

DR. CHARLES SMITH

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Charles Smith (b. 1940) 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*. With Hammond as his home, over 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.

KEYWORDS

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.

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

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.

Found Object: Items that are used as nontraditional art-making tools or materials. Often, a found object is something that was discarded or no longer usable for its original purpose. It can also be something from nature that can be collected, such as driftwood and rocks. Sometimes a found object is functional for its original purpose, but it is used in a different way in an artwork. For example, buttons can become a texture that covers a sculpture.

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.



Dr. Charles Smith at the African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive. Photo: Larry Harris.

THE SHAPE OF HISTORY: UNDERSTANDING ART AS A PRIMARY OR SECONDARY SOURCE

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is the purpose of recognizing, honoring, or documenting people and their experiences?
- How can art forms be primary and secondary resources?

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Artist: Dr. Charles Smith

Exhibition Title: *Aurora*

Exhibition Location: John Michael Kohler Arts Center

Exhibition Dates: July 14, 2019–May 17, 2020

Dr. Charles Smith is an African-American veteran who believes that black Vietnam War veterans are not equally recognized for their service. In 1986, he began creating the *African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive* in his yard in Aurora, Illinois, to educate visitors about untold African-American stories. This was the first site for his outdoor museum; the museum is now located in Hammond, Louisiana. His artist-built environment is full of figural sculptures representing black history. He creates the sculpture with found objects discovered near his home.

OBJECTIVES:

(Organized by National Core Arts Standards Artistic Processes)

National Core Arts Standards

Grade 6: Responding: VA:Re7.1.6

Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

Grade 8: Creating: VA:Cr1.1.8

Document early stages of the creative process visually and/or verbally in traditional or new media.

Common Core Social Studies Literacy Standards Grades 6-8

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9

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

VOCABULARY/KEYWORDS

(See **Dr. Charles Smith Biography** for definitions)

Artist-built Environment, Found Materials, Primary Source, Secondary Source, Representation, Figural Sculpture

MATERIALS

Shape Sheet for each student (see back), Pencils, Paper, Scissors

DISCUSS

Activator Questions: Representation

- What event from history have you found interesting?
- What makes that part of history valuable to you?
- What resources do you use to find information about the historical event?

Introducing The Artist: Dr. Charles Smith

- Review the PowerPoint of key works by Dr. Charles Smith and the key words.
- During the PowerPoint, watch the video of "*African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive*".
- Discuss: How do current events, media, or culture influence how you see yourself?
- Discuss: How does Dr. Charles Smith depict people in his art? What stands out to you about his representations?

CREATE

Students use the Shape Thinksheet to brainstorm, plan, and create a response poem in the shape of a sculpture by Dr. Charles Smith. The poem should include what they saw, what they learned, and why these things were important to them.

Teachers can use the following instructions to guide students in making.

Secondary-source Shape Poem:

- a. Create an outline of the sculpture you chose or a shape in the sculpture you chose.
- b. Fill the shape with the words of your poem.
- c. Erase the outline, if needed.
- d. Title your poem and include your name as the writer/artist.

REFLECT

- Why is it important to you that Dr. Charles Smith created sculptures that represented black life, black military service, and black people?
- What more do you want to know about Dr. Charles Smith and his art?
- How does your secondary source shape poem add to a story Dr. Charles Smith is telling in the artwork?
- What could you make next to continue your own art series?

SHAPE THINKSHEET

Pick a sculpture that interests you. Look closely at the artwork you chose, then answer the brainstorming questions below.

BRAINSTORM

What do you see? Include little and big details, shapes, colors, title, and materials.

List 5 or more below using full sentences or bullet points:

What do you think about the sculpture you chose?

- What is the message or story it tells?

- Why is the piece you chose important or interesting to you?

What do you wonder about what you see? What other questions do you have?

Write at least one question below.

CREATE

Dr. Charles Smith studies people and events from black history to create his artist-built environment that shares their stories. When he researches a different time period or person he did not know, he becomes a secondary source of information reporting on a topic. Add to the stories of his sculptures by making a secondary source shape poem responding to his art.

Use the words and sentences you brainstormed above to complete a poem about what you see, know, and wonder about the sculpture you chose. Start with the lines below, and continue adding additional lines and details.

I see....

Now I know...

Now I wonder...

Choose a shape from the sculpture as the shape for your poem and draw it on a separate piece of paper. Then, fill the shape with your poem. You can use different size letters and fonts to show the meaning of your poem.