

# ALEXANDRE

## Vincent Smith: An Overview Combinations, Permutation, and Transformation

The Art Galleries of Ramapo College  
1988

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### Part I: An Overview

Vincent Smith's early life in the rich urban environment of Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York offered him the opportunity of experiencing the riches of both music and painting in the Black community. Both the Jazz era and a significant variety of cultural resources acted as a role model for the impressionable young Smith, including Paul Robeson, and the visual artists Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Romare Bearden, and Beauford Delaney. Since he studied music, during his early years, it is not surprising that music especially jazz, became and continues as an area of genuine interest. That interest has brought him into contact with such jazz figures as Charlie (Bird) Parker and Thelonious Monk. Later the young artist shared a studio adjacent to Duke Jordan, and subsequently developed lasting friendships with noted musicians Kenny Durham, Randy Weston and Jimmy Owens. Although he was seriously fond of jazz and other forms of music, the young Smith chose painting as his lifelong goal.

After a brief enlistment in the U.S. Army in 1948-49, Smith studied at the Art Students' League in New York City and later at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

Despite an early involvement with genre style painting, Smith's mature art, which reached its true fruition in the 1960s, is enriched with humanistic implications, it is an art which is keenly aware of being a part of the *Zeitgeist* in which the artist witnessed political, social and racial upheaval. It is also indicative of those masters whom the young Smith admired, including Brueghel, Goya, Daumier, and many of the Mexican painters active in America during the '40s and '50s, as well as the rich artistry of the German Expressionists. He has also acknowledged the profound effect that the early works of Henry O. Tanner have had on his development.

However, as an art rich with narrative and literary implications, it has also been influenced by such figures as Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes and William Attaway. Smith's art continues to be influenced by a rich cultural diversity.

The work maintains a certain order while containing a human presence, through the use of a "modernist" vocabulary in the creation of the various parts of a given painting. One of

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the striking features of the work is the numerous episodic parallels resulting in a series of contrasts in a single work. However, this highly personalized approach informs the work throughout and assures its essential unity.

In many of the paintings of the early '60s, Smith's stylistic richness has been synthesized with the political nature of the thematic content. What unity critics have found in much of the politically inspired art of the '60s has been generally ascribed to the vague and unconvincing principles. It does not often seem apparent to the critic that most of the work could only be understood in terms of the allusion to contemporary events. It fails to take into account the pattern consisting of episodic parallels, narrative, and metaphorical links, all operating as a series of recurring themes.

Smith's works of the 1960s and the characteristics that continue in most of his recent work is far removed from being termed strictly political or narrative, despite the fact that the work is never without the tome of the painter as narrator. For Smith, the role of the narrator is primary.

Often the painter symbolically intervenes to alert the viewer as if relating a gospel truth, constantly calling upon his audience to verify and compare their own experience with his.

Though in the final analysis unity in Smith's art hinges on tome, it also succeeds in pulling together stylistic devices of a diverse nature. Seen in this light, the work evolves through a duality comprised of a subject matter that can be described as lusty and occasionally, coarse.

Once the common theme of the humanist idea is established, Smith in his stylistic approach to the subject is then able to endow the work with a lyrical grace and complexity which is characteristic of his mature period. Despite the series of dramatic events unfolding on the canvas the final resolution of the work appears to be its coherent dramatic structure, in which the elements are integrally related and the dissonance created by the extremely different elements is ultimately resolved. As is apparent in his African Series of the '70s, the work operates on a type of historical mythical level within which a resolution is achieved between the idyllic and tragic. In final consideration the combination of highly intricate stylistic devices and rich thematic content imbue the work with humanity.

The early works of Vincent Smith depicted scenes of family life with particular emphasis on the mother and child theme. During this same period, there is a series of night life images for which the artist turned to the city for inspiration. Most of these subjects are scenes from places as diverse as pool rooms, cafes, and dance halls.

During this period (1953-56) the artist struggled hard to establish himself as a painter whose work would be seen independent of the influence of many of the artists he admired, including Walter Williams, Jacob Lawrence, and Gregorio Prestopino. Smith was introduced to Lawrence's work at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in Manhattan. He saw Lawrence "American Struggle Series" in 1957 at the Alan Gallery and was greatly moved by the simple yet forceful forms visible in Lawrence's work. It is this type of quiet grace that

Smith attempted to evoke in his early works.

Angular shapes dominate a series of Cubistic-derived composition in these early works. In *Mother and Child* of 1953, a Black mother stands quietly by a nearly empty dining room table while her infant child clings to her practically exposed breast. Overshadowing the physical state of poverty and hunger evident in the mother's appearance is the artist's rendering of the tender compassionate mother who cares most of all for her infant child.

Smith began studying African art independently when he first visited the Brooklyn Museum in 1952. He commented:

*"...I used to go to the Brooklyn museum which has one of the finest collections of African art, also the Museum of Primitive Art near the Museum of Modern Art (two Rockefeller houses) and look at art. The Sego Gallery in Manhattan had a collection also. These were about the only places where one could see African art. Some of the paintings I still have from that period are Fang Woman with Children (1955), depicting a woman with a child on her lap, and a child on her shoulders in jungle; and the woman with children against her breast looking at the moon is Ibo Woman and Children (1954).*

In these compositions, as well as *Mother and Child*, the structure of the women's faces is based on some recognizable formula of rendering the nose long and pointed as in a Fang or Baule Mask, thereby giving accent to the Cubistic elements of the mask in the same manner as one sees in traditional African wood sculpture. In *Mother and Child*, the face of the mother echoes a format of presentation for the Fang female from a frontal position found in much of the African group.

In *Ibo Woman with Children* (1954) and *Fang Woman with Children* (1955) a distinct departure from the more geometric and angular patterned painting style of 1953 is noticeable. In both paintings for the first time there is a softening of planes in each work and a more direct reference to a more abstract stylization. In the latter, three figures of a mother and children are stacked in a totemic formation against a brightly toned background. In *Ibo Woman with Children*, the artist has arranged the placement of the mother and children in a position which seems to draw on two sources: African sculpture and Mexican painting. Here is reflected a gradual and conscious attempt by the artist to move art away from genre scenes to a more sophisticated form of imagery and complex compositional structure.

Commenting on the subject matter of many of his early works, Smith states:

*"My first social awareness came about in 1947 while I was working on the Lackawanna Railroad... repairing the tracks...listening to the chats, visiting bars and roadhouses and looking into the faces of the people who lived near the tracks in rural communities...In 1948 when I went into the Army, my nine months spent in the South was a realization and a revelation. In the roadhouses along the tracks of Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and North Carolina I saw the same people. When the convoys moved out I saw the other side, the big white mansions, Greek columns, magnolia trees, lush vegetation. I came away with a feeling of...well...you hear it in the music..."*

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Thereafter, the pattern of his life and experience became crucial elements for the thematic basis of his work. In *Saturday Night in Harlem* (1955), a crowd of people are seen milling about a dimly lit street in Harlem surrounded by a bar., poolroom, churches, and pushcarts in the streets. Smith's work of this period can be seen as the moment of occurrence of a special event. The subject remains ultimately about people and their broad connections with life in Africa, and the experience of living in the urban communities of the North. In *Artist in Paradise* (1954) several figures are seen leisurely enjoying each other's friendship in an informal setting; in *The Poet* (1954), the composition is more complex in terms of structure and space.

Although the utilization of types of African sculptural motifs are present in Smith's art, he acknowledges the impact of certain German Expressionists such as Emil Nolde on these early compositions. In the work of the German artists, Smith saw a direct correlation with African art. To him a modified Cubistic appearance of form was also evident.

Commenting on these tendencies in the work Smith states:

*"I tried at that time to create a feeling of Cubism in my street scenes by breaking up planes. The paintings from the series "Saturday Night in Harlem" (1955-56) is indicative of this attempt..."*

In 1959 Smith was awarded a John Hay Whitney Fellowship and he settled into painting in New York after a brief stay in the south. Smith's art began to change radically in the early '60s. The quiet genre scenes that celebrated the joys of city life disappeared. The new imagery reflected more serious issues symbolic of the unrest and turmoil of the '60s.

There is a highly personal style of painting which emerges that draws less on his earlier sources. The new style is dominated and continues to be formed by the artist's use of sand and other "found" elements on the canvas. The result is a body of work in which highly textured surfaces are predominant. Comparing the works of the '60s with earlier compositions, *Portrait of the Artist's Sister* and the *Artist in Paradise*, a line of distinction is noted in the manner in which there is a transition from the more angular formula of the '50s to a more complex structuring. In *For My People* (1964) the complexity of people seen in supermarkets, bars, storefronts, churches, and the surrounding crowds dictates the need for far more sophisticated handling of compositional means.

Thematically, these works continue the artist's preoccupation with narrative/political ideas of the '60s. In *Jake's Poultry Market* (1965) a scene is depicted in which the artist offers a cinematic view of an urban street scene by which means the poultry market becomes the center of community life. A woman sits out in front with her dog while two passersby—one having made a purchase of chicken at the market—move swiftly by. Other subjects of this period include prison riots around the nation and subjects that embraced the broad theme of man's inhumanity to man. *From the Caucus Room* (1968) and *Siege* (1969) poignantly reflect upon the politics of the period. *Siege* depicts the façade of an urban building with glowing reflections in the glass windows from the burning of nearby buildings.

During the early part of the '70s, Smith continued many of the basic themes derived from the '60s period. *Blood on the Forge* (1973) reflects upon the anger and violence of the period when riots were a way of life at the nation's penal institutions and the cities were a cross section of unrest.

Smith joined the Larcada Gallery in the middle '60s and exhibited there until its closing in 1977. At the same time Smith made the first of several visits to Africa, visiting such areas as Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. In 1973 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Travel grant to East Africa where he presented an exhibition of his work which traveled through Kenya and Tanzania. Upon his return to the states, Smith received the Child Hassam Purchase Award (1973-74) from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City. During this highly productive period, however, a fire occurred in his studio. Nearly one hundred paintings, some dating from 1953, were damaged or destroyed.

During this period the artist developed a series of mixed media works combining rope, sand and cloth. Many of these constructed paintings, started in 1976, depicted scenes of African landscapes, cylindrical houses, parades and people against a plain horizontal background with mountains or hills in the distance. A new color palette consisting of highly bright and lively tonal nuances was established in these works.

Commenting on an exhibition of Smith works at the Larcada Gallery in Manhattan in 1973, John Canaday in the *New York Times* writes:

*"A black artist whose blackness is the spiritual wellspring of his art is not a good artist simply for that reason. Like any other kind of artist, he has to be able to say whatever he has to say in terms that demand no concessions. Vincent Smith is such a painter, and his exhibition has the further effect of suggesting that there may be, at last, such a thing as a black idiom, a school of black painting whose members share points of view and a technical vocabulary that identify them with one another without holding any individual to a group formula.*

*In his combinations painting and collage, with liberal use of dress fabrics, Mr. Smith's manner is closely allied to that of Romare Bearden. Mr. Smith also shares, in one painting or another, some of the gentleness of Jacob Lawrence and the aggressive indignation of Benny Andrews. If these four artists—Smith, Bearden, Lawrence, and Andrews—held a group exhibition, both their unity and their individuality would be as apparent as as their blackness would be triumphant.*

*There are other names that could stand up in this company, but at the moment I might be tempted to put Mr Smith at the top of the list. He is not as polished or as assured an artist as Mr. Bearden, but the very fact that his art is still in a state of growth and flux is part of its expressive power."*

Throughout the '70s Smith brought a rich and varied set of experiences to his art as a result of travels to the African continent. In 1977 he traveled to Africa as a participant at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos and Kaduna, Nigeria. In 1978 he visited England, France, Holland, Spain, Sweden, and Denmark, organizing an

exhibition entitled, "An Ocean Apart: American Artists Abroad" for the Studio Museum in Harlem. In 1980 he was part of an exhibition "Retour Aux Sources" which traveled to the Ivory Coast, and Smith visited Burkina Faso. Four years later he would again travel to East Africa, spending time that year and in 1985 in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. These cultural experiences added to the cultural information from which he draws for the growth of his art.

In 1975-76 Smith chose a simplified plan of painting which relied heavily on geometric patterns that established linear registers within a given compositional framework. In "African Series No.2" or 1975-77, the painting based on African themes are blended with landscapes.

Described as somewhat spiritual and ethereal in nature, a series of paintings entitled the "Dry Bones Series" (1982-4), introduces the views to the tombs of ancient African kings. *The Tomb of King Tutankhamun* (1984), and to Afro-American themes such as *The Root Doctor* and *Drybones (Fire from the Diaspora)* (1982).

In these paintings, small figures are repeated in a horizontal and vertical frieze-like manner. These figures sometimes appear at the bottom edge of the composition as in *We Shall Reap What Our Fathers Have Sown* (1983). These mixed media works, which included several vertical triptychs and totems, are major developments in the artist's stylistic and aesthetic maturation.

In addition to these works the artist began to execute a series of monoprints that are based on the jazz theme, entitled: "*Hoo Do Hollerin, Beboop Ghosts*" (Dedicated to Larry Neal). *Juju Jass and Mojo Blues* are connected thematically to the improvised jam sessions among Black jazz musicians. This lingering spirit is clearly derived from his early interest in music. Commenting on this monoprints, the artist says:

*"These monoprints are diffused washes of color like waves of sounds. The lights on the stage flicker and cause and movements on the faces and clothes to take on strange shapes and colors, causing shadows and other ghostly effects like masks, or mosaics. Heightened by the excitement of the music, the atmosphere becomes like a phantasmagoria or another world. People cry out and holler and strange grunts, even curses, come forth, but this particular scene has its roots in black folklore and culture. Listening to jazz and blues is like being caught up in a séance or Juju."*

For Smith, art is the real affirmation of selfhood. It denotes growth in both physical and spiritual worlds. In all his related experiences, life becomes the subject of art. His personal approach is undaunted by the social or artistic order that prevails. He is an artist whose search for truth begins with thoughtful insights and ends with a tempered vision of history and the line is establishes among all humanity and the artist's vision of self as spirit.