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The Real Rock of Ages

Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

The artist Ugo Rondinone wears a necklace featuring a piece of limestone handed down by generations of men in his family in Italy.

By DAVID COLMAN

LOOKING AT THE STRANGE formation of mighty, 20-foot-tall bluestone totems outside Rockefeller Center, you might imagine them to be the unearthed ruins of some ancient temple: Stonehenge come to Saks. Upon learning that they are the work of the artist Ugo Rondinone, you might wonder if these sculptures (and the tabletop versions in a show opening Friday at Gladstone Gallery) are some kind of mystical portals to the Paleolithic.

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They are not. But something else is: a small piece of limestone, drilled and worn smooth, that hangs from a leather thong around his neck. It is a memento from his father, who grew up in Matera, an ancient and beautiful town in the Basilicata, in the instep in the

high-heeled boot of Italy — and more specifically, in the Sassi di Matera, a series of cave dwellings that date back some 9,000 years.

In 1993, the Sassi, which a century ago had living conditions not far removed from the Paleolithic, were declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco, and in the last decade chic hotels and restaurants have opened in the caves, making them a tourist destination. But for millenniums, the Sassi (Italian for "stones") were home to the poorest families in a very poor land. Called "schiavoni" (Italian for slaves), they were more or less bound to do physical labor for local landowners. Though they were not legally "owned" as slaves, their lives were among the harshest in Italy.

In 1945, Carlo Levi published an account of his time spent there, entitled, "Christ Stopped at Eboli," from a local adage meaning that the place was so barren that not even Christianity had yet arrived. The Levi book provoked an outcry, and in the early 1950s, the families in the Sassi, including young Benito, Mr. Rondinone's father, and his clan, were moved into low-income housing nearby. After 9,000 years, give or take, the Sassi were declared unfit for habitation.

Benito Rondinone, trained in masonry, moved as a teenager to Switzerland, where he married and had children, including Ugo, in 1964. But he never forgot the strange place where he spent his childhood. For Ugo, it was a different story.

"We would visit my grandmother in Matera every summer," the artist recalled. "When I was 7, my father wanted to show me where he grew up. So we went down, down, further down, and I always heard that far down, it's dangerous — you shouldn't even go there. But finally he showed me where he lived. It was literally a cave." A chimneyless fireplace still stood in the middle of the room.

"For years, I did not even mention it to anyone," Mr. Rondinone said. "I was ashamed."

And years later, when he was a 20-year-old art student in Austria, he was no happier when his father sat him down to give him a somber relic of his family's past. A stone, un sasso, drilled with a hole, it was worn around the neck as a kind of proto-ID. Different stones were worn, 24-7, by different workers in the Sassi, depending on which landowner they were bound to. Benito had never worn it, having left the area while still young, but his father, Frederico, had worn it and given it to his son, just as Frederico's father had worn it and given it to him, and his father before him.

"For him, it was an important moment, and I took it just to be respectful," he said, aping the dismissiveness of youth.

A decade or so later, Mr. Rondinone had moved to New York, where he was dating the artist and poet John Giorno, whose grandparents had emigrated to the United States from a village close to Matera. In 1997, the couple took a trip to the region.

“Through my boyfriend, I began to revisit the south of Italy,” he said. “Now we go every year.”

In 2006, Mr. Rondinone was making a masonry artwork covered with photographs of Matera when he suddenly flashed to the sasso his father had given him. He couldn’t remember where it was, but digging through childhood things at his parents’ home in Switzerland, he found it. Tying it to a leather thong, he put it around his neck, where it has hung, more or less, ever since.

“As a kid, I hid my origins,” he said. “Now I’m proud of it. Nowhere else on earth can you say, ‘My family has lived here for 9,000 years.’ ”

Not that he can trace the family tree very far. “They didn’t keep records,” he said.

But he does have the rock.