



Carvers Larry Longtine and Ruth Severson work on the spruce tree trunk at the center of the BLOCH art project which will travel to each continent. In the background Troyd Geist from the North Dakota Council of the Arts discusses the project with Fargo artist Molly McLain. John Lamb / The Forum

Area artists spruce up international project

By [John Lamb](#) on Jun 23, 2014 at 9:50 p.m.

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M OORHEAD – A 17-foot-long spruce tree will make the rounds with area artists over the next month, transforming from a simple log to an international art project.

At a kick-off event Monday in Moorhead, Troyd Geist, folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts, shared the significance of the project known as BLOCH, the German name for the tree’s trunk.

“Artists and communities interact with the tree and express who they are and what they’re about,” Geist said. “This is essentially a global talking stick. It gives each continent a turn to tell everyone what they’re about.”

He explained the Swiss tradition of how the last spruce tree cut in the season gets paraded between towns and auctioned off in a ceremony.

Three years ago, the artist team Com&Com – Marcus Gossolt and Johannes M. Hedinger, who live in Switzerland and Amsterdam – won the auction and decided to send the piece around the world to let different cultures interact with the 5,700-pound BLOCH.

In Bern, Switzerland, a dancer and singer performed atop the log as the mayor sent it off in July 2012. In Shanghai, China, musicians played on it. It was also used as a runway in a fashion show and served

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as a backdrop for a traditional Chinese opera troupe.

BLOCH recently arrived in Moorhead after two months of transportation. Geist said the shipping costs were paid for by European organizations, but the work stateside is being funded by various arts groups in the United States.

While it's being worked on across the river at Moorhead's In the Chips Carving Workshop, it's considered a North Dakota project and artists from around the state will leave their mark.

Carvers Larry Longtine and Ruth Severson were marking the log Monday, chiseling in Scandinavian floral and vine designs.

Severson said she felt "privileged" to be one of the few American artists to work on the project, though Longtine said spruce can be hard and not ideal for carving.

A section was marked out with blue tape next to their area. That's where part of the tree will be carved out to house a bowl to travel with the tree, made of North Dakota clay by Fargo artist Michael Strand. Shavings from the carvings will be used in the firing of the piece.

"It's terrific. It's really great," Strand said of the project. "We're transforming the tree as a community."

He said a colleague at North Dakota State University is working to make the tree a pin-hole camera.

"I love the idea that the tree becomes a character," Strand said. "It becomes the one looking at us."

It won't just be looking, but also talking. As the piece travels, visitors are invited to leave notes in the cracks of the tree. The messages will be gathered and set inside a wooden tube, similar to a traditional Norwegian budstikker, carved by Guy Paulson, who created the Hopperstad Stave Church at Moorhead's Hjemkomst Center.

The BLOCH will also travel to the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, where folk artists will carve out a section to make a wood flute. Fargo artist Molly McLain will create a painting in that hollowed-out area that will hold the flute.

Severson and Longtine have about a month to do their part on the log before it makes its public debut at the Fargo Street Fair from July 17 to 19.

Longtine doesn't know if that will be enough time to do everything he wants.

"When they take the log away, we're done," he said.

After touring the state in late July, the work will return to Moorhead for a BLOCH Party Aug. 3 at the Hjemkomst Center.

When the work has finished its travels, it will return to Switzerland for an art exhibit where Paulson's budstikker will be opened and the notes made public.

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