

Fred Smith (1886-1976)



Fred Smith grew up in Ogema, Wisconsin. As an adult, he worked in the area's lumber camps with horses and hand-operated tools. He also grew Christmas trees and **ginseng** to help support his family. At age sixty-two, after his retirement, he began building **bas-relief** plaques and sculptures near the tavern he owned, the Rock Garden Tavern, in Phillips, Wisconsin. He would eventually create 237 concrete and mixed-media sculptures. The art environment is known today as "Wisconsin Concrete Park."

The sculptures have **armatures** of wood, steel pipe, and wire covered with concrete, embellished with materials Smith salvaged, including brown beer bottle pieces, mirror shards, reflectors, colored glass, rocks, and other materials. Many of the sculptures show the history of Northern Wisconsin, told through representations of people, animals, tales, and events that impacted the area. He stated, "Nobody knows why I made them, not even me. This work just came to me naturally. I started one day in 1948 and have been doing a few a year ever since."

Ginseng

A Chinese perennial herb that has five leaflets on each leaf, scarlet berries, and a root used in herbal medicine, especially in eastern Asia.

Bas-relief

A sculptural relief is when forms project out from a background. Bas means low. A bas-relief means that the sculpture is low or does not project out very far from the background.

Armature

An armature is like the skeleton of a sculpture. It is a frame that an artist places the material for a sculpture, such as clay or concrete, onto to make it stronger.



Artist Overview



John Michael Kohler Arts Center

jmkac.org/learn/education-resources

(Top) Fred Smith, untitled, n.d.; concrete, glass, paint, and wood; 78 x 41 3/4 x 41 in. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Price County Forestry Department and Friends of Fred Smith.

(Bottom) Fred Smith, *Woman and Angel* (detail, Wisconsin Concrete Park, Phillips, WI), 1948-64. Photo: Fred Scruton, 2004.



It's Gotta be in Ya!

What memories stick with you? Is there a place or an object you would want to save were it in danger of being destroyed?

Many artist-built environments, like Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park, exist today because people saw the importance and value in the site artwork and made sure that it was preserved for future generations.

Watch the stop-motion animated video by Souther Salazar to hear the story of how former Arts Center Director Ruth Kohler helped ensure that Fred Smith's environment could remain in its location as he created it.

<https://vimeo.com/205906008>

Then discuss the following questions or write and draw about them in a sketchbook

- What place or object means a lot to you?
- Share a story about your favorite memory from that place or about the object.
- Why would you want to save that place or object if it were in danger?

Additional Resources and Extensions

- View more of Fred Smith's work and learn about other artist-built environments at <https://jmkac.pastperfectonline.com/>
- Perform your own puppet show or create a stop motion animation inspired by Souther Salazar to tell a story about the site that you would preserve. Create 2-D or 3-D objects to use in your story, for example puppets and backgrounds. You can use basic materials to create your props such as paper and markers — or even cut out pictures of the place or object and tape it to a stick to make a puppet! Many free apps are available for smart phones and tablets to create a stop motion animation.

For K-12 Educators

Suggested National Standard Connections

Visual Arts Responding 7.1

Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

Essential Question: How do life experiences influence the way you relate to art? How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world? What can we learn from our responses to art?

