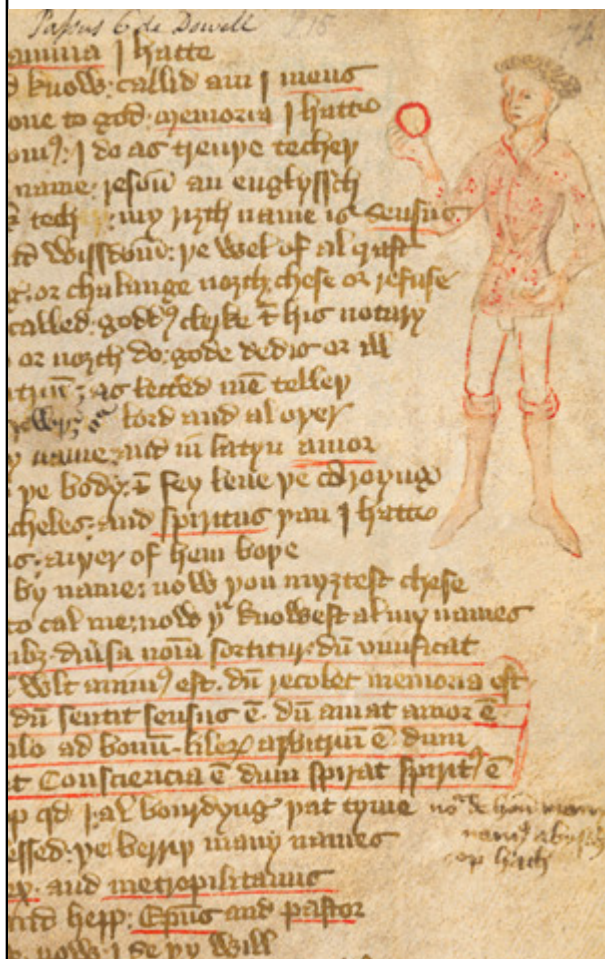


[Prof. Stephen Shepherd Collaborates with University of Virginia on Piers Plowman Electronic Archive](#)

## Stephen Shepherd Updates the 14th Century

Event date: Thursday, July 07, 2011, from 11:12 AM to 11:12 AM



Before the invention of the printing press, literary

works like *Piers Plowman*, the great rival to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, had to be copied out by hand. As each manuscript was painstakingly written out by a culturally and linguistically diverse set of scribes, variations on the texts and their illustrations naturally occurred. Combined with signs of use throughout the centuries, like margin notations, each surviving document itself becomes a new text, which can be analyzed on multiple levels.

Enter LMU English Professor Stephen Shepherd, who is collaborating with the University of Virginia on the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* project. This project, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, will transcribe the many versions of the poem *Piers Plowman* which was written by William Langland over 600 years ago. Shepherd is working on a particularly dynamic example which "...has full sets of pictures in the margins; pictures which, as I am continuing to discover through this project, make symbolic cross references to other works in the owners' collection—it's unlike anything we've ever seen before."

Currently, Shepherd and his graduate assistant have scanned the original text of their version of the manuscript and are in the process of translating it into an electronic text format that will be accessed on the Internet. Within the text format, information such as eraser marks, highlighted words, and overlap between words and graphics are marked so that the intricacies of the text's production and use may be explored. Once the transcription is finished, digital copies of both the manuscript (in the form of high-resolution images) and the manuscript's text (in the form of a full searchable e-text) will be connected with other versions being transcribed at the University of Virginia via an online database.

This project was started by Dr. Hoyt Duggan of the University of Virginia in 1994 with the aim to "recover from medieval manuscripts a near complete view of the medieval poem and produce definitive versions of the 'archaeological layers' of its composition and use, while making access to all existing manuscripts available in digital format," according to Professor Shepherd.

For more information, please see [The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive home page](#).

- [Prof. Paul Harris's Thoughts about Watts Towers, Ignatian Spirituality, and the Writing Process in LMU Magazine](#)

## Higher Calling: The Watts Towers



WATTS TOWERS

Published: July 7, 2011

### PAUL HARRIS

Paul Harris is professor of English and chair of the Department of English. He teaches literary theory and offers interdisciplinary courses on themes such as wonder, chaos, time and nothing. He has published more than 50 articles and edited several books. Harris writes poetry that he performs with jazz musician David Ornette Cherry. One of his prized possessions is Don Cherry's 1975 album "Brown Rice," the cover of which was shot at the Watts Towers.

To see an excerpt from the film "I Build the Tower," go [here](#).

*For more than 30 years from 1921–55, Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant, accumulated, assembled and constructed the Watts Towers — 17 sculptures, including three massive towers reaching to the sky, that evoke both playful randomness and meticulous order. English Professor Paul Harris has visited, studied, and written and taught about the towers for more than 20 years. To him, the Watts Towers, a National Historic Landmark, are a testament to one man's workmanship, engineering talent, artistic vision and near-mystical sense of spirituality.* Harris was interviewed by Editor Joseph Wakelee-Lynch.

#### **How did you first learn about the Watts Towers?**

I heard about the towers as a boy from Don Cherry, a jazz trumpeter and friend of my father, who grew up in Watts. He was a musician in residence at Dartmouth College where my dad was a physics professor. Don talked about the towers in terms of creativity, inspiration and improvisation. Charles Mingus' great autobiography, "Beneath the Underdog," talks about the towers as an improvisational structure. When I came to California in 1984 to go to graduate school, the first place I wanted to go was Watts Towers.

**The towers are made of things like pieces of glass bottles, drinking cups, seashells and bits of ceramic pottery, with cement, wire and steel rods holding it all together. That isn't the usual stuff of art.**

To me, the towers evoke art as technique: art is doing and making. The hand is technology. The towers are built with a man's hands: Simon Rodia worked with no power tools.

Here you have an immigrant laborer using the skills he developed in his work — tile-setting, construction, cement-mixing. He uses those labor skills and combines them with the found material, and they are bound together in an aesthetic that has deep religious iconography in it. The more you look at the towers, the more you develop an increasingly tactile and physical relationship with them and the act of making them.

**Rodia wasn't a religious person in the traditional sense, but would you say the**

### **towers arise out of spiritual impulses nonetheless?**

The towers feature a lot of images of hearts and rosettes, so there's no question that there's an Italian immigrant religious iconography. But it's not proper Catholicism. He's outside that tradition. To me, the towers are definitely a work of mourning, especially for his baby daughter who died, his series of marriages, his alcoholism and the bad years that preceded his buying the site.

I think of the towers as a spiritual place, because going there has become a private ritual for me. I try to put myself in a right frame of mind, and when I do and I'm open to it, yet another layer unfolds. It's an icon to meditate on. So that is the spiritual part. It functions like a sacred site for me. Those places can be natural environments, and they can be humanly made.

### **That sounds a bit like Ignatian spirituality: finding god in all things, or examining one's experience of god. yet Rodia never said he had religious reasons for building the towers.**

There is an aspect of Ignatius that highlights the mystic. In that sense, the experience of God is the experience of mystery, and there is a discerning of spirits involved. The other phrase in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises that resonates for me is "composition of place." That is the act of imagining, or composing, a place and projecting yourself into it. The composition of place is exactly what Rodia did. He composed this place on a daily basis, in an incremental way. I always picture him going to sleep at night thinking about the problem he had to solve the next day: What should I do with that object, and what will I put in that place? I do find the towers consistent with that aspect of Ignatian spirituality. You can find God in all things, but some things help you find God more than others, and this is one that does!

### **When did you decide the Watts Towers could be an important subject of study for your students?**

It was 10 or 12 years ago. I wanted to take students outside the classroom to sites that would produce different kinds of writing and thinking. The specific thing that led me to the Watts Towers was teaching Italo Calvino's novel "Invisible Cities." "Invisible Cities" is a series of imaginings of cities in an empire, and the cities have different qualities that define them. I thought of the Watts Towers as a kind of wondrous, imaginary place that had been made tangible. So I had students read the novel, go to the Watts Towers and write a short text imagining the Watts Towers as an invisible city. The towers are an inspiration for pedagogy.

### **Do the students find it easy to internalize the experience of their visit, as opposed to objectifying it?**

Yes. When you walk around inside the property, you realize that there is no inside or outside. You can't stand outside as spectator, so to speak. You are drawn in, and you keep noticing things. I've described that experience as "perception becomes cryptography," because your perception is so saturated that everything you see becomes a sign to be interpreted. For students, the distance that they have as spectators looking at an object breaks down, and they have a visceral experience that takes time to sort out.

### **Do you think the experience of visiting a site that is within the Watts neighborhood is a valuable part of what you're trying to teach?**

It's absolutely valuable. The towers are 12 minutes away from LMU by car, so they are really close. Ideally we'll take the LA Metro there, then walk three-and-a-half blocks. Students are out of their comfort zone and arrive at the towers somewhat concerned. The towers are in a neighborhood, not a museum campus, with houses across the street. But the neighborhood is very quiet. In fact, when the Watts Riots occurred in 1965, the towers went untouched. The Watts Towers visit is definitely in keeping with LMU's commitment to engage the city, get students off the bluff and provide a visceral learning experience beyond the classroom.

### **Do some students incorporate their experience of the neighborhood into their writing assignments?**

Absolutely. For some of them, the fact that the towers are made out of "junk," or items from the

neighborhood, makes the towers seem perfectly constructed in that environment. Also, they often have expectations about Watts and what they'll see there. When they arrive, seeing the towers changes some of their assumptions about what art is, and that, in turn, impacts their sense of place.

**We can say what the Watts Towers are made of, where they are, who built them and when. but it seems difficult to answer the question, "What are the Watts Towers?" how do you answer that?**

To me, the towers are the epitome of the endless fractal that has no inside and outside; they have quasi-infinite surface area and no volume and no center. There also is a crucial aspect of Rodia as an engineering architect, a laborer, a craftsman, a construction worker, a builder. They are a sculpture garden, we might say, because although the site is called the Watts Towers, there are 17 sculptures there. Then, just as they were made by accumulation, the more time you spend researching the towers and talking to people about them, you accumulate more and more knowledge, and you keep changing the pattern of the story that you use in talking about them. So, wherever your description starts, it will begin branching. It is an inspirational place.

- [Prof. Evelyn McDonnell Covers Funk Music in the LA Times's Entertainment Blog](#)

## Live: Thievery Corp., Fitz & the Tantrums at the Greek Theatre

September 11, 2011 | 1:18 pm

There are groove bands and there are song bands. Groove bands, such as Washington, D.C.'s Thievery Corporation, improvise like jam bands, but with rhythm -- not instrumentation -- as their base. They lay down a beat and then let it flow over a period of time, seeing where the interplay of players leads but following scant narrative. When the groove ends -- usually, it fades out -- they pronounce it a song.

Song bands, such as Los Angeles's own Fitz and the Tantrums, may have grooves, but they fit them into carefully constructed structures, like three-act plays, and favor melodic devices -- hooks, choruses, climactic bridges -- over riffs and solos.

Thievery Corp and Fitz and the Tantrums provided a yin-and-yang evening of funk music under an almost full moon at the Greek on Friday night. Thievery had the sold-out crowd swaying on its feet and cursing the 11 p.m. venue curfew. But people went home humming the irresistible radio breakthrough "MoneyGrabber" of openers the Tantrums.

Main Thieves Eric Hilton and Rob Garza have been creating dub-based club music for 15 years, mixing reggae, rap, ambient and trance into chill-out music for hipsters. They surround themselves with talented players from around the world. The 14-piece band Friday featured musicians from Jamaica, Argentina, St. Thomas and Iran, including a rotating cast of eight singers and MCs. Multilingual Lou Lou created a sultry trip-hop vibe; Boston rapper Mr. Lif provided a timely millennial edge with "Culture of Fear."

The group respects its sources and illustrated it by inviting a special guest Friday: War co-founder Harold Brown, who joined on percussion for "Heart Is the Hunter" and donned a washboard vest for the grand finale.

Songs from Thievery's recent release, "Culture of Fear," alternated with older tunes such as "Lebanese Blonde" and "Assault on Babylon." The band also lyrically tipped its hats to influences Funkadelic and the Wailers. But Thievery Corp is way looser, more hippie than those sovereign groove outfits. Funk patriarch James Brown famously drove his band like an Army

platoon. Garza and Hilton are laid-back leaders; unfortunately, that slackness made me at times want to dub the group Passive Attack.

Fitz and the Tantrums took their cues from Mr. Brown, motoring like a well-oiled machine. Possibly the city's best party band, the six members are pedigreed players (special shoutout to funky bassist Joseph Karnes) who cohere impeccably well, a la the Stax Records house band, or Elvis Costello's Attractions. They have not one but two compelling front people: The Bryan Ferryish Fitz wears tailored suits and croons blue-eyed soul. Noelle Scaggs melds the crowd-whipping exhortations of a hip-hop hype woman with classic backing-singer doo wops. A dynamo in a slinky dress, she and Fitz just look like they're having so much fun, they make you want to dance.

Mostly, Fitz and the Tantrums have some really good songs with catchy melodies and clear beginnings, middles and ends. Thievery Corporation lays down tasty grooves, but the Tantrums put on a show that, with an overt tip of the hat to the Isley Brothers, made you want to shout.