

The G-Nome Project

Andrew Leicester



Location

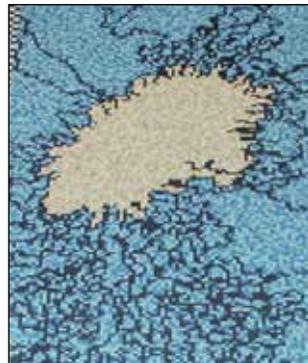
Molecular Biology Building

Materials

Terra Cotta, Brick, Metal, Aluminum, Ceramic Tile Mosaic

Date

1991-1992



"In modern society we expect instant understanding... Like watching television where everything is laid out before us and problems are resolved by the end of the half-hour. My art is not instantly understandable, nor is it meant to be taken lightly. Good art tends to raise questions, and it is important for artists to focus attention on the debatable. Otherwise, you get 'safe' art which serves only the prevailing popular theory."

- Andrew Leicester, 1992

About the Work of Art

The *G-Nome Project* fully integrates art and architecture into the Molecular Biology Building. Since the artist, Andrew Leicester, was selected at the start of the project, he was able to work with the architectural firm Hansen Lind Meyer, Inc. to incorporate the art into the building's design. As a result, Iowa State University gained a striking example of the successful merging of art and architecture, as well as a building rich in meaning and function.

When Leicester was commissioned by Iowa State to create this public art, he began to research the kinds of activities that would take place there. He found information at conferences, by attending lectures, by reading books, and through conversation with scientists and students. He kept a sketchbook of ideas and drawings on the subject. It became clear to him that the most debated area of current investigation in the field of molecular biology was transgenetic animal research with both the academic community and the public expressing their opinions. Philosophers, sociologists, animal scientists, and economists were among the many who were discussing the potential legal and economic implications of genetic research.

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The G-Nome Project includes Conception in Capitalization (U91.77), Forbidden Fruit (U91.75), Gene Pool (U91.76), G-Nomes (2016.979abcd), DNA Double Helix (U91.71efgh), Hy-Brids (U91.72abcd), Novel Agents (U91.78), Shotgun Method (U91.74a-x) and Warning-Biohazard (U91.73). All were part of an Iowa Art in State Buildings Project for the Molecular Biology Building. In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

About the Work of Art (con't)

Leicester discovered that while genetic engineering holds the promise of finding ways to prevent diseases, it also holds the potential for exploitation or accident. Even before genetics was understood scientifically, people feared the combination of species. It was thought that dragons and monsters could be the result. The sculptures and mosaics of Leicester's *G-Nome Project* ask the viewer to think seriously about the ethical issues surrounding the technological frontier of genetic research.

The *G-Nomes* are twelve-foot tall terra-cotta sculptures that stand atop each corner of the Molecular Biology Building. The figures may also be interpreted as sacred guardians of the Molecular Biology Building. Running up the side of the building beneath each *G-Nome* is a winding pattern of ceramic tiles that represents strands of replicating DNA. Wrapped around each corner of the building, these strands symbolically hold the secrets of life that are being discovered inside. They also symbolize the fact that DNA strands contain the secret of life within themselves. In the hands of the *G-Nome* figures are the X and Y chromosomes. The stylized black and white coats worn by the *G-Nomes* are symbolic references to the black suits worn by business people and the white lab coats worn by scientists. Together, these two professions must lead the molecular biology program at Iowa State University. The black and white squares also bring to mind crosswords and the challenge of solving puzzles. In this building, molecular biologists are trying to solve the genetic code of life. The symbolic black and white checks are repeated throughout much of the art.



DNA Double Helix



G-Nome

Leicester's title, *The G-Nome Project*, is a play on two relevant words: gnome and genome. The word gnome can mean a dwarf-like creature that usually guards precious treasure, or it can mean a terse saying. Genome is a scientific term for a complete set of chromosomes. This title also makes reference to the United States government's multi-billion dollar undertaking to map and decipher all of the human genes - *The Genome Project*. For additional information on *The Genome Project*, visit the following website: <http://www.ornl.gov/hgmis/>.

Above the north entrance hangs a terra-cotta relief sculpture called *Warning-Biohazard*. Two arms reach out from a design of jumbled letters on black and white tiles. When deciphered, the letters read: "HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT YET WISE ENOUGH TO DIRECT THE COURSE OF EVOLUTION." This is a quote from Robert Sinsheimer, a noted scientist in molecular biology. The two outstretched hands look like the black contamination gloves built into the sides of controlled experimental chambers. These gloves, however, reach out from the building into the environment as if to use the viewer and the surroundings as their experiment.



Warning-Biohazard



Over the south entrance are four reliefs titled *Hy-Brids*, featuring fictional monsters some feared would be the result of molecular biology research. Surrounding these cross-bred figures are tiles containing the letters A, G, C, and T. These represent the four basic building blocks of DNA. The relief centered over the entrance contains three images. The central one is the mythological sphinx. On either side of the sphinx is a box and a horn. These represent the two possible outcomes of molecular research: an open Pandora's box of evil or a cornucopia of good.

Detail of *Hy-Brids*



Gene Pool

Leicester designed three ceramic mosaics for the first floor of the building. The largest fills most of the atrium floor space and is titled *Gene Pool*. It is the image of a bacterium in the act of releasing strands of DNA. Scientifically speaking, a gene pool is a collection of genes in an interbreeding population. When the mosaic is viewed from above, it actually looks like a swimming pool, and plays on the double meaning.

The entrance vestibule contains the floor mosaic called *Conception is Capitalization*. This work represents a complete set of scattered human chromosomes as seen under a microscope. Encasing these chromosomes is a circle of dots that represent the petri dishes that are used for growing cells in culture.

The third floor mosaic is located in the auditorium lobby. *Novel Agents* derives its imagery from the phylogenetic tree and the fruit tree of the Garden of Eden. The phylogenetic tree maps out the evolutionary development of all animals and plants. The two symbols at the base of the tree represent a scorpion and a tarantula. Combined with the snake wrapped around the tree trunk, these poisonous creatures represent the possible dangers of tasting the fruit from this genetic tree. Above the tree flies a "super-genetic" creature, the dragon.



Novel Agents



Forbidden Fruit



Shotgun Method

Shotgun Method is the title of the 24 terra-cotta medallions that hang from the walls of the atrium. The top medallions are hybrid creatures from medieval mythology. The middle row shows the random distribution of these creatures' individual body parts. The bottom row consists of new hybrids created from the parts found in the medallion directly above. These new creatures are accompanied by hypothetical genetic codes that Leicester invented by giving each body part a number.

At the base of the atrium staircase stands the sculpture *Forbidden Fruit*. This female figure recalls the pose and symbolism of ancient Minoan snake goddesses. Snakes symbolize the powers of regeneration since they are reborn by shedding their skin. Instead of holding snakes in each hand, Leicester's sculpture holds strands of DNA that she has just split apart. In a sense, she is giving birth since DNA holds the key of life and reproduces by splitting. This goddess is wearing a metallic contamination suit similar to those used in some scientific experiments. Her brain is exposed through the top of her helmet and from this the phylogenetic tree extends its branches.



Completed in 1992, Iowa State University's **Molecular Biology Building** demonstrates that the functionality demanded by science can blend with the form and beauty intrinsic to art. The Molecular Biology Building is an innovative, five-level science structure designed to meet the challenge of unraveling the molecular secrets of living organisms. It is located on Pammel Drive in the northwest corner of campus.

About the Artist



Andrew Leicester is an American artist specializing in public projects around the world. Born in England, he earned degrees from Portsmouth and Manchester Polytechnic. Immigrating to the United States in 1970, Leicester now lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has created various types of artwork for

cities around the country including entryways, bridges, and garden pieces. The recipient of many awards, he has been featured in exhibitions and lectured nationwide. Leicester has also had fellowships with the Bush Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Some of his artwork includes the gateway of Cincinnati's Bicentennial Commons which features a set of pigs on top of riverboat smokestacks, referencing the city's history with the pork business. Although slightly controversial at first, community members rallied around the project and pigs became a theme of the city once more. Another of Leicester's works is the bridge extension over California's I-20 freeway. It features a woven basket pattern, an homage to the Native Americans that once lived in the region. Leicester's projects stem from his beliefs that art should exist in the public domain and form connections in the communities where they are.

G-Nomes replicas produced in 2016

The original four *G-Nomes*, the twelve-foot tall sculptures that stand atop each corner of the Molecular Biology Building, were made of terra cotta and deteriorated over time of being out in the elements. In 2016, University Museums obtained permission from artist Andrew Leicester to reproduce the *G-Nomes* out of aluminum. The replacements were fabricated by the Public Arts Incubator at the University of Northern Iowa and were installed in July 2017.



G-Nomes replicas fabricated out of aluminum at the Public Art Incubator at the University of Northern Iowa.



The replica *G-Nomes* were installed in July 2017.

About the Art on Campus Collection

Iowa State University is home to one of the largest campus public art collections in the United States. Over 2,500 works of public art, including many by significant regional, national and international artists, are located across campus in buildings, courtyards, open spaces and offices. In 1982, the University Museums created the Art on Campus Collection that codifies acquisition, education and care and conservation of the campus public art collection.

From its founding, Iowa State has recognized the value of integrating art with the educational experience. From early founder Peter Melendy and first President Adonijah Welch's vision for central campus to President Raymond Hughes' embrace of public art to President James Hilton's construction of the Iowa State Center as a hub for cultural spaces, the arts have remained an integral part of Iowa State.

About University Museums

University Museums is a distinctive organization that encompasses two art museums (**Brunnier Art Museum** and **Christian Petersen Art Museum**), a National Historic Landmark historic home museum (**Farm House Museum**), a sculpture garden (**Anderson Sculpture Garden**), and one of the largest campus public art collections in the nation (**Art on Campus Collection**). University Museums brings world-class exhibitions with educational programming to Iowa State University, actively acquires works of art to add to the more than 30,000 permanent collection objects, conserves and preserves collections, conducts and publishes curatorial scholarship, and fosters student engagement.

University Museums, Iowa State University - 1805 Center Drive, 290 Scheman Bldg, Ames, IA 50011

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*This information sheet is intended to be used in addition to viewing the Art on Campus Collection.
At no time should this sheet be used as a substitute for experiencing the art in person.*