

TORU OBA,  
Japanese stonemason, sculptor and Stone  
Foundation founding member.

Like many another present-day stonemason Toru Oba had a distinctly different previous existence. From a promising University physics student he was transformed into an international vagabond who found himself in a small French village with a family to feed. Stonemasonry was more interesting than picking fruit and could be done year round, so a stonemason he became. He was respected in his area as a skilled workman, strong and quick. He came to the USA with his American wife for the birth of their second child and settled in rural West Virginia and a hard-scrabble life.



The word expeditious can be defined as “acting with speed and efficiency;” it is personified by Toru at work. During the course of the first Stone Foundation workshop in New Mexico there was great need for a flatbed truck. Only one was available, the cost of its use—a stone fireplace. Toru had made no secret of his prowess in building fireplaces, he told us he could build one in a day so we ‘volunteered’ him to discharge the debt—which he did—in a single day!

In rural West Virginia, as in rural France, the struggle to earn a living required one to adapt to local standards. Only by building so expeditiously could he do the good work and underbid the competition. However, building at such a rapid pace necessitated a relaxation of his aesthetic standards and for years he had to be content with the occasional bits of artfulness done for boorish clients incapable of appreciating it. “*These bastards don’t deserve my work*” are words I heard Toru utter more than once, but of course he wasn’t really doing it for them.

Within a stonemason there is often an artist and often this artist is frustrated. The small satisfactions of working with stone are often overbalanced by larger dissatisfactions. And his sense of frustration was only slightly abated when he relocated to Virginia, a realm in which there were more opportunities to practice his craft.

Jobs he found there were often creative, but not ultimately satisfying, so finally Toru turned to sculpture and for the past several years he has been carving local stone into fountains, furniture and pure sculpture. He cites fellow Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi and Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi as influences.

Symposium attendees can expect a colorful description of Toru’s transition from stonemason to sculptor.