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## Walking on the water

Artist Jaume Plensa reinvents the fountain for the 21st century

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In 1927, Chicago became the proud owner of what was then the world's largest fountain -- the elegant Buckingham Fountain in Grant Park, famous for its Beaux-Arts charm and water-spouting horse sculptures.

Seventy-seven years later, the Buckingham Fountain is getting a companion -- Spanish conceptual artist Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain, opening Friday as one of the signature elements of Chicago's Millennium Park -- that's also a kind of counterpoint, ushering the idea of a fountain into the 21st century.

"The city has an amazing fountain, the Buckingham Fountain, but that was not my concept," the Barcelona-based Plensa says in his Catalan accent. "My question was: What could a fountain be today?"

The answer turns out to be an eye-catching, crowd-friendly work that puts a fresh and aggressively high-tech spin on an ancient form. The \$17 million Crown Fountain, in the park's southwest corner, consists of a pair of 50-foot-tall glass-brick towers facing each other across a black granite plaza covered with a one-eighth-inch layer of water (upon which visitors are invited to tread, creating the illusion of walking on water). Each tower encases an LED video screen that projects a complex, computer-controlled sequence of colored lights and high-definition images (shot with the same kind of camera used in the recent "Star Wars" prequels) of the faces of 1,000 different Chicagoans.

Water cascades down the sides of the towers and at strategic moments -- in a latter-day version of the water-spouting gargoyles, demigods and fabulous animals in classical fountains such as the Buckingham -- playfully gushes out from between the digital faces' pursed lips.

It's as far from a traditional fountain as anything could be -- which is why Plensa won the commission over two renowned architects, Maya Lin (creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial) and Robert Venturi. "Jaume took a risk," says Steve Crown, whose family contributed \$10 million to the project and oversaw its construction. "He's working with a lot of ideas from the older school of fountains and updating them, which we liked. The result is very different, very contemporary, and yet it also has a lot of traditional themes running through it."

Millennium Park's John Bryan is very enthusiastic about the fountain. "I think it's the most thrilling thing in the world," he says. "It's very minimalist and modern, for one thing, and yet it has an originality to it that didn't exist in the modernist period. And, of course, it's very 21st century in terms of its capabilities. Obviously, you could not have built this fountain 50 years ago -- which is good, because when we envisioned the enhancements for the park, we didn't want copies from an earlier day. What we're ending up with, I think, is a 21st century Buckingham Fountain."

Plensa agrees that his materials for the fountain are cutting-edge, but insists that it's a mistake to pay too much attention to the technological innovations.

"Everybody talks about technology, but technology is just a tool that serves you, that spreads an idea," he says.

"William Blake said you have to use the products of your time, and so we do. But the questions that artists ask are always the same. The way to express the answers are different, because the technology is different. In this case, I needed to show faces, so I used video. It's the ideas that matter, not the materials."

Besides, he says, nobody will care about technological matters when they're interacting with the piece. When he and park officials were testing the fountain last week, he said, the fence guarding it was down for some reason, and a group of children ran into the plaza and started playing in the water.

"Where is the technology in water? Water is water," he says. "What drew the kids to the fountain was the dream, the dream to be on the water. Dreams, that is something that artists work with."

And while his materials may be from the Information Age, Plensa says, his vision for the Crown Fountain -- as a place for people to congregate, play, talk, think, dream -- is timeless.

"The piece is trying to combine everything -- the water, the towers, the faces ... But the plaza is very empty, and that was my intention," he says. "I didn't want to create just another object for the public space. I wanted to create a place to be, a place to be filled with people. They will complete it, that's for sure."

And they will mirror the video images on the towers. Plensa chose the faces not for their conventional beauty, he says, but for their ability to represent Chicago's people. "I selected everyday people for this, you know, because I believe in the anonymous people building up a city," he says. "They're not just a nice girl or a nice boy -- they could be your son, or your girlfriend, or your grandfather, you know? When the faces are displayed on the piece, they become icons which represent all of us. That's the beauty. We'll be like a mirror, and one face will represent us all."

**GRAPHIC:** Bob Black, With the Crown Fountain, Spanish artist Jaume Plensa has crafted a nontraditional and interactive piece.

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