

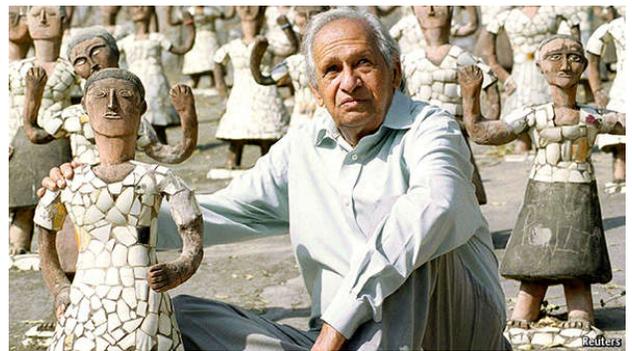
Nek Chand

From rubbish, beauty

Nek Chand Saini, creator of the Rock Garden of Chandigarh, died on June 12th, aged 90

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AT PRECISELY 5pm each working day, from 1958 until 1975, Nek Chand, inspector of roads for the Public Works Department of the city of Chandigarh, would climb onto his bicycle. But he did not head for home. Instead he turned north, towards the Shivalik Hills and the damp, mosquito-prickling forest. The road, good at first, soon became a bumpy track and then disappeared completely. Dense brush tangled in his wheels. “There were no roads to come or go,” he remembered. “Who would come here and what for?”



What he went for was to add one more rock, or a few more stones, to the secret world he was building there. The best specimens lay by the Ghaggar river, with strange man-or-woman shapes, and seemed to call out to be rescued. He brought these “individual souls”, at weekends

or under cover of darkness, to the space he had cleared with his bare hands in the jungle, and laid them out in patterns in the landscape. A small mud hut, its walls inlaid with perfect fist-sized stones, became his centre of operations.

To the south the great Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier was building a new Chandigarh, a “city beautiful” based on right angles and reinforced concrete. It was the first planned city in independent India. As a dutiful official, Nek Chand subscribed to these principles: he saw to it that the new highways ran straight rather than crooked, and when they cut through the old, poor, cluttered parts of Chandigarh, he accepted it as progress. In the rubble of these demolished houses, dumped not far from the forest, he found more treasure. Shards of crockery, electrical fittings, old tyres, bottle tops, sanitary ware, coal-tar drums, glass beads, discarded saris, were all carried to his secret site. These “beautiful” things he mixed with cement and sand to make hundreds of decorated figures of men, women, children and animals, standing, sitting or strolling in his city.

Among gods and goddesses

Le Corbusier’s project was an immense public work. Nek Chand’s was private, and at first just a hobby. He had never been taught art, sculpture or architecture. Though he had received a little general schooling in Lahore, he presumed that the family farm would be his life. He had always liked building with stones, creating little forts on the banks of the stream that flowed through his village of Berian Kalan in Punjab. One day he had found some broken glass bangles in the market; these had become decorations for tiny figures of clay, based on the stories of gods and goddesses he had heard from his mother.

All that was before Partition uprooted him from what became Pakistan. He fled first to Delhi, where his parents died, and then in 1951 to Chandigarh. The new life he made never eclipsed the old one. The earliest constructions in his garden in the forest were modelled on both the village life he remembered and the divine haunts he imagined: winding paths, walls and rivers, terraces and waterfalls, temples and alleyways and fairground formations of dancers, musicians, water-carriers, snake-charmers, revellers, horses, buffaloes and birds. He worked fast. The intricate “kingdom of gods and goddesses” grew and grew, until by 1975 it covered 13 acres. And then the authorities came to clear the forest.

He risked losing everything at that point. The land was the government’s, and his presence there illegal. At the least, he could have been fired. But city officials were so enchanted by what they found, and disarmed by the modesty of the builder, that they decided instead to encourage him. He was appointed sub-divisional engineer (Rock Garden), with a salary and 50 labourers to help him, and despite the usual administrative ups and downs—rows, money trouble, vandalism—his project flourished. Collection points for rubbish for him were set up round the city; hotels,

hospitals and restaurants proved especially fruitful. The garden acquired monumental buildings in the Mughal style, and immense aqueducts hung with giant swings. Eventually it drew 5,000 visitors a day, second in India only to the Taj Mahal.

At its centre, still in his mud-hut office, Nek Chand worked on. He had no formal plans, but just noticed how stones, trees and water spoke to him. Honours poured in, both at home and abroad: his statues were exhibited in Lausanne, London and New York, his work was ponderously analysed by critics, and he was given the keys of the city of Baltimore. None of it went to his head. He kept his shy smile and quietly muttered Punjabi, his elaborate courtesy and his insistence that he was neither an artist nor a craftsman, but “completely insignificant”.

Accordingly, he avoided interviews. His art he hoped, explained itself: it was about happiness, the cycle of life and the omnipresence of the gods. The chattering crowds who pressed through had to stoop as they entered buildings and courtyards, doing unconscious reverence to the spirits of the place. The peacefully staring figures —cowrie-eyed queens with hair swept from barbers’ floors and bodies sheathed in shattered bangles, saints made of broken white crockery, dancers of pieced-together plastic and tile—imposed their calm authority in their land of rescued stones. For Le Corbusier might have built a city; but Nek Chand the roads inspector, out of rubbish, had created a magic world.

From the print edition: Obituary