



Top - Le Palais Ideal, Ferdinand Cheval
Right - Watts Towers, Simon Rodia



Naives and Visionaries

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Introduction by Martin Freedman

The scruffy curiosa bordering the American highway includes such wonders as reptile gardens, instant pioneer villages, agate shacks, zoos and freak shows-glaringly announced by fluorescent billboards and pulsating neon. Sometimes, modestly juxtaposed among the roadway heraldry promoting these blandishments, crudely lettered signs invite the dazed motorist and his car full of travel-numbed children to visit quite another kind of attraction: hand-made universes created by elderly individualists. These exotic manifestations are best described as idiosyncratic architecture, whose forms include roughly carpentered houses, elaborately conceived stone arches and towers, and carefully "finished" figure sculptures. The conceptual and stylistic range is vast, as is the variety of materials and techniques used. These structures-we have no adequate generic term for them are characterized by direct, primitivistic forms. They are wondrous environments that radiate strength and optimism.

Although these bizarre manifestations are oddly suggestive of ancient monuments and shrines, this is a wholly intuitive expression, as unbounded by stylistic conventions as by local building codes-its configurations are an amorphous melange. Not all of these transformed environments were intended for public view, and some sites are well off main roads in relatively inaccessible areas. The creators of these phantasmagoric structures have removed themselves from the immediate authority and social pressure of towns and villages, and in large measure their art is a rejection of society's accepted values.

While it may be convenient to characterize these architectural manifestations as folk art, they are unique and isolated from each other: they cannot be regarded as examples of any widespread styles. Our conception of folk art, traditionally, has been limited to individual objects and architectural elements that recur, with some variation, throughout a given region. We used to think of American folk art as a Northeastern phenomenon, embracing such utilitarian objects as pottery, copper and iron cooking-ware, quilts, weather vanes and dolls. Our view has since expanded to include objects from other parts of the United States, especially the Southwest and urban ethnic centers. Folk art is a collective expression of a culture's values, passed along to succeeding generations. Its basic forms are understood by the society and, while these allow for some interpretation by individual craftsmen, its conventions are well established. By contrast, the often chaotic creations of the visionary "environmentalist" artists whose work is illustrated here are not folk art—they are individualistic, not collective expressions; they are fundamentally symbolic, not utilitarian; they represent an art of many complex, interrelated parts, not of single objects.

However, some attributes of folk art persist in these works: Simon Rodia's *Watts Towers* utilize decorative linear designs associated with Italian street fairs, and employ the ubiquitous Mediterranean technique of embedding fragments of ceramic and glass in cement to create rich, textured surfaces. But overall, Rodia's work is far too personal, too immediate in its expressive force, to be considered folk art; it really is without true formal precedent. These artists are obsessed with the need to build and occupy private utopias. Eccentrics in the view of the general public, they are also seers whose radically reformed surroundings are their life works. Virtually all of these unorthodox personalities began their lengthy projects just prior to, or soon after, their retirements from conventional occupations as farmers, carpenters, bricklayers and stonemasons. Inured to long hours of physical labor, most were unable to survive retirement without making things. Their formal educations were practically non-existent and most were raised and lived their entire lives in the same region, relatively unaware of the world outside. They had no art training and if some of their building dimly suggests an awareness of historical prototypes—towers, columns, arcades, entablatures—the associations are fortuitous, inspired, perhaps, by gleanings from the encyclopedia or the National Geographic.

These inspired craftsmen have amused and irritated their neighbors, who ordinarily have regarded them as eccentrics, not only because of their exotic transformation of houses and farmyards, but for their often abrasive social and religious views. Some, like Rodia and the black visionary, James Hampton, have preserved their private existences, but others, like S. P. Dinsmoor and Jesse Howard, have delighted in endless battles with the local establishment, which traditionally has viewed their inexplicable invention as a form of subversion. Today, the visitor to Dinsmoor's limestone and concrete *Garden of Eden* in Lucas, Kansas, might find that the 40 years since Its builder's death have not necessarily softened community attitudes about him. "Dinsmoor," says a surviving contemporary, "was an atheist! He was a free thinker!" Hard to forgive! Jesse "Outlaw" Howard's passle of fiendishly compulsive, hand-lettered signs attack local politicians and the "reds." Freely improvised biblical exhortations, Jesse's apocalyptic comments on issues of the day have not endeared that master graffitist to his fellow citizens in Fulton, Missouri.

Fred Smith's larger-than-life portrayals of loggers, hunters, farmers and other local celebrities, the glittering figures in his *Wisconsin Concrete Park*, are robust personalities, a pantheon of north woods demi-gods. These groupings, a casual mixture of legend and localism,

still stand outside the tavern Smith operated for years. Local personalities gained immortality in Smith's sculptures, as did such well-remembered, riotous events as the beer-soaked double wedding of 1900, depicted complete with brides and grooms in a wagon pulled by a team of glass-encrusted, concrete horses. This is an innocent mythology of individuals at ease with nature and each other. -

The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly is built upon a Fundamentalist religious belief. This dazzling, foil-decorated assemblage was constructed over a period of 14 years in a Washington, D.C., garage by James Hampton, who worked by day as a janitor in a government building. Hampton intended to conduct services before his *Throne*, and this awesome work is an extremely personal elaboration on the southern Pentacostal church, a store-front phenomenon extant in Washington's black areas, in which traditional Christian services are combined with ecstatic singing and dance. Hampton's remarkable altar should be considered within the larger context of a mystical black expression in North and South America that incorporates arcane symbolism in Christian rituals. The formal elements used by Hampton suggest the most unlikely sources, remote in time and geography: Byzantium, Tibet and India, for example. But this is only speculation, and all such inferences are subsumed within the totality of his environment. Its form is complex, but its spiritual quality is immediate.

Rodia's magnificent *Watts Towers* are an incongruous spiritual presence over the Watts landscape. Their spires have been compared with those of Gaudi's great church, *La Sagrada Familia*, in Barcelona. Rodia's life was intimately identified with the ascending forms of his towers, symbols of a need to create something extraordinary, free of earthly restrictions. The religious simile in Rodia's work is reinforced by the stone, glass and shell encrusted labyrinth from which the towers spring; these heavily ornamented surfaces are reminiscent of the holy grottoes of southern Italy. There is little evidence of specific religious iconography in the entire complex; rather, the work's spiritual quality results from its overall form and, of course, the ambition of its creator. The tower as a religious metaphor or secular shape is omnipresent in "grass-roots" architecture. The precise stone and concrete structures in Herman Rusch's sculpture garden in Cochrane, Wisconsin, and the carefully aligned rows of arches of the same material, suggest ancient near-eastern astrological forms. The tower form was also utilized by the Minnesota craftsman, Louis C. Wippich, in the two major components of his garden of antiquities. Wippich was a late convert to Theosophy, an esoteric doctrine predicated on an afterlife for the departed soul. For his next existence, Wippich invented a strange architectural idiom in which elements of wrecked buildings and large slabs of granite were incorporated in monumental towers and he lived his last years in a delapidated wooden structure below one of these.

The Bible has provided the "message" and the basic iconography for Howard and Dinsmoor, Midwestern Populists who did not hesitate to point the way for their fellow townsmen. Howard laced his hand-lettered judgments and exhortations with appropriate scriptural passages, promising hell-fire to the great and the small whose actions displeased him. He remains the Jeremiah of Fulton, Missouri.

Biblical images permeate the *Garden of Eden*, Dinsmoor's life work. Dinsmoor's head was filled with apocalyptic visions. He used biblical examples to support his strong social positions and through the sculptures that covered his house and stood in his garden, he sought to emphasize parallels between man's expulsion from paradise and his imminent corruption by "modern" society. The crucified Christ became the modern figure of Labor, and the jeering

centurions were transformed by Dinsmoor into the establishment figures of the Lawyer, Doctor, Banker and Preacher.

In Dinsmoor's art it is difficult to distinguish its moralistic strain from its Fundamentalist character. Didacticism was a motivating force for many of these artists who share an unwavering sense of mission, an ability to ignore conventions and proceed, undeterred, to realize their heroic visions. Each artist believed that he was destined to create great things. Each of these environments represents a unique visual inventiveness, an innate sense of the visual possibilities of materials. Adroit in the manipulation of materials, they developed their own sophisticated technologies. For example, Dinsmoor's method of shaping his limestone "logs" and biblical personae required enormous technical skill. The ephemeral shapes of Hampton's *Throne* were created by the painstaking wrapping of metal foil around intricately carved chairs and tables. Clarence Schmidt compulsively wrapped thousands of tree limbs and branches with similar materials to make his *Silver Forest*, and his innate ability to select and combine unrelated materials and objects is in the best tradition of modern art's "assemblage" aesthetic. Schmidt became a guru to a number of young artists and filmmakers who were impressed by the depth and inventiveness of his vision.

Another marvel of assemblage technique is Grandma Prisbrey's *Bottle Village* in Santa Susana, California. Like Schmidt, she has a perfect sense for selecting and combining improbable materials for structural and ornamental use. Rows of colored glass bottles are incorporated in the simple curved walls of her buildings, permitting light to enter. With considerable sensitivity, she has used glass and crockery shards as tesserae for her mosaic floors. In one room, vibrating wall surfaces are generated by hundreds of pencils in geometric configurations-her invention is boundless. Grandma's art is simultaneously beguiling and sinister. Groups of dolls impaled on metal rods are macabre sentinels surrounding the buildings. (Dolls are common in "grass-roots" assemblage -Schmidt, for example, used hundreds of "Kewpie" dolls in his great enterprise.)

Of the nine artists represented in the exhibition, five survive. Clarence Schmidt and Fred Smith are in nursing homes, but Grandma Prisbrey, Herman Rusch and Jesse "Outlaw" Howard continue to build their dreams, invigorated by their labors. It seems that all of these artists identify their ambitious building projects with the prolongation of their lives. Most work unaided, taking pride in results achieved on their own. Decades often separate the early parts of their environments from the later ones, and erosion and disintegration are inherent in them. Over the years, as these visionaries extended their imaginary worlds, they were psychologically imprisoned within them. Their transformed surroundings came to represent reality, the outside world became fantasy.



Grandma Prisbrey's *Bottle Village*

By Esther McCoy

The intensity and immediacy of Tressa Prisbrey's expression recalls Goethe's description of folk art: like a word of God spoken this instant. Built over a period of some twenty years, and compressed into a site 40 by 300 feet, are thirteen buildings and nine major or minor structures, all fashioned of bottles and concrete laid in courses. The Village is complete, not because of Grandma's age (she is 79) but because she has run out of room.

Her art falls into the category of pleasure building rather than shelter building; but the buildings did have a purpose. When the Prisbrey's, who had moved from North Dakota to the West Coast to work in war plants, finally settled their trailer home on their own lot in Santa Susana in the 1950s, Grandma was cramped for space. The trailer was too small for grandchildren, too small for her collection of 2000 pencils. To construct with concrete blocks would have been costly, but there was a cheap material in abundant supply- bottles.

Simon Rodia "had in mind," he said "to do something big." Grandma had in mind to build cupboards for the display of her pencils, ones big enough for children to play in. From pencils, she branched out, and as her collections grew in size and diversity the buildings grew larger. They became little museums of the commonplace. They never soared as Rodia's did, they are scaled to children and speak of childhood rather than heroes.

She was never obsessed with craftsmanship. The soundness of Rodia's engineering was tested many times to disprove the claim of city engineers that Watts Towers was unstable. *Bottle Village* was subjected to no tests for the very good reason that Grandma Prisbrey's son was a local building inspector. But the walls of the *Village* weather as well as do those of another piece of folk art, *Le Palais Ideal*, the postman's house in Hauterives, France. Permanence was never the test of folk art. Some of Grandma Prisbrey's buildings are craftsmanlike but their claim to fame is the quality of light they capture, their radiance and translucency.

At the root of her uniqueness is a divine disorder; she has a passion for all discarded

objects and shows a willingness to provide them all, equally, a place in her scheme. And there is a scheme, as tough and calculated as a carnival grounds layout, and springing from the same impulse of showmanship. Yet she is an historian, a naive recorder of the present as Edward Kienholtz is a sophisticated recorder of the past; her art is one of inclusion, his of exclusion.

The imagery might have come out of the Brothers Grimm, so innocent it is in its harshness. At the same time it suggests families together, a big table set; Grandma creates somehow a festival of the seasons, for in her scheme are the tinsel of Christmas, mica snow; sparklers and pinwheels of the Fourth of July: the dead celebrated on Decoration Day; and a hundred birthday cakes-there is in the *Village* all the creative energy that women throw into celebrations when funds are scarce.

Like a pioneer, she built with the material at hand, and her local quarry was the city dump. For years she visited it every day in her Studebaker truck, and beside the one million bottles she salvaged for the walls of the buildings, the base of minor structures and walls around the property, she brought home each discarded doll and everything else from plumbing fixtures to sash and doors. The only materials she bought were sand and cement, used in a three-to-one mix, roofing paper and two-by-fours for studs. She raised her walls without frame work, in increments of three: a course of concrete into which bottles were pressed, a second, then a third. There she stopped, and went to work on pavings or low walls. The following day, when the concrete was set, she laid three more courses.

Her plan has certain similarities to some of primitive cultures (despite the long narrow rectangular site and rigid boundaries): there is a definite central core and most of the buildings open onto a central protected compound. Her circulation pattern is not, however, circular; it is a linear road through the site. In the hierarchy of buildings, the ceremonial center is the *Round House*, by reason of its greater size (23 feet in diameter) and its aggressiveness.

Indeed, there is something awesome about the *Round House*; the uniform size and color of the brown beer bottles, and the uniform prickly texture of the bottle necks, lend a forbidding air. Although placed three-quarters of the way back on the site, it is the focal point from the entrance. The glance strikes it then bounces back to a semi-circular structure on the opposite side, close to the entrance the *Thatched House*, smooth-walled (necks of the bottles are toward the interior) and a variation of size and color of bottles. The immediate impression is that of guardhouse and fortress, but the fleeting impression of order is dispelled as a succession of images crowd in.

There is, for instance, the raised planting bed near the *Thatched House* (once palm thatched) in whose low walls are imbedded automobile headlights. The blooms are heads of rubber dolls impaled on pipes; sunburned to a parchment color, they resemble nothing so much as faces in catacombs. Nearby is a free form fountain with four-foot long fluorescent tubes for water to play over; at the entrance are two truncated telephone poles striped with painted venetian blinds, studded with tiny bottles and aflutter with bronze streamers.

The orderly character of a few of the buildings is satisfying if the eye is still on the Bauhaus, but the true spirit of the *Village* is variety-sometimes achieved simply by varying the size of bottles or by turning the necks to the interior or exterior, or by festooning a facade with pine cones.

There is a sheer joy in materials. In her walkways and paving appear castoffs from popular arts and technology. From the automobile industry come several thousand headlights; there are chromed parts of renders, hub caps, old license plates. A low wall in front of the *Rumpus Room* and *Cleopatra's Bedroom* is formed of 35 television picture tubes which act as glass

tables for odds and ends. Cylinders and cogs of machined graphite form a base for a cast iron Japanese lantern for the center of a “shrine.” Imbedded in the paving are 200 spidery lead molds from North American Aircraft. From medical laboratories are penicillin bottles and intravenous feeding tubes, the latter strung together to make a screen for the false fireplace in the Round House. Frames of eye glasses, pistols, a snorkel tube, scissors, the mechanism of a pencil sharpener—all are there to walk on. There is a spontaneous wit: the shell of a large fire extinguisher beside a false fireplace; a TV tube is a finial on a great snowball-shaped mass sparkling with headlights (entrance to the *School House*); venetian blinds, painted red, form a fascia on the *Round House*; in the *Little Chapel* are dolls whose dresses are covered with beer can caps; large truck springs are planted among the cactus in front of *Cleopatra’s Bedroom*. Even the choice of the name Cleopatra is ironic in view of the mountain of trivia inside: on a dais, reached by two sets of stairs made of rectangular bottles, is a bedroom suite which is a miracle of the commonplace. But the light that bathes the dolls on the bed, the plush animals on chairs and the pictures on the wall (worthy of Kienholtz) is religious in its radiance.

Her wit has a Western frontier tang, especially in conversation and in a little booklet she wrote in 1967 about the Village. An example:

Around all the buildings I have cactus beds. I don’t care much for cactus myself, but I don’t have a green thumb and if I forget to water the cactus they just grow anyhow... They remind me of myself. They are independent, prickly, and ask nothing from anybody.

There are moments of astonishing beauty. At the end of the site where three attached buildings wrap deftly around the corner is a masterfully conceived space. The angular flow of the buildings (*Pencil House*, *Shell House* and *School House*), the high boundary walls with planting beds at the base create a three-sided space and form a backdrop for a play by the Grimms. The carved out space appears as a deep sounding board which embraces the playerswicked stepmother, defenseless little victims. And in the foreground, nicely balanced, are two structures which in plan are shapes that might have come from a child’s drawing. One is a boat-shaped raised bed planted thickly with blue bottles fitted on pipes. The other is the splendid, freely drawn C-shaped Shrine. What gives cohesiveness to the whole scene is the great number of automobile headlights that shine out from low walls at the perimeter of the site, *Shrine*, blue-bottle planter and entrance to the *School House*; they strongly suggest stage lighting. The lyricism of the *Shrine* enclosure is countered by the sense of evil represented by the hard-edged graphite parts which dominate the enclosure—a powerful image of entrapment in the midst of shining trust. The German fairy tale character is not surprising as Grandma Prisbrey was the daughter of a German emigre who fought briefly in the Civil War, then after suffering a leg injury moved to Minot, North Dakota and took up blacksmithing; there he married a second generation German, Catharine Warmuth, and Tressa was born to them in 1895.

Many memories are recorded in the *Village*. After a trip to Las Vegas she laid a large heart, spade, diamond and club in one of the few remaining pieces of bare earth. And into a wall she introduced, among splinters from mirrors, some photographs of members of her family who have died. The light through the bottle ends and the fractured light from the mirror pieces are backgrounds for a chair where Grandma often sits. Behind her head is the wall, at her left are three pointed-arched niches containing plaster figures of the Virgin St. Francis and a drawing of Jesus; below them is a crèche. She looks directly at you as she speaks, a little defiantly, a little quizzically, but also flirtatiously. She may have built all of the *Village* with her own hands, with only the help of her sons in hanging doors, but the furnishing of the interiors is intensely

feminine. Beds, mirrors, satin cushions, the ceilings all draped with castoff velvets and rayons, flounces and valances at ceilings or windows, empty bottles of perfume, hundreds of empty lipstick cases. The Chinese wing of *Cleopatra's Bedroom*, "where I put my Chinese things," she says is a jumble of discarded objects from boudoirs.

Over the years many of her displays have suffered, especially the dolls in the overstuffed *Dolls' House*, but the *Pencil House* reveals clearly her flair for display. Many of the pencils are attached to round boards covered with cloth, spoking out from the center, others arranged in semicircles, semicircles within circles, hearts and rectangles. Pencils are attached to a counter and to the fringed shade of a standing lamp. Round boards are placed within a heart-shape outlined in tinsel. Pencils grow out of the branches of dead manzanita limbs, out of flowerpots.

The pencil collection, which prompted the Village in the first place, has twice been moved to larger quarters. First it occupied the small house across from the trailer, now the *Shot House* (a bar with hundreds of shot-sized glasses); this was enlarged, and when it also proved inadequate, the addition became the *Bottle House*. The *Pencil House* is now at the far edge of the *Round House*, and attached to it is the *Shell House*. If the pencil collecting continues, it may take over the *Shell House*.

But Grandma seems content now to act as curator. In fact, she sold the property several years ago after the death of her husband and went to the Northwest to live with her children. The new owner, a dentist, kept everything intact when Grandma left; and when she was "disgusted at herself" for doing nothing, he invited her to return and live in her trailer in the *Village*. There she expects to end her days, in the middle of her monumental creation.

Author and editor of numerous articles and books on architecture, Esther McCoy has recently been a Regents Lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz.