

*At 30, City's Picasso Still a Mystery*

Outside the Daley Center, carillon hymns from the First United Methodist Church Chicago Temple pealed forth over emptying streets of Chicago's Loop. Inside the center, musician Von Freeman blew a jazz tune to a standing-room-only crowd celebrating a birthday: that of the city's renowned and enigmatic Picasso sculpture, which stands five stories tall on the plaza in front of the Daley Center.

The mystery of art eclipses the mystery of faith here at the corner of Washington and Clark Streets, where the city's tallest church stands face to face with its most inscrutable sculpture.

Thirty years after the Picasso was unveiled to a stunned silence in Daley Center Plaza, Chicagoans still do not know what to make of it. But there is a difference now: They like it. "This has become to our city what Big Ben is to London and the Eiffel Tower is to Paris: A symbol of Chicago," Mayor Richard M. Daley told those assembled at the birthday celebration. And the sculpture's mystery is part of its charm. Whatever the monstrous thing is supposed to be, Picasso never said; he took his secret to the grave--and how fortunate for Chicago that he did.

"I love to see people from all over out here taking pictures and trying to figure out what it is--and why they put it here," Tracey DeRosa said Thursday afternoon as she watched her son Brandon slide down the sculpture's low, sloping front.

When DeRosa was born 30 years ago at St. Joseph Hospital in Chicago, she weighed 5 pounds, one ounce. "It's a girl," the doctor said. When the Picasso was unveiled 30 years ago, stunned onlookers saw before them a 162-ton Cor-Ten steel structure--and nobody could say what it was.

But the mystery of the Picasso has evolved into its most appealing quality, said Rose Farina, manager of Daley Center events for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs.

"I'd like to think it's the phoenix," Farina said, "rising out of the ashes of the Chicago Fire."

At the Picasso's birthday party Thursday evening at the Daley Center, master of ceremonies Terri Hemmert of WXRT-FM pronounced the sculpture to be a woman's head. It was a piece of news that elicited little response from the crowd.

But jazz artist Kurt Elling drew appreciative applause moments later when he said: "That ain't no lady. That's the Picasso."

"Here," Studs Terkel told those assembled, "is a statue that can be whatever you want it to be.

"It's yours."

Said Daley: "Thirty years ago, when people first saw the sculpture, they said 'What is it?' I think they're saying the same thing today."

Just as the sculpture still has the city off balance and guessing, the weather did the same. Fearing rain, organizers moved Thursday's festivities inside--only to watch the clouds break and the sun come out.

Outside, the sculpture sat distant and alone, its back to the crowd inside.

It had been different at lunchtime. At noon Thursday, as on every day, workers spilled out of the surrounding office towers and businesses to pass their lunch hours on the plaza.

Two jurors on lunch break from a trial in the Daley Center sat in the shadow of another mystery.

"I thought it was a bird, but some say it's a lady," said Gladys Daniels, 65, of the South Side. "I just know I like it. I think it gives the city more class."

Fellow juror Priscilla Brown, 56, also a resident of the South Side, proclaimed the sculpture beautiful.

"It says something for everybody," she said, pulling french fries one-by-one out of a McDonald's bag. "You look at it one minute and it looks like one thing. Then the next minute you think it's something else."

"I think it looks like an angel or something."

Catherine Pelech, who grew up in Chicago and returned a year ago after living in California for 10 years, said she thinks the city has grown into the sculpture.

"I remember my father wondering what the hell it was," Pelech said as she watched her 2-year-old son, Jake Stucki, slide down the sloped base.

Behind the sculpture, Leah Gauler, 30, ate a salad for lunch. Gauler, who works for the Illinois Arts Council, has no problem with skateboarders using part of the Picasso for a ramp.

"That's great," she said. "I think they like the sculpture. It's part of their lives."

Across the street, on the second floor of the church, Justine Casey, the senior pastor's secretary, glanced at the sculpture.

Casey thinks the Picasso is a horse's face--albeit not a very attractive one.

"I'm of Italian descent, so I find that very ugly," she said. "Show me the Sistine Chapel."

But co-worker Melba Rizzo, staff secretary and editor of the church newsletter, came to the sculpture's defense.

"I like its uniqueness," she said.

Rizzo, 70, grew up on a cotton and cattle farm in Texas, and the Picasso reminds her of the abandoned farm machinery she would see riding past failed farms as a girl.

Later, as DeRosa stood holding her toddler son, Brandon, the boy thought he saw an Indian.

"I thought it was a face," she said.

Thirty years has been time enough for DeRosa to marry, move to Florida, return to Chicago, take a job with the city's Department of Risk Management and have a son. But as of Thursday, she still hadn't figured out what Picasso had in mind when he dreamed up the hulking sculpture.

All around DeRosa and the sculpture, the city buzzed..

On the street, cabbies blew their horns, a No. 62 bus squealed to a halt and a siren wailed. An emergency unit from the Chicago Fire Department came to a stop where a woman had been struck by a red-and-white Bronco.

Paramedics put the woman's neck in a brace and hauled her away.

As the scene was clearing, a couple stood on the corner of Dearborn and Washington waiting to cross headed east. They spoke to each other in Spanish. The only word a passerby could understand:

Picasso.

