

Modernism's Heavy Metal

David Smith brought grace to the toughness of steel.

BY PETER PLAGENS

WHAT EVER HAPPENED to modern sculpture? It started in the early 1900s with the amazing semi-abstract heads by Picasso and Brancusi. Then at midcentury came those haunting, existentially elongated human figures by Giacometti and the seductively biomorphic bronze blobs by Henry Moore. But nowadays "sculptors" do "installations" of already-made stuff dispersed in a gallery. Maybe the wickedly deflating term "plop art" put the skids under any more Calder's in front of office towers. And the dreary public-art controversy over Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" may have soured the public for good.

If anything stands a chance of reigniting our taste for singular objects made solely to be beautiful in a resilient way, it could be the new exhibition "David Smith: A Centennial," at the Guggenheim Museum in New York through May 14. Smith, born in 1906 and the greatest American sculptor of the last century, was a master of muscular visual wit, as wonderful in skeletal format (he called those pieces "drawing in space") as it was in the gleaming volumes of the late "Cubi" series. A big, tempestuous, mustached man, Smith combined a bombastic ego with a

socially generous artistic spirit to form a relentless creative impulse in American art. "I never intend a day to pass without asserting my identity," he pronounced. "My work records my existence." Another time he said, "If you ask for whom do I make art, I will say that it is for all who approach it without prejudice." When he was let loose in a defunct metalwork factory in Italy in 1962, he cranked out 27 sculptures in 30 days—such as the looming "Voltri VII," seven feet high and 10 feet wide.

Smith, who got his start as a welder on an Ohio assembly line at the age of 19, tried to study art in college in the Midwest but found that pernickety painting classes "put me into a position of knitting—not exactly my forte." He married the painter Dorothy Dehner and quickly made his way to Greenwich Village. In 1929 Smith bought a 60-acre farm in upstate New York, and he began making sculpture there in the early '30s. A sinus condition kept him out of the military, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1950 finally allowed him to quit side jobs as a welder and be a full-time artist.

The rest is the gossip of art history: Smith was not, to put it mildly, nice to the women in his life. His drunken rages were legendary ("So many women to lay—so much liquor to drink," he wrote to a friend in 1945), and Dehner survived as an artist only by leaving him. Teaching later at Sarah Lawrence, he took up with a 20-year-old student whom he eventually married and who, having borne two daughters, left him in 1958.

The conventional wisdom in the art world is that Smith's welded and hammer-forged sculptures are entirely consistent with his untrammelled blue-collar persona. But what's surprisingly apparent on the curving ramps of the Guggenheim—where the sightlines to sculptures across the atrium are thrilling—is that his sensibility is so elegant. This isn't just a teamster's tough cubism, or a weight lifter's abstract art. Pieces like "Egyptian Landscape" (1951) are more lyrical than anything made out of steel has a right to be.

During the last months of his life (Smith died in a car crash in 1965), he finished "Cubi XXVII," a shining synthesis of practically everything he knew and felt about metal, light, volume, planes and voids. It's clearly a portal beckoning the viewer, metaphorically, to pass through it toward some kind of enlightenment. To young sculptors today, that work of art should be a challenge: to see to it that nobody 40 years from now is still asking, "What ever happened to modern sculpture?" ■



ASSERTING HIS IDENTITY: The artist (above), 'Egyptian Landscape' (1951)

