

The History of Ice Sculpture

People have made objects and buildings from ice for thousands of years. The early people of Canada and Greenland began to build snow shelters, often known as igloos, about 4,000 years ago. In an arctic habitat without stone or wood for building, hunters used blocks of ice to build shelters from the harsh conditions.



An igloo in the mountains.

The first known instance of ice being used in a decorative way occurred in China. During the 17th century, fisherman working in the Chinese province of Heilongjiang froze water inside buckets. They hollowed out the resulting blocks of ice, so that they could be used as candle holders. These can still be seen today at the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival, which dates back to 1897.



Anna Ivanovna

Russian empress Anna Ivanovna had an ice palace constructed in St. Petersburg in about 1739. It was extremely elaborate; it even had ice cannons that fired ice cannon balls! It was fully furnished with ice furniture (even pillows) and had an ice statue of an elephant. Blocks of ice were harvested from the nearby River Neva to build it. It sounds magnificent, but the whole place was built as a cruel practical joke. A Russian prince had married an Italian woman whom Anna did not approve of. Sadly, when the bride died soon after the wedding, Anna forced the prince to marry an old and ugly maid. The couple were made to spend their wedding night in the Ice Palace. She probably intended them to die of the cold, but they both survived.

In 1892 the famous chef Auguste Escoffier invented a new dessert; Peach Melba (peaches and raspberry sauce served with ice cream). It was designed for opera singer Nellie Melba and first served at a party held in her honour by the Duke of Orléans. The opera Melba was appearing in at the time featured a swan, and so Escoffier served the dessert in a swan sculpture made entirely of ice.



Ice sculpting

In modern times, ice sculptures are popular centrepieces at events such as weddings and parties. There is even a hotel made out of ice! Ice sculpture festivals and competitions are very popular in cold climates and are held in many countries, including Canada, Sweden and Japan, during the winter months.



An ice hotel.



An ice sculpture of some polar bears.