

An American Master

David Smith merged industry, mythology, and nature in his abstract sculptures. The result, Lance Esplund writes, is timeless art — and one of the best museum shows in recent years.

David Smith was once ranked by Clement Greenberg as “higher than any sculptor since Donatello” — an extremely provocative claim that would put him above Michelangelo, Bernini, Arp, and Giacometti. Certainly, Smith is a genuine American master, and his full range as an artist is firmly established in the powerful exhibition that opens tomorrow at the Guggenheim. “David Smith: A Centennial” is one of the best I have ever seen at the museum.

DAVID SMITH: A CENTENNIAL
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Employing hammer, saw, ax, and anvil, welding and cutting torch, Smith (1906–65) merged industry, mythology, and nature in his abstract sculptures. Schooled at the Studebaker assembly line, the locomotive plant, and the Art Students League, he was a blue-collar Classicist who transformed bone, wood, wire, and scrap iron into living beings.

Smith’s seemingly timeless oeuvre is a melting pot of pioneering styles: industrial Baroque; organic Constructivism; primitive Classicism; and, as in the masterful cast-bronze, bas-relief series “Medals of Dishonor” (1938–40), a lyrical, at times violent, Surrealism. Although a peculiarly 20th-century genius, Smith was rooted equally in ancient Egyptian art, Greco-Roman statuary, and the sculptures of Picasso, González, Giacometti, and Calder.

The Guggenheim show — a massive gathering of more than 120 sculptures, as well as a large selection of drawings, sketchbooks, and photographs — was curated by Carmen Giménez (who also brought us “Picasso and the Age of Iron”). Smith’s spindly iron sculptures sit half-in and half-out of the Guggenheim’s niches, and they invitingly encroach on the curving rampway. This allows viewers to move around the sculptures and gives the artworks the theatrical feel of having just stepped forward for their curtain call.

Like skeletal figures or barren, alien trees, the sculptures can be seen rising above the ramp’s curving wall. Linear, dark, and starkly silhouetted against the white walls, the works feel familiar, as if they were different parts of the same strange organism. They appear to be peeking on tiptoe, vying for viewers’ attention, or to be the rolling humps of some undulating sea monster, rising and descending along Wright’s rotunda.

The show begins like a cannon blast with three large, important late works: the grand, sweeping, insect-like “Australia”; the graceful, lightning-fast “Hudson River Landscape” (both 1951 and made of welded steel); and the tall, gleaming stack of brushed stainless steel cubes “Cubi I” (1963), which has the simplicity of a child’s building blocks and pushes forward with the majesty of a ship’s prow, rising like the long neck of a dinosaur. Together, the three sculptures command and calligraphically enliven the lobby of the museum. From there, the exhibition, for the most part arranged chronologically along the rotunda and in the side and tower galleries, gets stronger and more beautiful.

Born in Decatur, Ind., Smith moved to New York in 1926 and trained as a painter with Richard Lahey and Jan Matulka, a Hofmann student. Smith was introduced to Cubism,

Russian Constructivism, Kandinsky, and de Stijl; through John Graham he met de Kooning, Gorky, and Stuart Davis. The Guggenheim has mounted an uneven ancillary show of 11 Abstract Expressionist paintings by artists such as Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, and de Kooning (all friends of Smith) from its permanent collection. The contrast makes clear Smith’s remarkable breadth, greater as a sculptor than his Abstract Expressionist cohorts as painters.

This is in part because Smith, though he worked with American swagger in a Modernist, abstract language, did not sever his deep connection with the art of the past. In fact, he dug deeper. He never forgot where he came from — indeed, where we all come from. He embraced a universal language, creating mythological forms that merge flora, fauna, and figure; weapon, monument, and skyscraper. His constructed

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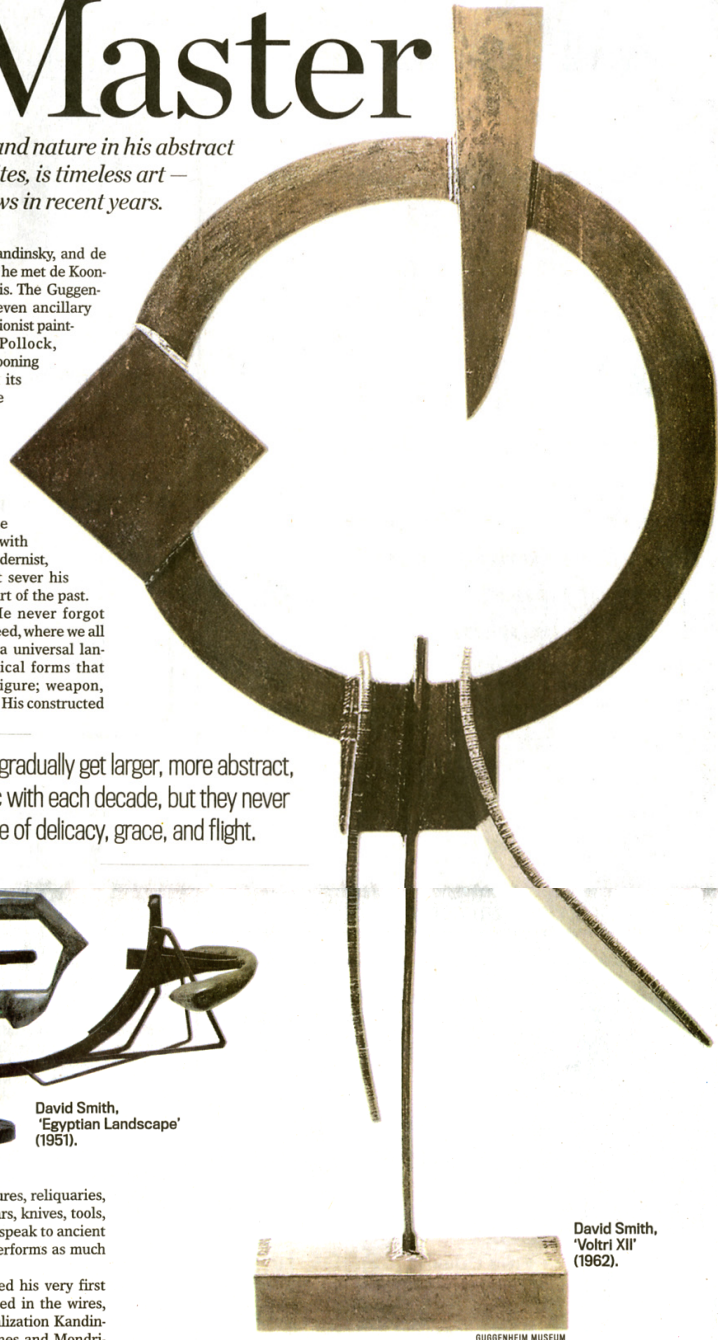
David Smith, “Egyptian Landscape” (1951).

iron landscapes, altars, figures, reliquaries, and totems — made of gears, knives, tools, and old farm machinery — speak to ancient rites and the origin of letterforms as much as they do to Modernism.

Like Calder, who inspired his very first sculptures, Smith recognized in the wires, nuts, and bolts of industrialization Kandinsky’s points, lines, and planes and Mondrian’s free line and flat color. Smith saw in 20th-century abstraction the roots of ancient Egyptian and Sumerian abstraction — the symbolic hieroglyphics and the animals and gods held actively in the plane. He adopted such an approach fairly early; his mature work is almost always frontal, and transitions all but fall away.

Ascending the ramp at the Guggenheim, you are introduced to a couple of beautiful groupings, from the 1930s, of Smith’s earliest forays into sculpture. Some of these small-scale, mixed-media works resemble Calder’s “Universe” series; others look related to Gabo’s Constructivist heads, Giacometti’s Surrealist works, or primitive birds and figures made out of stacked stones. But each is unique and, regardless of quality, never feels derivative.

The Guggenheim’s High Gallery is peopled with nine sleek, Giacometti-like works from the “Forging” series (1955–56), a gorgeous, classical, desolate grouping. Tall, slim, and wavering, almost-flat columns roughly 7



David Smith, “Voltri XII” (1962).

feet high, the “Forging” works were the only sculptures Smith made that were not collaged together.

Each of the sculptures conveys a personality and sex (or sexes), and they read (as do almost all of Smith’s linear sculptures) as drawings and ripples in space. From the side, they almost disappear. They shift slightly against verticality, creating whisper-thin pressures that slice and articulate the space, an orchestration that recalls sentries, dancers, Greco-Roman shields, shadows, water currents, and the shards of trees left by a forest fire.

Smith’s sculptures gradually get larger, more abstract, and more virtuosic with each decade, but they never lose their sense of delicacy, grace, and flight. Nor do they relinquish their uncanny power to shift from machine to flower to animal to man and back again. Some resemble street signs, three-dimensional models of the solar system, or monuments to ancient gods. Some look like

flying contraptions or whimsical torture or music machines. Others look like toys or tools for a race of giants. Many are monumental or, on wheels, they resemble medieval chariots, catapults, or battering rams.

Although I love Smith’s sculpture, I would certainly not go as far as Greenberg. But the Guggenheim’s retrospective makes an important case for the sculptor’s pre-eminence. David Smith — an amalgamation of folk artist, alchemist, shaman, and mystic; of hard-boiled machinist and junkyard dog — remains one of the most astounding talents and visionaries of our era.

February 3 through May 14 (1071 Fifth Avenue at 89th Street, 212-423-3500).

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