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Cascade Charley

Alice Wingwall

Working description: Cascade, from dictionary, "a fall of water over steeply slanting rocks... ."

A torrential rain shaped a working cascade before my eyes as it forced down a monumental cut in a hillside in the Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland. The day before, I had seen the boulders and slanting rocks dry in the afternoon sun. Now, water was plunging, flying and falling over the sharply descending angles of great big rocks, right next to the window of the train. Both the shape of the mountainside crevice of rocks and the force of the water astounded me. Yesterday, the cut had seemed climbable, a kind of natural excavation in the mountainside. Today, the tremendous onrush of the water made that impossible.

In the geology courtyard, I worked to reconstruct some of the geology I had seen in that mountain stair. My cut is a water stair beside a pedestrian stair between the geology courtyard and a terrace 15 feet above grade. The terrace itself links the older Volcanology or "Little Geology" building and the new geology building, Cascade Hall. The terrace also gives access to an outside stair on the upper level of Cascade Hall.

Color appears in various sizes of granite slabs in the pools and on the stairs; two granite pieces are elevated to the top of a column in the middle pool; tiles relating to colors on the surrounding buildings fill the bottoms of the three pools. The geologists brought additional rocks to fit into the formation of granite and tile.

A "shadow" of the column in the middle pool falls across the bottom pool. That shadow, formed as a path of quarry tile, contains pieces of granite that refer to the granite atop the column and in the top pool. The lower pieces may have fallen from the structure above, or they may form part of a large structure that we may not be able to see. We have to guess at its total pattern. We might be looking at geological sediment, at a kind of excavation through time. We might confuse the geological fragments with architectural fragments, like those we see at the Roman Forum, for instance. We might be looking at a temple dug out of a hillside, or a house just being built. This contemplative time is as fleeting as reflections in the water that flows past.

Yet reflections are as enduring as memories. The joking support of the construction team and the jibes of the concrete foreman: "Why the overkill on this concrete, Alice? You made gorilla steps!" he yelled as workers ran up and down the 24-inch risers on the slab walls of the fountain. "It's no dumb tilt slab." Finally, he told me quietly that the fountain was the most challenging, but most fun, of jobs he had done. "I had to think about it. But hey, it's a monument." And, beside the monument, the reflection of the lost presence of my father, Charley. He loved water and monumental rocks.

After all, it is about stones: Where we find them, where we put them, how we contemplate them. After all, it is about water: How it looks flowing around rocks, how it changes their colors, how it listens, how it falls differently from pools and stairs, around columns and over walls. We learn that cascade and chance come from the same original word, *cadere*, "to fall."

In one sense we fell into geological time, into archeological time, and loved learning from time, and from the rocks.

Left photo by Paraspazio.

Right inset photo by Timothy Hursley.



