

ARTIST CONNECTIONS:

Nek Chand, Dr. Charles Smith

Nek Chand
1924–2015

As he worked by day as a roads inspector in India, Chand collected stones and rubble from the many villages destroyed during construction. By 1965, he began to transform and arrange his collections at a hidden location on government land outside the city. The artist estimated that he had made 20,000 kings, queens, animals, and other figures, sprawling over a six-acre patch of land, an expansive garden of concrete figures, winding pathways, and enclosed structures in what is known as the Rock Garden of Chandigarh.

Dr. Charles Smith
1940–

In his Aurora, Illinois, home, Charles Smith created a memorial and history museum dedicated to Africans and African Americans. His efforts began to call attention to the poor treatment of African American soldiers in and after the Vietnam War; however, it expanded to encompass events and people from the slave trade to the present. Smith used the detritus of his own neighborhood, melded with a concrete mixture, to make hundreds of figures chronicling the struggles and victories of African American history and culture.



Nek Chand, untitled (royal figure), c. 1965–75; concrete, glass, ceramic shards, metal; 42 1/2 x 11 x 10 3/4 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

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BIG IDEA: IDENTITY

Identity is important in understanding and describing ourselves and others. Art-environment builders use their art-making techniques to explore and express their identity. Art can be an important vehicle for communicating personal and/or communal identity and it allows for a deeper understanding of cultural and individual differences and similarities.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is identity?
- In what ways do people express or show their identity?
- Why do people feel compelled to express their identity?
- In what ways do artists explore complex issues of identity, such as race or cultural norms, through their work?

LESSON OVERVIEW:

Informed by the figurative work of Dr. Charles Smith and Nek Chand, students will explore identity in relation to cultural, societal, and community issues. Students will design and create a 3D form, utilizing concrete as a medium for constructing a sculptural head.



Nek Chand at Rock Garden of Chandigarh, India. Courtesy of *Raw Vision*. Photo: Suresh Kumar.



Dr. Charles Smith with his works in the exhibition DR. CHARLES SMITH: HISTORY LESSONS, 2003.

OBJECTIVES:

(Organized by National Core Arts Standards Artistic Processes)

Connecting: Students will demonstrate an understanding of how visual works of art can be used to express or show complex concepts of identity in relation to cultural, societal, and community issues.

Responding: Students will analyze and discuss the work of Dr. Charles Smith and Nek Chand.

Creating: Students will design and create a concrete sculpture that addresses an issue of identity that resonates with them.

Presenting: With public audiences in mind, students will design and construct a group installation of their sculptures to explore intersections of identity within communities.

HEADSTRONG

VOCABULARY:

Additive/subtractive processes, armature, community identities, cultural norms, identity, stereotypes, symbolism

ART MATERIALS:

- **Materials:** Base material (wood, masonite, foam core, etc.), armature materials (foam pieces, head form, corks, newspaper, recycled materials, wire, etc.), duct tape, embellishing materials (buttons, shells, fake flowers, small found or personal objects, etc.), hot glue, masonry cement
- **Tools:** drill, hot glue gun, scissors, spatula or spreading tools, mixing bowls

RESOURCES:

- Umberger, Leslie. *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007.
- Lucienne Piery and John Maizels, *Nek Chand's Outsider Art: The Rock Garden of Chandigarh* (Flammarion, 2006).
- Soumyen Bandyopadhyay and Iain Jackson, *The Collection, the Ruin and the Theatre: Architecture, sculpture and landscape in Nek Chand's Rock Garden, Chandigarh* (Liverpool University Press, 2007).
- Charles Smith:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asLVtZ7BKHM>
- Charles Smith:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB0UI6bgZhl>
- Nek Chand:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5RtTOs_lm8

CONNECTIONS:

- Black History/Civil Rights movement
- Vietnam War
- Indo-Pakistani War of 1971
- Hurricane Katrina
- Current events
- Religion

DISCUSS:

- Discuss the idea of identity with the students
 - What is identity?
 - What are important aspects of your personal identity?
 - What challenges do you face in relation to your personal identity?
 - In what ways are personal challenges you face reflected in broader communities?
- Introduce, view, and discuss the work and life of Dr. Charles Smith and Nek Chand. Through their work, they expressed issues of identity related to specific communities.
 - How does the work of Nek Chand and Dr. Charles Smith express issues of identity?
 - Compare and contrast the work and experiences of Nek Chand and Dr. Charles Smith.
 - In what ways do Nek Chand and Dr. Charles Smith explore complex issues of identity, such as race or cultural norms, through their work?
 - How might you explore issues of personal and community identity in your sculptural work of art?

CREATE:

1. **VISUALIZE:** Use the mind-mapping worksheet with students to develop an identity design for their head sculpture. Students sketch 3-D design.
2. **BUILD ARMATURE:** Begin with a base and construct armature; adhere armature to base.
3. **DEVELOP FEATURES:** Using additive and subtractive processes, develop form and establish features by attaching or adhering small objects and structural components to the main armature.
4. **APPLY CONCRETE:** Mix masonry cement per directions to a frosting-like consistency. Spread over entire armature to create a skin layer using spatula, palette knife, or gloved hands.
5. **EMBELLISH:** While concrete is still wet, embed embellishments to further illustrate the concepts of identity. Let dry.
6. **PRESENT:** Students will design and construct a group installation of their sculptures to explore intersections of identity within communities.



DR. CHARLES SMITH: HISTORY LESSONS (installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center), 2003.