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## **Concrete Cosmos of Bits and Pieces**

By **KEN JOHNSON**

One of the most popular tourist attractions in India — second only to the Taj Mahal — is a 40-acre wonderland of vernacular sculpture, architecture and landscaping created in the city of Chandigarh over a 40-year period by the self-taught visionary Nek Chand. If you can't immediately make the trip to see Mr. Chand's Rock Garden, you might consider a visit to the American Folk Art Museum, where the exhibition "Concrete Kingdom: Sculptures by Nek Chand" presents a selection of his distinctively rough-hewn representations of people and animals and tells the amazing story of his magnum opus.

Though similar to the thousands of sculptures populating Mr. Chand's garden in India, the works on view here are from another place: Fantasy Garden, a miniature version of his Rock Garden that Mr. Chand was commissioned to create in the 1980's for the National Children's Museum in Washington. In 2004, because that museum was relocating, its garden had to be dismantled and disbursed. Twenty-nine of its 100 sculptures came to the American Folk Art Museum, joining a set of five earlier works already in the permanent collection.

Taken out of their original context, the sculptures lose something of their meaning and magic. Mr. Chand, who was born in 1924, is not the sort of artist who labors over singular works designed for contemplative viewing in neutral settings. He was driven to create a whole world, a kind of miniature cosmos, and his methods reflected a demand for quantity as much as quality.

He produced generic figures that he could quickly and easily duplicate with variations. In the Folk Art Museum show, for instance, are multiple examples of a type of figure called "Lady Fetching Water," an approximately half-life-size woman in a sari who bends slightly toward a water jug at her feet. Some are made mainly of concrete with bases embellished by colorful ceramic fragments. Others are covered by pieces of broken, colored glass, so they seem to be wearing shimmering robes and headpieces. All have round, cartoonish faces with stiff, blank, popeyed expressions. They look like the products of a low-tech lawn ornament factory.

Still, all of Mr. Chand's sculptures have a lively, animated presence, and the tension in them between their raw materials and their lifelike energy is compelling. An inventor, scavenger and recycler, Mr. Chand built his sculptures on metal armatures made from abandoned bicycle frames. In addition to glass fragments, he used found materials to give them color and texture,

including pieces of crockery, stones and clinkers (a waste product from nearby foundries).

In the exhibition the life-size seated monkeys in reddish concrete are mysteriously thoughtful, like Buddha figures. A large, flat bird figure, its opulent surface made of translucent green glass fragments, testifies to Mr. Chand's canny decorative instincts. And various human figures — from adult to toddler size and in a range of muted colors, from off-white to many shades of deep gray — reflect an all-embracing democratic sympathy with ordinary humanity.

Wall texts in the exhibition say that Mr. Chand's work was inspired by his personal religious beliefs — which are unspecified — and the teachings of Gandhi. Looking at the video that gives a brief tour of the Rock Garden in the show, you do get a strong sense of a powerful spiritual purpose at the heart of Mr. Chand's prolific creativity. With its winding stone pathways, statuary, fountains and seemingly antique small buildings, the garden could be part of an ancient monastery.

The story of its creation sounds like the stuff of a magical realism novel. It begins in 1947, when Mr. Chand was displaced from his small Punjabi village because it was on the newly created border between India and Pakistan. In 1951 he settled in Chandigarh, Punjab's new capital, which was then being turned into a great Modernist city by Le Corbusier.

Mr. Chand found a job as a government road inspector overseeing highway construction, and partly inspired by the construction of Le Corbusier's buildings, he began to build his own concrete world in secret in a forest clearing on public land at the outskirts of the city. He continued working on it until 1975, when the Indian government discovered it and determined to clear it away.

Public protests ensued, and the bureaucrats changed their minds. In 1976 the Rock Garden opened as an officially recognized public park with a crew of workers to help with its continued construction. At 81, Mr. Chand still oversees the park's maintenance and development and welcomes its countless visitors.

*"Concrete Kingdom: Sculptures by Nek Chand" is on view through Sept. 24 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan, (212) 265-1040.*