

# ALEXANDRE

## Independent 20th Century



**Vincent Smith**  
**Cipriani South Street at the Battery**  
**Maritime Building**  
**September 9 – 11, 2022**

Alexandre is pleased to present a selection of eight paintings and six works on paper by Vincent Smith (b. 1929, Brooklyn, New York; d. 2003, New York, New York). Utilizing an array of mixed mediums, including sand, cut cord, and thick cracked surfaces, this selection of works from the '70s and '80s arose from Smith's extensive travels in East and West Africa, and powerfully invokes his deep connection to the people and history he encountered there.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Smith decided to become an artist after attending a Cézanne exhibit at the MoMA in 1952, quitting his job at the post office to begin art classes. Throughout his decades long career, Smith served as narrator of the experiences of the communities of Brooklyn and Harlem in which he lived and reveled. While struggling to support himself in his early years as an artist, Smith lived a bohemian lifestyle, attending jazz clubs most nights of the week alongside his famed musician friends, and training his eye as a careful documenter of the everyday. Later, he became involved with the fight for equality in the civil rights movement. Out of this environment was born Smith's drive to create a true expression of his people and times, rendered in his own singular modernist language.

From his early career Smith was interested in the study of African history and culture, often visiting the collection of African sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum. In the '70s he traveled extensively in Africa (including Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Kenya, and Ethiopia) and held several exhibitions of his work there. Many works emerged from these experiences, including his *Stories from Africa* series (1975) of vibrant watercolors, which was used to illustrate a book of African folklore for children. His *Dry Bones* series (1982-1984) carried motifs that would be visible in his work before and after. Laden with symbolic meaning, the group of paintings based on these travels carries with it the history of a multitude of places Smith visited during his time in Africa. These often include references to the slave trade and African diaspora, as well as celebrations of traditional dance, clothing, and art. Art historian Sharon Patton indicates this symbolism in a 1984 catalogue entry for an exhibition of the *Dry Bones* series at Randall Galleries in New York:

*Paraphrasing recent comments, sand means a thousand years of civilization; the migration of people seen as historical and cultural links such as "the Moors coming from North Africa to Timbuktu." The irregularly shaped patches of sand (combined with Roplex and*

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*streaked across the work's surface) remind the artist of ancient footprints. The twisted ropes symbolize people. Sand and dry pigment give the effect of weathered stones or rock surfaces or frescoes. Altered, broken, irregular surfaces have always fascinated Vincent Smith because they remind him of old scrolls, parchments and prehistoric cave paintings. The effect of weathered, very old surfaces is at times reinforced by the channels or cracks in the painted surfaces made by the palette knife. The sum effect is that of millennia.*

Largely overlooked in the field of American painting of his era, Vincent Smith's work reflects his desire to change the white-washed art historical narrative in a multitude of ways—through documenting African American life, and emphasizing African culture and history. As Smith said of his career, "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."

Image: Vincent Smith, *Fire in the Diaspora (Dry Bones Series)*, 1983. Oil, sand and rope on canvas, 52 x 72 inches.

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*Moonlight in Togo*

1976, oil and sand on canvas, 26 1/2 x 36 1/2 inches, (VS 76.04)

The bands of color and form which make up *Moonlight in Togo* (1976) recall the words of David Driskell on Vincent Smith in 1977:

*A new dimension of seeing color in a healthy environment akin to that employed by a Tembu colorist when she paints the exterior of her South African home is felt in the layers of painterly texture that these paintings evoke. These canvases created during the last two years bear witness to the fact that literary subjects do not always have to be treated in a painting as though they can only be seen literally for what they are. Equally exciting are the planar relations that formal space creates in his work permitting linear patterns to emerge and designs that look like a well made cloisonne surface.*

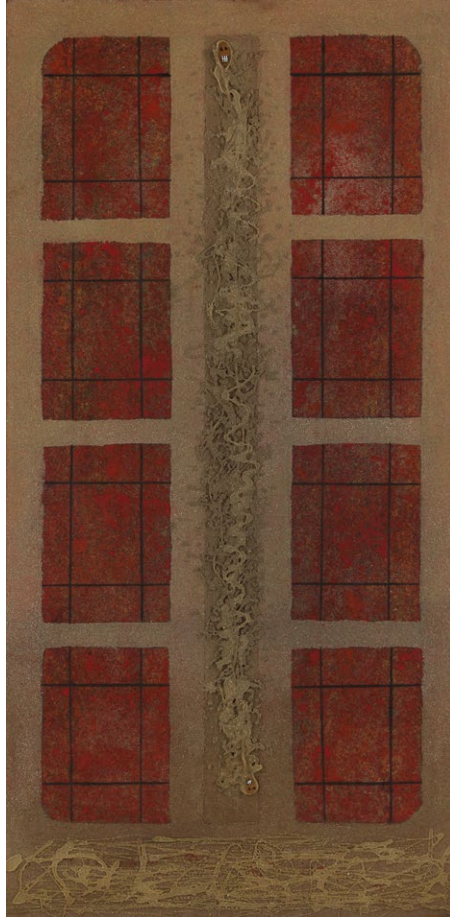
In the delicate "cloisonne surface" invoked by carefully layered sand and paint, Smith creates a tranquil scene of a quiet moon and stars above an endless desert in the West African country of Togo, where he traveled in 1972. While his vibrant palette of yellow, green and blue seems to bring the work a sense of immediacy and life, the rolling sands carry the timeless eternity of the ancient desert.

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*Elmina Slave Castle*

1976, oil, sand and rope on canvas, 72 1/2 x 36 inches, (VS 76.05)

Elmina Slave Castle, located on the western coast of present-day Ghana, was the first European slave-trading post in sub-Saharan Africa. Like other West African slave castles, Elmina housed luxury quarters for the Europeans in the upper levels, while enslaved people were held in horrific conditions in the dungeons below.

Vincent Smith visited the castle on his first trip to Africa in 1972. *Elmina Slave Castle* (1976) is a haunting reflection upon this tortured history. The red, barred windows which form the grid-like structure of the image are reminiscent of the singular windows depicted in photographs of the slave cells at Elmina—the only source of light for enslaved people held there. A short time after painting this work, Smith commented that the rope in his paintings is an abstract representation of “withering” figures, a particularly powerful statement given the context of this image. Smith gives these “withering” figures mask-like faces which mirror each other on the top and bottom of the canvas, emphasizing the vertical structure of the castle. Emerging from the encrusted, sandy masses of rope, these figures seem both ancient and immediately urgent in their swirling movement—demanding our reverence and solemn acknowledgement.

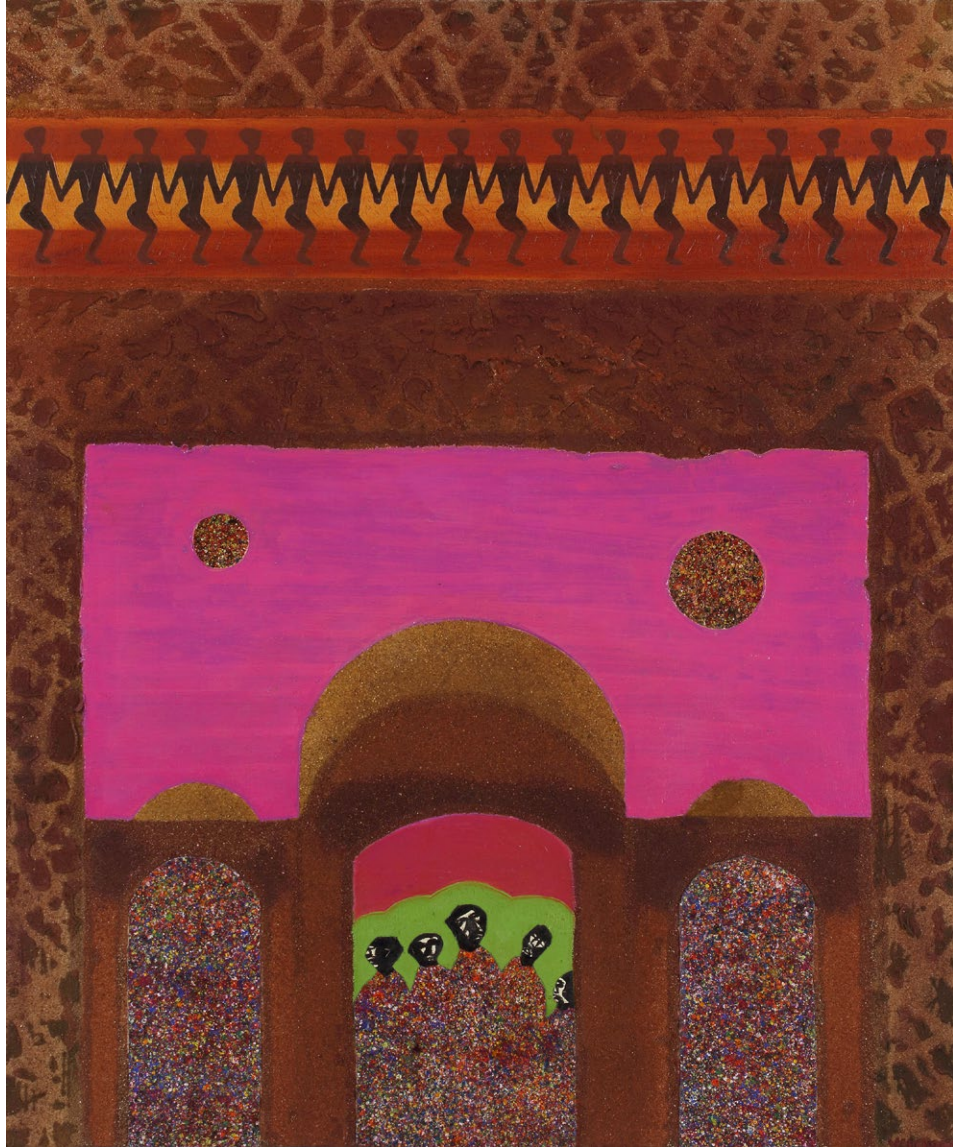
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*La Lalibela*

1983, oil, sand, rope, dry pigment and collage, 36 x 30 inches, (VS 83.08)

After Jerusalem was captured by a Muslim faction in 1187 AD, King Lalibela of Ethiopia set out to build a "New Jerusalem" closer to home—a site which would become a complex of eleven spectacular rock-hewn churches some 400 miles from modern day Addis Ababa. Vincent Smith first traveled to East Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, on a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1973. While Smith's signature gritty and cracked surfaces, encrusted with sand, invoke "the sum effect of millennia" as Sharon Patton wrote in 1983, a striking palette of brilliant pink, green, and red framing the worshippers in the center of the image references the continued life of this ancient, revered site.

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*Fire in the Diaspora (Dry Bones Series)*

1983, oil, sand and rope on canvas, 52 x 72 inches, (VS 83.09)

Vincent Smith's 1983 painting *Fire in the Diaspora* is a dynamic image which reflects upon the magnitude of its subject—the African Diaspora—in powerfully simple bands of color and collage. It is part of Smith's *Dry Bones* series, which often makes allusions to the history and shared culture of the African Diaspora. In this example Smith takes on the subject directly, in a fiery, layered rendering of oil, sand, and rope. The mask-like faces of numerous figures in the lower segment of the canvas appear to be erupting in flames—suggesting pressing turmoil and suffering. Susan Patton wrote in 1984 of the ways in which paintings of the *Dry Bones* series are descriptive of American and African experience, both contemporary and historical:

*The glowing orbs suggest the burning sun of Africa or a hot Autumn day in the Bronx; silhouetted figures within a horizontal frieze are reminiscent of the rhythmic designs depicting primordial beings in dogon (Mali) granary doors. The linking figures convey several meanings: the African slave-trade, the cultural connection between Black people of the world and Mankind in general. The theme is continuity and sustained cultural identity.*

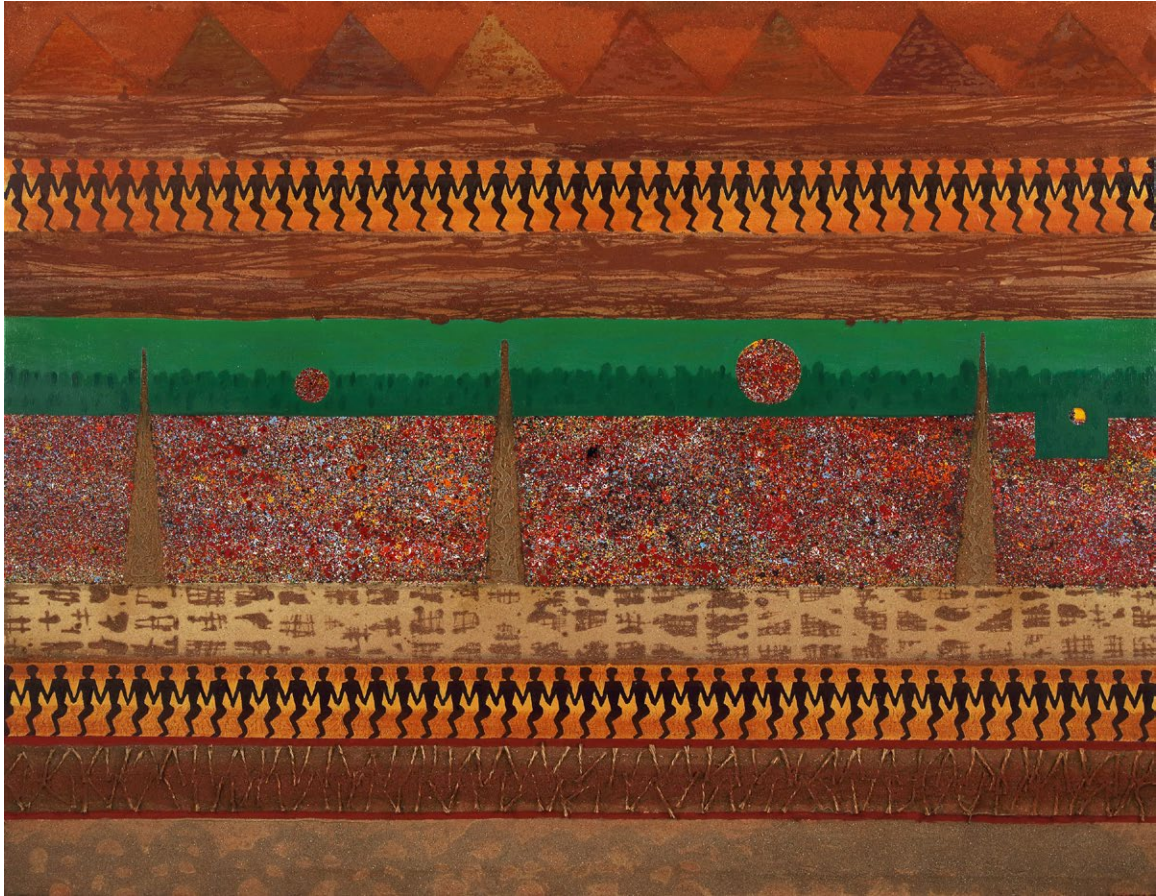
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*The Long Trek to Ouagadougou*

1985, oil, sand, rope and dry pigment on canvas, 57 1/4 x 93 1/4 inches, (VS 85.02)

Referencing the capital and largest city of Burkina Faso in Western Africa, Vincent Smith's 1985 painting *The Long Trek to Ouagadougou* is monumental, imposing in its strong bands of color interrupted by varied symbolic forms and collage elements of sand and cut cord. Burkina Faso occupies a high grassy plateau, and Ougadougou is known for its large trees and rich red clay ground—perhaps referenced in the painting's striking central band of green surrounded by a reddish palette. This painting was part of Smith's *Dry Bones* series, which references the cultural and ancestral history of Africa, and the shared experiences of humankind. Sharon Patton revealed some of the symbolic meaning behind elements of the painting in a 1984 essay:

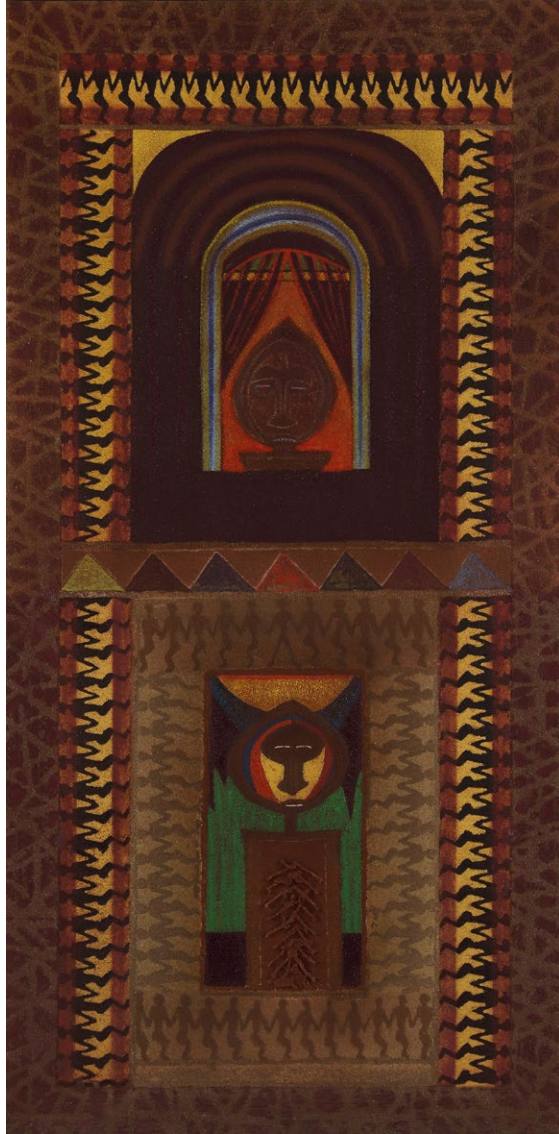
*The pyramid, a universal symbol of immortality, of ancient civilization is rendered in faceted colors... These works of the 1980s show his increased attention upon Africa and the continued use of the life-blood color of reds, the raw and burnt siennas of the ancestral earth (Vincent recalls the red clays of Ouagadougou) and the yellow ochre of the Sahara. The flow of the emphasis upon color is attributed to the African experience.*

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*Benin Shrine*

1989, oil, sand and rope on canvas, 72 x 36 inches, (VS 89.01)

Ancestral altars date to the earliest days of the Benin Kingdom, which prospered from the 13th-19th century in modern day Nigeria. Crucial for commemorating the dead, marking their achievements, and serving as means of communication between the dead and the living, these altars were central to the Benin culture. This painting, from Smith's *Dry Bones* series, represents the physical and spiritual roles of these altars—in the brass figures stationed centrally in the composition, and in the bands of dancing bodies, a motif of the series, here depicted in varying opacities, as if fading into the past. Sand worked into the surface of the painting invokes a sense of age and history, while the cut cord represents the physical body.

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These six radiant and character-filled watercolors come from a collection of sixteen completed in 1975, as part of a book of African folklore for children entitled *Stories from Africa*. Each illustration was originally published alongside a story from folklore written by Marguerite P. Dolch.



Vincent Smith, 1975





*How Man and Woman Were Made (Stories from Africa)*

1975, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, (VS 62)

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*Why We Have Rain (Stories from Africa)*

1975, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, (VS 61)

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*Kintu (Stories from Africa)*

1975, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, (VS 63)

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*The Daughter of the Sun and the Moon (Stories from Africa)*

1975, gouache and ink on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches, (VS 75.01)

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*The Lost Daughter (Stories from Africa)*

1975, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, (VS 57)

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*Little Kibatti (Stories from Africa)*

1975, watercolor and gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, (VS 59)

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*I wanted to walk in Africa. I wanted to put my two feet in Ethiopia. I wanted to feel that I'd come back to my roots, that this is where it all began, the beginning of man and I wanted to walk in Africa. Smell the trees, smell the flowers. When I stepped off the airplane and put my two feet down and I knew I was in Africa, it was a hell of a feeling. Tremendous feeling. It's like going back in time and space. You don't have to be born some place to have a very strong affinity with it.*

**—Vincent Smith, 1978**