

ALEXANDRE



Painting

In the 1950s and '60s Vincent Smith (b. 1929) had chronicled contemporary African and African-American urban society and everyday life in his genre paintings depicting the bars, poolrooms, street-corners and small tenement rooms of the densely-populated neighbourhoods. Working in various media, moving fluently between monoprint, etching, and drawing, he interpreted the realm of black life, combining figurative with abstract.

After seeing a retrospective exhibition of Paul Cézanne at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952 and traditional African art displayed at the Brooklyn Museum, Smith recalled that:

I came away with the feeling that I had been in touch with something sacred. For a year afterward I haunted the libraries reading everything I could get my hands on about art, literature, philosophy, religion, existentialism—you name it, I touched on it somewhere.

But he added, 'I didn't see anything reflecting the black experience or black contribution to American culture.' So he read James Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (1943); sought out exhibitions about African American artists in New York City, including Charles White at the ACA Gallery; focused on the works of Jacob Lawrence, the Mexican muralists of the 1930s, and German Expressionism. His bohemian existence in the 1950s (see p.176), meeting other African-American writers, musicians, and artists like Walter Williams and Sam Middleton informed his creative vision.

During the 1960s and '70s civil rights protesters, activists and political prisoners all became a major part of his visual repertoire, as in *Negotiating Commission for Amnesty* [89]. The influence of Jacob Lawrence is seen in the simple colour schemes and shapes, and the schematic arrangement of figures in the composition, and the Cubist style faces with broad open mouths, recalling African masks.

For nearly forty years, Vincent Smith has portrayed a universal humanism in the context of modern black life and culture, expressing his beliefs on social justice.

The flag is the only truly subversive and revolutionary abstraction one can paint. (Faith Ringgold, 1973)

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Negotiating Commission for Amnesty, 1972.

Using a strong visual image, trussed figures suspended upside down like chickens in a poultry shop, Smith speaks a universal language of morality.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

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