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Michelin Man Meets Stonehenge to Birth an Olympic Rock Star

Inuit-Inspired Logo Strays From Tradition; Stacks of Tuna Cans at the Aquarium

By PHRED DVORAK



VANCOUVER, British Columbia—Matthias Heimel has the Olympics figured out. The German spectator knows his way to the ice rink where his country's hockey team plays. He can get around downtown Vancouver.

But he's less certain about the Vancouver Games emblem, which can be seen from one end of the Olympic host city to the other on hats, jackets and shot glasses, and in monumental statues made of everything from chocolate to empty shipping containers. "It looks like an alien," says Mr. Heimel.

Olympic logos and mascots usually get plenty of attention, from Moscow's cuddly 1980 teddy bear to London 2012's Day-Glo emblem, whose pink jagged design sparked a flurry of criticism from comparisons to a broken swastika to claims an animated version caused epileptic seizures. Canada's choice of emblem is among the most curious: It's a pile of rocks.

An inukshuk is a stack of stones traditionally used by the Inuit of the arctic to mark anything from a hunting spot to a food cache. In 2005, the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the Olympics chose a multicolored humanoid version of an inukshuk as the games' official 2010 emblem. That sparked an inukshuk boom in Canada that has reached far from the frozen tundra where the figures originated—and precipitated its share of controversy.

In Vancouver, the official inukshuk logo can be found on everything from key chains and T-shirts to rain gear for dogs.

Similar rock piles have inspired unofficial products—from \$6 bottle openers to the Inukie Cookie designed by the creator of the Vancouver 2010 logo, which lets you build your own inukshuk out of maple-flavored shortbread.

INUKSHUK

The Vancouver Aquarium has unveiled a 10-foot-high inukshuk made out of 4,368 cans of sustainably fished salmon and tuna. That one looks more like a Japanese robot, admits aquarium spokesman Kent Hurl. “From far away, it kind of looks like a Transformer,” he says.

Other rock piles are sprouting up across Canada, as emblems of the Canada Speed Skating team and latest Group of Seven finance ministers meeting. Cities including Niagara Falls, in Ontario, and La Ronge, in Saskatchewan, have commissioned massive stone statues to commemorate the passing of the Olympic torch through town. Home-goods store Canadian Tire Corp. says its plastic \$38 Inukshuk garden statue is a top seller, along with its Golfing Gnomes and Canadian Moose.

In the Inuktitut language, inukshuk means “something that substitutes for a person.” (For the grammatical record: One inukshuk. Many inukshuit.) Archaeologists say some piles up north have been around for thousands of years. Luke Suluk, president of the Inuit Heritage Trust, says there are many old inukshuit around his home in Arviat, on the western Hudson Bay.

Some mark boat landings, Mr. Suluk says. Others point out caribou routes or good camping spots; a few memorialize local tragedies such as illness or starvation.

While old versions were meant to stand in for a person, the latest ones are increasingly anthropomorphic: The Michelin Man meets Stonehenge. And as the things sprout all over southern Canada, some Inuit are bemused.

“It can be misleading,” says Mr. Suluk, explaining that Inuit don’t build inukshuit indiscriminately. “All Inuit are told not to make any inukshuk without a purpose.”

Elena Rivera MacGregor, the designer of the Vancouver logo, had never seen a real one up north. Her inspiration was a big gray granite statue by her home in Vancouver, built for the city’s 1986 Expo as an expression of northern hospitality and friendship.

Ms. MacGregor created a multicolored version: two vertical blocks for legs, a horizontal chunk for a torso, a longer horizontal for outspread arms and, for a head, a crowning block with a gouge for a mouth. She dubbed it Ilanaaq, or “friend” in Inuktitut.

“When you find an inukshuk in the snow, you find friendship, shelter,” she says. “The inukshuk kind of gives you a hug.”

Not everyone found the idea so cuddly. When the logo was unveiled, Mark Busse, then-head of British Columbia’s graphic-design association, was quoted in press reports as calling the logo a “cutesy little smiley-faced Pac-Man on a pile of stones.” (“It’s grown on me,” Mr. Busse says now.)

Some Inuit elders, meanwhile, protested that the humanoid design isn’t authentic. Others fret the original meaning is being lost. “Inuit are concerned that inukshuk are being used everywhere without having much meaning or respect to Inuit,” says Mr. Suluk.

All that hasn't damped the appeal, in part because an inukshuk is pretty easy to make. Touchstone Site Contractors Inc., an Ontario provider of commercial landscaping and security fencing, had never made a stone sculpture before it landed the contract for the Niagara Falls inukshuk. Office manager Brandon Bradley whipped the design up himself on AutoCAD.

"As long as you keep it somewhat proportional—that's it," he says.

Inukshuit have also been popping up along the highways in central Ontario during the past few years. The stone piles have drawn the wrath of some environmentalists who have complained on blogs that they're eyesores and that building them damages local rock formations from which they say the raw materials have been taken.

On the streets of Vancouver these days, it's hard to go a few blocks without bumping into inukshuit. Some 1,000 Inuit carvers in the arctic territory of Nunavut have been conscripted to make authentic inukshuit for sale at the Olympics as well, says Dennis Kim, head of merchandising for the Vancouver Organizing Committee. A 15½-inch statue goes for about \$1,880.

Vancouver's souvenir shops are selling inukshuk statuettes made of pewter, glass, crystal, wood and British Columbian jade, as well as a full collection of inukshuk snow globes and playing cards.

Then there's the monumental approach. In Vancouver's downtown shopping district, the display window of chocolatier Daniel boasts a 320-pound inukshuk made of solid Belgian chocolate. The shipping hub of Richmond, just south of Vancouver, has built a six-story inukshuk out of several empty cargo containers.

So look out, maple leaf.

Cameron Dix, the manager in Vancouver of one of Canada's biggest souvenir trade shows, says the ramp-up in inukshukery he has seen since last year points to a bigger destiny for the inukshuk.

"It's become a Canadian symbol," he says.