

TEMPLE CHESS & POETRY GARDEN BY SIA ARMAJANI



ABOUT THE ART AND THE ARTIST

Dedicated in May 2016, this installation was a gift to the people of Des Moines by the family of Bennett Webster, an attorney who died in 2002 and who was a devotee of the game of chess. Chess is a game of deliberation, thoughtful planning, and strategy in which the two players anticipate one another's moves and are constantly interacting with each other. *Temple Chess and Poetry* provides a space for both social engagement and contemplation. It is composed of multiple parts: three chess tables, a larger table for gathering around, benches, and a small garden in whose iron fence are embedded lines of poetry by Language poet Barrett Watten (b.1948), a friend of the artist. Enjoy simply sitting here quietly, talking with a friend, or bring your own chess pieces for playing the game in the thoughtful aura created by this work of public art. It is installed in an intimate space between two major buildings in downtown Des Moines: the Temple for the Performing Arts (thus, the "Temple" portion of the title) and the Des Moines Public Library. The artist highly esteems libraries as an important — and free — source of information necessary for the proper functioning of a democracy.

Siah Armajani (b.1939) specializes in installations that have a strong architectural component, but with a twist: they require the viewer to become a participant. In fact, he does not consider them complete until viewers become participants and "activate" the work of art. This crucial aspect of his art reflects his education in philosophy and history which led him to value the importance of the individual acting in a public, democratic, and accessible society. One of his best-known works, which typically combined architecture, sculpture, and human interaction, was his bridge across a 16-lane freeway in Minneapolis whose construction had bisected a neighborhood, giving the residents a new chance to re-connect with

each other. Born in Tehran (Iran), Armajani established himself in Minneapolis after arriving in the United States in 1960 to study at Macalester College in St. Paul. His liberal arts education, emphasizing poetry, literature, and American philosophers and writers such as the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) provided a deeply-felt humanistic base for his art. A prolific artist, his works are exhibited and installed worldwide, notably the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.; the British Museum in London; and the Musee d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva.

Of his art, Armajani says, "I am interested in the nobility of usefulness. My intention is to build open, available, useful, common, public gathering places—gathering places that are neighborly." Bring your own chess pieces and take a seat in Temple Chess & Poetry for a truly neighborly experience!

Adapted from <http://observer.com/2013/12/siah-armajani-to-alexander-gray/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What do you notice about this space – what does it encourage you to do?

The artist's intention is for the art to be complete only after a viewer becomes a participant, either by sitting to play chess, reading the poetry, or entering the space. Now that you are here, how do you feel about you "completing" the artwork?

Read the poetry selections around this space. In what ways is this art piece representing the lines of poetry?

Describe this integrated art space to someone who may not be able to see it. Use as many sensory details as possible.

PRE/POST VISIT ACTIVITIES

AT THE SITE: POETRY INSPIRATION

(Grades 9–12) ELA; Art; 21st Century Skills

At the site, have high school students go around and read the lines excerpted from Barrett Watten's poem, plasma. In small groups, students can discuss the meanings of these lines and why the artist may have chosen these specific lines of poetry. It may be helpful to preface this activity with a reading of the full poem (find a link to this in the Internet Resources below). After the small-group activity, come together for a full group discussion.

Following this activity, have students sit in the space wherever they like. Task them with writing a poem inspired by the artwork.

INTEGRATED BRIDGE PROJECTED

(Grades 7–12) Art, Technology

Just as Siah Armajani integrates poetry, quotations, and images into his architectural installations, have students create an architectural bridge installation around a theme of their choice. Offer information about the artist's Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge in Minneapolis. Have students pull in other types of art, just as Armajani does, and either draw on paper or create on a computer through 3D graphic design. Some ideas for extended arts can include music bars and graffiti art. If students will be drawing their bridges, provide very large butcher paper so that plenty of artistic elements can be included. Make

sure students name their bridges, and perhaps require labeling of each added element, where they can extend out explanations.

[Some websites that might be helpful:

<https://www.kemperart.org/exhibitions/siah-armajani-bridge-builder> for a 2017 exhibition on his bridges at the Kemper in Kansas City; related to the YouTube link cited below in the Visual Media section

<https://erindziedzic.wordpress.com/2017/03/18/siah-armajani-bridge-builder>

and the johnweeks.com site listed below in the Cultural Passport section.]

CLAY CHESS CLASS COLLABORATION

(Grades 7–12) Art

This activity pays tribute to one of the centerpieces of *Temple Chess & Poetry*: the game of chess! Armajani’s work requires participation in bringing one’s own chess pieces, and what better way for a class to participate than making their own chess pieces? Depending on the size of your class, have students divvy up the 32 total pieces in a chess set. Vote on the two colors the class would like, and have students make their 1–2 pieces out of clay (or any other material that is easy to work with and can be glazed or painted for color afterwards). Chess pieces for each player are as follows: 1 king; 1 queen; 2 rooks; 2 bishops; 2 knights; 8 pawns. If time allows, bring the completed chess pieces to Temple Chess & Poetry and allow students to take turns playing in pairs.

You may wish to show students the YouTube video, “[Chess pieces – polymer clay tutorial](#)” (Diav Draconia), before they get started. The artist makes each pieces in a set, which is both fascinating to watch and informative for those who wish to make their own chess pieces. (6 minutes, 20 seconds). Images of chess pieces for inspiration: <https://pixabay.com/en/photos/chess%20pieces/>

INTERNET RESOURCES

Michalska, B. (2018, February 07). [Siah Armajani - An Iranian Artist In the US](#). *Daily Art Magazine Online*.

This spotlight on Armajani is very accessible for high school students, taking the reader through a brief journey of his commissions and various styles. In her series on art from “banned” countries, the writer emphasizes that Armajani is an immigrant artist who came to America from Iran and that some of his works have social or political content. His Fallujah of 2004–05, for example, was a lament for the destruction in that city during the Iraqi war.

<https://www.artsy.net/artist/siah-armajani>

The online artist database offers an Overview of Siah Armajani’s life, many photographs of his work, Past and Upcoming Shows, links to Articles on the artist, and even “Related Artists.” Use this website in your own classroom to enable students to view additional works and discover new artists.

[Art & Artists: Siah Armajani, 1939- Present. WalkerArt.org](#)

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota has a large collection of Armajani’s works, many of which are not always on. However, photos of these works with descriptions are always available on their website.

Siah Armajani| Alexander Gray Associates

Alexander Gray Associates, a New York City art gallery which represents the artist and hosts many of Siah Armajani's exhibitions, describes his ongoing "Tomb Series" (1972-2016) with photographs on their website. The series' exhibition PDF is provided for free download, as are additional PDFs from past exhibitions. An Exhibition Catalogue and various news articles can also be found; art teachers may wish to have students look through these PDFs for inspiration and further readings.

Find Tomb Series PDF here: <http://www.alexandergray.com/attachment/en/594a3c935a4091cd008b4568/Publication/594a3cec5a4091cd008b7219>

<http://barrettwatten.net/>

The poet featured in Temple Chess & Poetry has an interesting and engaging website, filled with images, documents, and explanations of his own work. The Events page is kept up-to-date for those who would like to attend a lecture, reading, or signing by Barrett Watten. Keep up with the artist on his Twitter page: @barrettwatten.

PRINT & ONLINE LITERATURE RESOURCES

Armajani, S. (2016). Siah Armajani. New York: Alexander Gray Associates.

This publication includes 30 full-color illustrations of the works exhibited at New York's Alexander Gray Associates in October–December 2016.

Watten, B. (1998). Bad history. Berkeley, CA: Atelos.

This is undoubtedly a poem for college students and mature thinkers. As a postmodern poet, Watten's long-form poem forces readers to think about the relationships of politics and poetry in the time before, during and after the Gulf War, also known as the Persian Gulf War, of 1990–91.

[plasma/barrett watten. 1979. \(GAMMM.org\)](http://plasma/barrettwatten.com/)

Temple Chess & Poetry features a few lines from a very long poem by Barrett Watten entitled, plasma. Read the complete poem here.

<http://www.thegrandpiano.org/>

The Grand Piano Series is a 10-volume "ongoing experiment in collective autobiography by ten writers identified with Language poetry in San Francisco." The project began in 1998, with the following ten poets appearing: Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Tom Mandel, Ron Silliman, Kit Robinson, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, and Ted Pearson. Considered "the eleventh pianist," Alan Berheimer organized the project. Find a recorded reading of the series with 8 of the 10 poets in the Visual Media section.

VISUAL MEDIA

Shamila Koohi. **[Siah Armajani and Public Art \(BBC\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)**. (03 Feb., 2014). YouTube video. 20 minutes, 21 seconds.

Though this BBC documentary is almost entirely in Arabic, this may be a useful backdrop to project in the classroom while students are working. They will be inspired by the artwork shown in the video, and exposure to Siah Armajani's work will provide a deeper connection to your Temple Chess and Poetry visit.

[parasolunitlondon. Artist talk with Siah Armajani](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...). (07 May, 2014). YouTube video. 1 hour, 6 minutes. The artist presents his motivations and thoughts about public art in general; shares anecdotes of various

experiences in his lifetime; and contextualizes many of his public works. The conversation was hosted with a slideshow, so students will be engaged with this talk as Armajani describes the backstory of every photo. Because the video is over an hour, teachers may wish to show it in three segments (artist talk; the photographic slideshow with commentary; and a Q& A) at different times.

At 45:57, the artist mentions the bridge he designed in Iowa City connecting the Biology Buildings (learn more about this bridge in Stamp Your Local Cultural Passport, below). Armajani's personality truly shines in this recorded artist talk, and viewers of all ages will enjoy his humor and history.

KCPT. [Siah Armajani: Bridge Builder | Arts Upload](#). (29 Sept., 2016). YouTube video. 7 minutes, 38 seconds.

This video takes the viewer through Aramajani's exhibition, Bridge Builder, when it was on view at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City . Information on the panels and discussions being hosted at the museum for this showing are also included.

UC Berkeley Events. [The Holloway Series in Poetry – “THE GRAND PIANO”](#). (28 Nov., 2011). YouTube video. 1 hour, 42 minutes.

Live reading and performance of the 10-part poetry book series (further information in the Literature Resources). Barrett Watten is one of the 8 authors performing his portions of this collective poetry retrospective, with its focus on 10 poets who created Language Poetry in San Francisco in the late 1960s .

STAMP YOUR LOCAL CULTURAL PASSPORT

[A Bridge for Iowa](#) (Iowa City, Iowa)

Find this bridge on Dubuque St., connecting the old and new Biology buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Unveiled in 2000, Siah Armajani integrated rural history in this installation, with its design referencing vernacular American architecture such as barns and silos.

STAMP YOUR NATIONAL CULTURAL PASSPORT

Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Siah Armajani's 375 foot bridge spans an urban freeway (I-94) that divides Loring Park and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden near the Walker Art Center. Crossing sixteen lanes of traffic, the bridge, built in 1988, reconnects neighborhoods that had formerly been divided by the interstate highway. The bridge is an example of Armajani's belief in using art to enhance human contact and social interactions and in the benefit of public art to foster neighborliness and interdependence in a democracy. Like Temple Chess and Poetry in Des Moines, the Minneapolis bridge incorporates poetry, in this case lines by the American poet, John Ashbery (1927 – 2017). Find an enormous amount of detailed photos and further information on John Weeks' website: <https://www.johnweeks.com/miscbridges/pages/ihwbr.html>

The Walker Art Center will presented Armajani's first major retrospective exhibition, entitled *Siah Armanjani: Follow This Line* (Sept 9 – Dec 30, 2018). As the [Walker's website](#) states: "This groundbreaking exhibition spans six decades of the artist's studio practice and engages a range of references—from Persian calligraphy to the manifesto, letter, and talisman; from poetry to mathematical equations and computer programming; from the Abstract Expressionist canvas to the vernacular architecture of rural America, Bauhaus design, and Russian Constructivism."

[The Reading Garden](#) (Roanoke College, Virginia)

This installation was acquired by Roanoke College in 1980. One of the artist's first public works, the

shed-like enclosure holds benches and tables inside, once again inviting the viewer to become a participant in the art space.

The Beloit Poetry Garden (Beloit, Wisconsin)

The Poetry Garden (Beloit College, Wisconsin)

The Beloit Poetry Garden, on the campus of Beloit College, was originally commissioned by the Lannan Foundation for Los Angeles in 1992 and was given to the college in 1999. Like The Reading Garden, The Beloit Poetry Garden has benches and tables inviting viewers to sit inside of this art installation. Don't be surprised to see a class meeting or musical performance happening here! Read more about the move from Los Angeles to Beloit in this 1997 *Los Angeles Times* article by Suzanne Muchnic, "Going, Going, Garden": http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-13/entertainment/ca-48172_1_contemporary-art

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