

By Dennis McClintic

Earth art

Stan Herd transforms country landscapes into art on a grand scale



Having grown up on a cattle operation near Protection, Kan., Stan Herd connects with his past every time he taps his creative juices to produce original rural art on Earth's canvas. Highly sought after these days, Herd produces huge works of art that are either seasonal or permanent in nature. He also fashions corporate logos in various agricultural crops to help sell company products. ►



Above: "The Medicine Wheel" shows a spirit bird flying into the wheel from the east, the same direction Columbus came to America. **Left:** Sunrise ceremonies at the wheel attract numerous students from Haskell Indian Nations University.



Above: “Little Girl In The Wind” is an earth-art creation that reflects Wes Jackson’s work with sustainable farming on the prairie. **Left:** The little girl in person is Carole Cadue, daughter of a past tribal chairman of the Kickapoo Indian Nation. Herd felt a portrait of this third-generation Kansas native would best illustrate work on the prairie.



Above: Beside the Hudson River, Stan Herd’s 1-acre countryside image fights for space and attention in New York City’s concrete jungle. **Above right:** A closer look at Herd’s countryside image actually reveals a rural Kansas landscape made from corn, soybeans, vegetables, and rocks. Homeless people helped construct the art image, and later consumed the bounty. **Left:** Stan Herd takes a break from the New York City project to read graffiti on a nearby wall. He notes that graffiti artists also like to create images on large surfaces.

Herd first made a name for himself in the early ’70s by producing large murals on buildings. One day, while viewing one of his four-story-tall paintings from an airplane, he conceived the idea of creating art on a much grander scale. Hence, his earth-art career was born.

“When I began, I thought I needed to plant three or four types of vegetation myself

in a field to make a design truly my art,” Herd says. “Now I prefer to carve designs into existing crop stands. To achieve the effect I want, I simply subtract vegetation by mowing or tilling key areas on a typical 1- to 5-acre tract of land. Earth art needs to be this large to be viewed from the air.”

Sketchy start. Many of Herd’s concepts for crop art start out as sketches on napkins at the dinner table. He pursues that original image with a series of drawings until he gets a design that he likes. Then he reduces the final drawing to a field-grid sketch that he takes to the farm to create his earth art.

About 90 percent of Herd’s projects are what he calls seasonal, temporary art. They are crop creations that ultimately get har-

vested in the fall, and disappear through the winter months. Herd also creates permanent earth art using materials such as native stones and perennial vegetation.

“The temporary nature of most of my artwork reflects my respect for the natural landscape,” he says. “The fact that I create earth art from a crop, walk on it, photograph it, and return it as something that feeds people appeals to my aesthetic sensibilities.”

In the past several years, Herd has used mazes in some of his crop art to create an overall design. Viewing platforms built beside some of these works allow tourists the opportunity to engage in different levels of interaction with Herd’s field creation.

While most of Herd’s crop art is commissioned by corporate or private clients, the

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Left: “Iowa Countryside” was a 5-acre creation that Stan Herd designed using the style of Iowa artist Grant Wood. **Below right:** All earth-art creations start with a series of sketches that result in one final drawing.



Left: Stan Herd (on tractor) and his assistants transform an acre of Kansas wheat into a remarkable likeness of the Statue of Liberty. **Above:** Every June, musicians come for a prairie festival by “The Prairie Man,” one of Herd’s permanent works near Winfield, Kan.



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Kansas native sometimes takes on projects that appeal to one of his personal causes.

For example, he made 32 roundtrips to New York City in 1994 to create a Kansas landscape adjacent to an overbuilt urban skyline. The project cost Herd \$90,000 of his own money, which required him to take a second mortgage on his home.

“I created the 1-acre piece on Donald Trump’s property with the help of one assistant and numerous homeless people,” Herd

relates. “We planted corn, beans, squash, and a variety of vegetables to create the countryside image. I thought it would be neat to showcase a rural Kansas landscape on the edge of New York City’s concrete canyons.”

Edible earth art. “After it was all finished, the homeless people harvested the food to eat,” Herd adds. “I hoped the project would be a door-opener for something bigger, and it was in many ways. I got a tremendous amount of media coverage. But more importantly, I found out how hard I could work for something I believe in under very challenging conditions. It took me the biggest part of a decade to financially recover from the New York City project.” ▶



Above: Amelia Earhart's portrait resides at Atchison, Kan. On flag day, students march around its perimeter. **Right:** This ancient fish is called Xiphactinus. Herd created its likeness by designing his first maze almost a decade ago.



Another project Herd is proud of is his three-year collaborative effort with the students and faculty at Haskell Indian Nations University to create the earth art called “The Medicine Wheel.” Permanently constructed at the Lawrence, Kan., university, “The Medicine Wheel” was completed in 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus coming to America.

“One of the university instructors, Dan

Wildcat, wanted to make a positive statement about an event that forever changed the future of native Americans,” Herd says. “Many students protested, but Wildcat convinced them that they should be forward-looking rather than dwell on the past. This is the kind of project that has special meaning for people, and provides me inspiration to come up with new earth art.” **E**