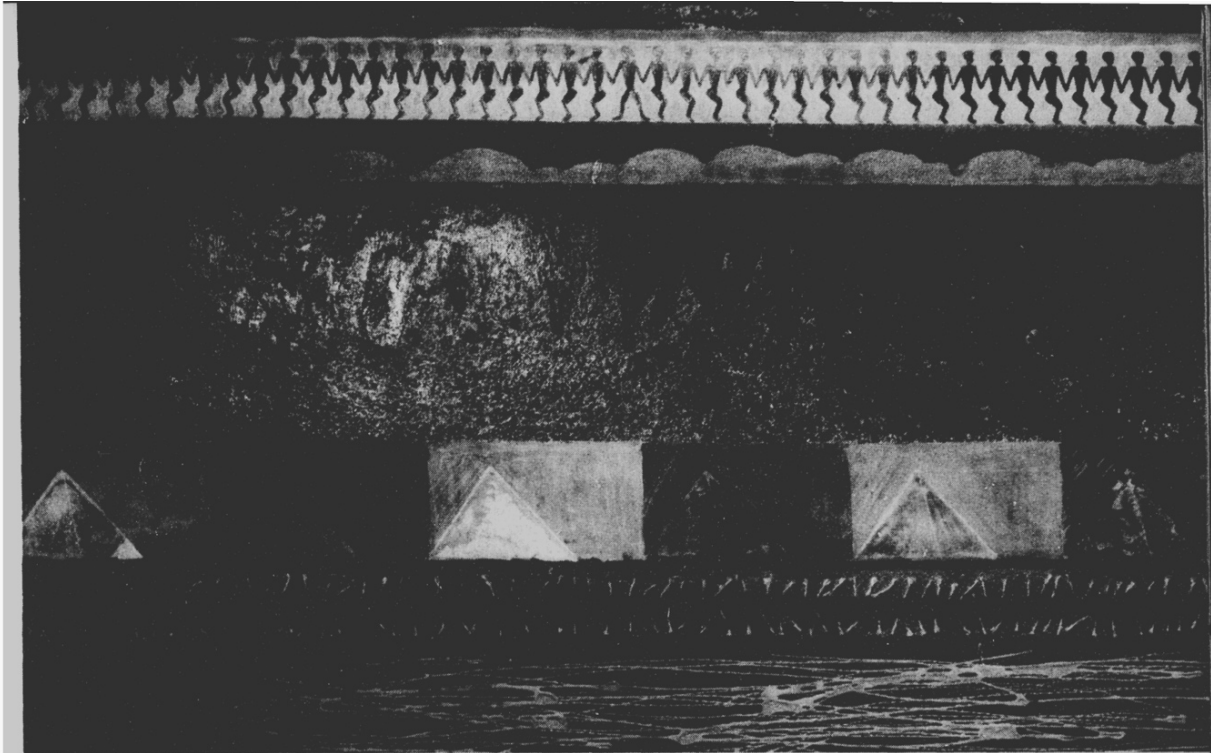


# ALEXANDRE

**Headline:** Art Vincent Smith: The Original Hipster as Artist

**Article Type:** News/Opinion **Author:** Amiri Baraka

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Oil, sand, rope and dry pigment by Vincent D. Smith, from the Dry Bones Series, Drums — Pyramids — Shadows and Slave Castles.

## ART

### *Vincent Smith: The Original Hipster as Artist*



Vincent D. Smith

#### AMIRI BARAKA

An anonymous building, is it painted some color?, junk stores on the first floor, that when you go in the center door between the storefronts you enter part of the world of painter, Vincent Smith!

The building houses Vincent's studios and working space since 1970. He

has three floors: on the third floor storage and utility room. On the second floor the studio where he paints. Rooms adjacent, across the hall, work in progress and canvas primed.

The first floor an office and research library, a kitchen. A kind of *ritualorium* with objects, prints, postcards, reproductions, anonymous funky entity essences to suggest the inhabitant.

The painting on this page is part of

Vincent's *Dry Bones Series* he was finishing when we met which was finally very successfully exhibited at the Randall Gallery, 823 Madison Ave., New York, April 11-28, 1984.

In the last year he has also shown a very important and broadly expressive show at the Center for Art and Culture at Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Center in Brooklyn's oppressed black community.

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Oil and sand on canvas by Vincent D. Smith "The Super."

**“But I don’t represent no school, I’m a true Expressionist. I use figure elements, abstract, revolutionary, all kinds of materials . . .”**

One shaping element of his work is *The Music: Jazz, Blues, Reggae, Calypso, High Life, Boogie Woogie*, a black peasant internationalist consciousness, made possible by the industrial sophistication of the workers, the city folk, the niggers in the north!

One of Vincent’s earliest influences was the master, Jacob Lawrence. Smith was 22 and “reading art books seriously,” when he happened on examples of Lawrence’s work in James Porter’s book on black artists. It turned him around. This was around 1952, then in 1955 Vincent met Jake Lawrence “on the subway,” at 3:00 a.m. in the morning.

The Lawrence influence is everywhere identifiable in Smith’s works, very much so in earlier works. But the Lawrence influence seems to me merely a leavening with the necessary historical ingredient of African American expression. Lawrence is such a necessity! To have no real acquaintance with his work is to risk babbling concerning contemporary American painting.

Another formidable and shaping influence, both visually and probably philosophically were the great Mexican muralists, Orozco, Rivera and Siquieros, themselves at the very pinnacle of what great art can be. The amazing highly stylized form, the thrilling color, the heavy social communication!

Rafael Tamayo, the Afro Cuban expressionist, Vincent lists, as well, as a shaping influence. But an artist’s whole life and experience are influences as well. Their class and national history, their background and families and close friends, as well as other paintings.

Smith’s father had come from the oil fields of Barbados, immigrating with Vincent’s mother to the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Another shaping dimension of Vincent Smith’s work was the kind of graphic representation of the religious oriented Garveyites of the African Orthodox Church of Brownsville. West Indians made up a substantial part of the Garvey movement; Garvey was born in Jamaica. One minister at the Brownsville Garveyite church was a friend of Vincent’s father, also from Barbados.

So the brush of Pan-African consciousness must have touched Vincent when he was quite young contained in the “Black Pride” Garvey inspired

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with his UNIA.

Vincent also drew as a child, as well as playing alto saxophone and piano. He said he always felt himself “on the periphery of art.” At fourteen he left school and as a painter and intellectual he is largely self-taught.

Between the ages of 22 and 23 Vincent spent time reading and studying at the Brooklyn Museum and Brooklyn Public Library. He also spent about one month studying with painter Reginald Marsh. By 1955, Vincent had studied sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum and was painting about two years when he won a competition which gave him a nine-week scholarship at Skowhegan, Maine, at the internationally known school of the arts. This widened his horizons considerably, bringing him in contact with the Doyens and reputation of the “international art

circle.”

It was at this juncture that Vincent was touched by the work of the German Expressionists of the 20's and 30's. Particularly he was moved by the German Expressionists' use of the woodcut. He sees this art as not only very important to his own work but to the history of art and “despite the various isms that came and went . . . it's coming back in high gear.”

But one interesting thing about Vincent Smith's art is that it is so full of rhythm and color it speaks very eloquently and directly about real life. And for Vincent it has been a life of perception, sensitivity, consciousness and change. Art comes as an expression, an attempted defining of one's life and society. It is for the artist and his audience a shared revelation in development.

Vincent was always interested in

what was the reality below the surface of things. Expressionism, as a genre, always seeks to make the real show through the apparent. He has had a conscious political dimension to his nexus with society since he was a young boy even while, as he puts it, “getting caught up in a whole lot of shit.” At the age of 16, he was working on the Lackawanna Railroad, at 17 he went into the army for one year. Even at that age he felt “politically motivated.”

At Brooklyn College Smith swung with a political group, the Labor Youth League, who considered themselves part of the “Paul Robeson Movement.” In Flatbush he ran with a group of young radicals that later got involved with the Civil Rights Movement.

“I was looking for something,” Smith says, discussing his early life and army stint in Texas. “I saw all that shit

Oil and collage on canvas by Vincent D. Smith, “Before the Mayflower.” (1972)



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down South in Mississippi, Louisiana.” (There are drawings of this period, done a little later by Smith, that are fantastic. Simple, yet powerfully evocative ink drawings of the Civil Rights Movement in the South!)

In 1953, Vincent had found Greenwich Village and was there, most times being at now émigré painter Walter Williams’ studio until 1958. In the early 60’s he went back down south, but since 1964 he’s been in Brooklyn. And the Brooklyn experience has contributed a great deal to the total art shaping life experience that is Vincent Smith. He speaks of these various periods of his life, early childhood, adolescence, working on the railroad, army, still other and multiple penetrations into the reality of life in this society, as learning and deepening contradictions.

For one thing Vincent has become exceedingly clear on “the lack of recognition for black painters” in this society, which is almost an understatement. It seems, from this observer’s point of view, that black painters are even “less visible” (ironically enough) in this society than black writers. In large part, I would imagine, because the graphic artist’s work can be carried off into *one* gallery or museum or person’s home and not be generally seen. (This is the importance particularly to black and working class people of inexpensive reproductions!)

Plus art books that reproduce the black painters’ works are much more expensive to publish than small literary magazines black writers can emerge in. Smith believes there is a general “absence of visual arts” in American culture. Meaning the barren blankness of too many people’s walls in their homes or even in institutions. The average educational institution, for instance, classroom walls stand blank when obviously it should be mandatory to use them for artists to teach us while we’re being taught something else formally! But the rulers of this society are merchants interested only in maximum profit. Art has use to them only for its commercial value.

Part of that “lack of recognition” Vincent speaks of is in the method by which the big galleries “look at” or exclude (*really*) people. In the main, the



Oil and sand on canvas by Vincent D. Smith, “In the Yard.” (1973)

ALEX K

“choices” are rooted in the same White Supremacy. As Toni Morrison told us in *Tar Baby*, they think Picasso a genius because he could appropriate the African graphic style, but the originators of that style remain savages.

And this too, Vincent asserts, “all influence what and why I paint.”

“I’m a painter from the word go,” says Vincent. His face carrying that familiar cool appreciation of reality. He has a kind of hip half smile that says so much, and in opposition, and still to have accomplished so much. And still

things should be painted . . . don’t put (stiff) labels on things . . . I’ve been denigrated as a ‘figure painter’, ‘black painter’, ‘protest painter’.”

“But I don’t represent no school, I’m a true Expressionist. I use figure elements, abstract, revolutionary, all kinds of materials . . . paint different kinds of ways — figure, abstract, ritualistic.

“In the series (*Dry Bones Series*) I’m not jumping from one thing to another.” Indeed, *Dry Bones* is a statement of African/African American

and against almost abstract slave figures bound side-by-side bound Hell (a place with trees and a moon). Vincent has always, it seems, been pointed in the right direction, though he has followed the twists and turns hard won rising consciousness just as any other progressive intellectual artist. When I first blew into Greenwich Village as a teenager, Vincent already on the scene, a figure already in my mind, in the emerging painter scene of the time. Many of young painters of Vincent Smith’s

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Oil and sand on canvas by Vincent D. Smith, "Molotov Cocktail." (1968)

Delaney, or Jimmy Baldwin — and Jimmy is in this country as much as he is away. Those émigrés who thought they must go out of racist America lest they be killed with frustration, their dreams of making art trampled by white supremacy. It was the black arts generation that thundered "no!" to this back to Europe philosophy which finally does seek not only to invade the Afro American struggle against imperialism in the U.S. but maintain Europe as an aesthetic standard against which all other peoples' art only finishes a poor second.

Vincent then had a rep as a "bohemian painter," and he was a real bohemian unlike some I met then whose mothers and fathers were paying their way through bohemia. He lived the wild life of the 1950's in Greenwich Village. But when the 60's came Vincent had amassed enough sensitivity and insight to see past the bourgeois art scene. When some of us went up to Harlem to create the Black Arts Repertory Theater School and the Black Arts Movement that came out of that short-lived pilot project Vincent was at "The Arts" as well as making his contribution to a black art that would emerge, in the period of Harlem renaissance, that would be "mass oriented, African American and revolutionary." Vincent is still doing that.

Ironically, Vincent Smith stayed in the United States and struggled to create his art against the crippling odds

the African American consciousness as long as that exists. Yet Vincent is still snubbed by the Madison Avenue types, though this latest show *Dry Bones Series* is at a Madison Avenue gallery (one owned by an African American). But uptown, in Harlem, where Vincent's work should be celebrated, the Studio Museum crowd goes on as the Museum of Modern Art, Harlem branch. Many of the shows at the Studio Museum have been of black painters who are within the mainstream of bourgeois formalist art — abstract, hard edge, Mickey Mouse, op, pop, etc., who have made it "downtown" in the world where art is an expression of white supremacy. Yet these folks have never seen fit to give Vincent Smith, one of the great painters of our time, a show! He is the kind of an artist a painter rooted in the African American experience and creating forms and following the imagination of the black majority with an aesthetic that is African, Afro American, Caribbean, urban and politically progressive. (It is Vincent, for instance, in various shows who has documented the dynamic 50's, and scalding hot 60's and early 70's. Certainly a retrospective of his work is in order, but in the answer to such a proposal, I was turned down by SUNY at Stony Brook where I teach, as well as at the Newark Museum, where I live.)

But art like everything else in society is a matter of class definition and the timid Negroes who define art for the

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The “hipster” of Vincent is his personality, a result of his walking with the Afro American philosophical way and being a “savage” “nobody” ruled by Civilized Significant. Ah, that there would be such lowness and murder, invention of fascism, moreover, all up our chest, and to walk with that and know that and try not to be killed by that — you know, to prevail somehow. Victory, in the midst of, loss. HIP = *Aware* i.e., the property of the Digger that is to function at some high consciousness, in the midst of brute commercial savagery. What it seems, in image, the President of the music, Lester Young, Pres, who it was always about. To exist in some consciousness in the

midst of . . . *Squares*. Pyramid consciousness trying to survive in the midst of four sided thugs so that Vincent can say, with clarity of the repercussions of history of opposition to Afro American lives that “my works deal with black culture and civilization. I try to paint every aspect of the human condition in black. The sharecroppers, Obelisks, . . . the game reserves in West Africa.”

There is a dazzling “aliveness” to Vincent’s work. He is not circumscribed by the content of bourgeois society. While *Babylon* makes ready to blow up right before our eyes Vincent is painting it and painting himself painting us in the same motion.

Vincent has also “caught” sketches of advanced consciousness by way of itself through the years I say *caught* because it is like an *eye-line* pinned to us through him. Garvey in a car, waving; the struggles on those southern roads; King-like figures; Malcolm icons inscribed in the people’s memory; Dr. Carver lecturing in a wagon; Walter Rodney surrounded by young students; “snapshots” of the black power conferences; Ralph Featherstone’s blazing FBI-caused funeral pyre on the highway; Trane’s funeral; Rap Brown at the top of his thing; red, black and green lovers; African mythology and dusty green reality; Harlem star roads; that host of complexifying memory

Oil and collage on canvas by Vincent D. Smith, “Let it Be Like Men.” (1973)

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Oil and collage on canvas by Vincent D. Smith, "Apple Pie for the Kids." (1968)

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presents that color our seeing and understanding.

Throughout it all, there is the artist, signed "Vincent" at some place on the canvas. It ain't Van Gogh the works

norance that defines the American Sensibility. Survival is one level of revolt and the elegance of its telling. But then to be expressive, not consumer destroyed or drunk, dope addicted, or

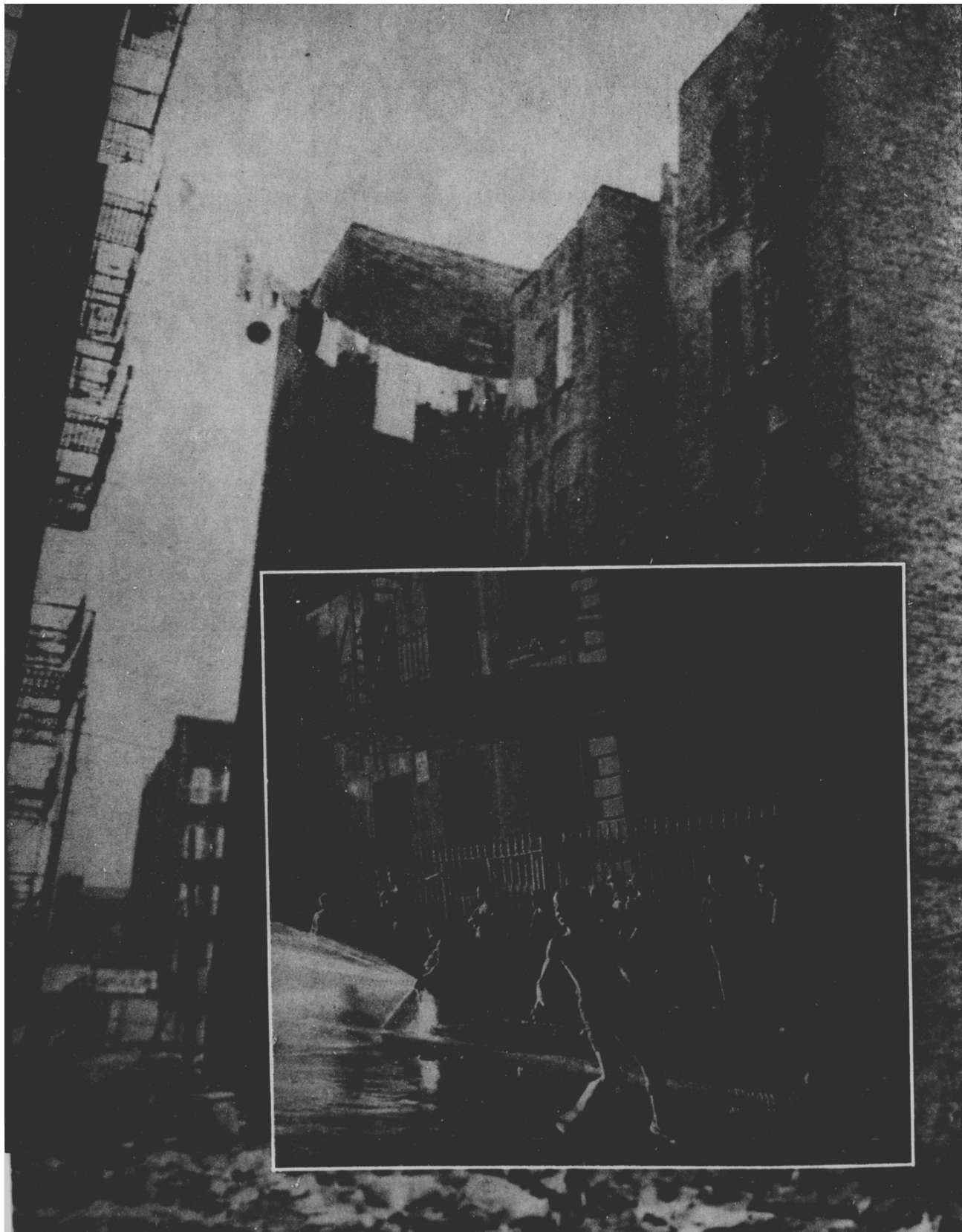
oly capitalism rendered "Roman by bourgeois mythology — to sur all that and then to transcend it knowing that triumph with j trace of BeBop in your walk, talk and address to the world, is one

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