sodded grass as shafts of sunlight broke through groves of gnarled trees. Each of the sculptures—tall, cragged, and abstract—had been carved by von Rydingsvard out of four-by-four-inch blocks of cedar, then, depending on her impulse, translated into other mediums. (Three of the sculptures were left in their original cedar.) The tallest, *Bronze Bowl with Lace*, took more than two years to make.

It was a perfect afternoon and an idyllic setting. (Grass alone is a rarity in central Venice.) And yet, “a week ago, the park looked like a bomb site” said Peter Murray, the executive director of the [Yorkshire Sculpture Park](#) (YSP) in West Yorkshire, U.K., the organization that organized, sponsored, and implemented the installation.

The time, equipment, money, and logistics necessary to create the park is instructive: As the 56th Venice Art Biennale and its collateral events open across the city this month, it’s easy for visitors to forget—or ignore—the exceptional logistics required simply to get artworks to the floating city, let alone install them successfully.



First the sculptures had to be unloaded from boats onto the Riva dei Sette Martiri. *Source: Yorkshire Sculpture Park via Bloomberg*

“The entire installation was quite problematic,” said Alan Mackenzie, YSP’s manager of sculpture and estates and the man responsible for the Venice project. “There’s about 20 tons of sculpture, and another 30 tons of steel and equipment. We had to ship it on 40-foot truckloads, along with another truckload of equipment, and then transfer everything to eight 40-foot-long boats to actually get it all here.”

It all seemed so straightforward when planning began a year and a half before, when the 500-acre YSP in Northern England hosted an exhibition of von Rydingsvard’s art. “We thought her work would look superb in Venice,” said Murray. “And it was already in Europe—once it went back to America, it was unlikely to ever come back here again.”



Next, a crane hoisted the pieces over the garden wall. *Source: Yorkshire Sculpture Park via Bloomberg*

So, after drawing up a plan that involved €100,000 (\$109,000) for the restoration and maintenance of the run-down Giardino della Marinaressa park, which Murray called “not well-loved,” the YSP raised money for the project “primarily from American supporters,” he says, and set about organizing the sculptures’ trip south.

Everything was going fine until “pretty late in the day, the Venice engineers said that we couldn’t excavate more than 25 centimeters below ground,” said Mackenzie. The garden, it turns out, used to be part of the lagoon until the 1930s. “There’s very little information about what’s underneath here,” he said. “So they were very, understandably, nervous about it.”



Lowering a sculpture into place. The sculptures required more than 12 tons of steel armature underground for support. *Source: Yorkshire Sculpture Park via Bloomberg*

So were the organizers from the YSP, who suddenly were in a position of figuring out how to keep a 21-foot-tall, 8-ton bronze sculpture upright. The solution was to build an underground steel armature, itself weighing more than 12 tons, throughout much of the garden. “The answer was to spread the load,” said Mackenzie.

And then, two weeks before the park opened, a crew of five sculpture technicians and 15 landscapers worked to hoist the sculptures out of their barges onto the broad boulevard Riva dei Sette Martiri, over the garden fence, and put them into place.



Adding the middle section of *Bronze Bowl with Lace*, a bronze statue that weighs close to eight tons. Source: Yorkshire Sculpture Park via Bloomberg

“Simply unloading the boats was a nightmare,” Mackenzie said. “To lift the sculptures out of the boats, we needed a crane, but the crane we brought was itself too heavy to lift out of the boat.” So the team had to return to the mainland, build a false deck on the barge, and strap the crane onto it so it could be driven directly from the barge onto land. “But of course, we had to wait for high tide,” he continued “So there we were, sitting there in this bobbing boat for several hours before we could do anything.”

“That,” he added drily, “was a lot of fun.”

Next they were able to drive the crane through the park gates, whereupon they hoisted each sculpture—two were bronze, three were cedar, and one was made out of a semi-translucent blue resin—over the walls and set them into place. They started from the back, so that the landscaping team, working under a time crunch, could start laying down the plantings without worrying that they’d be obliterated by construction equipment.

After securing the sculptures, laying the paths, installing the plantings, and rolling out the sod, the park was ready just a day before the official opening.

“But look at it!” said Murray, delighted. “We brought out the rhythm of the trees, now there’s an elegance to it.”

Mackenzie nodded, and after posing for a photo with the construction crew, excused himself. “I think we deserve a drink,” he said, and headed toward the bar.



A view of the renovated Giardino della Marinaressa with Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures. *Source: Courtesy the artist and Galerie Lelong. Photo: Daniele Venturelli via Bloomberg*