

Luukkainen's art tames the roughness of stone

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"The Stone split" reads the epigram at the beginning of Ritva Luukkainen's catalog of stone mosaics, "and the Word rang out."

The Finnish artist's works, hewn entirely from stones native to her

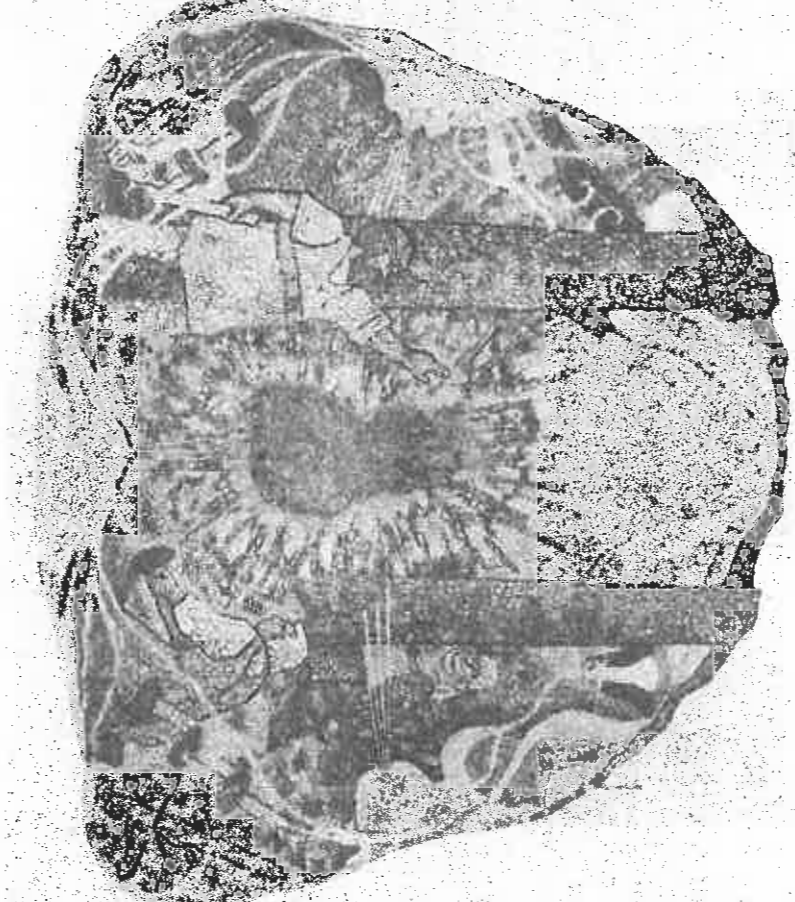
country, can be seen in the Boston Room of the Boston Public Library's main branch. Her own poems — the words ringing out — hang beside many of the mosaics. Bits of granite, quartz, amethyst, and Jasper shine over the rough surface of each piece, tracing out landscapes, portraits, religious icons, and illustrations from the Kalevala, the epic Finnish creation myth.

The stone lends itself best to the large-scale depictions of the myth. Strong lines and spare shading make the images simple and illustrative. It's a style that works with complicated subjects, as in "Kullervo and his Herd," where the young hero of the Kalevala tames wolves and bears into a circle dance in the woods.

Luukkainen's poems, translated from the Finnish, are serviceable if not lyrical. As with most of the mosaics, a poem accompanies "Kullervo and his Herd," one that simply describes the image: "Kullervo's bread is the bread of stone. Broken on it the knife he inherited. / The man, deceived, blows his birch-bark horn. / a call to wolf and bear to dance. / A moment of power for the orphan boy, / a round dance on the forest floor."

In "The Forging of Sampo," the powers that be create Sampo, a symbol for Finland itself. Luukkainen has made a vaguely circular mosaic here, artfully composed. At the top, heaven's pursed lips blow a wind down to earth. Fat-cheeked gods blow as well from the east and west, and where the wind meets, matter seems to shatter into a glittering light display. A trio of blacksmiths huddles about, awed by this wild creation.

Many of these images would fail if they were paintings. The portraits are less inventive, and less successful, than the myth mosaics perhaps because stone is too big, too epic to capture the subtleties in a subject's face. The best portraits here forsake firm lines for vivid expressionism: "A



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RITVA LUUKKANEN:
STONE MOSAICS
At: Boston Room, Boston Public Library,
Copley Square, through July 29

"Stranger" glowers out of the stone itself, hair and beard afire with pale quartz, features sunken and mysterious in a darker stone.

Luukkainen herself sits at one end of the gallery. Finnish/English dictionary in hand. She's been working in stone since 1975, when one day she found herself palming a rock, and admiring its glittering crystals. Could she fashion a human eye from stone, she wondered. She decided to try. Since then, she has spent her days driving around Finland collecting rocks, then going home and hammering the dickens out of them.

"I'm a hermit," she admits through a translator. "I lead a secluded life. I live in the forest, by a lake, with my two cats."

The artist resists recounting her history with the Kalevala, refusing to say when she first heard the story.

"I am the Kalevala," she declares. "In my soul, I know the story. It comes from within me. I listen to

only my soul."

Myth seems to run through the artist's veins like blood. Near where she sits, a large mosaic titled "The Way to Live" hangs. In it, a cross ringed with enormous thorns rises toward the heavens. A pale angel hovers to the left. A swirl of red and white falls to the right. Clearly, Christ has just risen.

"That's the flow of blood that came upon humanity," the artist says. Luukkainen, who describes herself as an ecumenical Lutheran, sees this resurrection image as a metaphor for her own life.

"The angels descended," she relates. "Golgotha was empty, and the angels went to the grave. When I descend, I will rise, too. The cross is bare because Christ is in heaven, so that I can rise, too, because the way has been prepared."

The most ambitious work in the show is a stone artist's book, bound in an iron brace made by Luukkainen's son. Each page looks like one of Moses' tablets. They are made principally from snow quartz, which glistens in the sunlight falling from the window above. Rose quartz, amethyst, and granite, ground fine, draw out the letters of the "Our Father" prayer in Finnish, and illustrate it

with small embellishments in the margins. On the page that reads "Our daily bread," golden wheat sweeps up the right side of the mosaic.

The creation of the book was itself an act of prayer. It took Luukkainen one year of meditation and two years of work to put the book together. In contrast, a medium-sized mosaic of about 18 inches by 3 feet takes six weeks to make.

Stone is rugged and harsh; tamed into mosaics, it seems magical, as if Luukkainen has worked some sort of alchemy by forcing her rocks into pictures. That effort, which gitters off every piece in the show, is the power of these pieces. The tapestry of religious and ethnic mythology that they depict seems like gossamer over the stone — a human creation, intricate and lovely as a spider's web strung over the ancient rock, and just as fleeting.

Still, Luukkainen presses on, hammering her stones to bits, assembling them into pictures. Why stone?, she is asked. What is the attraction?

She pauses, considers, before she speaks. "It has the same strength that I do."