

David Smith

David Smith (Decatur, Indiana, 1906 – Bennington, Vermont, 1965) was one of the great American sculptors of Abstract Expressionism and the creator of one of the most consistent oeuvres in the second half of the twentieth century. His sculptures, built in iron using a welding technique, bore influences from the European avant-garde in the interwar period - particularly from the pioneers Julio González and Pablo Picasso – and adapted them to an abstract language that appropriated the introspective themes of the painting from his generation.

Between the autumn of 1935 and the summer of 1936, Smith travelled to Europe, where he enriched his artistic grounding and came face to face with the social and political tensions occurring across the old continent. He spent one month in Paris, before a lengthy spell in Athens, which allowed him to explore classical art in depth, and also travelled to the Soviet capitals Leningrad and Moscow, where he contemplated some of the masterpieces of modern painting. Finally, he discovered, in London's British Museum, the Sumerian seals with reverse carvings and the collection of German medals from the First World War, which were key to the formulation of the series *Medals for Dishonor*.

Medals for Dishonor is a series of fifteen reliefs produced between 1937 and 1940. Through them he executed a profound critique of a period marked by the far-reaching social and political consequences of the economic crisis and the onset of war. The series, exhibited at the Willard Gallery in New York in November 1940, was influenced by the sense of disappointment in humanity's regression through fascism in Europe and the injustices of world capitalism. Therefore, after the series was displayed in various US states, in December 1941 the artist told the gallerist Marian Willard that the medals reflected an "anti-fascist and pro-democratic" stance.

"This series hit the dishonorable and destructive elements of society. Certain elements, though true, might be interpreted as conflicting with war effort. One fact I wish to re-state –that my basic conception has always been anti-fascist and pro-democratic."

David Smith, 30 May 1942, The Estate of David Smith Archives. Published by McCOY, Garnett: "The David Smith Papers" *Archives of American Art Journal*, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 8 no. 2 April, 1968, p. 9.

In contrast to the majority of his compatriots, among whom isolationism was prevalent, Smith was concerned by the progress of Fascism and Nazism, the development of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Popular Front in France (1935–1939), and the outbreak, in 1939, of the Second World War, which the artist saw as an imperialist conflict. The reliefs expressed the injustice of war, and contradictions in society and its fight for freedom, for instance with its support for Spanish Republicans, and the war against fascism.

"Bombing of Guernica didn't surprise me too much. I thought it was pretty much Capitalist Perfidy- especially the way the blockade went- I had gone to Europe in 1935 to see it before I expected it to be bombed out [...]. I was very saddened at the

fall of Spain but I had also witnessed the invasion of Ethiopia by Fascism and was fully aware of the Nazi penetration of Greece when I was there.”

David Smith. David Smith: “Events in Life. Autobiography”, ca. 1950 in: GRAY, Cleve (ed). *David Smith by David Smith*. N. York 1968. p. 27.

The entirety of Smith’s artistic output is characterised by a particular engagement with the most artisanal side of the work. From the 1930s onwards he welded and soldered his own abstract pieces, combining the production of steel sculptures with the ambitious work *Medals for Dishonor*, on which he would work night and day.

For these reliefs Smith employed the technique used by the Sumerian seals carved in reverse - the huge demands and attention to detail in the whole process, from the preparatory drawing to the finished plaster casts, for which he even used dentist’s tools, explain the time it took him to finish the series. The rigorous technique was carried over into making up the first edition of the medals in metal, a process which saw Smith work with a local jeweller.

“The 15 medals in the series (1938-19540) were made as follows: The sculptor traces his drawing or layout in reverse on the plaster blank. He carves the negative plaster blank, working out into space, instead of enveloping an object with space. When the reverse carving is completed, he cast the positive in a plastic dental stone, so that the harder positive will break away and unseen undercuts in the softer reverse. [...] Then the first bronze is cast from the plaster positive, to become the master model, being chased, engraved and corrected [...].”

McCAUSLAND, Elizabeth: “David Smith’s New Sculptural Idiom” in: *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, November 10, 1940, p. 6E.

In these compositions specific references can be found to the tumultuous political period and the situation at the time in the United States. In *Private Law and Order Leagues*, Smith satirised the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi organisation German-American Bund, which even marched in New York. In *Co-operation of Clergy* he mentions the anti-Semitism of Father Coughlin, who indoctrinated people through his radio programme. Compositions such as *War Exempt Sons of the Rich* parallel the exploitation of the working class with artists, in opposition to the privileges enjoyed by the rich. In *The Fourth Estate* he delves deeper into the issue, underscoring the use of the press and censorship by the media powers-that-be and magnates in contributing to maintaining a situation of injustice. In this relief, as emphasised by Jeremy Lewison, the collusion of justice, represented by a building held in a clenched fist, can be seen, while *Diplomats* criticises the attitude of diplomacy in the period leading up to the USA’s involvement in the war, analysed by the artist when he wrote: “The deadliest weapons aren’t in the field; they’re in the embassies!”

Smith’s interest in myths and their symbols from pre-history explains the complex and personal iconography used in these reliefs, with his preparatory drawings brimming with nudes in grotesque poses, threatening weapons, scenes of destruction, musical instruments, game

birds and marine animals, originating from the notebooks from his travels in Europe; these books contained numerous protozoans, skeleton shapes, prehistoric beings, amoebas, etc. The image representing the brutality of war in the form of a canon raping a woman that appears at the top of *Propaganda for War* is also significant and has links to Surrealist imagery, while the universal symbolism of myths is summed up in the presence of Greek inscriptions throughout the entire series.

The medals were exhibited in New York just months after the exhibition *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art*, which opened in November 1939 and included *Guernica* and its preparatory drawings, which since 1938 had been travelling around Europe and the United States to support Spanish refugees. Both ensembles are made up of works that defend freedom and democracy, works that are tied to contemporary events, and which diverge from realist accounts to shape a narrative through a personal system of symbols.

Carmen Fernández Aparicio

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