

Dr. Charles Smith (b. 1940)



Dr. Charles Smith is an artist, activist, minister, veteran, and historian. He creates **figural sculptures** about Black history to create a more equitable **representation** and educate people about the untold histories of African-American people.

His sculptures show famous events in history, such as the civil rights movement, and scenes from everyday life, like a family eating dinner together. Details are often added to the sculptures in the form of found objects like hats, broken glass, and fabric. Dr. Smith's artwork, created around his home—first in Aurora, Illinois, and currently in Hammond, Louisiana—is an **artist-built environment** that he titled African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive. His museum is always open to visitors.

Dr. Charles Smith was inspired to open a second museum after stopping in Hammond, Louisiana, on his travels. When he stopped, he found a historical marker that included a grave marker titled “Unnamed Slave Boy.” Frustrated by the lack of equal representation in the story on the marker, Dr. Smith moved to Hammond and began his second museum, also titled African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive. After Dr. Smith moved to Hammond, more than 500 of his sculptures from the first museum site in Aurora were acquired by other museums across the country.



The art of Dr. Charles Smith acts as both a **primary source** and a **secondary source** in teaching Black history. He draws on his own experience as a soldier when depicting scenes of war. Because he was a soldier in the Vietnam War, he acts as a primary source for his art in that case. Because he was not alive during the time of slavery, he acts as a secondary source who researched, then depicted that story.

Figural Sculpture

Three-dimensional art that represents or has elements of real forms, particularly the forms of humans and animals.

Representation

Generally, representation is a verbal, written, or visual description of a person, event, culture, place, or objects. Culturally, representation focuses those descriptions on teaching and sharing the history of all people truthfully and equally.

Artist-built Environment

A unique place—usually a home—that is transformed by an artist. Often inspired by the life experiences of the artist, they typically are made using nearby and easily accessible materials.

Primary Source

An original artifact such as a document, photograph, or artwork from a specific time period or historical event, or a person who experienced the time period or event.

Secondary Source

An artifact, document, or other informative piece about a person, place, thing, or event, that the creator did not directly experience or know. For example, a book about dinosaurs is a secondary source.

Secondary Source Shape Responses

1. Look at examples of Dr. Charles Smith's work online at jmkac.org/artist/smith-dr-charles or use the images on this handout. Choose a sculpture, a shape in one of the sculptures (such as a camera, a shoe, or a hat), or create your own shape inspired by his work.

Sketch your shape on a piece of paper.

2. Fill in the shape with words or designs that express your reactions to Dr. Charles Smith's work. You can also write a poem, such as a "see, think, wonder" poem.

Complete the following sentences to create a poem.

I see...

I think...

I wonder...

Find more ideas for poems at socialstudio.space.

3. Cut out your shape poem, tape it to a skewer, and display it, for example, in your home, classroom, or garden.

4. If you are working with friends, family, or in a group, discuss your responses together and create a collaborative display of all of your shapes.

Additional Resources and Extensions

- Read anti-racist books. Find suggested children's books at <https://www.embracerace.org/resources/childrens-books>.
- Research online or at your library to learn about the history of the people Dr. Charles Smith represents in his work, including Louis Armstrong, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Watch Dr. Charles Smith tour his Hammond, Louisiana, environment at <https://vimeo.com/270386320>.

For K-12 Educators

Suggested National Standard Connections

Visual Arts Connecting 11.1

Anchor Standard

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring Understanding

People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Common Core Social Studies Literacy Standards
Grades 6-8

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic



Dr. Charles Smith, (from left) *Horn Player: Louis Armstrong Series*, c. 1985–c. 1999; concrete, paint, and mixed media; 32 3/4 x 9 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. *Rosa Parks*, c. 1985–c. 1999; concrete, paint, and mixed media; 40 x 18 3/4 x 29 in. *untitled*, c. 1985–c. 1999; concrete, paint, and mixed media; 44 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 12 in. *Issues*, c. 1985–c. 1999; concrete, paint, and mixed media; 46 x 18 x 25 in. *Woman with Fancy Earrings*, c. 1985–c. 1999; concrete, paint, and mixed media; 36 x 18 x 10 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.