Case studies of folk art environments: Simon Rodia's "Watts Towers" and Reverend Howard Finster's "Paradise Garden" (California, Georgia)

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Abstract
The study of folk art, or self-taught art, has been riddled with problems. Scholars have not agreed on terms or definitions, and research has been sporadic. Folk art environments, large decorated sites at homes or businesses, cause further problems because these sites define space. Simon Rodia built The Watts Towers in Los Angeles, and no one knows why he built the site or why he later abruptly abandoned it. The environment he built consists of three tall spires and several other smaller structures, all covered with colorful tile mosaic. Reverend Howard Finster created Paradise Garden just outside Pennville, Georgia as a means to communicate the teachings of God. The environment, a result of religious visions, contains hundreds of sculptures and describes an area of over seven acres. These sites represent two types of folk art environments: systematic and random.

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Los Angeles, next to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the University of Southern California. Billed as the West Coast's largest hands-on science center, the California Science Center is a public-private partnership between the State of California and the California Science Center Foundation. Thank goodness there are dozens of folk art environments and public art installations that we can visit when we prefer our art to be a little rougher around the edges, to have been created out of a compulsion that borders on obsession and to be at least a dozen miles from the nearest Starbucks. Did he ever. Rodia, an Italian immigrant, spent 33 years constructing the towers out of steel rebar, concrete and wire, and covering them with a mosaic of broken glass and pottery. Finster—whose art you might recognize from R.E.M. and Talking Heads album covers—collected these and thousands of other folk art-ifacts in his Paradise Garden. You can visit for the day or immerse yourself in all things Finster by staying in the onsite Airbnb. Philly Magic Gardens | Flickr CC: Jennifer Boyer.