

Essay by Nancy E. Green: 2001

Excerpts of essay by Nancy E. Green, Senior Curator of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. This essay was published in the catalog, *Dreams, Myths, and Realities: A Vincent Smith Retrospective*. (2001)

At an early age, Vincent Smith absorbed a strong sense of the many strands of his Black cultural heritage. His paternal grandfather owned a large farm and quarry in Barbados, and his father worked on that farm and in the oil fields until emigrating to the States with his wife in the 1920s. Born in 1929 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Vincent Smith was raised in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in a neighborhood often familiarly depicted in his early paintings. As a child, his family attended the African Orthodox Church. He studied music and played alto saxophone and piano, and although he did not continue his lessons, this experience would translate into a lifelong love and appreciation of the rich strains of jazz and blues, bebop, Dixieland, funk, and doo-wop.

In his mid-teens, Smith dropped out of school, traveling around a bit, working a couple of weeks repairing tracks on the Lackawanna Railroad, followed by a year in the Army stationed in the South, an eye-opening experience which sparked his early involvement in the Civil Rights movement. It was in 1952, while he was working for the Post Office, that a friend invited him along to visit the Cézanne retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Just as Cézanne had inspired the Cubists nearly fifty years before, the experience literally changed the course of Smith's life. As he remembers, "I came away so moved with a feeling that I had been in touch with something sacred."

Soon after, Smith quit his postal job and began to paint in earnest. He briefly attended classes at the Art Students League under Reginald Marsh, an association that infected the young artist with some of his teacher's informal and enthusiastic approach to the city. Smith also began dropping in at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where he informally sat in on classes and met Walter Williams, with whom he later shared a studio in Manhattan. In the summer of 1955, Smith received a scholarship and attended the Skowhegan School in Maine. That same year, he was awarded a scholarship to enroll officially in the Brooklyn Museum Art School. At that time, Smith remembered, the Brooklyn Museum was one of the few museums in this country to show the sculpture of African artists. This made an impact on Smith and the result was his painting *Fan Woman with Children*, (1955) one of two paintings on an African theme that he did during this period.

The works from the 1950s are an amalgam of his newfound identity with the Black cultural milieu and his childhood roots and the community that nurtured him. His subjects are the jazz cafés, poolrooms, storekeepers, families, lovers, and street scenes he met and knew firsthand. In choosing mentors Smith has naturally been attracted to artists sharing an interest in similar issues of isolation, identity, and survival, and it is not surprising that the German Expressionists Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and the Blue Rider group, as well as the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco have found an echo in his work. His strong graphic sensibility and intense color and symbolism align him with these predecessors. Also apparent is the unmistakable influence of African sculpture, but as Smith contends, "I don't have to take them literally from African sculpture. It's right there in the street. To me it's not stylized. To me, you still know it's a person."

In the mid-sixties things began to shift. Many of Smith's friends and cronies moved to Europe, hoping for a less hostile environment for their work. There was a new vehemence in the Civil Rights movement, for those artists who remained, these issues became paramount. The non-aggressive approach of the fifties gave way to explosive responses to the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King's death, riots, and the poverty of the ghettos. Smith's work came to reflect these struggles; his view was clear-eyed without self-pity, sentiment, or blame. The facts, laid bare in his work, speak eloquently of the times. He recorded the strife and the turmoil side by side with non-aggressive solutions in paintings such as *For My People* (1965), *The Fire Next Time* (1968), and *Black Power Conference* (1968).

During this volatile decade, Smith was an active member of the Black Arts movement, spearheaded by Amiri Baraka. Moving away from the familiar domestic subjects of the fifties, his images were now largely of the disenfranchised – political prisoners, the unemployed, and the poor, as well as narratives of racial conflict and discrimination. In his portfolio series of *Eight Etchings* (1965-66) Smith captures the Zeitgeist by rendering scenes of terror and pain drawn from his own experiences while traveling through the South in the late 1940s and early 1960s. There are also scenes of New York and its own brand of racism rampantly apparent in the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants. The masklike faces of the figures provide an anonymity in an unsympathetic world.

For Smith, as a chronicler of Black culture, the story shifted again the seventies. With the deaths King and Malcolm X, some of the intensity receded from the civil rights movement and the focus became the African heritage of America's Black population. Between 1968 and 1999 Smith made five trips to twelve African countries, as well as travels to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Europe (including two artist residencies at the Cité-des-Arts in Paris), and these experiences shaped his work. On a journey to Dar es Salaam he saw Konda Rock paintings in the National Museum of Tanzania and old slave castles and ruins in Bagamoyo. On this visit he traveled to Fort Jesus, a slave castle in Mombasa. Sites such as these would become the subjects of paintings, such as *Fort Jesus* (1984), upon his return to the States. Africa inspired experiments with the canvases as Smith began to add sand and rope for texture and meaning, with reference to the magical 'nkisi objects of the Kongo culture. In this culture, these objects are made up of everyday materials such as string and rope, symbolizing the native peoples, irregularly shaped patches of sand, reminiscent of ancient footsteps, dry pigment, implying rock surfaces and weathered stone, and fabric and nails, and can dictate human actions and therefore contain great power. Thus, through surface modulation and color choice, his images achieve a sculptural quality not normally associated with paint on canvas.

In his African work Smith weaves a powerful tapestry of rich, dense color filled with exotic figures, animals, and plantlife exuding a joyous response to life itself. The smell and feel and heat of the African landscape is palpable, the texture of village life tangible. Unlike the restless explorations of the sixties images, Smith's African subjects are modulated by a pulsating rhythm and harmony inherent in the place.

Smith's work provides a conduit, carrying the lyrical thread of African art through its permutations in Southern, Northern, and Caribbean folk painting to reflect the total Black experience. His art and his message is one of inclusion, universalizing the experience of Blacks the world over. For Smith, his travels in Africa solidified an already well-developed spiritual and ethnic bond with the birthplace of his ancestors. His arrival

there was a moment of epiphany and his response was both intuitive and wholehearted. “I wanted to feel the mystery of walking in ancient civilizations. I wanted to get a feeling of the whole panorama and splendor of Africa...what a tremendous feeling – it was like going back in time and space.”

Another notable impact of Smith’s in the 1980s was the effervescent strains of jazz. He translated the smoky crowded energy and seductive women of the jazz clubs into dense, gestural expressions in monoprint, a technique he began using in 1983. For Smith, listening to jazz and blues summoned up the richness of Black culture. The immediacy of the moment of sound is captured in the spontaneity inherent in the monoprint process – quick, energetic and improvised, like the music itself.

In all his work, Smith takes us along on a journey; his narrative segues smoothly between the African-American and African experience. Using iconography interpreted as both personal and universal, his observations are poignant and unflinching. “I remember that Bird (Charlie Parker) once said to me, ‘Vince, stick to your vision; don’t let nobody turn you around,’ what sustained me was the fact that I was doing something significant, that I was hopefully making a contribution to the African-American community and the world.”