

# Syd Carpenter: *Ella Mae Edwards*

## Looking Questions:

- Describe what you see in this sculpture.
- Describe the artist's use of space and perspective.
- How does the artist incorporate texture in her work?
- Would you describe this work as organic or geometric? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Is the artist's work representational or abstract? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Does this work remind you of anything?
- Do you think any of the components of this sculpture could be a symbol? Explain your answer.



Syd Carpenter (b. 1953), *Ella Mae Edwards*, 2009, Ceramic, acrylic, graphite, wood, 24 x 20 x 6 inches, James A. Michener Art Museum, Gift of the Artist.

## About the Artwork:

Syd Carpenter was inspired by the ingenious and beautiful African American farms meticulously mapped by architect Richard Westmacott in the late 1980s. It was these maps that influenced her sculptural forms and helped her understand the cultural relationships between building, growing, and earth. Carpenter interjects everyday objects including clothes pins, fence posts, and wish bones into the landscape magnifying their importance through scale. Many of her pieces incorporate overlapping walls, fences, and land masses to create a sense of the overcrowded clutter of a typical farm.

Syd Carpenter feels her ceramic sculptures are abstracted land portraits, telling a story about the daily lives of African American gardeners. For Carpenter, a gardener herself, the discovery of Westmacott's vernacular study of African American gardeners in Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama was revealing. The gardeners described their relationship to their spaces and the sense of independence they derived from providing for themselves and their communities.

Carpenter's work demonstrates that the garden is not always about physical sustenance. For her, it is also an expression of her artistic soul, a flourish of color, light, energy, movement, form, and texture. Like gardens, her work is perpetually changing.

# Curriculum Connections

## Visual Arts

### Pre-Visit Activities:

- Research *African American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* by Richard Westmacott. Think about how these farms and farm life compare with that of Bucks County. Create a drawing that compares the two.
- Create a work of art based on an imaginary garden. Think about the plants or crops you would grow in your garden, and the kinds of insects and animals that would live there. Would you garden include statuary, or found objects such as an old bicycle?
- Syd Carpenter was inspired to grow her own garden by her grandmother, Indiana Hutson. Indiana was a minor celebrity in the 1940's, all because of her Victory Garden along Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh. It was one of the largest in the city, a major tourist attraction, and it fed her family for an entire decade with enough left over to sell. You, too, could grow a garden—in a big flower part, in a small corner of your backyard, or at your school. Let your garden be an inspiration, and let it become a work of art.

### Post-Visit Activities:

- Create an abstract sculpture out of clay inspired by a natural object.
- Some of Syd Carpenter 's artwork is inspired by maps. Find a map of a part of the world that interests you, and recreate it in a relief sculpture. Use plaster, clay, wood, wire, or found objects to complete your creation.
- Create a relief sculpture mural with your classmates. Incorporate large scale objects that represent a geographical area that interests you. It could be a faraway region, like the Rocky Mountains, Asia, or New York City. It could also be a sculpture about something close by, like your neighborhood or school community.

## Language Arts

### Pre-Visit Activities:

- In his book, Richard Westmacott documented changes in farming over the years. He also included photographs of villages in West Africa that show striking similarities to the swept farm yards of the South. Create your own book documenting another aspect of our American culture that has been influenced by other traditions and changed over time.

### Post-Visit Activities:

- Write a short story about the garden/farm represented in the work, *Ella Mae Edwards*, or about the people who planted it.
- Study the history behind vernacular gardens. How does Syd Carpenter's sculpture accurately reflect this unique agrarian lifestyle? Present your findings in a research paper or PowerPoint presentation.