

Back to Oklahoma

Cover | Untitled, 1955 Acrylic on canvasette 19 7/8 x 16 inches.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIRST EDITION

The Museum is most grateful to the Board of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation who made this generous gift of works on paper possible. Special thanks go to Patterson Sims, President of the Foundation, and Maryanna Vermonte, Registrar of the Foundation Collection, for their knowledge about the art and assistance with access to the online database of Leon Polk Smith's art.

Thanks also to Dr. Taryn Chubb, Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Pogue Art Gallery at East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma, for giving me access to University archival materials on Leon Polk Smith and for a very informative discussion about the artist. Thanks to OSU photographer Phil Shockley for coming to our assistance on very short notice to shoot the images used in this essay. I am also indebted to the Museum staff for working with me to complete this project on a very short timeline. Art history master's candidate Tiffany Sides assisted with the research. Registrar Carla Shelton oversaw the exhibition development and Edward Whelan, Preparator, completed the framing and salon-style exhibition installation. OSU Museum of Art Director Victoria R. Berry provided me with a valuable sounding board for working out the exhibition and catalogue content.

REVISED EDITION

The continuing growth of interest in Leon Polk Smith combined with a short run of the original catalogue have presented the opportunity to do a second revised printing. We are most appreciative of the ongoing assistance of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation who has provided funding for this project as well as for student interns and research. Foundation support has enabled us to expand the catalogue to include photographs of the 2016 exhibition installation, additional illustrations, and a checklist of the exhibition.

We look forward to the assistance this reprinting and the continuing Foundation involvement will provide in enabling the Museum to advance knowledge about the resources our Leon Polk Smith Collection offers to curators and researchers in Oklahoma and beyond. Such joint efforts contribute to greater appreciation of Leon Polk Smith's pioneering contribution to twentieth-century abstract art.

Arlette Klaric, Ph.D. Associate Chief Curator, Curator of Collections

Published in conjunction with the exhibition Leon Polk Smith: Back to Oklahoma at the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art, May 31 - September 3, 2016

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Back to Oklahoma

LEON POLK SMITH

May 31 – September 3, 2016 Oklahoma State University Museum of Art





Fig. 1 | Untitled, 1961 Acrylic on paper 10 7/8 x 8 inches

LEON POLK SMITH PURSUING EQUILIBRIUM

by Arlette Klaric

LATE IN 2015, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation in New York City brought the Oklahoma artist back home. The Foundation gifted more than 700 works on paper to the Oklahoma State University Art Museum, to be shared with art institutions across the State. Leon Polk Smith (1906 – 1996) gained national recognition in the 1960s as a pioneer of the Hard Edge painting movement, which favored abstracted, clean-edged forms, flattened space, simple color schemes, and economic compositions.

Leon Polk Smith: Back to Oklahoma offers an introduction to his art on paper. Never widely exhibited or studied, these works offer a more nuanced picture of Smith's development and working habits. They represent the more familiar periods of his development from his early figurative work and his testing of different styles of European modernism

in the 1930s and 1940s to the pared-down abstractions of the mid-1950s, which Smith refined thereafter. Drawings from the 1950s, however, reveal new insights about his development—stepping stones to understanding better how this body of work relates to his paintings.

SMITH'S EARLIEST

WORK draws on his experiences growing up near Chickasha, Oklahoma.

After finishing high school in 1924, he worked seven years, first on ranches in Oklahoma and then on road and telephone systems construction in Arizona. He then enrolled in what is now East Central University in Ada and earned a degree in English in 1934. During his senior year, Smith happened upon art. After seeing a painting class in session, he persuaded the professor to let him sit in. So began his career. Between 1934 and 1940, Smith taught elementary and secondary education in Oklahoma. In 1936, he attended the first of three summer school sessions at Columbia University Teachers College in New York City to complete a master's degree in art and educational psychology.

Smith's rural life in Oklahoma frequently inspired paintings and drawings during these years: cowboys, cattle branding, the dustbowl, and college life (Fig. 2). While these subjects reflect the preference of the reigning Regionalist art movement for local scenes, his stylized treatment of figures and landscape anticipates his later turn to abstract form and economic compositions. Smith tested different approaches to simplifying his forms. In Leo's Bay (Fig. 3) he used flattened forms encased in curvilinear black lines to describe a cowboy on horseback riding through a hilly landscape. Unifying the background and figure, a dull red wash animates the image



Fig. 2 | On the Farm in Oklahoma, November 1934, ink and pencil on paper, 17 x 13 1/2 inches

with drop and spray patterns. Looking backward with his chest full of hearts, the cowboy appears to be yearning for something lost or found.

Although Smith later described his technical training as limited, his early drawings suggest that he was a prodigious talent and a quick study. Within a sixyear period he had leapfrogged over naturalistic rendering to increasingly abstracted forms. His summer stays in New York accelerated his progress. While taking courses at Columbia University Teachers College, the artist was also exploring modern art outside the classroom. An advanced course in

painting with artist Ryah Ludins the first summer was a significant turning point in his education and artistic path. Along with adopting her exercises in free drawing to liberate himself from conscious thought processes, he followed her advice to look at modern art in New York. In 1936, accompanied by Ludins, Smith visited Albert E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art, the first public collection of modern art in the country. The novice artist subsequently worked in a range of styles in the later 1930s, responding to examples he had viewed in the Museum of Living Art, during his 1939 trip to Europe, and elsewhere.1

Fig. 3 | *Leo's Bay*, 1939 Opaque watercolor on paper 19 3/4 x 24 7/8 inches



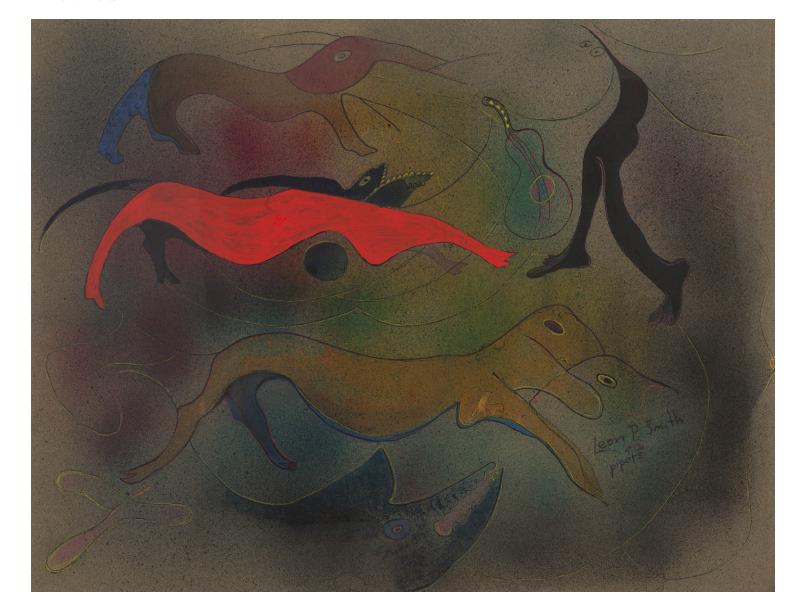
Fig. 4 | Untitled, 1940 Opaque watercolor on paper 26 x 19 7/8 inches

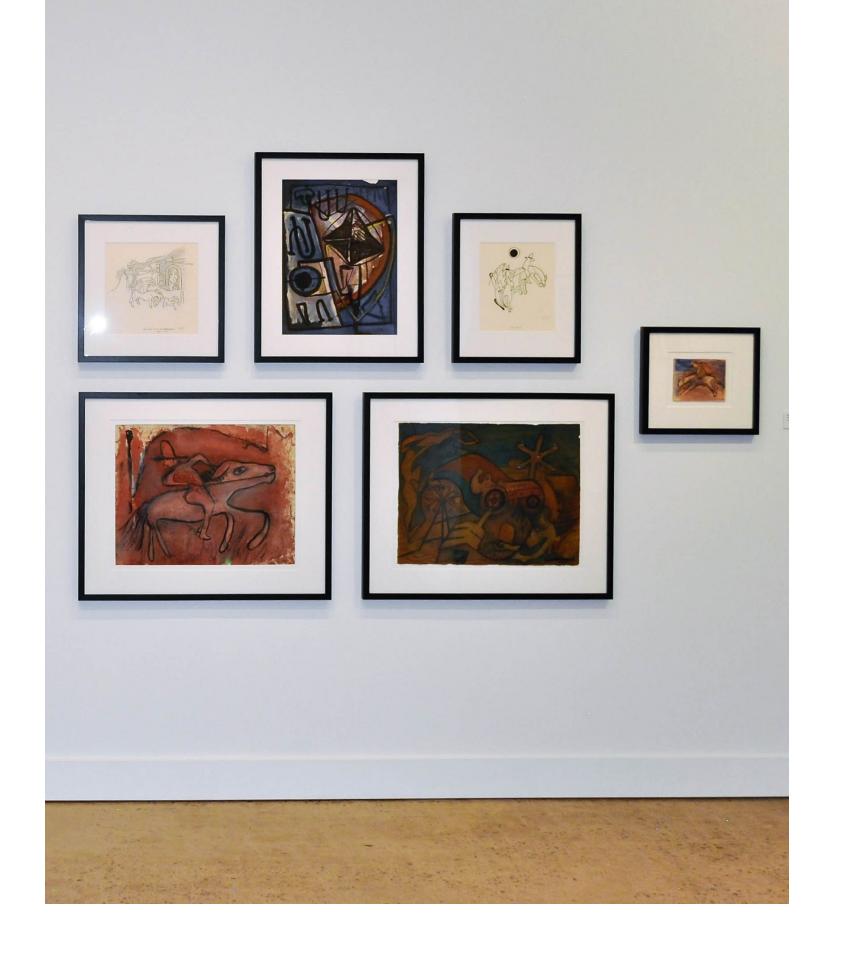


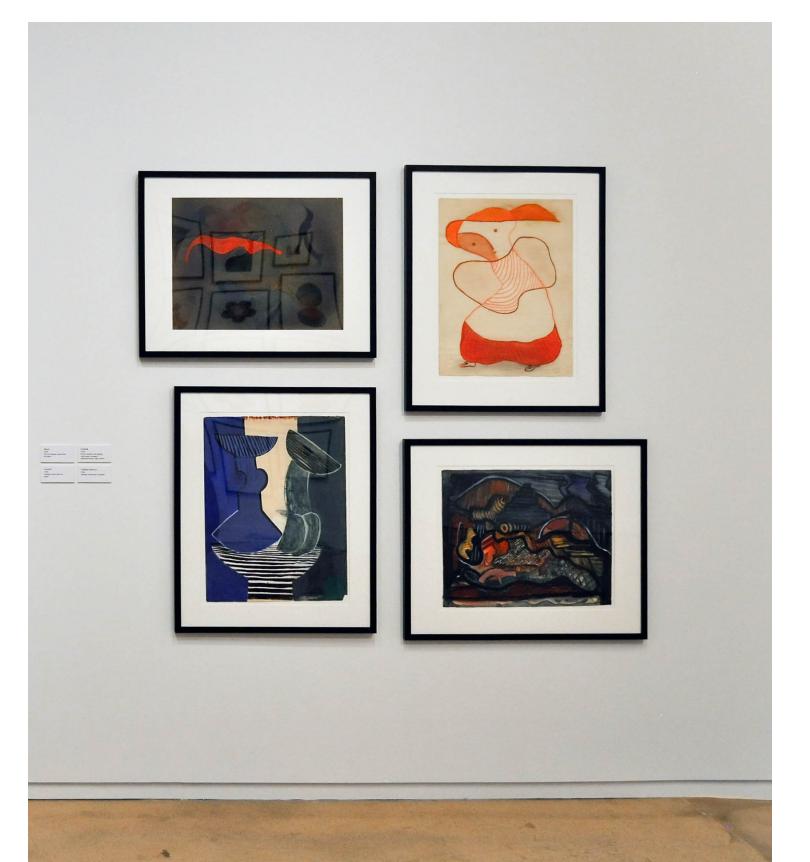
A cornerstone of the Museum of Living Art collection, Cubism shaped Smith's Untitled of 1940, a geometricized composition reminiscent of female and male figures (Fig. 4). The artist adapted the collage-like compositions, solid color forms, and linear patterns of the later phase of Cubism known as *Synthetic*. He may well have been inspired by Picasso's *Still Life with a Glass and a Package of Tobacco [Composition]* (1922), which Gallatin had purchased in June 1936.²

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Surrealism, with its emphasis on a streamof-consciousness process, also commanded Smith's attention. Pipets (Fig. 5) shows his close study of Joan Miró. Smith had the opportunity to see four superb examples of the Spanish artist's work once again at the Museum of Living Art, in particular, Painting of 1933. A series of biomorphic forms merging animal and human anatomy plus a guitar populate the multicolored, atmospheric space of Pipets, echoing Miró's hybrid images and soft, variegated backgrounds of the 1930s. This array of strange creatures conforms to Surrealism's arbitrary juxtapositions of invented images emerging from the human subconscious.

Fig. 5 | *Pipets*, 1940 Watercolor and ink on paper 19 x 24 1/2 inches







WHILE IT IS EASY ENOUGH TO IDENTIFY the artists and styles that Smith "tried on" during these years, his outcomes demonstrate the artist's independent and selective adaptations of European modernism. Whether through imagery and/or style Smith imprinted these works with elements of the singular vision that shapes his mature work.

Smith's first viewing of a painting by Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian in 1936, once again at the Museum of Living Art, was a turning point for his art beginning around 1943. A major memorial retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the spring of 1945 offered another opportunity for him to revisit the Dutch artist's work. Living in New York between 1945 and 1949, Smith set the abstract direction of his art with a group of works inspired by Mondrian's minimalist geometry, two being tributes to Mondrian's New Yorkinspired Boogie Woogie paintings. The American artist focused on the formal implications of Mondrian's art, leaving behind its utopian social theories. In particular, he embraced the Dutch artist's idea of "the interchangeability of form and space," as Smith termed it, wherein "space and form were complimentary to each other as well as interchangeable." He added to this goal the challenge of using Mondrian's idea "in a curvilinear manner, in curved lines, free forms."3

Smith's drawings track his transition from Cubism to Mondrian. In a 1943 example, Smith abandoned the quasi-figurative imagery of the Cubist-inspired, 1940 painting (Fig. 4) for grid compositions (Fig. 6). Though the work moves a step closer, Smith's freely drawn rectangular forms and striping have yet to comply with Mondrian's ruled grid. Smith adopts a more limited palette, but it is not as regimented as the Dutch artist's, which was limited to black, white, and the primary colors—red, yellow, and blue.

Another drawing from 1946 shows
Smith improvising to create his own
distinctive configurations (Fig. 7). It
represents a more simplified version of the
1943 grid with closed rectilinear forms,
whose overlapping creates an interplay
between the solid and void references.
Once again, Smith departs from the
Dutch artist's strict formal vocabulary in
introducing C and L shapes to his grid
composition, eliminating line, and varying
his color scheme with a combination of
black, gray, red, and orange.

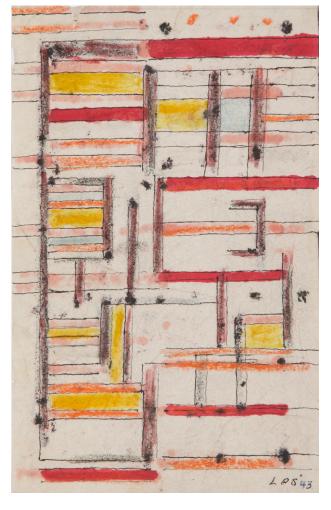
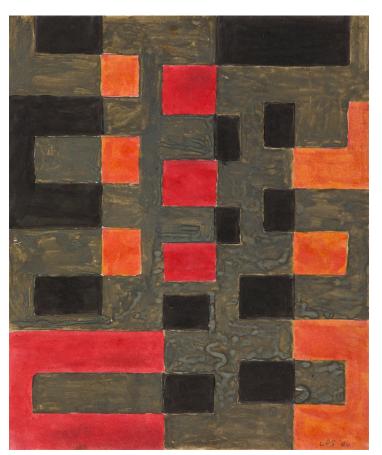


Fig. 6 | Untitled, 1943 Crayon and ink on paper 8 x 5 inches

Fig. 7 | Untitled, 1946 Pencil and opaque watercolor on paper 10 x 8 1/2 inches





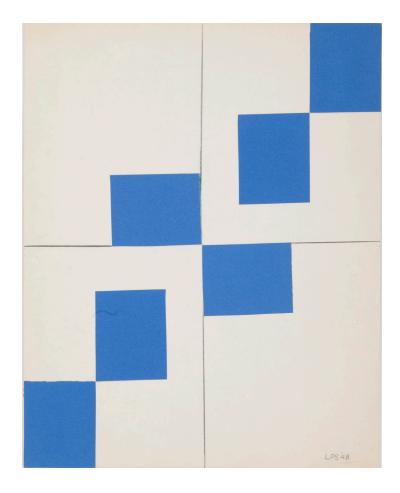


Fig. 8 | Untitled, 1948 Pencil and colored paper on cardboard 17 x 13 5/8 inches

The 1948 work on paper and NUSH'KA (1949) are the most direct adaptations of Mondrian's style, conforming to his palette and rectangular forms (Figs. 8 and 9). The similarities stop there, as Smith sets up some alternative formal problems to investigate. Smith broke with Mondrian's strict grid composition by introducing diagonal axes. Further, in the work on paper, not all the blue blocks are contained by lines or paper edges but rather anchored at corners (Fig. 8). The blocks read as solid forms suspended in space, sidestepping Mondrian's notion of interchangeability.

NUSH'KA exemplifies Smith's early efforts to implement his concept of dynamic form and space applied to curves, here through a shaped canvas (Fig. 9). This painting combines the closed- and open-ended rectilinear forms of the earlier 1940s drawings. The texturing of the white areas gives the painting a physicality that moves the white planes from a ground to surface reference. As a result, the lines and rectangles sink to assume the role of background, another departure from the Dutch artist's concept of form and space.



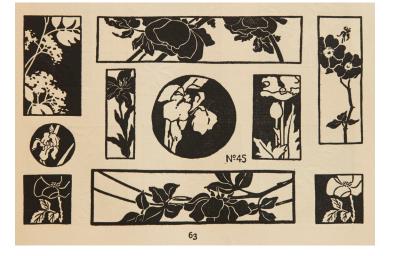
Fig. 9 | *NUSH'KA*, 1949 Oil on board 12 inches, dia.

IN THE 1950S, SMITH PURSUED TWO INDEPENDENT AVENUES OF EXPLORATION—

one of which has not been recognized—that would lead to Smith's art to its maturity and recognition as an early example of Hard-Edge painting. Representing a significant body of work on paper, studies of plant forms suggest that Smith returned to the lessons of art educator Arthur Wesley Dow that were a mainstay of the fine arts curriculum at Columbia University Teachers College.

First appearing in 1899 and last published in 1940, Dow's text *Composition* was an early prototype for teaching what today is known as *design foundations*, principles of line, form, space, color, and composition in the abstract (Fig. 10). Smith's plant studies reflect Dow's strategies of "arranging lines in space," with attention to the framing of the image and the distribution of form, color, and values to create an all-over patterned space—what Dow termed *Notan*.⁴

A series of studies of dusty miller illustrate how Dow's exercises of framing and cropping guided Smith down an avenue of organic abstraction. More naturalistic descriptions from the early 1950s evolve into economic arrangements of stylized forms seen in *Dusty Miller* (Fig. 11) and *Dusty Miller*



Wesley Dow,
Composition: A Series
of Exercises in Art
Structure for the Use of
Students and Teachers,
thirteenth edition,
revised and enlarged.
Garden City, NY:
Doubleday, Doran
& Company, Inc.,
1931, p. 63.

Fig. 10 | Arthur

(Fig. 12). Smith's plant studies are logical outcomes of Dow's strategies of framing and scaling an image, simplifying and cropping the form, and

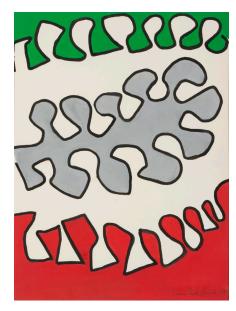
reducing the composition and palette to a two-color surface pattern fundamental to the breakthrough painting series *Correspondences* (Fig. 13).



Fig. 12 | *Dusty Miller*, 1953, Opaque watercolor on paper 18 x 14 inches

Below, from left to right: Fig. 11 | *Dusty Miller*, 1955, Opaque watercolor on paper 24 3/4 x 17 7/8 inches

Fig. 13 | Untitled, 1955, Acrylic on canvasette 19 7/8 x 16 inches









As he acknowledged, Smith discovered the second of his visual models in 1954. A chance viewing of a sporting goods catalogue received in the mail enabled him to resolve his other Mondrianinspired formal challenge. Hand-drawn illustrations of tennis balls, baseballs, and footballs showed Smith "how to use the curvilinear form within an inner circle" and advanced his abstraction. 5 He

quickly progressed from the images closely resembling baseballs in the orange-and-beige study to the frontal composition of the gold-and-white drawing, which takes on an iconic presence (pg. 24, top left; top right). Smith then adapted this curvilinear model to rectangular and square formats. In tandem with the Dowian insights, the *Correspondences* series was born.

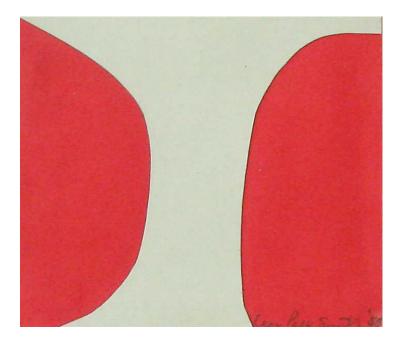


Fig. 14 | Untitled, 1956 Paper on paper 5 x 5 3/4 inches

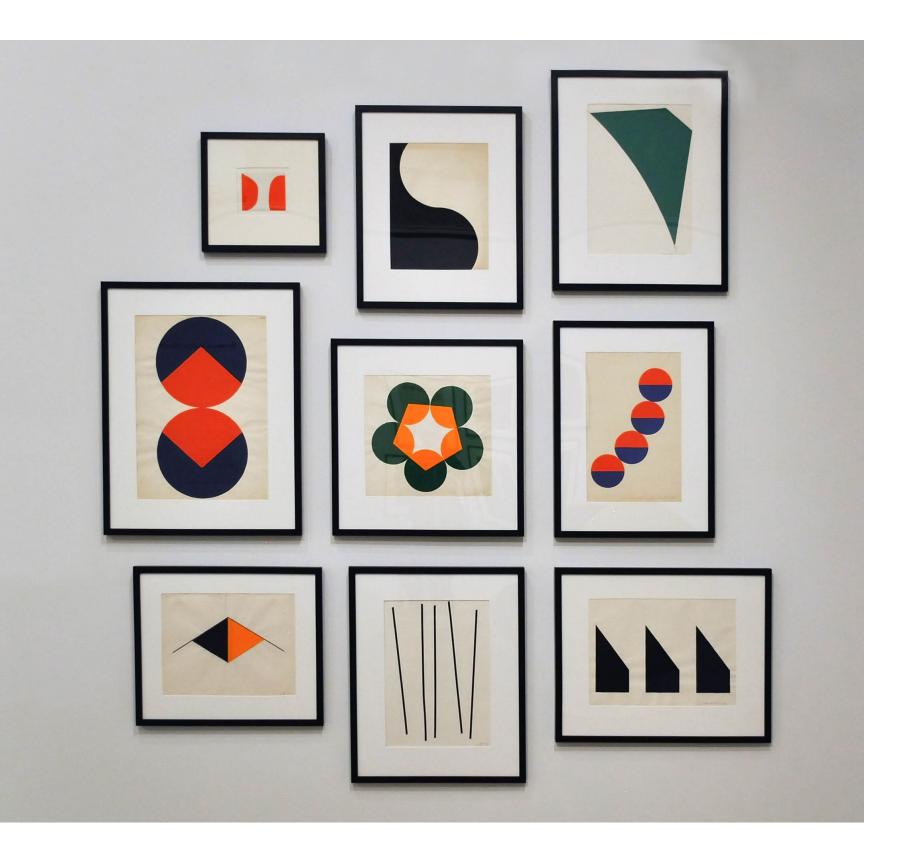
In 1958, Leon Polk Smith left teaching and turned to art full time. His 1940s and 1950s experimentations crystallized into a set of formal practices that guided his mature abstractions. The *Correspondences* series created in the late 1950s established Smith's reputation as

a major artist. An example from 1958 confirms his account of beginning with "three shapes, three forms, but I reduced it to two. I would paint this one colour and that one colour" (Figs. 14 and 15).⁶ The forms vary in character from organic to angular, rendered in two colors.

Seen as early as 1955 in his drawings, this economy also involved eliminating line. The interfaces of color fields and the support edge(s) replaced line as boundaries. With these reductive measures the scale of forms increases, amplified through their cropping and framing.



Fig. 15 | Untitled, 1958 Opaque watercolor on paper 16 3/4 x 13 1/8 inches



SMITH'S OVERARCHING GOAL WAS VISUAL "EQUILIBRIUM" AS HE TERMED IT,

starting with line. For him, drawing a line created "two worlds in direct opposition to each other and yet so well related that they fit into each other as a jigsaw puzzle must."

The color choices, their intensity, proportions, and spatial character made equally important contributions to this balance. Smith thereby eliminated the spatial hierarchy of form and ground in favor of adjoining fields of equal substance. Collectively these formal decisions impart a monumentality that gives the drawings a heightened presence and importance. The impact is all the more so with his

paintings on canvas, which had grown to mural scale (Fig. 16).

The artist evoked a still greater sense of space with the *Constellations* series begun around 1967 (Fig. 18). Rather than increasing the size of individual paintings, Smith introduced clusters of canvases as single compositions. He returned to geometric forms—curved and rectilinear—and vivid hues plus black. These

components are arranged in tangential sequences that imply their unlimited expansion. The alignment and partitioning of the components suggest fragmented large-scale forms. With this new format, his paintings break out of their canvas boundaries and incorporate walls as part of the compositions (Fig. 17).







Fig. 18 | Untitled, 1966 Acrylic on paper 24 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches

From top to bottom:

Fig. 16 | Installation view of *Leon Polk Smith: Paintings and Collages from the 1960s* at Washburn Gallery, New York, 2015. © Leon Polk Smith Foundation. Courtesy Washburn Gallery.

Fig. 17 | Installation view of *Leon Polk Smith* at Lisson Gallery, London, 2018. © Leon Polk Smith Foundation; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

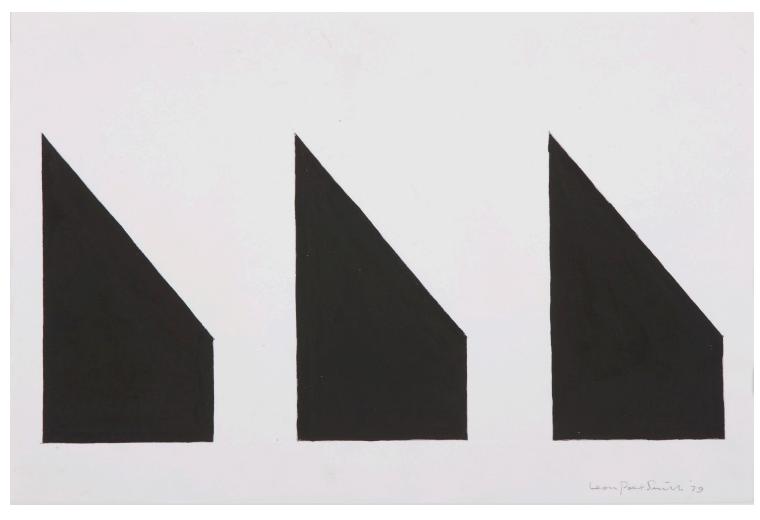


Fig. 19 | Untitled, 1979 Acrylic on paper 14 3/4 x 20 inches

Smith returned to more streamlined compositions in both single- and multiple-canvas works beginning in the 1970s while continuing to integrate wall space into the artworks. He also repeatedly explored formal issues through black-and-white compositions, as he had throughout his career. The deceptively austere composition of this 1979 work on

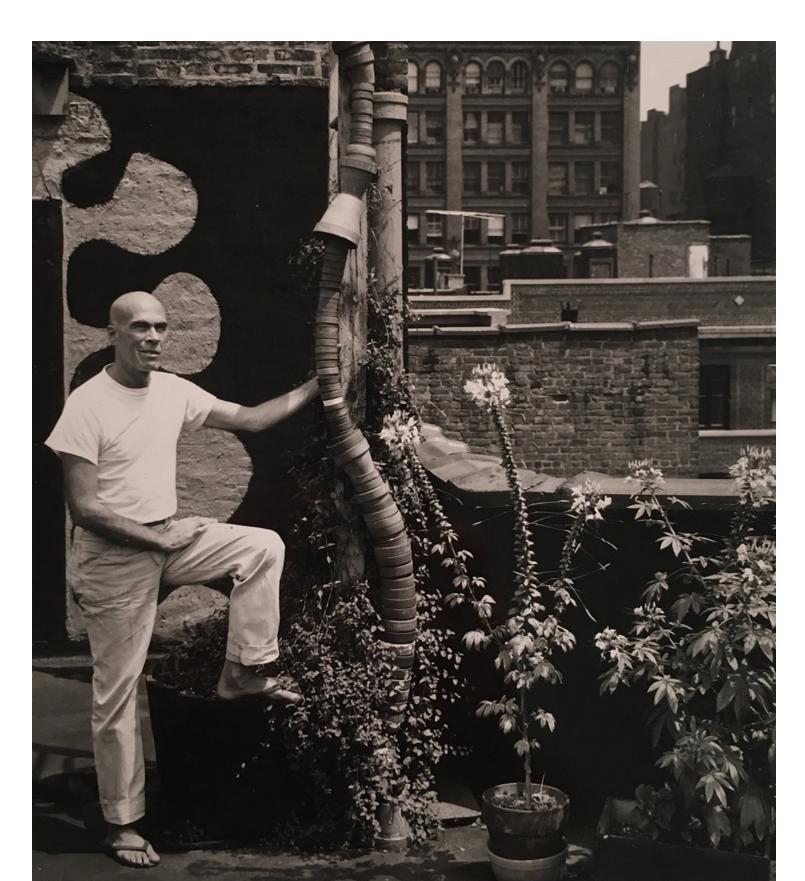
paper integrates a white field with black modules to set up provocative perceptual experiences (Fig. 19). The sequence of forms moves the eyes simultaneously in two directions, upward and to the left, over the support surface and beyond. Designating shaped canvases, the black forms become, as Smith explained, "the nucleus for a much larger area [of wall]."

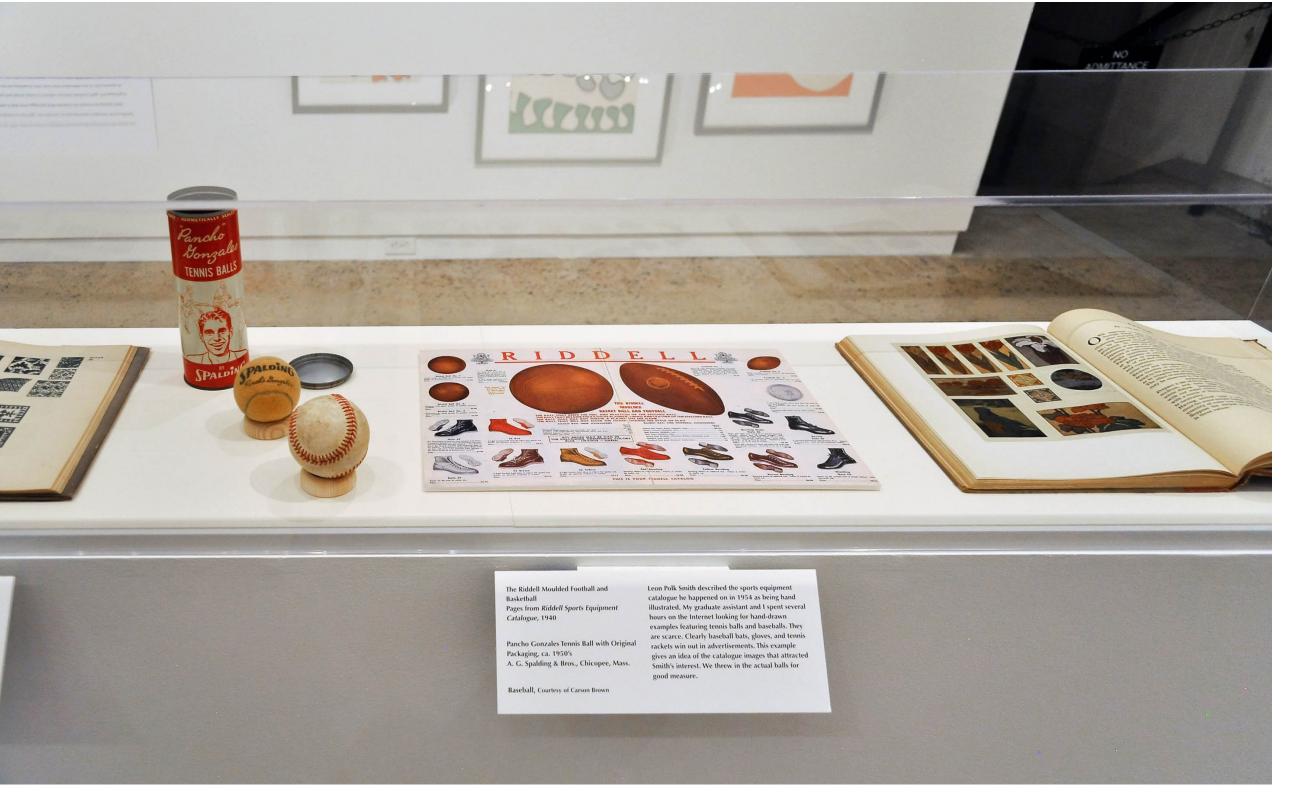
VIEWED IN HINDSIGHT, LEON POLK SMITH'S CAREER reveals a very self-contained character of development that would not only define his mature style but also contribute to a redirection of Western art away from the reigning Abstract Expressionist sensibility.

Through exploring Mondrian's abstractions, Dow's principles of composition, and sports ball designs, Smith evolved a set of formal issues that became the engine of his art from the 1960s onward. While his contribution has yet to be fully recognized, Smith took a leadership role in forging what became a dominant aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s. Reducing art to its

defining formal components underpinned his singular art and gave rise to the movements of Minimalism, Hard-Edge painting, and Color Field painting. As a late-blooming artist from the United States heartland, Smith was one of the earliest to query the essential, defining properties of art—what made art art in the second half of the twentieth century.

Leon Polk Smith outside his studio at 82 West
12th Street, New York, 1962. © Leon Polk
Smith Foundation. Courtesy Leon Polk Smith
Foundation, New York. Photographer unknown.





ENDNOTES

- ¹ For further information on A. E. Gallatin and his museum, see Gail Stavitsky, "The A. E. Gallatin Collection: An Early Adventure in Modern Art," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, 89, No. 379/380 (Winter Spring 1994): 1, 4-47.
- ² A. E. Gallatin donated his collection the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1943. To learn more about specific artworks discussed in this essay, go to http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/search.html and search the museum's online collections database.
- ³ Artist Statement, c. 1961, typescript, Galerie Chalette, New York, NY, 1968; and "A Conversation between Konstanze Chrüwell-Doertenbach and Leon Polk Smith," *Nike*, No. 19 (July/August/September, 1987); reprinted in *Leon Polk Smith*, exhibition catalogue, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, and Musée de Genoble, 1989, p. 105.
- ⁴ Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, thirteenth edition, revised and enlarged. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1931, p. 63.
- ⁵ "A Conversation between Konstanze Chrüwell-Doertenbach and Leon Polk Smith," p. 105.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 "The Paintings of Leon Polk Smith. A conversation between Leon Polk Smith and d'Arcy Hayman," Ina Prinz, Leon Polk Smith im Arithmeum, Bonn, Germany: Bouvier, 2001, p. 19.
- ⁸ Brooke Kamin Rapaport, "An Interview with Leon Polk Smith," *Leon Polk Smith: American Painter*, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 1996, p. 23.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST*

1. On the Farm in Oklahoma, November 1934 Ink and pencil on paper 17 x 13 1/2 inches 2015.011.002 | LPSF 1934.D.001 Figure 2

2. Cow Boys, 1934

Ink and pencil on paper

17 x 13 1/2 inches

2015.011.003 | LPSF 1934.D.002

3. Oklahoma Dust Bowl, 1934

Opaque watercolor, marker, and pencil on paper
19 1/2 x 25 1/4 inches
2015.011.006 | LPSF 1934.D.005

4. Untitled, 1936 India ink and watercolor on paper 6 1/2 x 8 inches 2015.011.014 | LPSF 1936.D.004

5. Oklahoma Cattle Brands, 1937 Opaque watercolor on paper 21 3/4 x 16 1/2 inches 2015.011.017 | LPSF 1937.D.001

6. *Leo's Bay*, 1939 Opaque watercolor on paper 19 3/4 x 24 7/8 inches 2015.011.068 | LPSF 1939.D.032a Figure 3

7. Untitled, 1938 Pencil, marker, and opaque watercolor on paper 25 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches 2015.011.026 | LPSF 1938.D.003

8. Untitled (Mexico), 1938 Opaque watercolor on paper 19 3/8 x 24 1/4 inches 2015.011.084 | LPSF 1940.D.010

9. Untitled, 1940 Opaque watercolor on paper 26 x 19 7/8 inches 2015.011.091 | LPSF 1940.D.019 Figure 4

10. Pipets, 1940 Watercolor and ink on paper 19 x 24 1/2 inches 2015.011.108 | LPSF 1940.D.036 Figure 5

11. Untitled, 1942
Cut paper, ink, and crayon on colored paper.
11 1/2 x 17 3/8 inches
2015.011.135 | LSPF 1942.D.001

12. Untitled, 1943 Crayon and ink on paper 8 x 5 inches 2015.011.143 | LPSF 1943.D.011 Figure 6

13. Untitled, 1943
Pencil, Indian ink, and watercolor on paper
5 X 8 inches
2015.011.146 | LPSF 1943.D.014

14. Untitled, 1946
Pencil and opaque watercolor on paper
10 x 8 1/2 inches
2015.011.151 | LPSF 1946.D.017
Figure 7

15. Untitled, 1948
Pencil and colored paper on cardboard
17 x 13 5/8 inches
2015.011.152 | LPSF 1948.D.004
Figure 8

16. NUSH'KA, 1949Oil on board12 inches, dia.Jonathan and Talitha Nichols CollectionFigure 9

17. Arthur Wesley Dow, Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers, thirteenth edition, revised and enlarged. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1931, p. 63. Figure 10

18. *Dusty Miller*, 1953 Opaque watercolor on paper 18 x 14 inches 2015.011.203 | LPSF 1953.D.057 Figure 12

19. Dusty Miller, 1955 Opaque watercolor on paper 24 3/4 x 17 7/8 inches 2015.011.306 | LPSF 1955.D.075 Figure 11 20. Untitled, 1955 Acrylic on canvasette 19 7/8 x 16 inches 2015.011.304 | LPSF 1955.D.071 Cover, Figure 13

21. Untitled, 1954
Pencil, ink, and opaque watercolor on cardboard
13 7/8 x 10 7/8 inches
2015.011.253 | LPSF 1954.D.061

22. Untitled, 1954
Opaque watercolor and metallic paint on cardboard
8 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches
2015.011.246 | LPSF 1954.D.046
Page 24, top right

23. Untitled, 1954
Opaque watercolor and pencil on cardboard 8 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches
2015.011.251 | LPSF 1954.D.057
Page 24, top left

24. Untitled, 1956
Pencil and opaque watercolor on paper
13 7/8 x 10 7/8 inches
2015.011.367 | LPSF 1956.D.061

25. Untitled, 1956
Paper on paper
5 x 5 3/4 inches
2015.011.357 | LPSF 1956.D.032
Figure 14

26. Untitled, 1958 Opaque watercolor on paper 16 3/4 x 13 1/8 inches 2015.011.436| LPSF 1958.D.039 Figure 15

27. Untitled, 1963
Pencil and paper on paper
20 1/8 x 14 1/4 inches
2015.011.634 | LPSF 1963.D.073

28. Untitled, 1966 Acrylic on paper 24 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches 2015.011.642 | LPSF 1966.D.004 Figure 18

29. Untitled, 1968 Acrylic on paper 16 1/4 x 17 inches 2015.011.645 | LPSF 1968.D.030

30. Untitled, 1968 Acrylic on paper 20 x 12 1/2 inches 2015.011.652 | LPSF 1968.D.051 31. Untitled, 1973
Pencil, marker and paint on paper
14 x 18 inches
2015.011.681 | LPSF 1973.D.013

32. Untitled, 1979 Acrylic on paper 14 3/4 x 20 inches 2015.011.703 | LPSF 1979.D.032 Figure 19

33. Untitled, 1995
Paper and artist tape on paper
20 x 14 1/8 inches
2015.011.720 | LPSF 1995.D.002

*Unless otherwise noted, all works are Collection of Oklahoma State University Art Museum, Gift of the Leon Polk Smith Foundation, New York, New York. © Leon Polk Smith Collection.