

If you ask me why I make sculpture, I must answer that it is my way of life, my balance, and my justification for being. —David Smith



David Smith welding *Agricola 1* (1951–52), detail, Bolton Landing, New York, ca. 1951. Photo by John Stewart.

< DAVID SMITH >

1906–1965

ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Smith, who would become one of the most influential and innovative American sculptors of the twentieth century, was born in Decatur, Indiana, in 1906. His mother was a schoolteacher and devout Methodist; his father was a telephone engineer and part-time inventor, who fostered in his son a reverence for machinery. After his family moved to Paulding, Ohio, in 1921, Smith developed an interest in art. Although he spent one year at Ohio University in Athens, Smith felt that the studio art curriculum offered there did not provide the stimulation or approach that he sought. Smith, who was a man of formidable stature, complained, “I wish somebody had taught me to draw in proportion to my own size, to draw as freely and as easily, with the same movements that I dressed myself with, or that I ate with, or worked within the factory. Instead, I was required to use a little brush, a little pencil, to work on a little area, which put me into a position of knitting—not exactly my forte.” Throughout his lifetime, drawing would remain an important component of his process and

expression. In the spring of 1925 he left school. During that summer, he worked as a welder and riveter in South Bend, Indiana, at a Studebaker automobile factory, where his understanding and love for industrial materials and techniques took root. Much of this early training would prove essential to Smith's career as an artist.

Between 1927 and 1932, Smith studied painting at the Art Students League in New York City. He began to incorporate found objects such as shells, bones, wood, and wire into his paintings, adding depth and transforming them into sculptural reliefs. Soon after, inspired by magazine photos of welded sculptures by Julio González and Pablo Picasso, Smith began constructing his own welded-steel sculptures. He was also drawn to Surrealism and its underlying concept that the subconscious was the source of creativity. Although never formally trained as a sculptor, his earlier on-the-job training at the automobile factory served him well. Smith began experimenting with constructed sculpture (as opposed to the more traditional ways of creating sculpture by casting in bronze or carving in stone). While traditional materials and techniques were still used in the

early twentieth century, sculptors such as Smith were turning to new materials and methods of construction that they thought were more relevant to the industrial and scientific age. By 1934 he had settled into a "studio" at Terminal Iron Works in Brooklyn, where he constructed innovative and remarkably diverse sculpture from used machine parts, scrap metal, and other found objects.

In 1940 Smith moved permanently to Bolton Landing, New York, a small community north of Lake George in the Adirondack mountains. He named his studio there Terminal Iron Works, after the machine shop on the Brooklyn waterfront where he had worked previously, and created what he called a "sculpture farm" in the fields around his house. "My sculpture is part of my world," he once said in an interview. "It's part of my everyday living; it reflects my studio, my house, my trees, the nature of the world I live in." Modern industrial machinery intrigued him. He made sculpture out of previously used, discarded industrial metal, including scraps from old farm equipment. When he used found objects, he integrated them into his work so that their original function was obscured in the over-all design.

In the early 1950s, Smith began to enlarge the size of many of his welded sculptures, making constructions slightly taller than human beings. He also began to create work in series, first with the *Agricolas*, welded steel constructions that incorporated parts of farm tools, and then with the *Tanktotems* that incorporated concave and convex elements supplied by industrial boiler tank tops that he ordered from a factory.

In 1962, Smith was invited by the Italian government to the town of Voltri, near Genoa to create a work for *The Festival of Two Worlds* in Spoleto. With a crew of Italian workmen, he constructed in one month not one sculpture, as commissioned, but twenty-seven. These pieces incorporated tongs, wheels, wrenches, and other industrial detritus Smith found on the floor of an abandoned factory in Voltri. After returning from Italy, Smith continued to work at an impressive rate.

In 1961, Smith devoted himself to his last series, entitled *Cubi*, which comprised 28 monumental, abstract steel sculptures. These celebrated sculptures were composed from a repertoire of stainless steel geometric cubes and cylinders of varying proportions that Smith burnished to a highly reflective surface. He told critic Thomas Hess, "I made them and I polished them in such a way that on a dull day they take on a dull blue, or the color of the sky in the late afternoon sun, the glow, golden like the rays, the colors of nature."

During the course of his thirty-five-year career, David Smith produced an extraordinary amount of work spanning many approaches: painting, sculptures, drawings, etchings, lithographs, jewelry, ceramics, and photographs. In addition, he wrote extensive accounts of how he saw his art. Smith died May 23, 1965, in an automobile accident near Bennington, Vermont. In 1969, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, organized a major exhibition of his work.

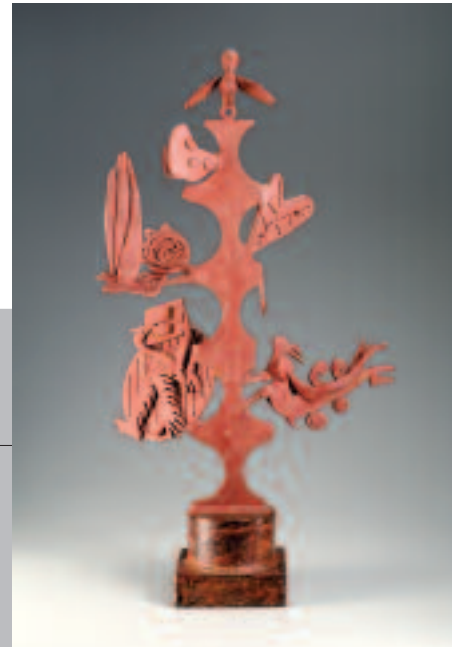
There is no such thing as truly abstract. Man always has to work from his life. —David Smith

Pillar of Sunday, 1945. Painted steel, 31 x 16 7/8 x 3 1/2 inches.
Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington

< PERSONAL SYMBOLS >

Completed in August of 1945, *Pillar of Sunday* is a witty and ironic commentary that incorporates memories from Smith's teenage years, growing-up in the small town of Paulding, Ohio. Art historians have frequently interpreted the imagery attached to this sculpture like leaves on a tree. Although some of the imagery is clearly recognizable, including birds and an inscribed heart, the meaning of these personal symbols is less apparent.

The private symbolism of works such as *Pillar of Sunday* is suggestive, ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations. This work and others from the period are thought to be Smith's way of processing childhood recollections. "Just as the child who draws a landscape or outer-space battle inhabits that scene as he creates it, so Smith seems to have inhabited and animated the forms he was inventing." It has been suggested that one reason abstraction may have appealed to Smith is that it provided a way for him to both express and disguise, his innermost feelings. Through the use of abstraction he could recover and use potent memories without revealing himself entirely. The ambiguity of his



symbols, which frequently merge many images into one, provided Smith with the freedom to invent new combinations, and the viewer with the freedom to interpret them.

His glyphs are pictorial objects, fetish-like things, usually quite complex and realized in the round. However disguised and ambiguous, these forms often seem to be the carriers of the symbolic implied content of the sculpture. In many works, a variety of linear structures (in this case the tree-like structure) display or enclose the glyphs. Smith creates the expectation that *Pillar of Sunday* is a puzzle, waiting to be deciphered, but this approach may not yield success for the viewer. More often than not, Smith revealed in order to conceal. As his work evolved these personal symbols would be replaced by more direct and intuitive responses to materials.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Pillar of Sunday*, 1945

- ▶ Describe this sculpture as carefully as you can. If you visit the museum, be sure to walk around it and view it from all angles.
- ▶ What are your initial reactions to this work?
- ▶ Does this sculpture look like or make you think of anything? If so, what?
- ▶ Smith grew up in Paulding, a small town in Ohio, and it is believed that this sculpture was based on his memories of Sundays that he spent in Paulding. Although we do not know exactly what this sculpture meant to Smith, what recognizable images does he include?
- ▶ Although Smith did not elaborate on the individual meaning of each symbol, what do you think their meaning might be?
- ▶ Why might an artist decide to be ambiguous about some of the symbols and images he/she creates?
- ▶ Do you think it is necessary to understand the artist's meaning in a work of art in order to appreciate it?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- The inspiration for *Pillar of Sunday* was Smith's childhood memories related to the events, rituals, foods, and sounds that he associated with the Sundays of his boyhood. Make a list of the various associations that you have with Sunday. Be sure that they include all of your senses: things that you see, taste, smell, hear and touch during the course of the day. Compose a poem using these words and share it with your classmates. What title will you use for your poem about Sunday?
- Some symbols contain clear and easily understood ideas, while others can hold private, individual meaning. Develop personal symbols that express your own associations with a specific day. It can be a day of the week, or a date that has special significance for you. Like Smith, the symbols you create can be personal and need not have an apparent interpretation for all who view them.
- Layering sketches on tracing paper is a technique that can be used to create an abstract symbol with personal meaning. Have multiple sheets of tracing paper available. Begin by drawing a symbol for each of the following:
 - a noun, for instance: chair/tree/house/car/animal
 - a verb, for instance: thrust/shut/collapse/swing/melt
 - an adjective, for instance: turbulent/sharp/lively/deep/hollow
- When your drawings are completed, layer them, like a sandwich, and add a top sheet of tracing paper. Select, modify, emphasize, and revise your symbol into one that includes aspects of each preliminary drawing. Your top drawing will be a new personal symbol created by synthesizing three symbols into one.
- In her book on David Smith, author Karen Wilkin states, "Just as the child who draws a landscape or outer-space battle inhabits that scene as he creates it, so Smith seems to have inhabited and animated the forms he was inventing." Have you ever created or encountered a work of art that has made you feel as though you have become part of it? Describe the work and your experience of it.

Drawing is the most direct, closest to the true self, the most natural liberation of man. —David Smith

Cockfight Variation 2, ca. 1945.
Ink, wash, and pastel on paper. 25 x 19 3/4 inches.
The Estate of David Smith



< DRAWING >

Smith believed fervently in the power and truth of drawings. He drew regularly throughout his career for many different reasons: to make notes, plan sculptures, jot down observations, explore techniques, relax, and make beautiful, independent works of art. His vast output of works on paper provide a telling record of his visual thought and experimentation and in themselves represent a great aesthetic accomplishment.

Smith was adamant about drawing every day, whether from photographs, his imagination, or from a model. His sketchbooks reveal that he drew inspiration from the most varied sources: natural history museum skeletons or stuffed animals, country landscapes and city perspectives, nudes, newspaper photographs, Near Eastern seals, hieroglyphs, machinery, medical book illustrations, newspaper stories, and classical philosophy.

Smith's drawings and sculptures were frequently related. Drawing was essential because its smaller scale allowed him the freedom to experiment with numerous ideas, some of which were later incorporated into sculptural

form. Drawing allowed Smith to work quickly and make changes in contrast to the laborious and time-consuming process of large-scale welded sculpture.

In the drawing *Cockfight Variation 2*, we see Smith's conception of the action and violence found in a fight between two roosters. Smith recalls, "It so happened that I had a small drawing in my book on *Cockfight*. One day I picked up a piece of metal that had been cut from another sculpture. Its grace and rhythm suggested my drawing. I don't go to cockfights but fighting roosters are raised by my friends in the hills and meets are regularly held near Saratoga." Here we see Smith's exploratory drawings, experience and sensitivity to materials coming together to transform the initial drawing into a three-dimensional work. It is this dialogue between mediums that makes clear his conviction that every step of the artist's activity—a work stream, as he called it—expresses an inherent part of his artistic vision.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Cockfight-Variation*, 1945



- ▶ Without knowing the title of this drawing describe it as fully as possible. What adjectives come to mind? What title would you give to this drawing?
- ▶ Compare this drawing to Smith's sculptural rendition the same subject. What aspects of the drawing are incorporated into the sculpture? What components of the drawing are not apparent in the sculptural version?
- ▶ Which version of this subject do you think is more successful? Why?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Imagine that this drawing comes to life. What would it look like five minutes after it is animated? Using a tracing paper overlay, or by importing this drawing into a layer in PhotoShop® on a computer, draw a new version that reflects how you think the action might progress.
 - Choose another subject that contains lots of action. Create a drawing that captures the quality of the movement. Using the experience of making the drawing, create a sculpture in any medium (clay, thin cardboard, Styrofoam, copper foil, wire, etc.) that suggests the same energy. Do not copy the drawing, but rather use the experience of drawing to inform how you approach making the sculpture. When you are done compare the two works and the relationship between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional versions.
 - Smith was not happy with his first sculpture that used the subject of a cockfight. He stated, "When it was finished I found it in no way was related to the cubic structure which my drawing originally had. So still having interest in the subject as I had conceived it, I went ahead and did another cockfight based on the drawing and called #2 *Cockfight Variation*."
- If you were to do another sculpture with the same theme as above, how would you change it? Why would you change it?
- Smith stated that, "I truly believe that anything anyone has seen he can draw . . . and that all that stands between his drawing anything in the world is his own inhibition. . . . [It is] more the mental block that keeps him from trying that which he deems impossible." Do you agree or disagree with Smith's belief that everyone can draw? Explain.

I cannot live in New York. . . . I want to live alone and far away. I want to live in nature and when I live in nature I have the most idealized concept possible. —David Smith

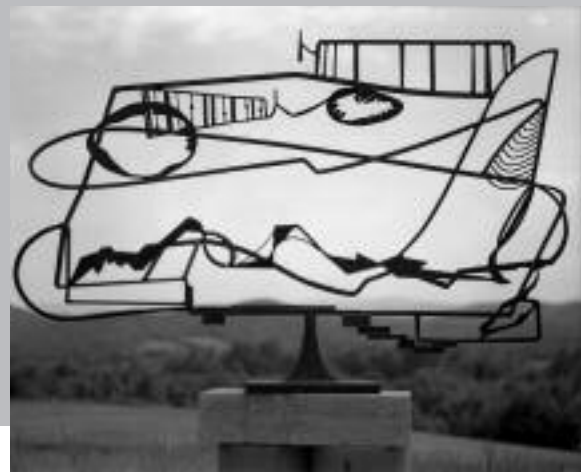
< NATURE AND LANDSCAPE >

In 1940 Smith and his wife, the painter Dorothy Dehner, permanently moved from Brooklyn to Bolton Landing in upstate New York. Smith immersed himself in nature and the land. In return the natural environment became his home, a subject for his work, a backdrop for his photographs, and eventually the site for an expansive display of his sculptures.

In 1946 Smith began a series of landscape sculptures. Although the subjects of his landscapes do not signify a specific vista, many of the works in this series reflected the tree-covered mountains of the New York Adirondacks. Strong patterns suggest the rugged terrain of this mountainous landscape.

Hudson River Landscape (1951) is considered Smith's first mature work and demonstrates his continuing attempt to unite painting and sculpture. On several occasions Smith described the genesis of *Hudson River Landscape*, as being the product of many drawings that he made while traveling by railroad between Albany and Poughkeepsie.

During this period Smith thought of sculpture not in traditional terms of volume and mass, but as "drawing in space." Many of these works are framed by an outside border in much the same way that a frame is used around a painting. Although made from steel, they are constructed as linear calligraphy. Their frontal alignment reminds us of their relationship to drawing and painting. They also stress the fluid movement of travel through a landscape and the free associations that the various elements can inspire. Of even greater importance to Smith than a specific place, was the relationship of earth to sky, and the individual's relationship to the universe.



Hudson River Landscape, 1951.
Welded steel, 49 1/2 x 75 x 16 3/4 inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951

- ▶ Before knowing the title of this work, spend a few minutes looking at it. Jot down any words or associations that come to mind. Make a cumulative list of these words with your classmates. Which words were used the most? The title of this work is *Hudson River Landscape*. Which words on your list might be used to describe a river or the land around it?
- ▶ What aspects of this work seem to relate to things you might notice from the window of a train while riding alongside a river?
- ▶ According to Smith, “Your response may not travel down the Hudson River but it may travel on any river or on a higher level. . . . I want you to travel, by perception, the path I traveled in creating it.” Explain what Smith might mean by this statement.
- ▶ Smith’s approach to work from this period is sometimes referred to as “drawing in space.” In 1952 Smith wrote, “If a sculpture could be a line drawing, then speculate that a line drawing removed from its paper bond and viewed from the side would be a beautiful thing.” In what ways is *Hudson River Landscape* like a drawing or painting? In what ways is it uniquely sculptural?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- The character of a “drawing in space” can be achieved by creating a sculpture in soft wire using a needle-nosed pliers (and perhaps a mallet) to bend and shape the line of wire into a sculpture. Like Smith you can use an observed or remembered landscape as inspiration, or another subject.
- According to Smith, *Hudson River Landscape* is not based on a single moment. Rather it is an accumulation multiple views, experiences and perceptions over time and distance. According to Smith, *Hudson River Landscape*, started from drawings made on a train between Albany and Poughkeepsie a synthesis of drawings from ten trips going and coming over this 75-mile stretch. On this basis I started a drawing for a sculpture. As I began, I shook a quart bottle of India ink, it flew over my hand, it looked like my landscape. I placed my hand on paper and from the image this left I traveled with the landscape to the other landscapes and their objects, with additions, deductions, directives which flashed past too fast to tabulate, but whose elements are in the finished sculpture. No part is diminished reality, the total is a unity of symbolized reality, which to my mind is a greater reality than the river scene. Is my work *Hudson River Landscape*, the Hudson River, or is it the travel, the vision, the ink spot, or does it matter? The sculpture exists on its own, it is the entity. The name is an affectionate designation of the point prior to travel. My objective was not these words, or the Hudson River, but to create the existence of a sculpture. Your response may not travel down the Hudson River but it may travel on any river or on a higher level. . . . I want you to travel, by perception, the path I traveled in creating it.”
- Have you ever taken a train ride and looked out the window at the passing landscape? Where were you? What memories do you have of that experience? Create a narrative description, poem or drawing that captures your recollections of that journey.
- Think of a trip that you have taken multiple times. It can be your trip to school, a relative’s home, or a place you revisit on vacation. First, create a work that focuses on a specific day and a particular moment of a trip to this place. Then create a second work that is a synthesis of all the trips you have taken to this place and creates the “feel” of these accumulated experiences. Compare the two works. In what ways are they similar? How are they different from one to another? Which do you prefer? Why?

They become kind of personages and sometimes they cry out to me that I should have been better or bigger, and mostly they tell me that I should have done that twelve years before—or twenty years before.

—David Smith

Running Daughter, 1956–60.
Painted steel. 100 7/8 x 334 x 20 inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Kolin

< PERSONAGES >

During the 1950s the upright “figure” became one of Smith’s dominant themes. These works are linked by a common verticality and suggestion of the human figure heightened by horizontal divisions that can be interpreted as head, torso, and limbs without resembling them specifically. Their verticality and presence make us think of them as personages sometimes confrontational, sometimes playful, not as mere upright assemblages of metal.

Smith produced and named several series that included figural works. The *Agricolas* (1951–59) were made from salvaged farm implements, the *Sentinels* (1956–61), imply an attentive and watchful presence. The *Forgings* (1955) are single slim columns of steel, given gesture by the blows of a hammer on red-hot metal. Another series of sculptures known as *Tanktotems* (1952–60), incorporate the ends of industrial boiler tanks, and suggest creatures from the world of science fiction. Smith referred to them as “monsters.”

Running Daughter may have been inspired by Smith’s own daughter running across the fields of Bolton Landing. Throughout his career,



Smith repeatedly rendered moving figures—identified as dancers, bathers, and running figures—in various media. Forward movement was suggested by the extension of one leg, or on some works, the addition of actual wheels to the base.

Smith spent much of his time living and working in solitude at his home and studio at Bolton Landing. It has been suggested that the great number of large sculptures he produced in the last ten years of his life, can be interpreted as a way of literally filling this aloneness. When his studio was full he began to set sculptures on the land surrounding his house eventually filling the north and south fields with his works.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Running Daughter*, 1956–60

- ▶ Look carefully at *Running Daughter*. How has Smith suggested the figure is running?
Which way might she be moving?
Which parts of this figure can you identify?
Are there parts that are puzzling or seem to be missing? What are they?
How has the artist suggested that his subject is a young girl?
- ▶ If you did not know the title that Smith had given this work, what would you title it? Look carefully at the sculpture for clues and think of several possibilities. Compare titles with your classmates.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- *Running Daughter* suggests a figure in action. With your classmates brainstorm two lists. The first will be a list of personages, the second a list of actions. For example:

<u>PERSONAGES</u>	<u>ACTIONS</u>
Dancer	Skipping
Swimmer	Hopping
Soldier	Thinking
Baby	Marching
Teacher	Sleeping

Select a word from each list and make a sketch for a sculpture that expresses how that personage and action could be expressed in one sculpture. Make several drawings that explore ways to depict a person in motion. Look at these together with your classmates to determine which drawings are the most successful. Create a sculpture that synthesizes these two concepts into one work.

- Look through your own family photos, newspapers, or magazines to find an image that you would like to use as the basis for an abstract sculpture. Why did this photo appeal to you? If you were to create a sculpture that used this image as inspiration, what materials would you use? How large would it be? What title would you give it? Where would the final work be situated?
- Through on-line research or by photocopying images from books find as many reproductions of Smith's figural sculptures as you can, including those from his *Agrícolas*, *Forgings*, *Sentinels*, and *Tanktotems* series. Lay them out on a table. Without consulting the object labels create groupings that seem to have similar characteristics. Write down descriptions of the similarities that seem to connect works to the series. Don't worry if your final groupings are not exactly in keeping with Smith's. Even art historians have sometimes had difficulty understanding his system of categorization.
- Pick one of the Smith sculptures that you found during your research and write a story about this character. What aspects of the sculpture helped you to determine your character's traits?

I try to approach each thing without following the pattern that I made with the other one. They can begin with a found object; they can begin with no object. They can begin sometimes even when I'm sweeping the floor and I stumble and kick a few parts and happen to throw them into an alignment that sets me off thinking and sets off a vision of how it would finish if it all had that kind of accidental beauty to it. I want to be like a poet, in a sense. I don't want to seek the same orders. —David Smith

< COLLAGE AND FOUND MATERIALS >

Early in his career Smith discovered that sculpture could come from the collected remains of nature or manufacturing. Although he incorporated coral, bones, and frying pans in his constructions, most of the found objects he used came from the worlds of industry and agriculture—two areas of life with which he strongly identified. Smith frequently transformed his found objects in a way that completely disguised their previous use, so that they lost their original identity and became another neutral element in the completed sculpture.

In 1962 Smith was invited to spend thirty days making sculpture at an abandoned steel factory in Voltri, Italy. It was the ideal working arrangement for him: the factory setting, a large supply of scrap steel, and a group of assistants. Smith made twenty-seven sculptures in thirty days. At the end of his time in Voltri, Smith had a large amount of the scrap materials shipped back home. His next series, the *Voltri-Boltions* (or *Voltrons* or *VBs*) were works made back at his Bolton Landing home using the steel and found objects from the

stockpiles of Italian factory materials that he kept adjacent to his studio.

Some of the most radically new *Voltri* images are the workbench still lifes that use found objects in a more literal way than at any other time in his career. Tools, tongs, and the stuff of the factory are placed on workbenches, exactly where you would expect to find them. The objects appear neither to have been altered physically, nor to be transformed. But Smith also used identical elements in other works of the series, in nonliteral ways, more characteristically subordinating them to their new contexts.



Voltri XIX, 1962.
Steel. 55 1/4 x 45 x 50 inches.
Private collection, Boston.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Voltri XIX*, 1962

- ▶ Look carefully at this sculpture. Describe it as fully as you can.
- ▶ Does it remind you of anything you have seen before? What parts of it are familiar or recognizable? Which parts are unfamiliar? Which parts seem to be least altered by the artist, which parts have been changed the most?
- ▶ Smith found the forms and industrial scrap materials in the factory in Voltri so appealing that he had some shipped back to his home. He was known to have said, "I kind of like rust." What do you think he liked about these materials? Do they appeal to you? Why, why not?
- ▶ In what ways is *Voltri XIX* similar to traditional still-life subjects? In what way is it different?
- ▶ If you owned this sculpture, where and how would you display it? Why?
- ▶ What do you think the other side(s) of this work looks like?
- ▶ *Voltri XIX* is different from other Smith sculptures in that it seems more grounded in reality and recognizable than many of his other works. Compare it to another sculpture in this guide, or in the exhibition. Which do you prefer? Why?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Assemble a collection of objects that appeal to you and lay them out on a table. Do you notice qualities that they have in common? What are they? What are their differences? Are you aware of why these particular objects are of interest to you? Do these objects have any personal connotations or histories that we could not know without you telling us? Write down a list of adjectives that could be used to describe their qualities. Compare both the objects you have collected and adjectives with your classmates.
- Artists have created art from materials as diverse and unusual as live ants, dead flies, Vaseline, pills, car fenders, lightbulbs, and the discarded tires from cars. Research an artist who has made work from an unusual material. What about the material was of interest to the artist? Describe your response to their work.
- Create your own found object sculpture. Describe your process. Did you run into any problems as you progressed? What were they? How did you solve them? Did you choose to have the found material recognizable or seamlessly incorporated into the rest of the work? How did you connect the materials? In what ways is your found-object sculpture successful? Are there things that you might change?
- In 1950 Smith wrote this poem:

There is something rather noble about junk—selected junk—
junk which has in one era performed nobly in function for
common man—
has by function been formed by the smithy's hand alone
and without bearings roll or bell
has fulfilled its function, stayed behind,
is not yet relic or antique or precious
which has been seen by the eyes of all men and left for me—
to be found as the cracks in sidewalks
as the grain in wood
as the drops in grass
out of snow hummock
as the dent in mud from
a bucket of poured storms
as the clouds float and
as beauties come
to be used, for an order
to be arranged
to be now perceived
by new ownership

What is your reaction to this poem? What are your own associations with "junk"? Write a poem that focuses on an inanimate subject with which you have developed a close and unique affinity.

I make them and I polish them in such a way that on a dull day, they take on the dull blue, or the color of the sky in the late afternoon sun, the glow, golden like the rays, the colors of nature. . . . I have used atmosphere in a reflective way on the surfaces. They are colored by the sky and the surrounding, the green or blue of water. Some are down by the water and some are by the mountains. They reflect the colors. They are designed for outdoors. —David Smith

< GEOMETRY AND LIGHT >

In 1961 Smith began work on a new series titled *Cubi* that would eventually consist of 28 monumental sculptures in stainless steel. The *Cubis* can be identified by the focus on volumetric, geometric form, and polished stainless-steel surfaces. These huge sculptures, some of them more than ten feet high, continue to demonstrate Smith's interest in gravity-defying relationships and asymmetrical balance.

Smith arrived at the compositions of his *Cubis* by working through ideas using cardboard models (maquettes) that he constructed in three dimensions from old cardboard boxes and cartons. Once he settled on a configuration the stainless-steel volumetric forms were ordered to his specifications from a factory. These hollow forms were then welded together into the final sculpture.

Once assembled Smith used an electrically powered polishing disk to clean the welds and inscribe the surfaces with gestural marks that Smith likened to brush strokes. The burnished surfaces both absorb and reflect light, so that the appearance of the sculptures changes

according to the weather and time of day, an effect Smith enjoyed. He believed that this method created, "a structure that can face the sun and hold its own against the blaze and the power."

Some of the *Cubis* are vaguely figural, while others, such as *Cubi XXVII*, suggest architecture. This example is one of three *Cubis* usually referred to as "Gates" (although Smith called them "arches"), which frame a central opening. By including a precariously placed cylinder and two small tilted blocks that balance on edge, Smith adds elements of energy and surprise to an otherwise stable configuration.



Cubi XXVII, 1965.
Stainless steel.

111 3/8 x 87 3/4 x 34 inches.

Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show *Cubi XXVII*, 1965

- ▶ Find a wall where you can project the image of *Cubi XXVII* to its full size. Describe your reactions to the work.
- ▶ *Cubi XXVII* has been likened to gates, arches, and architecture. In what ways is it like and unlike each of these references? Are there additional structures or objects that it reminds you of? What are they? Describe the relationship that you see.
- ▶ Like many of Smith's sculptures *Cubi XXVII* was meant to be placed outside. Imagine that this work has been given as a gift to the town or city you live in. Where would be the best place for it to be permanently installed? Why? Compare the site you have chosen with those of your classmates.
- ▶ One of the identifying features of the *Cubi* series is Smith's unique treatment of surface. He felt that by using polished stainless steel, his work would reflect the quality of light and atmosphere. Do you think he was successful? Explain. Over the course of his career, Smith experimented with many materials and surfaces for his sculptures, including polishing, painting (sometimes with many coats of vivid color) and leaving them to rust. Imagine *Cubi XXVII* with another surface. Describe how it would change the impact of the work.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS



Untitled, 1962.
Spray enamel on paper. 20 x 26 inches.
Alvin S. Lane Collection, New York

- Smith experimented with various two-dimensional methods for visualizing his ideas. One involved using cardboard shapes, or other found objects, that he would arrange on a sheet of paper and then spray paint the surface. When the cardboard was removed it left a stenciled image. Smith called these "think pieces" or "sprays." The results might serve as sketches for his sculptures. Try making your own. This project is best done outside. First, cover a wide area with a plastic tarpaulin to protect against errant spatters. On a sheet of paper arrange cardboard shapes, and/or discarded, relatively flat, found objects. When you are pleased with your arrangement, partially fill a spray bottle (the kind used for misting plants) with a non-toxic ink or paint diluted with water. Spray over the surface and then carefully remove the objects.
- When you have done several "sprays," consider which one might make a successful sculpture. If you could transform it into a three-dimensional sculpture what material(s) would you use? What size would it be? How would you treat the surface? What title would you give it? Where would you place it when completed?
- Smith created his maquettes from cardboard boxes and cartons. Over the course of a month collect a large variety of boxes in different sizes and shapes. Smith believed that having an abundance of materials to choose from was essential, so collect much more than you think you will need. Work in a group with a few other students to create a three-dimensional, standing sculpture from the boxes you have collected. Lengths of wooden dowels along with tape can be used to connect the boxes. Consideration should also be given to the surface treatment of your work. When finished display your creation inside or outside of your school, but remember that unlike Smith's work that was fabricated in materials designed for prolonged outside exposure, cardboard boxes are vulnerable to the elements.
- Smith was at the height of his creative powers when he tragically died in an auto accident in 1965. He had created 28 works in this last series. Research other works in the *Cubi* series. Using any digital graphics software, create a computer-generated drawing that suggests what *Cubi XXIX* might have looked like had Smith continued his work. Compare your creations with those of your classmates and be ready to explain the connections to the rest of the *Cubi* series and how this work suggests the "next step."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carmean, E. A., Jr. *David Smith* (exh. cat.). Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1982.

Causey, Andrew. *Sculpture Since 1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Fry, Edward F. *David Smith: Painter, Sculptor, Draftsman*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1982.

Giménez, Carmen. *David Smith: A Centennial* (exh. cat.). New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006.

Gray, Cleve, ed. *David Smith by David Smith. Sculpture and Writings*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1972.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.

———. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Marcus, Stanley E. *David Smith: The Sculptor and His Work*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.

McCoy, Garnett, ed. *David Smith*. New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973.

Smith, Candida. *The Fields of David Smith*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1999.

Wilkin, Karen. *David Smith*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984.

Website: Estate of David Smith
<http://www.davidsmithestate.org>

Website: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
<http://hirshhorn.si.edu/education/interactive.html>

Website: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum

FOR YOUTH:

Greenberg, Jan, and Sandra Jordan. *The Sculptor's Eye: Looking at Contemporary American Art*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1993.

———. *The American Eye: Eleven Artists of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1995. (See Chapter 9 for a discussion on David Smith.)

Opie, Mary-Jane. *Sculpture: A Visual History of the Art of Sculpture, from Its Prehistoric Beginnings to the Works of the Modern Masters*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 1994.

ABSTRACT art in which the elements—line, shape, texture, or color—rather than a recognizable object have been stressed.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM a style of art introduced by American artists in the 1940s and '50s in which color, line, shape, and /or texture is stressed rather than using a recognizable image to express emotion and meaning.

ADDITIVE PROCESS (direct—metal) a building-up of objects from plaster, clay, wood, or metal fragments, joined mechanically or by adhesives.

AGRICOLA a name coined by Smith for a series of more than twenty sculptures made from discarded farming implements and machinery. The term refers to an agrarian phenomena and a Latin name—which means both “farmer” and “agricultural deity.”

ASSEMBLAGE a work of art composed of materials, objects, or parts originally intended for other purposes.

CAST *n.* a hollow mold from which a work of art can be made; *v.* the act of making a work of art from a hollow mold by pouring molten metal, liquid plaster, or other material into the mold and letting it harden.

CUBISM an early twentieth-century-art movement in which objects have been abstracted by breaking and fragmenting them into geometric forms.

FOUND OBJECT an existing object found or selected by the artist and incorporated into a work of art.

FORGING to form or shape heated metal with blows from a hammer. Smith gave this name to a series of a dozen works made from 1954–56. The

series is characterized by rods of steel stock that Smith forged into abstract vertical personages.

MAQUETTE the French word for model, it has come to mean the small preliminary models sculptors make for the artworks.

SENTINEL traditionally a person or animal set to guard or watch over a group. Smith used this term to refer a small series of sculptures.

SUBTRACTIVE PROCESS an approach to making sculpture where form is created by removing (cutting away, or carving out) unwanted materials from a block of stone or wood.

SURREALISM an art movement that originated in France in the 1920s and focused on subconscious forces, dreams, and the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud.

SYMBOL an image that has meaning beyond what it appears to be.

TANKTOTEM a series works by Smith that incorporates the concave ends of steel cylindrical tank drums as a significant part of their structure. Smith ordered these manufactured units from a catalogue.

TOTEM among ancient people, an animal or natural object considered as being related by blood to a given family or clan and taken as its symbol. Smith studied psychoanalytic theories written by Sigmund Freud that linked these ancient beliefs to modern psychology.

WELD to unite pieces of metal by heating until molten and soft enough to hammer or fuse together.