

Tending the Gilgal Sculpture Garden

SLC park is quirky,
bizarre, restored

by ERIC PETERSON

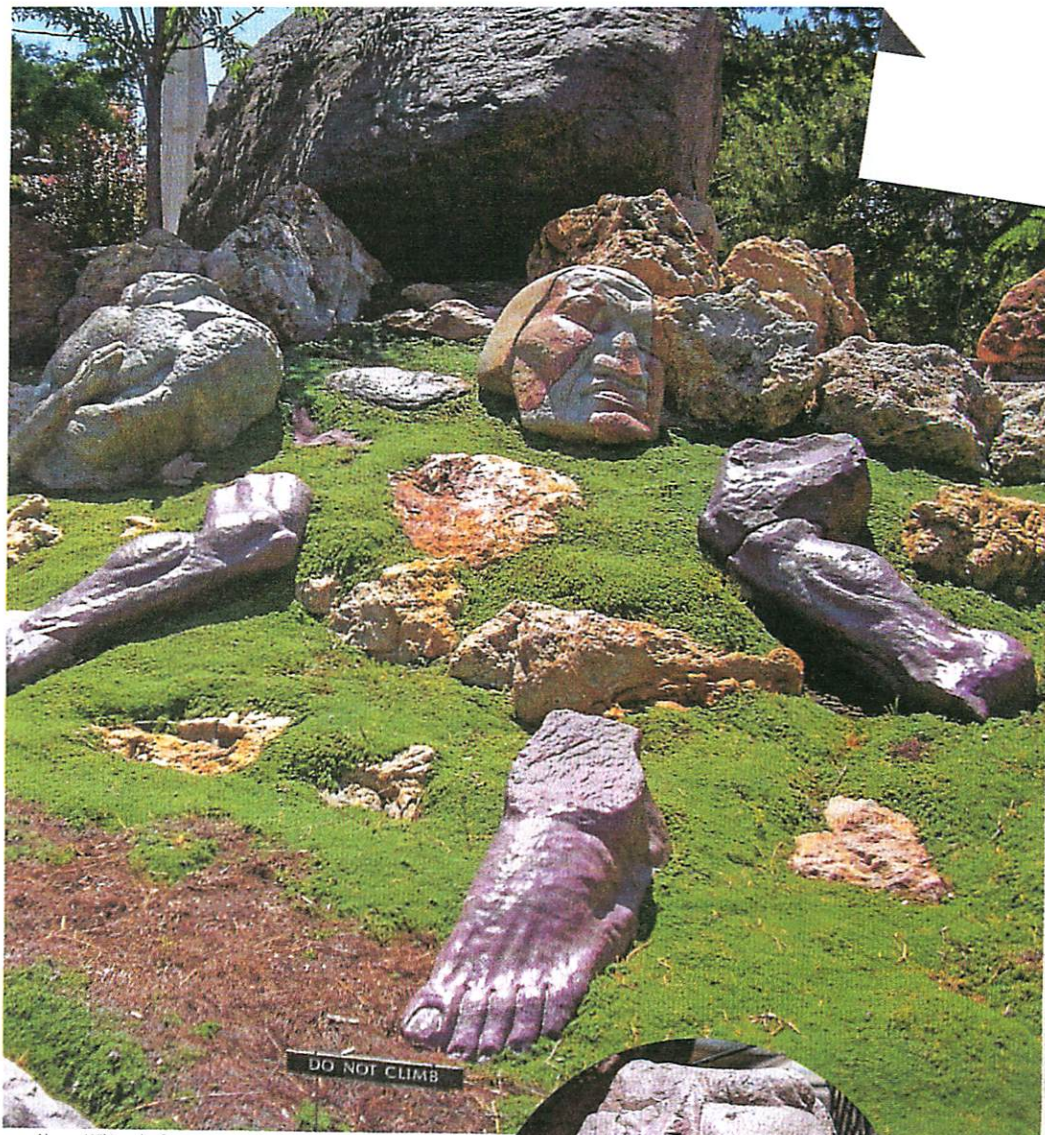
A masterpiece of outsider art is hidden in plain view in southeast Salt Lake City.

Named for a biblical memorial in Israel, Gilgal Sculpture Garden is a collection of unusual and elaborate works of stonemasonry at 749 E. 500 South. There's a sphinx with Joseph Smith's face, an archway of boulders and the brickwork self-portrait of the garden's creator, Thomas Battersby Child Jr.

Child began creating the sculptures when he bought the property in 1947 and worked tirelessly until his death in 1963. A stonemason and bishop of the 10th Salt Lake Ward of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Child drew on his faith for inspiration. He also drew on a zany imagination.

Judi Short of Friends of Gilgal Garden (FOGG) calls it an "intriguing conglomeration" of more than 100 sculptures and stones. "Not a lot of people know it's there," she said.

The park was nearly lost to the wrecking ball before FOGG formed in 1997 and worked with the Trust for Public Lands and Salt Lake Corporation, raising funds from the community and entities like Salt Lake County and the LDS Church. The group purchased the property in 2000, and it became a Salt Lake City park. FOGG is responsible



Above: Wikimedia Commons Right: Gilgal Sculpture Garden

for maintaining the art and park in all its glory.

Chelsey Zamir inventoried and mapped Gilgal Garden for the American West Center at the University of Utah in 2016. "I'm not religious myself," Zamir said. "For me, Gilgal Garden stood out as a unique piece of Mormon history and Mormon art. It's quirky."

Zamir measured every sculpture and stone in the garden. "How did this guy have the time?" she wondered. "It shows a lot of love and dedication to not only his craft but also his religion. That's a lot of work."

She also transcribed all the writing engraved on the stones and tracked down the sources of much of Child's material. "He had a way of mixing poetry with biblical verse. It does have its own flow," she said.

Zamir's survey supplemented a plan first developed by John Lambert of Salt Lake City's Abstract Masonry Restoration about a decade ago. Lambert's work at Gilgal Garden has ranged from cleaning graffiti off the sphinx to "healing" the



Among the statues and dozens of carved stones at Gilgal Sculpture Garden is an unusual sphinx with Joseph Smith's face.

varied body parts that comprise the sculpture Nebuchadnezzar's Dream.

"There's a lot of things with Thomas Battersby Child where I felt a kinship," he said. "He was the convergence of a very talented mason, a visionary artist, a spiritual leader and a bizarre guy. For someone to do a brick sculpture – not a stone sculpture, but a brick sculpture – of himself as the centerpiece of the garden is nothing short of bizarre."