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## At horticulture complex, the pillars of the community college

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### Trustees pick etched stones for art project

By Lola Sherman  
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OCEANSIDE – Eight stone pillars etched with images of insects will grace the entrance to the new horticulture complex at Mira Costa College.

Three of the pillars will stand 12 feet tall.

College trustees last week approved a \$55,000 contract with San Diego artist Roberto Salas to create the sandstone pillars – often called steles by archeologists and architects. Salas said in a recent interview that he chose the 12-foot height for the columns “so they will have a beautiful presence.”



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

“I’m in it for the challenge,” Roberto Salas (right) said of his public art, like his project on Grove Avenue in Nestor. Angel Morris (left) and Junior Tapia examined Salas’ etching beneath the sand.

Noting that horticulture is big business in North County, Salas said he would etch insects that aid agriculture, such as the honey bee, praying mantis and ladybug.

Salas’ project is the first public artwork to be purchased under the college’s new policy requiring that 1 percent of the cost of a new building be put into art, said Bonnie Hall, college director of public relations.

Hall said Salas was chosen over two other artists’ entries by the college’s 12-member Spaces and Places Committee, which she heads.

The pillars, Hall said, also solve a problem – the fact that the horticultural complex can't be seen from the roadway because it's hidden down a slope.

Salas plans to position two 12-foot columns at street level, five 3-foot pillars along the ramps on each side of the main stairway and a 12-foot stele in front of the main horticulture building.

The large pillars will weigh six to eight tons and will be implanted 4 feet into the earth for stability.

Salas, 51, who holds a master of fine arts degree from University of California San Diego, is no stranger to public art in this county. He has etched Mayan heads on the walls of Southwestern College in Chula Vista and created colorful signposts along Park Avenue in front of the San Diego Zoo. In Oceanside, Salas was awarded a \$24,000 city contract to create the signposts along Mesa Drive in front of Martin Luther King Jr. Park that depict incidents in the life of the civil rights leader.

Salas also won a city contract for a tile-and-fountain work at Libby Lake Community Center in Oceanside, but that project never came to fruition and a contract was given to another artist this year.

His proposal for a tall cobalt-blue concrete palm statue on Harbor Island in San Diego was part of a well-publicized controversy between the board of that city's Unified Port District and its Arts Commission. Eventually, the board rejected the art and the commission members ultimately resigned.

Salas has done an etched-stele project similar to the Mira Costa proposal at South Bay Water Reclamation Sewer and Pump Station on Grove Avenue.

There, he said, he acted as a “social catalyst” able to work with all factions in the south San Diego community, each having a different vision for the project.

“I'm in it for the challenge,” Salas said of his public art.

He will quarry pinkish rock for the Mira Costa pillars in northern New Mexico and sandblast the etchings there.

Once the etched pillars are in place, college President Victoria Muñoz Richart has suggested installing a plaque near the entrance to the horticulture complex so visitors can identify the insects. The complex is expected to be completed for the new semester Jan. 22, but Salas has until March 30 to complete his project.