

You're a what?

Sand Sculptor

By Elka Jones

Once upon a time, there was a builder of castles. But he didn't use sticks or stones to make his castles. He built them out of sand.

It might seem like a fairytale, but sculpting sand has been Damon Farmer's job for nearly 30 years. Damon is a professional sand sculptor. His job involves turning tiny grains of sand into large-scale works of art. "It's interesting to see that there's a benefit to following your love and having it become something you can make money at," says Damon. "When I first started out, I didn't realize this was something other people did. I liked sculpting out of sand, and so I did it."

Although Damon currently builds fewer castles than he did when he was starting out, his work retains a fairytale feel. With a sand sculpture of Jack and the Beanstalk, for example, he won the 1996 World Championship in British Columbia, Canada—and later recreated the sculpture for the Castelli di Mare (Castles of the Sea) competition in Jesolo, Italy. Invitational events like these are all-expenses-paid trips that give Damon the chance to travel around the world.

No matter where it is done, though, sand sculpting involves more than just having fun in the sun. Creating these sculptures, which can be as high as 20 to 30 feet, requires some special techniques and a lot of hard work.

"It's a physically demanding job," says Damon. Many sand sculptors begin a sculpture by shoveling sand into a wooden or plastic frame that's about 2 feet high.

Then, they carry numerous 5-gallon buckets of water to mix with the sand. As soon as the sand is evenly saturated, it is pounded into the frame with a hand tamper (a tool for packing sand) or a gas-operated machine called a jumping jack.

After the initial layer of sand is compacted, a smaller frame is put on top of the first. More water is added, and again, the mixture is pounded until compact. This process is repeated until the structure reaches its desired height. "It ends up looking like a wedding cake," Damon says of the multitiered structure.

Next, the frame is removed from the top tier, and Damon—standing on a 6-inch-wide ledge—begins to sculpt, working from the top down. "It's all deductive," he says. "You're taking away to reveal the form."

Damon might work from a sketch, but he doesn't do much measuring. Sculpting, he says, is an easier art form than a two-dimensional one, such as painting, which requires creating the illusion of depth. "An artistic eye helps," he says, "but to some degree, anyone with a desire to sculpt can do it."

There are no formal training requirements for becoming a sand sculptor, but Damon says that practice is one of the best ways to prepare for the occupation. While developing his abilities, Damon says, he used only a shovel and a butter knife instead of working with frames or special tools. "My first sand sculpture looked like something any kid would make on a beach," he says.

Damon has a degree in art. But, he says, “there’s hardly any kind of education that wouldn’t come in handy.” Sand sculptors use mathematics, for example, to convert square yards into tons when calculating the volume of sand that they need. They also use math when ordering plywood, such as 2-by-4s, to make the frames.

Computer and Internet skills also are an asset for sand sculptors. Damon created his own Web site, which he uses to inform people all over the world about sand sculpting and about his work.

Communication skills are important, too. “You’re dealing with people a lot,” says Damon, “sending people sketches, negotiating prices, and communicating with spectators.” Spectators like to interact with sculptors, which often makes the process of creating a sculpture as important as the finished product. Sand sculpting is a performance art, Damon says, so “anytime a sand sculpture is being built, people enjoy watching it.”

The ability of sand sculptors to draw a crowd is one of the reasons why the work is profitable. Cities sponsor sand-sculpting events as promotional or tourist attractions, and companies sponsor them for advertising purposes. Commissioned sculptures may be built either indoors or outdoors, adding variation to the work.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that Damon got his first paid job. Now, he estimates that he’s one of hundreds of people who sculpt sand on a regular basis. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect data on sand sculptors.

Damon accepts two types of sand-sculpting jobs: Those for which he is solely responsible and those for which he’s a subcontractor to a company that hires several sand sculptors. The first type of job, says Damon, requires him to do everything, from talking with clients to ordering materials, arranging lodging, and hiring other sand sculptors, if necessary. But as a subcontractor, Damon doesn’t have to worry about logistics; he just shows up and sculpts.

The extra work involved in an independent job can be worthwhile, however. Damon estimates that sand sculptors working on independent jobs earn about \$500 daily—about twice as much as they can make subcontracting.

But sand sculptors don’t work every day. In fact, Damon says that many people, including himself, do sand sculpting part time while also working in another occupation. In addition to the income he earns from sand sculpting, Damon makes money by painting and by doing computer animations.

Sporadic earnings are not the only reason why few people choose sand sculpting as their primary source of income, though. The occupation’s exhaustive travel requirements are another reason. “People tend to burn out if they do this full-time,” says Damon. For example, Damon lives in landlocked Versailles, Kentucky—so nearly all of his jobs are elsewhere. He says that it’s draining to be away from home and to travel all the time.

To complete a project, sand sculptors might work 8 or more hours a day for up to 14 days straight. Sand sculpting is done just about anywhere that can accommodate a delivery of sand. The ample supply of sand at beaches makes them an obvious location choice for many projects and competitions.

Beaches also have an ample supply of water, a key ingredient in creating any sand sculpture. Grains of sand in a sculpture are held together by the surface tension of water droplets. Compacting the wet sand makes the bond between the water droplets stronger, helping the final sculpture to last longer—sometimes for a month or more.

While they are working, whether inside or out, at a paid display or in a competition, sand sculptors and their creations draw a lot of public admiration. “It’s satisfying, as an artist, to have your work appreciated,” says Damon.

This gratification also helps Damon not to be bothered by the fact that each of his creations is short lived. “It’s like a song,” he says. “It’s there for people to enjoy, and then it’s over.”



Damon Farmer still sculpts castles out of sand (right). But these days, Jack and the Beanstalk (background, left page) is a more likely subject.