

What Towers?

I'm a big fan of art created from recycled objects. One of my favorite galleries is in the San Francisco garbage dump. It contains a special studio used by artists-in-residence who create and display things they've made from articles they've scavenged, alongside the seagulls who frequent there.

In Sonoma County, where I now stay half the time, discarded bridge parts and rusted remnants of old cars form what I call a culture garden near my part-time home. There's even a makeshift altar where a beautiful cactus flower seems to grow out from the twisted tangles of a tree's cross section. There's an empty vessel into which I place my prayer stones. I truly appreciate this phenomenon as much as I enjoyed walking among the Giacommetti sculptures and Braque Chapel 30 years ago in a garden overlooking the Mediterranean Sea run by the Fondation Maeght in St. Paul de Vence when I was a student in Southern France.

I enjoy making collages, decoupages and colorful textured paper from junk mail. I've made my own sculptures with a glue gun and broken toy parts and, most recently have taken to a form of mosaic work called Pique Assiete or Broken Plate pottery.

So you can imagine my delight at learning that the Watts Towers before my most recent trip to Los Angeles. Over about 40 years, beginning in the 1930s, an Italian immigrant named Sabato "Simon" Rodia single handedly created, during his off time from his regular job as a construction worker, a complex of seventeen major sculptures. The tallest of his towers stands 99 ½ feet and contains the longest slender reinforced concrete column in the world. Rodia, on his own, poured the cement into mesh molds he made himself and without scaffolding climbed onto finished parts to build the rest. Embedded in the concrete is a wide assortment of materials, including ceramic tiles, sea shells, pottery fragments, broken 7-Up bottles, mirror, marble, colorful rocks, hand drawn images and the impressions of the tools he used to do it all. The most prestigious implants are some broken dinner plates given to Rodia by Charlie Mingus' wife. Rodia's monument also features a gazebo with a circular bench, three birdbaths, a center column and a spire reaching a height of 38 feet.

At the car rental office, after flying into Los Angeles for the Memorial Day 90th birthday party of my father in law, I asked the agent, who I assumed would be familiar with all the culture his City afforded, how to get to the tourist attraction of my choice. "Lady," he answered, looking at me with grave sincerity, "I've had lots of people ask me how to avoid Watts, but you're the first to ask me how to get there." No one at racially diverse Enterprise office knew the way. One African-American employee even went so far as to call me crazy for wanting to venture into what he saw as dangerous territory where he would never go himself. But I knew that the drug dealers and thugs everyone feared were generally night owls, and to visit by day would be safe enough—as safe as it is for all the residents who call Watts home.

I did get knowledgeable directions from my father-in-law, Dave, who knows LA super well. He, too, thought I was crazy to want to go to Watts, but he had little argumentative ground to stand on. He was having 90th birthday party in a bowling alley! Not that he bowls, but his favorite LA restaurant is a place called Pepe's near his house in Westchester, not far from LAX.

My husband, Joel, accompanied me on the trip to Watts Tower. His nephew Marcus and Marcus' partner Mary came along too. The couple was in their 20s visiting from Miami with their two young children. Gangster movies and video games in which rap and hip-hop artists are featured were their mainstay of entertainment. Most of why they accompanied us, though, was to take advantage of grandparental childcare available back at Dave's house.

Not long into our entry into the vicinity of Watts, I felt like a busdriver taking an older generation of film buffs through Beverly Hills. Oohs and aahs and excited notice of the terrain made famous by films like *Boyz in the Hood* and *Menace 2 Society* emanated loudly from the back seat. Even the graphics in the video game, *Grand Theft Auto* are apparently modeled after the streets of South Central LA and Watts.

The Towers themselves, we soon found out, were now a part of a new and growing Watts Cultural Center that sponsors exhibits, classes in any art forms and even Drumming and Jazz Festivals. We got a guided tour of the fenced in structures for a small fee, which was well worth the entertainment, including poetry, provided by its performance artist docent names Syni Paterson.

The Watts Towers are shaped like a boat within a boat, the towers themselves become the would be smokestacks of the Ocean Liner within. There are curious baptismal basins scattered throughout, leading some to believe that

Rodia had some sort of spiritual purpose in mind in the tower's creation. He called his masterpiece Nuestro Pueblo, Our Town, and worked on it for 33 years.

I left the Watts Towers quite inspired and validated Simon Rodia did something unique and original and you know there must have been some neighbors, friends and relatives at the time who must have thought he was absolutely wacko to be doing so.

Today the Watts Towers are on the National Registry of Historic Places, are a National Historic Landmark, a State of California Historic Park and Historic-Cultural Monument#15, designated by the City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission. They are well cared for, restored when needed and protected. People in our tour group were from all over the world, including Sweden and Australia.

Forty years ago, while watching on TV the Watts Riots that resulted from devastatingly intolerable racial injustices, I could not have imagined I'd be a tourist there buying souvenirs some day. Fifteen years ago, when Dave's wife died and his life spirit seemed to go with her; I could not have imagined him celebrating his 90th birthday with a twinkle in his eye. Ten years ago, I could not have imagined that my offbeat hobbies could be recognized as a legitimate art form. Did Simon Rodia know, as he poured his concrete and placed fragments of this and that in their respective places, what would evolve from his 33 years of effort? Probably not, although I'm glad he went on, doing his thing in the moment. Time is the after the fact, added ingredient that determined some answers to questions he may not have thought to even ask.

6/20/05