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Experiential Playscapes Rely on a Unique Foam Material

by Amanda Carmichael
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by Sean O’Keefe

It simply isn’t like any other material they’ve ever worked with. It’s extremely strong yet incredibly lightweight. It can be quite large but is still easily moved. It is durable yet can be finely articulated down to the smallest crevice, crack, or crinkle. The material is molded polystyrene foam from ACH Foam Technologies and the artists using it are sculptors at PLAYTIME, creators of immersive, animated playscapes frequently found in malls and entertainment centers.

Following a mission to advance the power of play and bring happiness to kids and families around the world, PLAYTIME takes fun seriously. Ryan Moats is the Director of Marketing and admits he too is still routinely amazed by the incredible creations coming out of PLAYTIME’s studio.

“As I saw the sculpting studio and understood the many layers of talent built into every project, I was invigorated,” says Ryan of his first impressions when he joined the company in 2016. From the graphic artists creating three-dimensional plans to the sculptors and painters bringing them into the physical world, everyone at PLAYTIME strives for perfection as they collectively render life-like cartoon figures kids can really wrap their arms around. “We use artistry to create truly believable fairytale environments.”

As pioneers of the indoor play movement, PLAYTIME’s first commission was an ensemble of eggs, bacon, waffles, and cereal at the Cherry Creek Mall in Denver. Over the 20 years since, PLAYTIME has created hundreds of handcrafted pieces to render any conceivable configuration of characters, castles, canoes, canons, or campsites creative clients can imagine. Many of the figures commissioned are copywritten, including Warner Brothers Looney Tunes characters and Nickelodeon’s PAW Patrol. In such a case, the level of detail must be exact, with Warner Brothers ultimately having the final say on the proportions of Bugs Bunny’s grin, eyeballs, and likeness. Though each piece is designed digitally, it takes a special combination of craftsmanship, patience, and material familiarity to transform solid blocks of molded polystyrene into a tiger poised to pounce.

“Sculpting stone, wood, or clay can be quite difficult,” says Spencer Smith, one of a group of talented artists who spends his days transforming large monolithic blocks of molded polystyrene into wonderfully detailed pirate ships, bridges, butterflies, or whatever else. Even after three years at PLAYTIME, Smith, a self-described art school dropout, still finds himself somewhat amazed by the primary material he works with. “Each of the artists here has their own techniques for sculpting the foam to a velvety, smooth surface. We all constantly draw inspiration from the work given to us and from each other. It’s an amazing environment.”
Smith is joined by many of the other PLAYTIME artists, in his appreciation for the versatility of molded polystyrene. Sculptors begin with blocks as large as 8’ x 4’ x 48”-thick, delivered by ACH Foam Technologies. First, the blocks are cut with a hot wire cutter to the maximum dimensions of the basic silhouette of the piece they are creating. From there, each designer works in their own way with any combination of saws, rasps, wire grill scrapers, horse brushes, or whatever else they come across to carefully coax form from the foam.

“One of my favorite techniques is cutting a piece of foam and gluing sandpaper to it to make a tool shaped for exactly what I’m working on,” says Smith. Sculpture, he points out, is really the process of removing material, and many of the techniques used with stone, wood, or clay are applicable to foam. Where foam really differentiates itself from other materials, especially in commercial applications like PLAYTIME’s work, is in the versatility afforded by being both durable and lightweight.

“The foam is very easy to take away compared to stone or wood,” continues Smith. “If you take away too much, it’s forgiving and very easy to add back.”

Once the foam is sculpted, the art is covered with a proprietary blend of sealants coating it with a soft, thick, smooth, rubbery surface. PLAYTIME’s cadre of artists also includes skilled painters, who carefully airbrush in the playful particulars that bring each piece to life. Ironically, as soon as many of the largest pieces like castles and ships are complete, they must be thoughtfully sectioned for transport to their destination and reassembly on site.

Despite using it every day, like many people, including others who work with molded polystyrene, the artists at PLAYTIME don’t know much about the material’s uses beyond their own. Commonly thought of by the misnomer “Styrofoam”, ACH Foam Technologies’ molded polystyrene foam is used in everything from precisely shaped...
packaging for electronics, pharmaceuticals, and wine to an amazing array of construction applications. As an advanced cold chain shipping solution, molded polystyrene’s superior insulating properties allow controlled payloads to travel with thermal certainty. As a void filler in industrial products, it encases fragile components in a lightweight, impact-resistant shell. It serves as the core in jet ski hulls and as shaped molded insulation in products such as RVs, spa covers, and garage doors.

Today, PLAYTIME’s creations are bringing joy to children and parents in shopping centers, hospitals, and restaurants on six continents around the world. Their product lines have expanded to include experiential play components like splash pads, water walks, floatables, and hanging elements among others. Whatever they are and wherever they play, at the heart of every PLAYTIME piece is a skilled team of artists and lightweight, flexible, easy to customize molded polystyrene from ACH Foam Technologies.