

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 1 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---

**Summary**

"I'm a complete snob where rocks are concerned. I won't talk to just any rock. Some rocks have a lot to say if you let them. But you have to let them...With a lot of rocks, it's better just to leave them alone where they are. But there are some rocks that won't leave you alone. They don't want to be where they are at all. They can't say what they want to say where they are. Or rather, they can't be what they want to be. And eventually they will tell you how and where they want to be if you listen."

From James Rose, *Gardens Make Me Laugh*

Ellsworth Rock Gardens is significant at the state level as a mid-twentieth century art environment. Its creator, Jack Ellsworth, used native elements of the northern Minnesota landscape—rocks, flowers, and trees—as his primary media to create a distinctive work of "visionary" art. "Visionary art ... refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself."<sup>1</sup> Parallels can be drawn between the creators of Midwestern grottos and roadside attractions, the apocalyptic landscapes of the rural south, and urban sites such as Watts Towers in terms of Mr. Ellsworth's lack of formal training. However, when considering Ellsworth's refined composition of beds, walls, and sculptural elements, use of native materials, and incorporation of planar surfaces, varied textures, and flowing lines, it is also necessary to compare the gardens to landscape architecture of the post World War II period.<sup>2</sup> By reflecting these basic principles of modern landscape design, the gardens possess high artistic value. The property's historic character is evident today in the terraced planting beds, rock walls, and stone sculptures. Ellsworth Rock Gardens possess importance under criterion C as a unique overlap of "visionary" art and landscape architecture. The property's period of significance, 1944-1965, encompasses the time during which Mr. Ellsworth designed and built the gardens. This period begins more than 50 years ago and ends with the termination of his work at the site (41 years ago at the time this nomination was completed). This meets Criteria Consideration G.

*Garden Chronology*

1942 The Ellsworths purchased the property  
1944 Jack and Elsie began building the cabin, privy and workshop

---

<sup>1</sup>American Visionary Art Museum Mission Statement. <http://www.avam.org>.

<sup>2</sup> The National Register of Historic Places program defines landscape architecture as "the practical art of designing or arranging the land for human use and enjoyment." *National Register of Historic Places Bulletin 16A* (Washington, D.C. National Park Service), p. 41.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 2 Ellsworth Rock Garden St. Louis MN  
Name of Property County and State

---

1946	Ellsworth began building garden
1950s	Photograph shows sculpture in the nasturtium bed
1962	Jack began creating stone sculptures on the outcropping
1965	Jack and Elsie stopped coming to site
1975	Voyageurs National Park established
1976	Main cabin removed
1996	First effort to remove nonhistoric vegetation from the site
2000	First Garden Blitz
2001	Picnic shelter built on foundation of main cabin
2003	Guest cabin removed
2004	Multi-purpose building constructed on footprint of guest cabin and wooden bridge reconstructed

*Art*

Considering his intuitive design process, it is possible that the notion of creating sculpture came to Ellsworth directly from the stockpile of castoff rock fragments left over from the rock he quarried for his terraced flowerbeds. He located, gathered, and crushed large quantities of gneiss, a very coarse-grained metamorphic rock, and used it as the top layer of the walls. Gneiss consists of a small amount of quartz, which provides the small chunky gray grains, and a large amount of feldspar, which gives the “frosting” its white color.<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth spent years building and garnishing the many terraced garden beds, and in the process he left behind an ever-expanding inventory of altered stone shapes. Making them into sculptures was a matter of finding pleasing, suggestive shapes, modifying them slightly, and arranging them in the landscape. Ellsworth quickly developed a vocabulary of sculptural forms, ranging from archetypal architectural elements to enigmatic shapes. As described by artist Robert Amft:

Ellsworth accented his landscape with sculptures he created from existing rocks and boulders. Some of these were simple slender monoliths that stood on end in groups reminiscent of Stonehenge; others were made of two to three large stones combined with mortar to form Noguchi-like abstract pieces. There were also pagoda-like tables supported by stone tripods that demonstrate Ellsworth’s experience as a contractor—they are perfectly balanced and absolutely level, even though the landscape tilts in many directions.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Electronic correspondence to Mary Graves, from Brian Klawiter, April 17, 2007. On file at Voyageurs National Park.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Amft. “The Outsider Art of Fred Smith, Jack Ellsworth, and Tom Every.” *In’tuit*, Volume 4, Issue 2, Winter 1996, p. 6.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 3

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---

He used mortar sparingly to join stone members, accentuating the illusion that his sculptural forms “appeared” with minimal intervention. In addition to 20-century Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), Ellsworth’s works bring to mind the creations of Noguchi’s mentor, Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1875-1957), whose minimally-shaped sculptures convey a fundamental reverence for stone and contemplation of nature. In many one-of-a-kind works, Ellsworth took amorphous rock shapes, barely suggestive of objects or animals—a raven, or a Saturn globe—and balanced them on larger stone masses. While Ellsworth was reputed to have stated “I just needed something to keep me busy,” perhaps something more elemental was at work.<sup>5</sup> He was driven to play with the rules of the natural world. To quote Noguchi “... to fight gravity is a tour de force. The nature of stone is weight.”<sup>6</sup> While some sculptures connect the garden to the outcrop, others seem to suggest figures barely touching the ground—a bird, a deer—composed of only enough rock shapes to complete the image. Ellsworth also diverged into a more literal, rustic northwoods vocabulary by installing two wood teepees (one enclosed with canvas), and a large upright stone with an appliquéd and painted arrowhead shape, all installed at the top of the outcrop.

*Landscape Architecture*

While it is unlikely that Ellsworth’s project was directly informed by Modern sculpture or principles of Modern landscape architecture, his work bears comparison with respect to his design sophistication. The elements of Modernism he employed, either consciously or not, are abstraction of nature and native materials, juxtaposition of texture and form, and skillful composition. Ellsworth Rock Gardens’ sculptures are for the most part highly abstract, simple, unornamented forms. The entire environment seems to draw inspiration from the surrounding natural environment. The result is a work of landscape art that seems skillfully and creatively integrated with its site. Like many works of landscape architecture, Ellsworth appears to simultaneously employ elements of art, engineering, and conservation. His gardens echo those of well-known American landscape architects Thomas Church (1902-1978) and James Rose (1913-1991); many of the sculptures mimic the well-placed stones in their residential gardens. Like Church, Ellsworth “abandoned the central axis in favor of multiplicity of viewpoints, simple planes, and flowing lines. Texture and color, space and form were manipulated in ways

---

<sup>5</sup> Alan Burchell, an oral informant, said the garden began as simple flowerbeds at the base of the outcropping; Ellsworth himself is quoted saying he started the garden as a way to occupy his time. A comment from an interview in this article suggests Ellsworth may have begun the garden circa 1946. “Giant Rock Garden in the North Woods,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, July 30, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World* (New York and Evanston, Harper Row, 1968).

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 4

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---

reminiscent of the cubist painters, while satisfying all practical criteria.”<sup>7</sup> The Gardens’ beds and sculptures moved visitors through the gardens by directing their movement and focusing their attention. According to Jane Wooley, of the Dry Stone Conservancy, the dry-laid stone walls are equally as integral to the Garden [as the sculptures], especially in how they define pathways, drainage patterns and planting areas thus directing the visitors experience while showcasing the sculptures. To our knowledge there are no other comparable rockeries in the mid-west, central or western states, and certainly none that represent the life's work of one individual. Additionally, the method of construction with the quartz "frosting" top, we have seen nowhere else in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Several characteristics contribute to the Ellsworth Rock Gardens’ significance as a unique design. These include the use and manipulation of the rock outcropping; the use of uniform terraced planting beds to create color, scale, and texture and direct circulation; the organic, meandering quality of the beds and pathways; numerous vertical focal points created by individual plantings, sculptures, and ponds; and the rugged texture of the rock. The tactile quality was carried through at a variety of scales throughout the garden, from the rock outcropping, through large compositions of rocks that create “scenes” to smaller stones that were added for their unusual shape and color. Evidence of Ellsworth’s love of the site is seen in his dedicated use of available materials and the fact that he committed at least twenty years of his life to realize his vision. The quality of construction, attention to plant cultivation and the collection of site ornaments contribute to the garden’s significance.

*Art Environments*

Like many examples of environmental design, the Ellsworth Rock Gardens include art objects, architectural elements, engineered structures, and vegetation features arranged in a manner that traverses the traditional categories of architecture, landscape architecture, and art. Landscape designers—whether “self-taught” or operating within an academic tradition—employ principles of art and science in an attempt to reshape and transform nature in order to satisfy aesthetic and utilitarian purposes.

Lisa Stone, a curator for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who is an expert on art environments in the United States, employs a conception of art environments that focuses more on relevant qualities in the work than the artist’s background. Stone defines

---

<sup>7</sup>Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA and Robin Karson. 2000. *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*. New York: The McGraw Hill Company, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Correspondence from Ms. Wooley to Voyageurs National Park, 2006. On file at Voyageurs National Park.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 5

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---

an art environment as “an extended artistic creation of interrelated elements, as opposed to discrete works of art standing alone.”<sup>9</sup> The art environment is “an artistic creation which occupies a specific place—an exterior landscape, an interior space, or both—whose content and meaning is derived from the spatial context or relationship of components to each other and to their location.”<sup>10</sup> Stone argues that the makers of these environments understand the importance of site context to their work: “the artists were not merely decorating their yards haphazardly, but worked intentionally—and not naively, as was so often assumed—creating environments in which each part was integral to the whole.”<sup>11</sup> Stone’s approach differs from a more conventional view of folk artists and their environments, which dwells on the biographical characteristics of the artists and their alienation from mainstream culture. Ellsworth Rock Gardens fit with many of Stone’s parameters for art environments. It is expansive, even monumental, in scale, uses common, readily available materials in unconventional ways, incorporates recycled materials or cast-off items, employs unconventional, inventive construction techniques, and incorporates materials that are not customarily employed for art or architecture. Like other art environments, it evolved organically, rather than according to a detailed, preconceived plan and, consequently, never reached a complete, or finished, state. She makes a distinction between Ellsworth Rock Gardens and other idiosyncratic folk environments such as Wisconsin’s Fred Smith’s Concrete Park, the Dickeyville Grotto, and others highlighted in her book “Sacred Spaces and Other Places.” As Stone stated in electronic correspondence with Voyageurs National Park,

“...folk art generally refers to things that are a) not high style, an b) informed by community, ethnic, or family traditions, things that are passed down through traditional avenues, and importantly (as was written in an essay by Carl Magnuson in *Backyard Visionaries*), they “have precedence in the community.” We don’t know what Ellsworth was informed by, but we can make some educated guesses, but his work definitely doesn’t have precedence in the community. I would wager that he was not only informed by but was intentionally adapting the composition of the Olsen Rug Company Memorial Garden [non-extant], and I also think that as a Chicagoan who may have spent time at the Art Institute, he may have been aware of Modernist sculptors such as Isamu Noguchi and Constantin Brancusi, and other artists.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Stone, “The Preservation of Art Environments in the United States: Toward a Unified Approach.” (M. A. thesis, Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, June 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Stone, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence from Ms. Stone to Voyageurs National Park, August 1, 2005. On file at Voyageurs National Park.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 6

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---

Jack Ellsworth worked in the construction trades, a trait that is manifest in the gardens' high level of craftsmanship. The garden he created reflected his own personal aesthetic and was a creative expression of his love of the northwoods. It also demonstrates his growth as an artist. Over the span of the garden's development, the sculptures evolved in complexity. As Ms. Wooley states "...the walls told a story of one man's journey from novice to experienced stone mason, of his self-discovery and experimentation with a variety of construction techniques, which is evidenced by the improvement of his work over time."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to constructing terraces, Ellsworth incorporated different types of rocks into the garden, used small rocks, stood rocks on end, and used rocks with distinctive shapes, colors, or evocative forms as focal points. He planted his garden with brightly-colored, hybrid perennials and annuals, arranged in regular patterns or solid masses. Ellsworth did not mimic patterns observed in nature, but instead integrated natural elements with the patterns that sprung from his mind.

Although we know very little about his aesthetic philosophy, Ellsworth's careful attention to site and setting produced a sophisticated, "minimalist" aesthetic, achieved through a sophisticated repetition of scale, shape and texture and balance between contrasting and complementary elements. It is clear that Ellsworth's work was guided by a set of personal, aesthetic principles, which he applied consistently at multiple scales, from small stone sculptural elements, to the composition of the landscape as a whole.

Ellsworth's sculptures are abstract, and fit into the garden setting in which he placed them. Comparisons with the work of sculptors like Brancusi and Noguchi do not imply that these modern artists directly influenced Ellsworth, but rather that his work possesses formal qualities that place it on par with high-style, academic art. His sculptures are comparable in quality to the abstract works produced by modern masters not only in terms of their form, but also in the manner of their execution. The stone and mortar assemblages are expertly composed and constructed. Ellsworth's table- and altar-form sculptures, for example, are perfectly level and balanced despite the uneven topography and undulating rock surface upon which they rest.

In terms of its formal and aesthetic qualities, very few examples are readily comparable to Ellsworth Rock Gardens. Perhaps the closest is Harvey Fite's "Opus 40" near Woodstock, New York. The upper Midwestern United States contains other significant environments created by self-taught artists, but none that derive so fully from their site and its natural setting. Ellsworth's design approach differs markedly from other well-known art environments. Ellsworth created no soaring towers, heavily encrusted architectural monuments, intricate constructions composed of myriad materials, or representational sculptures decorated with bright colors or shiny objects. Indeed, the

---

<sup>13</sup> Correspondence from Ms. Wooley to Voyageurs National Park, 2006. On file at Voyageurs National Park.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 7

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

formal characteristics of Ellsworth's sculptures differ markedly from the structural elements created by many other self-taught artists. The overall aesthetic effect of Ellsworth's stone sculptures is more subdued, but elegant and no less powerful. Both of the other extant Minnesota rock gardens, Louis Wippich's "Molehill" in Sauk Rapids and John L. Christiansen's Rock Garden (a.k.a. Itasca Rock Garden) in Bancroft Township, prominently feature large, ornamented architectonic elements that at least vaguely evoke recognizable architectural forms and styles.<sup>14</sup> Other environments feature elaborate, more-or-less figural, concrete sculptures. Although many environments contain sculptural elements built from stone and concrete, none feature so prominently the kinds of unadorned, abstract forms and stark, evocative compositions that constitute the majority of Ellsworth's work.

Ellsworth Rock Gardens is unique in the extent to which natural landforms, structural elements, art objects, and vegetative features are integrated into a single landscape composition. It is a deliberate artistic creation, not merely a whimsical ornament on the landscape; its aesthetic value and artistic merit derives from the unique, creative vision of its creator rather than from conformance with a recognized garden "style." The Gardens' aesthetic qualities make it a distinctive and important kind of art environment. In a 1979 memo, Voyageurs National Park's Assistant Chief Naturalist noted, "Ellsworth's rock sculptures are a singular interaction with the nature world. Most of his work is highly abstract, dependent on form, shape and texture of the rock and counter-playing these elements against the 'natural' landscape. Only a few sculptures appear to be representational."<sup>15</sup>

Ellsworth moved large rocks into position using only the ancient technique of the incline plane and lever. By 1960, Ellsworth estimated he had spent more than 14,500 hours creating the garden. Instead of the traditional materials associated with fine art, Jack Ellsworth used rock, earth, water, and plants as his primary creative media. His garden seems to bridge the related categories of landscape architecture and art. His application of concrete was highly individual expression.

#### Role of Ellsworth Rock Gardens in the Community

The Ellsworth Rock Gardens were visible from various vantage points within Kabetogama Lake, especially during mid-summer when it was in full bloom. The Ellsworths welcomed visits from community residents and sightseers; by the early 1960s people made regular excursions to tour the gardens. Although the Ellsworths never promoted the garden or charged admission fees, their garden became a local tourist attraction, known as "the show place of Lake Kabetogama." Hundreds of people visited

<sup>14</sup> "Molehill" was constructed from 1932 to either 1956 or 1958. Itasca Rock Garden was built from 1920 through 1938.

<sup>15</sup> Assistant Chief Naturalist to Superintendent, Voyageurs National Park, 28 August 1979.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 8

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

the garden each summer, while many others regularly took in the view from the lake. The garden was regularly photographed, with visitors posing next to his rock sculptures. The garden also gained local and regional acclaim from tourist brochures, as well as from magazine and newspaper articles published in nearby International Falls, and Minneapolis, some three-hundred miles distant. The garden was and continues to be a landmark. In 2005, visitation from mid-July through mid-September was 6,650, as high as the years when Mr. Ellsworth was working at the site and offering tours to visitors. The gardens are the most popular day use destination for park visitors; people are still fascinated by the sculptures and the scale of Ellsworth creation.



Figure 1. Constantin Brancusi, Bird in Space, 1923. From [http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/viewone.asp?dep=21&viewmode=0&item=1996.403.7a](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/viewone.asp?dep=21&viewmode=0&item=1996.403.7a) b.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 9

Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State



Figure 2. Isamu Noguchi, *Landscape of Time*, 1975. From <http://www.noguchi.org/landscotime.htm>.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 10 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---



Figure 3. Ellsworth, sculpture # 15. Photograph courtesy of Voyageurs National Park.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 11 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State



Figure 4. Ellsworth sculpture # 8. Photograph courtesy of Voyageurs National Park.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 12 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State



Figure 5. Constantin Brancusi, Table of Silence (Targu Jiu), 1937-38. From <http://www.brancusi.ro/>.



Figure 6. Garden designed by James Rose, From *Gardens Make Me Laugh*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 13 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

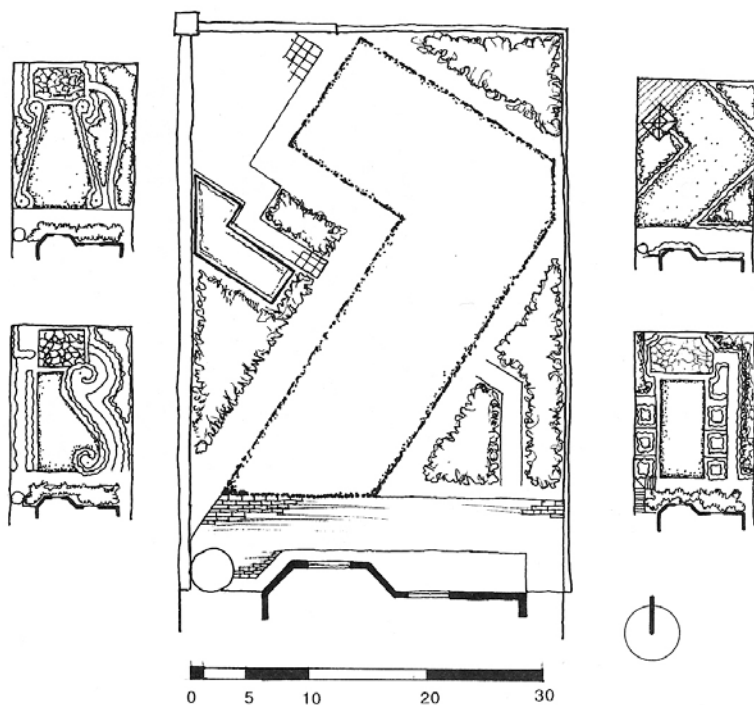


Figure 7. Thomas Church, plan for Sullivan Garden. From Pregill and Volkman.



Figure 8. Harvey Fite's Opus 40, Saugerties, New York. From <http://www.opus40.org>.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 14 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State

---



Figure 9. Harvey Fite's Opus 40, Saugerties, New York. From <http://www.opus40.org>.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 15 Ellsworth Rock Garden  
Name of Property

St. Louis MN  
County and State



Figure 10. Louis Wippich's Molehill, Sauk Rapids, Minnesota. From <http://www.mnmuseumofthems.org/Grotto/Molehill1.html>.



Figure 11. John L. Christiansen's Itasca Rock Garden, Albert Lea, Minnesota. From <http://www.mnmuseumofthems.org/Grotto/Christiansen.html>.