

POWERFUL

L A C E S

The Spiral Jetty

Great Salt Lake, Utah

By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

The spiral is the most noble and perfect of all geometrical figures asserted the Swedish scientist and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. Yet, the spiral is charged with multiple symbolic meanings. One of the oldest symbols in existence, it represents the perpetual motion of life, presenting a picture of life as an endless, evolutionary process bound within the cycles of time. Although each turn of the spiral brings us back to the same place, it takes us to a higher and more evolved level.

Artist Robert Smithson's (1938-1973) piece, a 1,500 ft. long x 15 ft. wide spiral sculpture, was hidden under the surface of the Great Salt Lake for 30 years. Due to a drought, the art piece is re-emerging, weathered by saltwater and time. Smithson left New York in 1970, and headed west to create art in the wilderness. The monumental earthwork known as "Spiral Jetty" was built that year using black basalt rocks and earth from the site. The spiral stretches out counterclockwise into the translucent red water.

At the time of its construction, drought conditions made the water level of the lake unusually low. Within a few years, the water level returned to normal and submerged Spiral Jetty for the next three decades. The Jetty re-emerged in 1999 and was completely exposed. Then, the lake level rose again during the spring of 2005 due to a near record-setting snowpack in the mountains and partially submerged the Jetty once more. Originally black rock against ruddy water, it is now largely white against pink due to salt encrustation and lower water levels.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Smithson's creation is that it is only visible when climate conditions cause the level of Great Salt Lake



to drop below an elevation of 4,197.8 feet.

The water's pink color is due to a red pigment in the salt tolerant bacteria and algae that survive in the north arm's extreme 27 percent salinity. Great Salt Lake was split into two parts by a rock causeway constructed across the lake by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1959. Before the causeway was built, fresh water from the Bear, Weber/Ogden, and Jordan Rivers circulated throughout the entire Great Salt Lake. When the causeway was built, circulation became restricted and salt content of the north arm increased because most of the river water flows into Gilbert Bay (the south arm).

White salt crystals encrust almost any solid object in contact with north-arm water. The black basalt boulders Smithson took from the beach to construct Spiral Jetty are no exception; they are now covered with salt crystals. The basalt boulders are from local volcanic eruptions during Pliocene time, about five to two million years ago.

Throughout the lake-level fluctuations, Spiral Jetty has survived wave erosion; the hard salt crust probably cemented the boulders together and provided a protective layer on the Jetty surface, making the spiral easy to walk for those who come to experience its power and wonder.