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Fitzgerald, Sharon: **Vincent Smith: Sage, Bohemian, Prince**
American Visions 14:3 [June-July 1999] p.22-27

"This is the largest group I've seen here on a Saturday morning," a regular visitor to Harvard Law School commented last fall. Lawyers from the class of 1968 had gathered that weekend to celebrate the writ of passage handed to them 30 years before. Their collective tweediness did not conceal the hardy crimson glow of achievement and belonging that they possessed.

Presiding from this lecture hall's front wall, close to the ceiling, were ponderous portraits of venerable, wigwearing barristers suited in red. One leaned against a mantelpiece; one was seated in a chair; another sat poised at a desk, quill pen in hand. Ornate frames situated them duly within the past, detached from the room's modern touches--its blackboard, podium and microphone, and two television monitors.



The visiting alumni appeared comfortable. They may have sweated here before, but today they were unharried in these surroundings. Besides, their capacity for nonstop wheeling and dealing notwithstanding, upbringing demanded that each bide his time.

This moment belonged to the late financial wizard and investment attorney Reginald Lewis--a classmate who had seized the corporate spotlight--and to Lewis' portraitist, the artist Vincent Smith. Placed upon a wooden pedestal to the right of the podium was a large canvas, covered with a white sheet. The Lewis family had made a \$3 million gift to the university, and Lewis' portrait would that day become the first of an African American mounted within Harvard Law, among the other distinguished achievers.

Prior to the unveiling, representatives of Harvard, Lewis' widow, Louida, and Vincent Smith addressed the assembly. "I knew Reggie for 10 years," Smith said. "Five of those years were before he became wealthy. He told me that he loved to spend time in my studio. After the high-tech world of business, he would come in, take his coat off and discuss all sorts of things.

"Then I picked up the paper one day and saw that he'd taken over the world. I thought, This is not the Reggie that I know. After he got big, he called up and asked me, 'Aren't you sorry you didn't paint me now?' But you can't rush the muse."

As the Lewis family gathered around the portrait, preparing to go public, their faces offered no clues about which aspect of Lewis' personality had been committed to canvas. Smith's expression, while just as mysterious, whispered a number of tales. Heavy, mysterious lids shielded eyes both curious and knowing. His frame suggested a wiry

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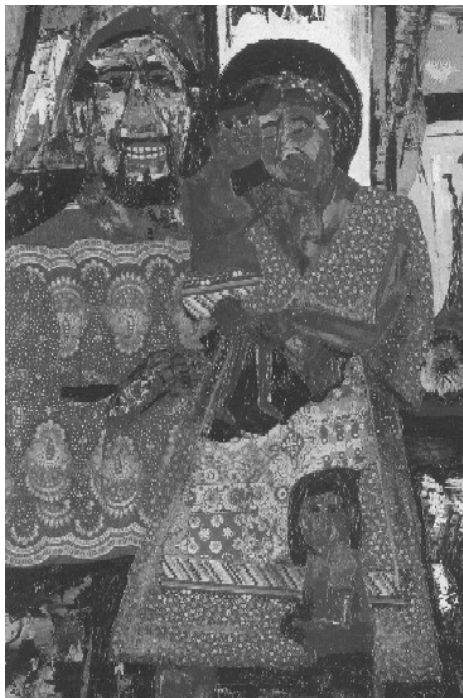
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restlessness in youth that had evolved into an easygoing, purposeful canter. With a swatch of kente cloth or one quick switch of his hat, he could become an enduring sage, a streetwise bohemian, or an urbane prince of a fellow.

On this day in Cambridge, Smith was both friend and creator. No drum roll sounded as each Lewis family member grasped a small portion of cloth and prepared. to uncover the painting. Nevertheless, a mood of expectation pulsated among the assembled alumni, almost becoming audible.

"Ta ta, da da," sing-songed Mrs. Lewis, in a voice filled with both pride and loving memories. In one breath, the portrait was revealed. The hush that followed stopped just short of a gasp. Lewis' arrival this day was just as it had been during his lifetime: They hadn't seen him coming. In vivid, fearless, uncompromising colors, artist Vincent Smith had surprised this audience by conveying the brilliant, assertive, individuality of his multimillionaire friend.

Smith's "Portrait of Reginald F. Lewis" is a textured, exuberant array of oils that dares to convey an African- American man of power. The colors embraced by the black liberation movement work distinctly with strong yellows, rich purples and pinks, lime greens and azure blues. The patterns--streaks of drapery, a mottled suit,checkered stained glass--create movement and hold the viewer in constant surprise, while sculpted forms keep the focus on Lewis' humanity.



"The Black Family," oil and collage on canvas, 1972.

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Detail from the mural "Jonkonnu Festival Wid the Frizzly Rooster Band," oil and collage on canvas, 1991.

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Once the formal presentation had ended, Mrs. Lewis thoughtfully discussed the painting's meaning: "There is so much in it. The colors are strong. There are symbols-- [Smith] got our daughters in; there are African sculptures, an Ashanti tie.

"The stained glass is important, because [Lewis] was spiritual. He is not in a blue suit, because he was not that type of man. He was a Renaissance man--a man of spirit and color and imagination."

As others milled about, Smith paused to survey his creation within its new context. "I am not a portrait painter; I am an expressionist," he said.

Vincent Smith has spent much of his 69 years experiencing the world on his own terms. He earned his college degree at age 50, having returned to school years after his art career was underway. Having dropped out of school at 15 ("I was a good student, but I got into trouble"), he pursued the kinds of adventures that parents fear and their children dream about. At 16, he spent the summer as a hobo. "Did you ever see the movie *Nothing But a Man*, with Abbey Lincoln and Ivan Dixon?" he asks. "Well, he lived in a boxcar and worked on the railroad. That's what I did."

This episode--call it romantic realism--was inspired by his encounters in the Bowery upon leaving school. "I used to roam around the city with a friend of mine," he recalls. "We used to go around the Bowery a lot. The Bowery in 1946 was not like it is today. There were hundreds of bars. There were guys sleeping all over the street, people sleeping in the back of the bars. It reminded me of Eugene O'Neill. We used to go down there and hang out and drink with those guys and sit around and talk.

"They told us that this was how they got around the country: They hopped on a train, and then when they got where they're going, they hopped off. My friend and I thought that sounded exciting, so we went to the office and signed up."

Despite the gritty, survivalist quality of this adventure, Smith managed to have artistic inklings. In an account shared with artist and art historian David C. Driskell, Smith once wrote: "My first social awareness came about in 1947 while I was working on the Lackawanna Railroad--repairing the tracks, listening to the chants, visiting bars and roadhouses and looking into the faces of the people who lived near the tracks in rural communities."

Upon returning to his family's home in Brooklyn, he did a brief tour in the army and then took a job at the post office, but he could not commit to this service as his life's work. Then one day a friend invited him along on a trip to a museum. As soon as he arrived, Smith knew that he had found his purpose.

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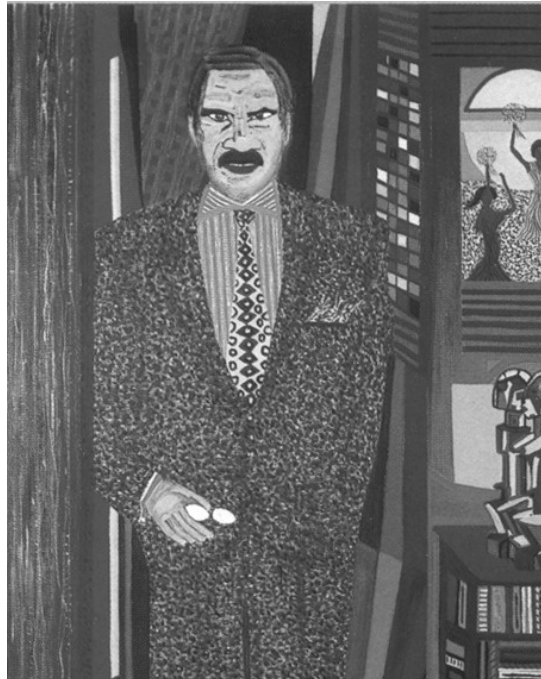
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"Makonde Carver," oil and sand on canvas, 1980.

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"Portrait of Reginald F. Lewis," oil on canvas, 1998.

"Something told me when I walked into the museum that this was where I belonged," he says. "I always knew that I would do art, but you know how you carry something around with you, and you know that one day it will surface, but you don't know when."

"To a certain extent, it's born in you. If you don't do anything with it, it goes by the wayside. You're born with a certain instinct; you don't know why something appeals to you sometimes. I always knew that I was either going to do something or do nothing. And when I thought of myself as a painter, I dreamed of myself as a great painter."

He began taking classes and spending days at the Brooklyn Museum. He met other artists and began making himself comfortable with his craft. In 1954, he submitted a painting for competition and won first prize. His education in art would be boosted by fellowships and artist-in-residence opportunities at such prestigious institutions as the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and the Smithsonian Conference Center in Elkrige, Md.

His early works, decidedly political in nature, served as an outlet for his social observations and consciousness. "I felt that it was important, saying something about my people," he says. Still, in spite of his outward toughness and perseverance, the experience of sharing his body of work with others required a wisdom that engaged and protected his sensitivities.

"I never even showed up for my first one-man show," he recalls. "It was like revealing your soul for the first time. You have to develop a tough hide to get through that early period; it is very rough."

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The success that Smith has enjoyed in the nearly 45 years since his career began has been remarkable. His hesitant response to that first one-man show segued into calm assuredness. There has been little time--or reason--for second-guessing himself. Since 1968, he has had nearly 21 one-man shows, and he has been included in at least 30 group shows in museums and galleries around the country.

Numerous institutions have claimed his art as part of their holdings, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Smith taught a course for nine years at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

In 1985, along with David Driskell, he curated the exhibition "Unbroken Circle: An Exhibition of African- American Artists of the 1930s and 1940s." "Rootin Tootin Blues," a monoprint from the artist's jazz series *Riding on a Blue Note*, was presented to President and Mrs. Bill Clinton by Daniel Kronenfeld, the executive director of New York City's Henry Street Settlement, during the President's first inaugural celebration. A mural--a syncopated celebration of uptown jazz--which Smith was commissioned to create for one of Harlem's subway stations, is nearly all in place.

"When I first got into art, Jacob Lawrence was possibly my first real influence," Smith says. "And the thing that I noticed about Lawrence, more so than his color or anything else--although he's a superb colorist--was his composition. How he orchestrated his pieces, It all looked very simple because he had laid it out for you, but the composition was very intricate and tight.

"When I paint, I'm always aware of composition because I've always felt that the tighter the composition, the more interesting the work."

Like many artists, Smith lives simply in order to live exuberantly. He has made five trips to Africa over 12 years to feed both his eye and his soul. The apartment he shares with his wife, Cynthia, located on Manhattan's Lower East Side, is a haven of books, prints and artifacts from their many trips. The living room's coziness makes a terrific skyline view embraceable, for once. Smith's art is created in a cavernous studio-out-post in a Brooklyn warehouse-turned-artist-colony.

His sense of conviction has found encouragement in his travels over the globe and in his relationships with the creative universe that he navigates. Back in the 1960s, he was an active member of the black arts movement, spearheaded by Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka). In 1973, Baraka described Smith's creations:

"Vincent Smith's is an art of the depth--an art of the black signaling depth, openly stating its cultural parameters, but not as limitation, but as standard, against which to measure the atomic magnitude of emotional diversity that shapes the world.

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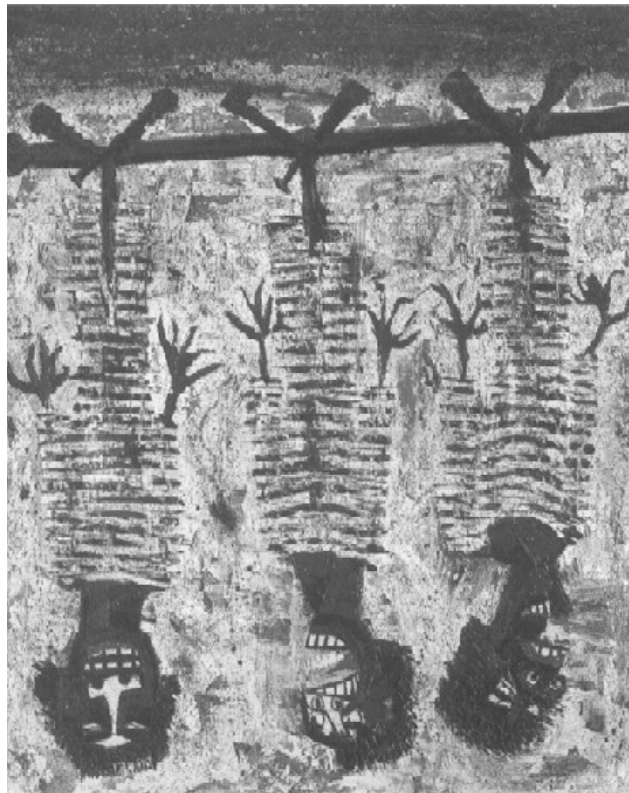
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"Sisters smile a little, buildings hang stiff in Smithspace, flowers glow indelibly, into the consciousness, civil rights leaders and militants are caught in paint like fixed artifacts of the black creative aesthetic, their politics collected forever in colors and forms."

Indeed, Smith's receptivity to the unexpected has opened the doors to artistic transformation and development. As with many artists, he attributes each sequence of changes to a rediscovery of light. "When I went to Skowhegan in 1955," he recalls, "I had a studio, sort of like a barn. So I'm in the country for nine weeks, and the light changes. The light is very, very strong up there. Then I went to the Smithsonian in Maryland, and it was the same thing again: being out there in a barn with all of this light around me. And so the paintings change. The third time the light changed on me was when I went to Africa in 1972. As a matter of fact, it changed for 10 years.

"It changes in very subtle ways. You're not conscious of it, but it's reflected in the work. When I was in Maryland, I did some landscapes, which I normally don't do. But the green was so strong that at night, when I got into bed to read, the pages on the book would turn green. They would have this greenish-like glow. That's how strong it was. You've been in the city all these years, and then, all of a sudden, boom! You're out in the middle of the country with trees. After a while, you begin to change.



Negotiating Committee for Amnesty, oil on canvas, 1972

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"Then, when I went to Africa, the landscape was all over the place, and so the yellow started coming into the painting--all those yellows. It was coming from the sun, from all that sky. It's hot; it's yellow; it's orange. It just seeps in. You're not aware of it."

Geometric formations and African themes appeared early in Smith's creations. "Bio Woman With Children" (1954), for example, lays claim to modernist forms and transports them unintrusively into symbolism. His control of the dynamic interplay of color and form, interestingly, has remained consistent, while his approach has evolved. The 1976 oil and sand work "Queen of the Nile," for instance, is starker and has more definite boundaries than some of his other work, including the monoprints devoted to musical themes that he created in the 1980s.

Still, as unpredictable as his approach to technique and subject matter may be, Smith manages to discover the internal energies at work in all that he observes and to amplify these on canvas. He hears, as well as sees, his work.

"My approach has always been very spontaneous and sort of inventive, instinctive, intuitive," he says. "I tend to refer to whatever I am doing as an orchestration. Because whatever I am doing, the whole thing has to come together.

"I may be working with seven or eight ingredients at the same time--oil and sand and dry pigment and collage and pebbles and dirt and so forth. To control all of these elements, all of these things have to work together in a certain way so that when the finished product is presented, it makes sense.

"When I hit, I'm like a conductor. I am working with all of the instruments at my disposal. I am working with all of the sounds, all of the vibrations. Some things are muted, some things are louder, but everything has to be controlled."

Girding his imaginative thrust are the dedication and skills of a seasoned navigator. "In order to make the work interesting, I've felt that the composition was important," Smith says. "With composition, you can go into surrealism, you can go into cubism, you can go just into representation. There are many avenues that you can explore at the same time with little shifts and turns.

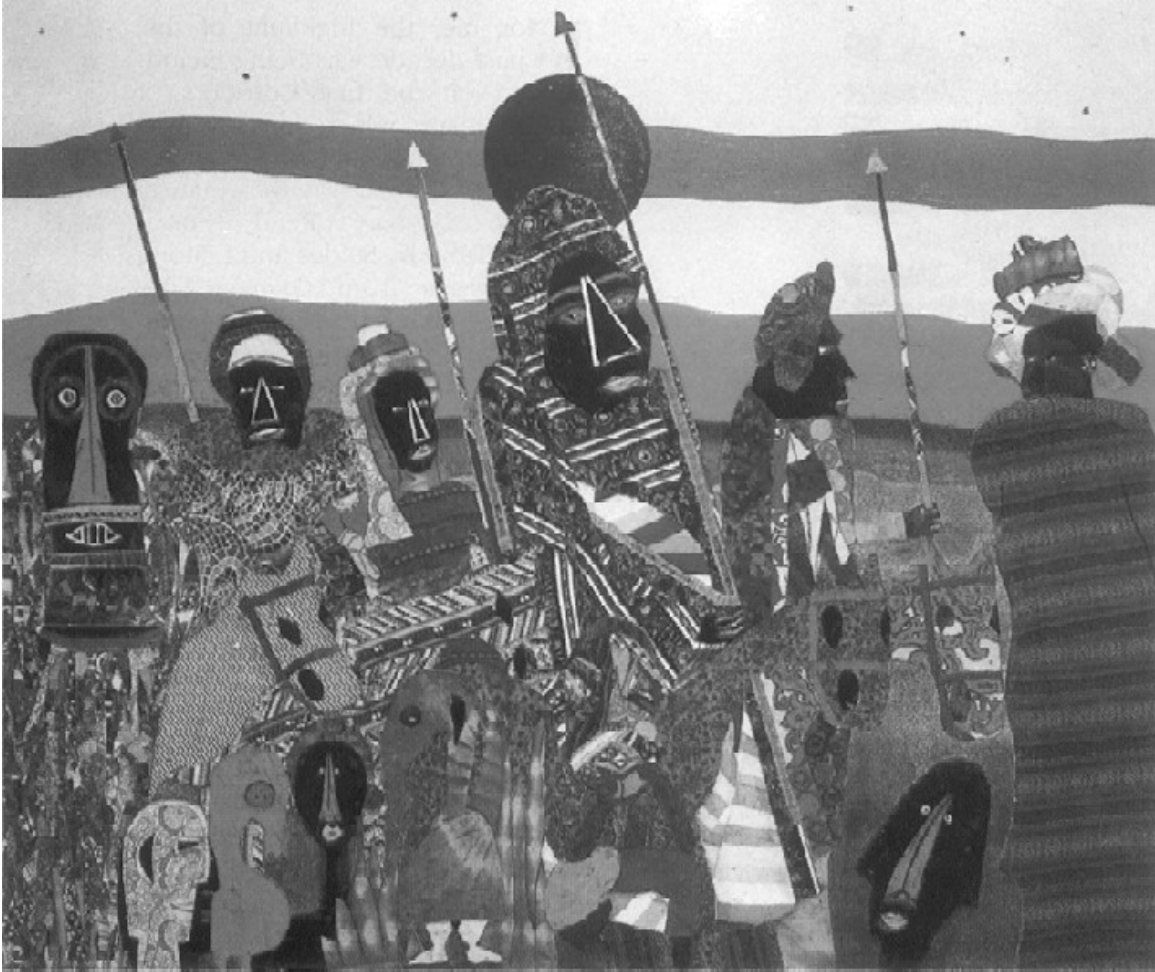
"You have to titillate your public in a sense. You have to wind up saying what you want to say, but you also like to take them on a journey."

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"Ode to Zimbabwe," oil and collage on canvas mural, 1980.