

Book Presentation - Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development

Natasha Lardera (November 02, 2014)



Luisa Del Giudice's book, *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts* (Fordham University Press, 2014), provides an insightful, thorough study of the man, his monuments, and their cultural and social meaning. Rodia was an artist completely possessed by his work, he was often derided as an incomprehensible crazy man. Now a National Historic Landmark and internationally renowned destination, the Watts Towers represent both a personal artistic expression and a collective symbol of *Nuestro Pueblo--Our Town/Our People*.

“Once someone brought him an image of Gaudi's *La Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona...those towers were very similar. They asked him if he knew about them and had been inspired by that work



somehow. Incredulous, he looked at the picture, he had never seen Bracelona's unfinished cathedral and he asked 'did this man have any help?'"

This is a fragment of an exciting presentation that independent scholar Luisa Del Giudice held at the Calandra Institute to introduce the book she edited *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts* (Fordham University Press, 2014).

Luisa Del Giudice "is an independent scholar, former university academic (University of California Los Angeles, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia), public sector educator (Founder- Director of the Italian Oral History Institute), and community activist. She has published and lectured widely on Italian and Italian American and Canadian folklife, ethnology, and oral history, and has produced many innovative public programs on Italian, Mediterranean, regional, and folk culture, and local history in Los Angeles. In 2008 she was named an honorary fellow of the American Folklore Society and knighted by the Italian Republic."

She is also the coordinator of the Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative which seeks to celebrate the common ground of the Towers, a locus of creativity, of sustained resolve in adversity and of positive public transformation.

The Initiative organizes a range of public events throughout the city. "I first approached the towers in 2003, when I was in LA for a festival... I was hooked. And although I am bone tired from the efforts of almost a decade I feel much more has to be done to protect them," Del Giudice confessed. Thus, we have this book.

The unique Watts Towers "were created over the course of three decades (construction began in 1921, but and was completed in 1954) by a determined, single-minded artist, Sabato "Simon" Rodia, a highly remarkable Italian immigrant laborer who wanted to do "something big" and ended up creating an internationally renowned architectural wonder.

Rodia was born and raised in Serino, in the province of Avellino. In 1895, he emigrated to the US with his brother; first to Pennsylvania, then to Seattle, where he married Lucia Ucci in 1902. They moved to Oakland where Rodia's three children were born. Following his divorce about 1909, he moved to Long Beach where he worked at numerous odd jobs and then finally settled in Watts in 1920. Rodia purchased a triangular plot of land in a multiethnic, working-class, semi-rural district.

He set to work on an unusual building project in his own yard. "He was a hard worker," Del Giudice explained at the presentation, "He was pretty much everything, even a night watchman but never a brick layer. He worked all the time and every penny he made he used to build his towers. He was constantly experimenting with the materials he used, form, color, texture, cement mixtures, and construction techniques. He would build something, tear it down and then rebuild it. There was no master plan, no drawings, no inspiration... he just built as he went along."

As an artist completely possessed by his work, he was often derided as an incomprehensible crazy man. The towers were frequently vandalized by neighbors but that never stopped him. Now a National Historic Landmark and internationally renowned destination, the Watts Towers represent both a personal artistic expression and a collective symbol of *Nuestro Pueblo--Our Town/Our People*. "He was a loner who wanted to create something that somehow brought people together." When he completed his work he moved away never to return.

Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts is a much-anticipated reappraisal of the man and his work and it consists of essays from twenty authors, offering perspectives from the arts, the academy, and the communities involved in the towers' preservation and interpretation. "I did a lot of oral research," Del Giudice explained, "I listened to interviews with fresh ears. What surprised me is that some important parts were deleted. The interviewers were more interested in his art than him as a man, so there is not much about him being an Italian immigrant. All quotes about food were eliminated as seen trivial, he talked a lot about olive oil, but it was not trivial, it was a connection to his Italian ancestry. There is so much more we do not know about him." Del Giudice also conducted her own interviews and concludes the volume with some personal reflections.



Del Giudice's mission to preserve and protect the towers continues: she has applied to get them to become a UNESCO's World Heritage Site, therefore a Treasure of Humanity.

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