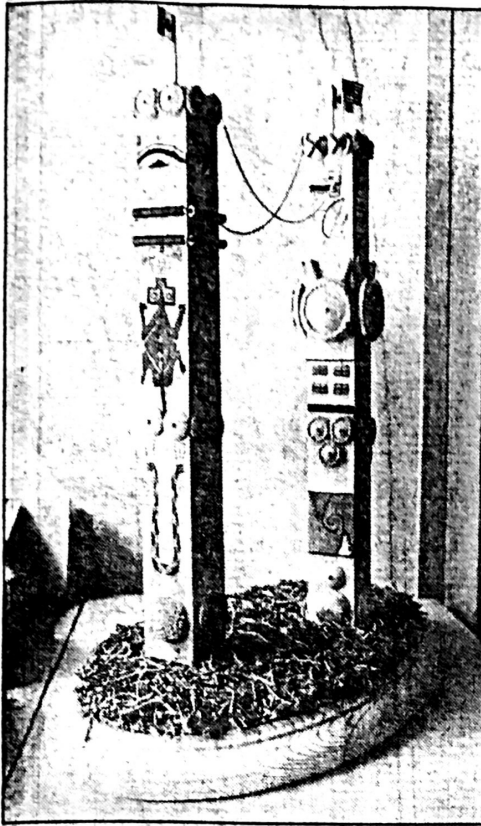


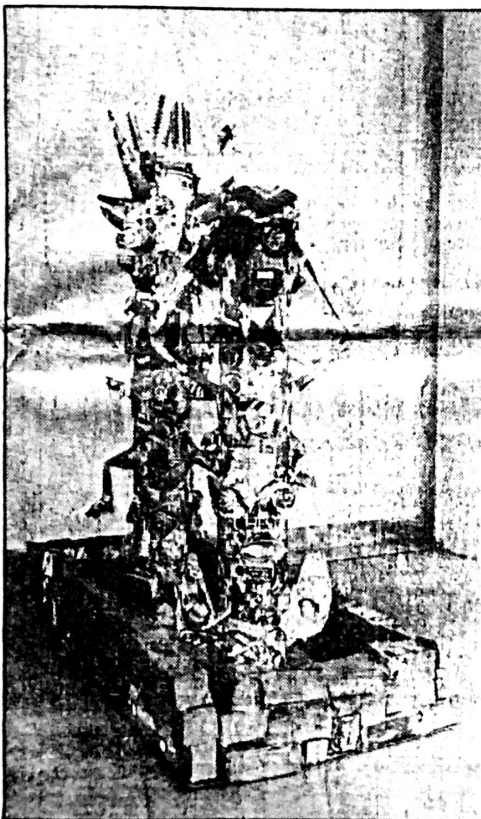
STYLE

Handmade
Part 1 in a series on
artisans and their arts
features the
painstakingly made, but
zany jewelry of Christina
Smith./E-2

Publication
The tabloid L.A. Parent
began five years ago with
12 pages and a circulation
of 10,000. Now it has 5
pages and prints 80,000
copies./E-7



Carver Junior High School



Belvedere Junior High School

WATTS TOWERS CONTEST FINALISTS

By Hunter Drohojowska

The Herald's Watts Towers Contest appears to have tapped great resources among the junior high schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District. In fact, when the models of the Watts Towers were brought in, we couldn't narrow the choice to a mere 10 finalists as we had planned. We finally settled on 14, made by students who worked either as individuals or in groups and interpreted the towers in ways that rival the creative instincts of Sam Rodia himself. Each reflects a particular neighborhood, ethnic background and perspective on L.A., as well as demonstrating some pretty impressive artistic skills.

The contest winners will be announced June 1. Prizes will be \$1,000 for first place, \$500 for second and \$250 for third, plus trophies and commemorative plaques. In the meantime, the contest entries will be on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Little Tokyo where they will be judged by MoCA director Richard Koshalek, Herald art critic Christopher Knight and Michel Pittas, dean of Otis Parsons School of Design.

L.A. city junior high schools were invited to interpret the spirit of the towers, not try to copy their appearance. And just as Rodia referred to the towers as "Nuestro Pueblo" (Our Town), the young artists were encouraged to think of their school as a town and reflect its composition. To that end, Virgil Junior High School with its 2,400 students representing 52 nationalities made a model of its school building and mounted the Statue of Liberty and flags of different countries on the roof.

Each school submitted the students' comments with its model, revealing how differently students see their schools and their community.

The clearest example was Belvedere Junior High School in East L.A. As the teacher Johanna Hassan wrote on the application, "Art can be identified as belonging to a particular cultural group — most of the time because of the selection of visual images."

Belvedere's model includes two totem poles collaged with images cut from magazines, newspapers and sundry other objects, all chosen as symbols of concerns raised in a verbal survey of the students. The primarily Hispanic participants in four art classes were remarkably frank and unblinkingly realistic in their observations. They listed their concerns in categories: drugs, sex, dislike of cafeteria food, partying, looking good, crime and violence, etc. A few also submitted explanatory essays, one on the mirrors and brushes glued to the totems, (teen-agers think their good looks are more important than studies and education).

One explained a picture of a woman on the tower captioned "trouble in the family," saying "this can stand for many things such as a killing in the family or dying of hunger." Surrounding the two Rodialike totems is a red brick wall that the teacher indicated as "symbolic of the caste system where peoples of our Hispanic community are bound together. The wall also prevents penetration from outside cultural influences."

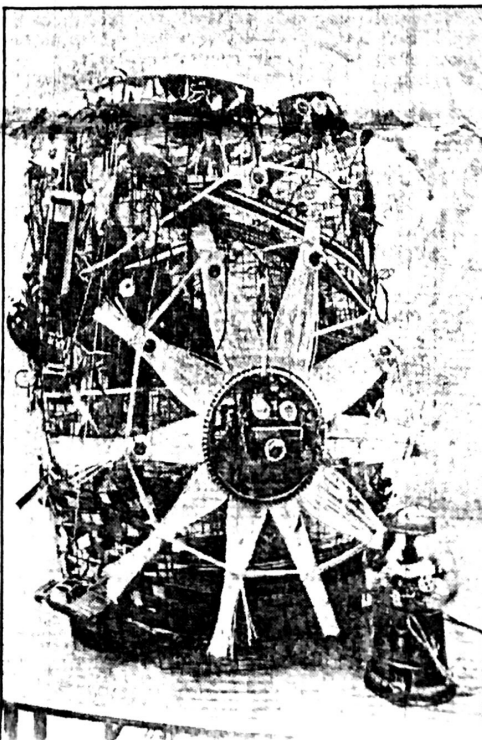
From this single work of art, with its students' comments

Watts/E-8, Col. 1

SAVE THE WATTS TOWERS



This article continues the Herald's effort to encourage the nurturing of the Watts Towers. Our purpose is to celebrate that magical monument and to explore the social and symbolic importance of the Towers to its neighborhood and Los Angeles at large.



Watts Towers contest finalists

Watts/Continued from E-1

any viewer might empathize with the community, see it from an insider's point of view. That has long been the function of the Watts Towers themselves.

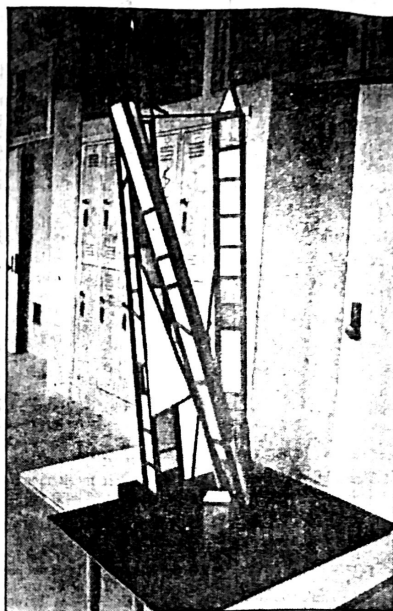
At Thomas Starr King Junior High on Fountain Avenue in Hollywood, tower models were turned in by the classes of two different art teachers. Vivian Nickas' students came up with "King Tower," a big wire barrel filled and covered with what can only be called junk: Snickers candy bars, Christmas tree lights, toy cars, feathers, flowers, bottle caps, plastic spoons, a big white star and so forth. One student modestly said, "I feel the King Tower represents the unification of art and junk; the start of a whole new era in art history." And another wrote in her essay, "King Tower has the spirit of America, daring, responsible and ever growing... We are the ones who will make changes, make history."

Meanwhile, Carol Hoffman's students were designing King Junior High's appearance in the year 2000: a pristine, highly complex model of struts, pyramids, and Buckminster Fullerlike constructions painted entirely white. The school mascot, the lion, stands guard in front. These students are geared toward the future.

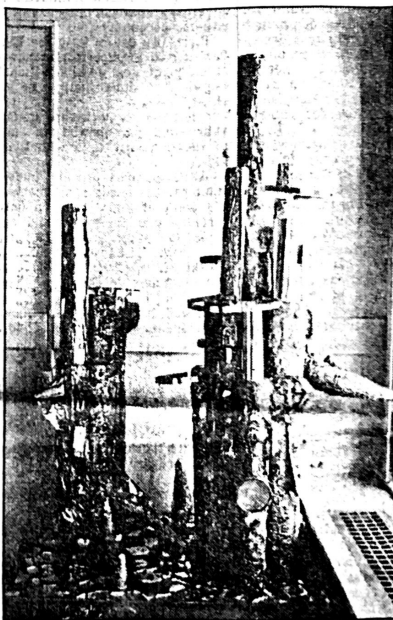
But an awareness of and ambivalence about the coming decades showed up in many of the models, evidence of communities in transition. Many of these schools are populated by immigrants, children trying to acculturate to a new world yet retain ties to the old. Just like Sam Rodia. This was apparent in a model submitted by Linda Thomas' students at George Washington Carver Junior High School in South Central L.A. Two pillars of balsa wood decorated with Aztec designs stand on green grass made of painted wood shavings. The one topped with a Mexican flag represents the old ways, the one with the American flag, the books, school and computer symbols reflects a consciousness of the new. They are linked by beads connecting the past to the future. One student poignantly wrote, "When I look at the first tower I think of my grandmother, and when I look at the second tower I think of me."

Emma Fujiki's class at Bret Harte Preparatory Intermediate School in a primarily black neighborhood on South Hoover called its project "Team Towers" because the students collaborated to produce the best results possible. More than half a dozen conical forms soar upward in navy capped with royal blue, as though they are protecting blue castle-type clock tower with the crenelated roof. Of the work of art, a student wistfully wrote, "Wouldn't it be nice if the towers were real and if people would walk in and come out HAPPY!"

In some way, we hope all of the students simply enjoyed creating their own towers, a monument to themselves and their beliefs, just as Rodia once did. The Samuel Gompers Junior High School on the corner of San Pedro and East 112th streets is one of the closest to the Watts Towers, and the students in



Hale Junior High School



Muir Junior High School

Carl Swallow's class said they identified with that structure. Their model, however, is a refined, even elegant bit of handiwork, as close to the inclinations of Post-Modern architect Michael Graves as to those of Rodia: Handsome multicolored pillars rise in a cylindrical shape to a circular yellow roof topped with arcs of silver. A crimson bridge traverses the middle of the pillars. By painting their hands and names on the base, the students honored the activity of working together. One student said, "I like our tower because I worked on it and helped make it look the way it does. Even if we don't win, we still came in first."

To all of our participants, we wish you a lifetime of building towers and following dreams, and coming in first.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.

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