

SCULPTURE

Metal-bashing with a passion

The Guggenheim's David Smith show reveals an artist of extraordinary vigour, Clare Henry writes

An abstractionist – and a difficult one at that," concluded *The New Yorker* in the late 1930s as the young David Smith pioneered a new, American form of sculpture. It was not alone in its opinion. Smith's drawings in space – with their forged, beaten, welded and twisted metal sheets and rods and strange cubic forms – seemed formidable to many. "Smith must have got plenty of shoulder action," observed *Art and Artists* magazine in 1940, stressing the artist's blacksmith physique and love of white-hot furnaces and anvils, which gave him the scarred, calloused hands of a steelworker. "He is an experimenter. Some pieces are failures; others have magic. With a strong arm and chest he is pounding out a new expression."

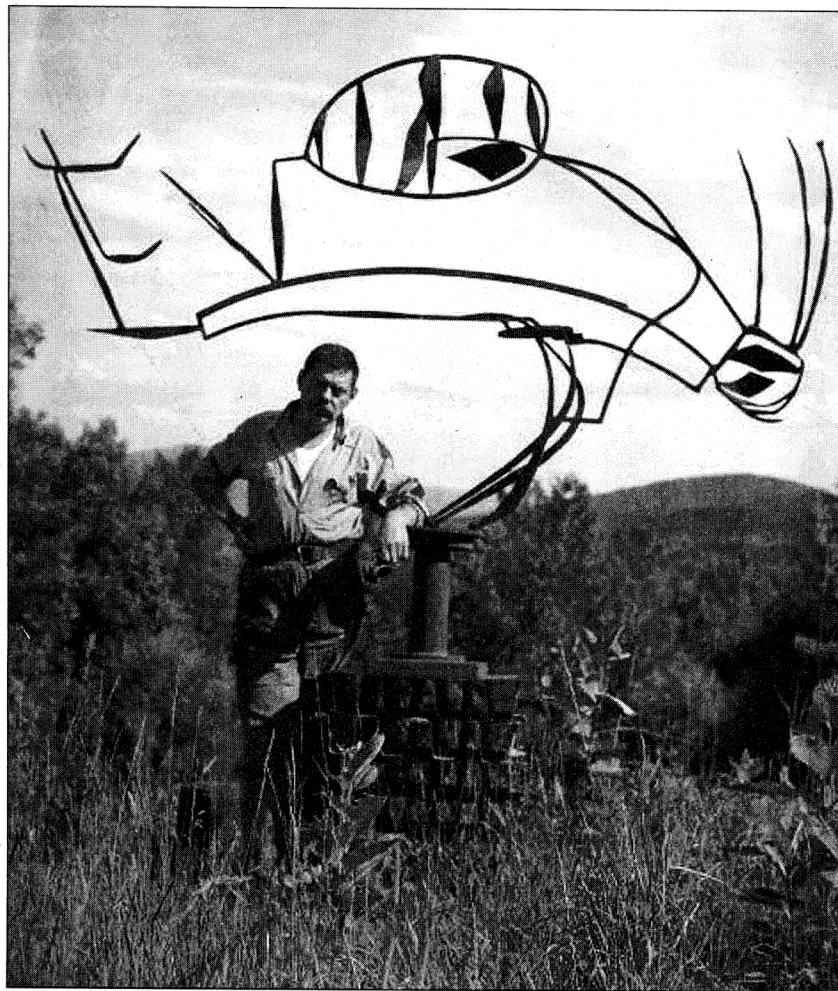
Accustomed to sleek minimalism, today's audiences may be equally awestruck by Smith's oeuvre of heavy iron and steel. Some 120 key sculptures dating from between 1932 and 1965, the year Smith died in a car accident, are now on exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum to celebrate the centenary of his birth.

All the pieces are handmade, their curves and loops, planes, rods and wedges – intricate but massive – collaged together with virtuoso skill and confidence to create a three-dimensional version of Abstract Expressionism. Smith was one of the greatest sculptors of his generation: we can see here how new ideas and concepts poured from his hand to revolutionise sculpture in the US.

The show is arranged chronologically, as much to accommodate the Guggenheim's famously awkward spiral ramp as for the visitor. Ambitious, 9ft-high sculptures from the 1960s, by virtue of their size and weight, must sit in the biggest bays at the top of the ramp, with smaller, earlier pieces lower down.

Smith was a difficult man, with, says catalogue contributor Paul Tucker, professor of art at the University of Massachusetts, "a violent temper and an appetite for both alcohol and the opposite sex". But he was also, Tucker points out, "a graceful dancer, lover of jazz, gourmet cook, skilled fisherman, inveterate draughtsman, good writer, inspiring teacher, an incredibly hard worker and a dotting father of two girls."

The girls were born in the mid 1950s. Since the 1930s, Smith – who



Great outdoors: Smith with 'Australia' at his home in Bolton's Landing, c. 1951

Estate of David Smith

sold his first sculpture in 1937 for \$8 – had been living in an old farm at Bolton's Landing in the Adirondacks, in upstate New York, with 60 acres and several barn studios. He was already very successful, exhibiting widely in the US and Europe. In 1950 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled him to sculpt full-time. He represented the US at the São Paulo Biennale in 1951 and showed at the Venice Biennale in 1954.

Although Smith and his wife divorced in 1961, his devotion to his children never wavered. The names of Candida and Rebecca appear in more than two dozen sculptures – "Dida's Circle" of 1961, for example, or "Bec-Dida Day" of the same year – while others allude

to tricycles, wagons and ponies, and others still have inscriptions on the base mentioning the girls.

"It was his way of saying hello to us," Candida tells me. "He encouraged us to talk about the sculpture. Rather like a parent cooking with his kids, it was very normal for us to comment on how a work was made."

Smith drew every day. "I make 300 to 400 large drawings a year, usually with egg yolk and Chinese ink and brushes," he wrote in 1953. "Like every artist I am always drawing from the figure. It is the source of almost everything we do." More than 50 of his drawings are on display at the Guggenheim. "For our father drawing was a very physical activity – a natural flow.

Nothing crammed or tight. That's what he loved to do." Candida says. "He often told us: 'I'm making a piece for you girls.' We had a very strong bond."

In the 1950s and 1960s Smith sited many sculptures in the land around Bolton's Landing. And despite the imposing installation at the Guggenheim, the monumental pieces somehow demand to go outdoors: there was a memorable Smith installation in 1997-99 at New York state's Storm King sculpture park.

There are some surprises in the show. The little-known "Medals for Dishonor" (1938-40) is vitriolic, angry and satirical, highlighting Surrealist influences. An uncharacteristically figurative sequence, its

15 circular, intricately crafted bronze plaques include mutilation, killings, skeletons, and fierce birds of ill-omen. With titles such as "Bombing Civilian Populations", "Scientific Body Disposal", "Death by Bacteria and Gas", "War-Exempt Sons of the Rich", it is an eloquent anti-war testament.

During the second world war, Smith worked as a welder on a locomotive assembly line. He developed his use of steel and arc-welding at this time, and by the late 1940s he was overflowing with ideas. Two masterpieces, "Australia" and "Hudson River Landscape", date from early 1951. Then he set about organising his work into series.

Their huge number comes as a surprise. In his final 13 years he worked on 16 series, each bigger and more abstract than the last, some with as many as 28 sculptures: a total of nearly 200 works. The first, "Agricolas", a collage of old farm implements from 1950-51, is followed by "Tanktotems", made from boiler parts, which explores the concave and convex.

In 1962 Smith worked in Voltri, Italy, where he had access to a wealth of material from several abandoned welding factories, creating 27 sculptures in 30 extraordinary days. These rusty giants composed of old tongs, cart wheels and abstract off-cuts are among his most imaginative works. He had a magical way of transforming found objects.

'Drawing was a very physical activity for him – a natural flow. Nothing crammed or tight,' says Smith's daughter

Perhaps Smith's best-known works are the "Cubi", which he worked on until his death. Here he eschewed junkyard materials in favour of elegant, stainless steel cubic and rectangular elements, more polished than the rough-hewn work that had troubled critics in the 1930s. But their abstract vigour, always rooted in nature, mythology and industry, was undiminished, as this show makes beautifully, abundantly clear.

'David Smith: A Centennial', Guggenheim, New York, until May 14. Tel +1 212 423 3500. Then Pompidou Centre, Paris, June 24-August 21, and Tate Modern, London, from October 25. Sponsored by Deutsche Bank