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AULA Library Research Award

Research paper

04 May 2020

The Watts Towers

I live a block and a half away from the Watts Towers, a California Historical Landmark, and State Historic Park. I can see the tall towers from my home. When I admire The Watts Towers from my living room window, I see beautiful colors. It reminds me of a grand castle. The towers are located at 1765 East 107th Street “on a triangular lot that is one-tenth of an acre, making it the smallest site in the state of California park system” (den Arend). So many different people come from all around the world to observe this beautiful monument. I see the way their hands go up and down in a triangular motion as they point out details or try to figure out what type of glass or tile was used on a certain part of the sculpture. People from all over the world bring their family and friends to observe this sculpture from the Roaring Twenties, and all of this beautiful art is free to view in my community. I am often stopped for directions to The Watts Towers and without hesitation, I always point visitors in the right direction.

Sabato Rodia, the artist who made these towers, was born in 1879 in Ribottoli, Italy (den Arend). He worked on his family's farm. At the age of 12 years old, he came as an immigrant to America and “lived in Pennsylvania until his brother died from a mining incident” (US Census 1910). In 1902, he moved to Seattle, Washington, where he was married to Lucia Ucci. They then moved to Oakland, California, where they had their three children. After seven years they were divorced. He then moved to Long Beach, California where he worked odd jobs like

construction and tile setting, before finally ending up in Watts, California. In 1921, he was in search of a unique triangle-shaped plot of land and he finally found it in Watts, California. He was known as Sabato, Sam, Rodia, and Don Simon by some of his neighbors, reporters, and visitors (Unknown, Mike).

Rodia began working on his towers in a time of great change and artistic development for American society, the Roaring Twenties. During this time, Watts was home to a thriving working-class community from "a variety of ethnic backgrounds like Latino, German, Italians Chinese African American, and Japanese" (den Arend). "By 1920, 14% of the Watts' population was African Americans which at that time was the highest in California" (Swanson). At the time, the world was experiencing large scale development and industrialization, with the use of automobiles, telephones, movies, and electrical appliances being brought into the lives of thousands of Americans. For the first time, "Mass Broadcasting of the news was being delivered from radios all across America" (Gorman 1562). Advertisement was booming and seemed to focus on celebrities, especially sports heroes and movie stars. "The (NAWSA) National American Woman Suffrage Association also won the right to vote" (Gorman 1644). This had a very large impact on society. This was called the spirit of the Roaring Twenties. Also in this moment in history, during the 1920s and well into the 1930s, Harlem produced a cultural richness that made it a mecca for New York of all colors and creeds (Gorman 1555). This was surely the time of possibilities. "White men were as good at singing and dancing as the American Negro" (Huggins 194). The Harlem Renaissance was developing in American literature, poets, sculptures, musicians, novelists, artists, media, jazz, and dancing grew in popularity. These fine people had intellect and abundant talent. This was in opposition to the disposition of World War

1. Then Americans had to deal with The Wall Street Crash in 1929 which ended the era. Shortly after the world suffered from the Great Depression which brought many years of hardship spread worldwide. This went on for about 4 years.

For a little over 33 years (1921-1954), Sabato solely built inch by inch a huge and complex structure. It was said that he lost his family and became an alcoholic (Unknown, Mike). "He was broken because he made so many mistakes" (Unknown, Mike). All the broken pieces that he gathered he wanted to put them back together again to make one whole piece. With no help, he labored to create the entire Towers, structures, sculptures, pavement walls and designed it. "Some people thought he was crazy" (Hale). While others thought he was going to do something artistic. "He had a deep respect for Galileo, Michelangelo, Marco Polo, Columbus, builders, explorers, and men of great stature. He hoped that in some way his work was related to their traditions" (Hale). All these artists were born in Italy just like Simon. I believe this is why he connected so strongly with all of these different artists.

Unlike other sculptures, The Watts Towers were not made by a team of professional artists. "Simon Rodia had no drawing board" (den Arend). He began to gather tools such as discarded bottles, broken dishes, mosaics tile, pottery, glass, mirrors, rocks, seashells, cooking utensils, wrought iron, scrap steel, linoleum, concrete, chisel, bucket, hammer, shovel, and his two hands. Over the years he added many other ordinary items. Some of the neighborhood children would help by bringing him shells and bottle caps or broken bits of pottery that he used for his creation (Hale). He used his curiosity, creativity, and resourcefulness on this project. And he did not care what people thought.

The scattered objects form an alluring design. When I am standing in front of The Watts Towers, I can see broken pieces of colored plates embedded in the concrete. As I am standing there, I asked myself what the broken pieces represent? Could it be that he was broken-hearted and unable to share his heart with his wife and children? He also created hearts but the one that really stuck out to me was the Mosaic heart. It's possible to see the entire Watts Towers as a single mosaic piece of art with each part assembled from small pieces of colored glass or stone, and even some other, unknown types of material. Mosaic art has a long history starting in Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C. and Rodia's work continues on with this tradition.

The Watts Towers reflect the vision and work of one single person. Rodia was determined to work night and day and created the entire sculpture by himself. He "couldn't hire anyone to help him because he didn't have any money" (Hale). And even if he could have hired someone, he wouldn't have known what to tell them. Rodia often stated that he didn't even know what to do himself. He had no written plans, only an idea. When asked about the idea behind the towers, Rodia stated simply, "I had in mind to do something big and I did it" (Hale 1957).

The Watts Towers has 17 major sculptural forms and is the largest folk art structure in the world constructed by one single person. Also, the tallest of the three main Towers is "99.5 and a half feet tall and contains the largest slender reinforced concrete column in the world" (den Arend). Simon was so talented that instead of climbing the towers with his tools, he attached them to his window-washer belt and with his designing elements contained in a bucket or burlap bag, he was able to work at the top of The Watts Towers.

Rodia called his project "Nuestro Pueblo" which translates to "Our Town" (Watts Towers 2020). This was a point of pride for him. After completing his unique monument in 1954, Rodia deeded his property to one of his neighbors and walked away and never looked back. He moved to Martinez, CA to be near his family, where he died in 1965. Not too long after the towers were completed, in 1957, the city of Los Angeles issued orders to remove the towers saying they were unsafe and in 1959, the Towers were threatened with demolition" (den Arend). The community came together as a whole to defend The Watts Towers, and over many years the community worked together to save the towers from being torn down.

In 1959, Bud Goldstone, a stress analyst, tested the Towers and deemed that it was safe and could withstand force winds up to 80-mile per hour. Also, in 1959 William Cartright and Nicholas King formed a committee so they could buy Mr. Rodia's Watts Towers to protect and preserve the site. Because our community came together as a whole, they were able to open the Watts Center and offer different programs and activities for the community. Then in March of 1963, the Watts Towers were designated as Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Monument #15. Almost a decade later in 1970, The Watts Towers Arts Center was built. This is where our community continues to celebrate Simon Rodia every year with The Watts Towers Jazz Fest. This is the very thing that they were doing in the time that he was first building the Watts Towers.

Five years after the Watts Towers Arts Center was built, the committee of Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts deeded the property to the city of Los Angeles. Three years after that, April 19, 1977 "the Watts Towers were added to the National Register of historic places" (Shatkin). Then

on August 3, 1990, the towers were named a California Historical Landmark.. Shortly after that "The Watts Towers became a National Historic Landmark in December 1990" (Shatkin 2019).

The Watts Towers have been able to stand the test of time because the people in the surrounding neighborhoods have embraced them as an important part of our community. "On August 10, 1965, the Watts Riots broke out a few blocks away from the towers; the Watts Towers were left untouched" (de Arend). This site became the vanguard for black art history. This place by the name of The Watts Towers became the front lines of black art. This is where a lot of talented, well-renowned Black artists came to show their work. They didn't have anywhere else to show their talent, so they all came to The Watts Towers and this is still going on even to this day. And this also reminds me of mosaic art. Just like the towers are made of diverse colors and types of material, our community today adds new pieces to the artwork. Just like our community, the towers are made up of diverse colors and are able to withstand the test of time. Simon's legacy lives on through his hard work and dedication building the Watts Towers for our community to enjoy and for the whole world to see.

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