

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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## SCULPTURE BY DAVID SMITH ON VIEW AT MUSEUM

The first one-man exhibition of the sculpture of David Smith will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from September 11 through October 20. Organized and installed by Sam Hunter, Associate Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, it includes 34 sculptures and a limited number of paintings and drawings. Nine sculptures in the show have never before been exhibited: Chicago II and The Five Spring of 1956; and Sentinel III, Sentinel IV, O Drawing, Pilgrim, Portrait of a Lady Painter, Detroit Queen and Personage of May, all from 1957. Covering the period from 1936 to the present, but concentrating on the last decade of the artist's activity, the exhibition is part of a series devoted to middle-generation artists in America and Europe, entitled "Artists in Mid-Career."

Now 51, David Smith has been one of the important innovators in contemporary American sculpture, and a pioneer in welded iron and steel constructions. His first iron sculpture was made in 1933. Mr. Hunter says in the catalog\* accompanying the exhibition that in his use of metals,

"Smith is distinguished from his American contemporaries...by an adherence to strict forms, by his almost exclusive use of the more obdurate materials, iron and steel, and by a basically constructivist esthetic, which is relieved by references to Surrealism and by quixotic invention...All this is in decided contrast to the prevailing tendencies in metal sculpture which are anti-formal and embrace more tenuous, indeterminate forms, forms which tend to lose their identity, and function mainly as metaphors for the expressive potencies inherent in the material means themselves."

David Smith was employed on the assembly line of an automobile plant, as a riveter and welder, before becoming an artist; he considers his interest in metal sculpture both a matter of vocational aptitude and part of a search for vital new expressive forms. "The equipment I use, my supply of material comes from factory study, and duplicates as nearly as possible the production equipment used in making a locomotive," he has said. "The metal...itself possesses little art history. What associations it possesses are those of this century: power, structure, movement, progress, suspension, destruction, brutality."

The exhibition traces the development of Smith's early style from Leda of 1938, characterized by Mr. Hunter as "one of his first and most forceful assertions of heroic gesture and design in abstract sculptural form," through the "symbolic narratives" of the middle 'forties such as Home of the Welder (1945). These condensed sculptural anecdotes, which combine elements of Surrealism, abstraction, and realism, have a wealth of symbolic references which stem from both personal

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\*David Smith by Sam Hunter. 32 pages; 33 black and white illustrations. 75 cents. Published by Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Simon and Schuster.

and social experience; one of Smith's significant contributions the author notes, "has been to give the constructivist ideal a new dimension as personal history."

From the mid-forties through 1950 the artist alternated in two modes, Mr. Hunter says, "creating ambiguous relationships...between a fantastic anatomical imagery and a constructivist diagramming of space," as seen in The Royal Bird and Oculus respectively.

The period 1950 - 1951 showed a new monumentality, simplicity of form and a new lyricism, as exemplified in such works as Australia, The Fish and The Banquet, the latter being the culminating sculpture of a group of flat, rectilinear structures in which Smith had introduced, "an impersonal, abstract alphabet of ready-made castings and standardized graphic forms." In 1951 also began the Agricola series, which, Mr. Hunter says,

"utilized 'found' forms of machine and farm equipment parts in open linear designs--an abrasive, unadorned art brut of laconic gesture, almost no discernible style, and yet of an extraordinary lyric intensity...With the Agricolas...the identity of the art object and the found object imperceptibly merge; there is no longer a question of conflicting spheres of influence acting on one another. These forms are cunning structures, and play both roughly and subtly on our esthetic sensibilities; but they also move us more broadly, like a spectacle of nature."

From 1952 to 1955 the artist was engaged on a series of five Tank Totems, which combine his feeling for heroic design and fanciful presences with certain Surrealist elements of humor. Then, in more recent years, he has worked on other groupings of related forms, a series of "Forgings" and a group of "Sentinels"; two of each category are included in the exhibition.

In conclusion Mr. Hunter writes:

"The most recent sculptures, and The Sitting Printer of 1955 which anticipated them, join a cluster of totemic deities whose imagery mixes associations from the world of the machine and from organic nature, and which since the early 'forties have embodied many of the artist's persistent animistic obsessions. They are rough fantasies, cast in large outline, half-poetry and half-burlesque. The purist may rebel at such mixed sculptural metaphors and at the magnitude of their fancy. Behind them stands an artist secure in his own mythologies of form and needing no defense. His abundant energies have never submitted for long to any narrow principle of uniformity; an astonishing inventive capacity and wide expressive powers legitimize his apparent inconsistencies in style. Smith's new sculpture is demanding and unsettling, for it is the essence of artistic originality to disturb us in our accustomed routine of appreciation."

#### Biographical note on the Artist

David Smith was born in Decatur, Indiana in 1906. His father was a telephone engineer and part-time inventor, and his mother a school teacher. He attended college and worked as a riveter and welder in the middle west until 1926, when he came to New York to study painting at the Art Students' League. There his teacher, the Czech painter Jan Matulka, introduced him to modern styles, and he came into contact shortly after with John Xceron, John Graham and Stuart Davis who encouraged his experimental ventures in painting, and then in sculpture. He began to make con-

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structions in wood, coral and metals in 1932, and in 1933 came his first sculpture exclusively in welded iron. 1938 was the date of his first one-man show, and he has been showing regularly in New York ever since. Over the past seven years Smith has taught sculpture at the University of Arkansas, Sarah Lawrence College, the University of Indiana and the University of Mississippi. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1950, which was renewed the following year, and in 1954 he was a delegate to UNESCO's First International Congress of Plastic Arts in Venice. The artist lives in Bolton Landing, New York, near Lake George, and maintains his sculpture workshop there.

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Further information, photographs, catalog are available on request from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York City. Circle 5-8900.