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ROCK GARDEN; AN AMALGAM OF ART IN LAP OF NATURE**Art History and Visual Arts****Ms. Anantdeep Grewal**

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Abstract

Chandigarh was conceived as a planned city by Mons. Le. Corbusier and to this day the development of Chandigarh has been done according to his planning. Amongst these planned buildings and sectors lay an unusual work of art, the Rock Garden, which was not only unplanned but was developed on government land without permission. Despite being illegal, today it has become identity of the 'City Beautiful' world over. Rock Garden does not fall into any conventional genre of art; it is a unique work which entwines many genres in it, so it is difficult to categorise this art work in any single set. 'Rock Garden' consists of elements of various art genres, but still stands independent in its own capacity.

Key words; *Rock Garden; Indian Art; Installation Art; Land Art; Trashion; Found Art and Object trouve`;
Landscape Architecture*

Objective

My aim in writing this paper is to recognise different elements of art used in Rock Garden and based on the findings try to categorise Rock Garden under any one or more genres.

Introduction

'Rock Garden' is a unique creation amidst green trees, which not only surround it but also helps in providing a mysterious ambiance to the art work. It is a project which began in late 1950's and even today it continues to grow. Nek Chand, a humble untaught artist, developed it as a fantasy kingdom, or Dev Nagari as he calls it, essentially to unleash his creativity. While creating this masterpiece he incorporated elements from various genres of art, although it was not a deliberate effort, but this amalgamation has given a unique character to the 'Rock Garden'. Unlike the artists of his times and being independent of any influence of the practiced fine arts around him, Nek Chand developed his work according to his aesthetic sensibility and used material available to him. In a way he developed his own material to create his art. It becomes essential to briefly go through the history of the Rock Garden to understand the circumstances and choices made by the artist in creating this work of art.

Story of the 'Rock Garden'

In 1976 when a road near Sukhna lake was under construction, to everyone's astonishment some fascinating sculptures were found hidden in the wilderness. It became known that one of the road inspectors employed with the Chandigarh Administration was secretly making these sculptures, away from the prying eyes. He was none other than Nek Chand, who was then employed as a road inspector. He had been working there for nearly 18 years before his secret was out. Chandigarh Administration was in dilemma about this work of art, which sat so perfectly in its present environment. On one side were the building by-laws of the planned city under which no such provision was given for occupation of land for this kind of artistic activity and on the other hand were these brilliantly created sculptures, demolition of which would have been aesthetically criminal. It was Dr M.S. Randhawa, who resolved the issue by bringing the project under the beautification of the city and naming it 'Rock Garden'. With the new lease of life, since then, Rock Garden has thrived and thousands flock to it from India and around the world. It has also managed to get Chandigarh a place on the world map.



Foundation stone of Rock Garden

The creator, of probably India's first instillation art of modern times, Nek Chand, was not comfortable with his secret leaking out, but he did fear its demolition so he did not hesitate to seek help from Dr. Randhawa. Nek Chand's intentions while making this 'Dev Nagari' was purely to unleash his creativity and not for any material gains. Although Nek Chand did not get any formal or for that matter informal education in art, his work shows influence of his surroundings at that time. Chandigarh was being built during then and there was no dearth of cement, iron roads and broken pieces of ceramic tiles. This material was easily available to Nek Chand as he practically resided on the construction site itself. So using such material became a natural choice for him. Along with these materials he also used pieces of cloths and broken bangles, glass and crockery in his work. His wife also sometimes helped him and supported him in his creative journey. Nek Chand was born in the pre-partition Punjab and had to flee from Pakistan during the massacre. As a child he had heard many stories of God, goddesses, kings and queens which had left a deep impression on his young mind. These impressions became a source of inspiration in his artistic works.

Nek Chand, as mentioned before was an untaught artist and learned the art of sculptures making on his own by experimenting with the available material around him. The influence that we see in his work comes from his natural surroundings and also from the works that he must have seen as a child created in his village. He handpicked stones from the bed of river Ghagar and installed them in the garden. He gave a folk like treatment to his initial sculptures; most of them had their eyes wide open. This was probably due to the figurines that he saw being made in his village as a child. His imagination to create a 'Dev Nagari' could be credited to all the stories he had heard as a child which had magic, God, Goddesses, kings and queens in them. The overall planning of the garden has some architectural elements in them and use of discarded material in his sculptures shows altogether a new facet of this multifaceted work. Over the years many other artisans worked in the garden as well. Although the essence of the garden is maintained as originally visualised by Nek Chand but with different hands working on it a slight stylistic variation can be seen now. This, I believe, has added to the charm of the garden.

Nek Chand is over eighty years of age today, but he still instructs and over sees the ongoing work in Rock garden, which has grown comparatively since the time of its discovery. Many phases have been built beside the original set up which have swings, aquarium and other additions attracting more and more foot fall every year. It is a life time project which will probably continue for at least as long as Nek Chand doesn't give up on it. To understand Rock Garden in a better way we must first compare and contrast its various elements with different genres of art.

Installation Art

Art has been part of human society since time immemorial and creative ability of the humans is one of the primary reasons of our evolution which distinguishes us from other animals. Humans, since pre-historic times have been using art to decorate their surroundings and their bodies, but to assume that art for humans only serves the purpose of beautification would be limiting its influence on human psychology. Art, for that matter, has much wider scope and in per-historic times it was believed to possess some magical powers. Only a few indulged in this creative practice and it was a general custom to paint images of animals and human figures on the walls of some natural caves. Usually these paintings are found on places which were used

primarily for this purpose alone. These works were, what is termed as, 'site specific' works. The site on which these works were done had some special purpose associated with the works. Likewise many sculptures were also found on specific sites. These may be assumed as the early examples of 'Instillation Art'. However, we should not dismiss the ritualistic aspect that was connected with these art works. These works were not installed for creative satisfaction or beautification but had a deeper belief attached to them. But when we talk of instillation in the modern art context a fairly different picture emerge in our minds. It is a picture of an arrangement of objects by an artist which covers a space (with in an art gallery or outside in the open). The modern concept of instillation in art started taking shape in the western art of the 1930's. Since then it has seen a dovetailed development touching many a genre and blurring the line demarcating various disciplines of art. In the Rock Garden, Nek Chand has created a dream like ambiance by assembling various sculptures (most of them created by the artists himself) in an open area which is surrounded by trees. The Rock Garden is definitely an example of the Instillation Art, where the instillation is permanent in nature as it is created using long lasting materials like concrete, stones, ceramic tiles and other such material, but since installation art itself cannot be confined to a single genre, it would not be fair to limit Rock Garden to just instillation art alone without studying its other aspects as well. Hence it becomes essential to explore more in this regard to come to a better understanding of the fascinating creation of Nek Chand.



Installed sculptures at Rock Garden

Land Art

'Land Art' is a genre of art which developed in the late 1960's to early 1970's in America and Europe. It was essentially a revolt by the artists against painting and sculpture and the anti-formalist trend of that time. The artist through Land Art brought art out in the open from confined space of the museums and galleries. Another aspect associated with Land Art is that of anti-commercialisation of art. Artists were trying to retain purity of art in their works by creating art for the sake art and not keeping in mind its commercial value. These works were created out of material which was environmentally friendly and locally available like sand, rocks, soil, twigs etc. Most of the works of Land Art are created on monumental scale away from human habitation and are generally perishable in nature so it is difficult in most cases to assess their commercial value. Likewise the Rock Garden too was created away from preying eyes and not keeping any commercial gains in mind, however as the material used in creating sculptures and developing the entire area has concrete, metal and other such material, which is not local to the area it becomes difficult to include Rock Garden in the genre of Land Art. The Rock garden has some elements of Land Art but yet the true essence of this genre is lacking in this work.



Architectural Landscaping in Rock Garden (Picture courtesy <http://www.downtheroad.org>)

Architecture

If we go by the general definition of the architecture we would find that it includes designing, planning and construction of buildings and other physical structures. Architecture has

a wide range which also includes structured gardens like Mughal Gardens, step Gardens and many similar gardens. Rock Garden undoubtedly is a structured area; hence it may be classified as a part of the Landscape Architecture. Although the garden is not a building or provides any kind of shelter but its planned construction is a form of this genre. The narrow lanes, waterfall, canal, hills and a maze like construction of the area which sometimes confines the visitors in narrow lanes and then leads these lanes into wide open spaces is all part of landscaping. Nek Chand on purpose kept the door ways small so that the visitors will have to bend while entering the Garden. His argument for this feature is that he would want people to respect his gods and goddesses or the god and goddesses of his 'Dev Nagari'. This careful planning adds spirit to the art work. Rock Garden is a landscape tease which engages the visitors thoroughly urging them to explore more. Nek Chand with architectural setting of a specific route manages to manoeuvre the path of visitors according to his wishes. These little details in the layout planning of the garden make it a good example of landscape architecture.



Folk Art like sensibilities in some of the sculptures at Rock Garden

Folk Art

When scholars discuss influence of folk art in the sculptures of Rock garden, they are usually trying to point out the simplistic manner in which these sculptures are made. Folk art does not have any universally agreed definition so it becomes very difficult to categorise any

particular style in this genre. Generally Folk Art is associated with the art works created by the peasants for various rituals, decorations and objects of everyday use. Nek Chand does not belong to any family of artisans and his art is not passed down from his ancestors to him, so influence of folk art or outcome of folk art, is not justified here. His work is of his own accord and outcome of his own imagination and experimentations. It's similarity to folk art is just a coincident and should be seen like that. However his work does have folk sensibility in it which surfaces in the women figures which are shown carrying pots on head and also juxtaposition of human figures with that of animals and gods. These kinds of elements are quite common in folk art and Nek Chand has used them with no discrimination in his work. Yet his work is not limited to folk art like appearance, as he has created sculptures in which male and female figures adorning urban clothing as well. Combined these sculptures gives an impression of a mixed society which is very Indian in its approach.

Trash Art, Found Art and Object trouve`

Comparatively a new term in art, 'Trashion' stands for art works which are created by using waste or previously used material, essentially in fashion. The term is now also used in art as the creations made under this genre are not practical and serve purpose of art alone. In a way it is recycling of waste material into art. Although the term 'Trashion' was coined in early 2004 in New Zealand but around the world waste has been used to create art. Recycling in India is a common practice and being brought up seeing various objects being recycled in the household any creative may get influenced. A more appropriate term for art created with thrash would be Trash Art or Junk Art. Francisco de Pajaro from Spain is one such artist of contemporary times who is working with thrash in his art. Long before the term 'Trashion' was used in art, Nek Chand had started working on the idea of creating art out of waste. He has used broken bangles, ceramic crockery, sanitary wear, waste cloth pieces and similar objects in his work which clearly qualifies his work in this genre. Likewise he has also used interesting stones picked from river bed which are arranged in an aesthetic manner without changing them in any way. Objects when used in art in their original form fall under Found Art and Object trouve`. The credit of using readymade objects in art goes to [Marcel Duchamp](#), who had used a urinal in his work titled 'Fountain' made in 1917. Since then there have been many debates on the use of readymade

objects in art. Nek Chand used such objects in Rock Garden independent of any such influence but their use certainly makes a strong case for Object trouve` being part of his work.



Sculptures made using broken bangles

Conclusion

Rock Garden is an art work which is not true to any one genre of art but consists of elements of many genres which are aesthetically used by the artist. On analysing the garden we see features of Installation art, Land art, Landscape architecture, Trash Art and also Folk art but a careful observation reveals that none of these genres has completely dominated or appeared in their complete elements in this work. So from the above discussion we may come to the conclusion that to categorise Rock Garden in any one genre will not be doing justice to this unique creation or to that particular genre. Nek Chand has used many elements borrowed from various genres of art while creating Rock Garden but still he retained originality in his work. Despite amalgamation of various genres two of them stand out; Installation Art and Landscape Architecture. Hence we could safely categorise Rock Garden under an Architectural landscape instillation. However this categorization is open for further debate and speculation. Although Rock Garden had existed for more than half a century but still it demands a profound analyses.

Rock Garden is a shining example of an artist's dedication and administration's admiration of his art. This mutual understanding and working has resulted in a fabulous work with which both are benefitting. These kinds of projects should be encouraged and initiated by the government in our country. There is no dearth of brilliant artists in India, sometimes they just need push.

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