

SMITH’S ART CAME OF AGE around 1959 with *Correspondences*, the first of two series that won him national recognition.

This series embodies his Mondrian-derived principles of achieving a compositional equilibrium through creating “a continuity of space and form” with the assistance of color and a new, more expansive character of space (Figs 8, 9). The compositions vary from excerpts of dusty miller leaves and offspring of sports ball silhouettes to angular and free forms. The line was the starting point. He explained, “I am drawing two forms with one line, and I am having to think of both sides of the line, feel both sides, know both sides,”⁵ The emerging divisions bleed off the edges of the composition or are suspended in an unbounded ground to suggest an endless space. Large in scale, filling the paper,

they gain a monumentality that is magnified in his now mural-scale paintings. Smith used colors in trios or pairs to achieve this exchange of form and space through “equivalences of unlike color areas, balanced by the artist’s judgment,” as he explained. Smith linked his distinctive bright colors in combination or with neutrals to the Native American palettes that he grew up with in Oklahoma. There, he said, “my Indian neighbors and relatives used color to vibrate and shock in all its intensity with equal rampancy.” Together, Smith observed, line and color “create two worlds, in direct opposition to each other and yet so well related that they fit into each other as a jigsaw puzzle must.”⁶

Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10

In the mid-1960s, Smith moved on to another formal problem with his series *Constellations*—to introduce a greater sense of space to his paintings. As witnessed in drawings for this major series, he returned to geometric forms—circles, ovals, squares, and triangles—and a palette of primary and secondary colors plus black and white (Figs 10, 17). The multiple geometric forms floating on the gray or white paper background represent groups of shaped canvas paintings, which are to be read as single artworks. With this new format, the wall becomes an integral part of the paintings. Together, they represent much larger compositions because, in Smith’s words, they are “reaching out in every direction.”⁷

Smith initiated new variants of his abstraction in the early 1970s. Now in his sixties, having gained national renown, he moved away from the *Constellations* series toward an increasingly spare aesthetic that would characterize his art into the 1990s. While walls remain an essential part of the artwork, Smith introduced the illusionistic space system of linear perspective as the basis for the interplay of space and form. Associated with the new *Extended Space* series, Untitled from 1972 represents shaped canvases that alternately appear to be flat

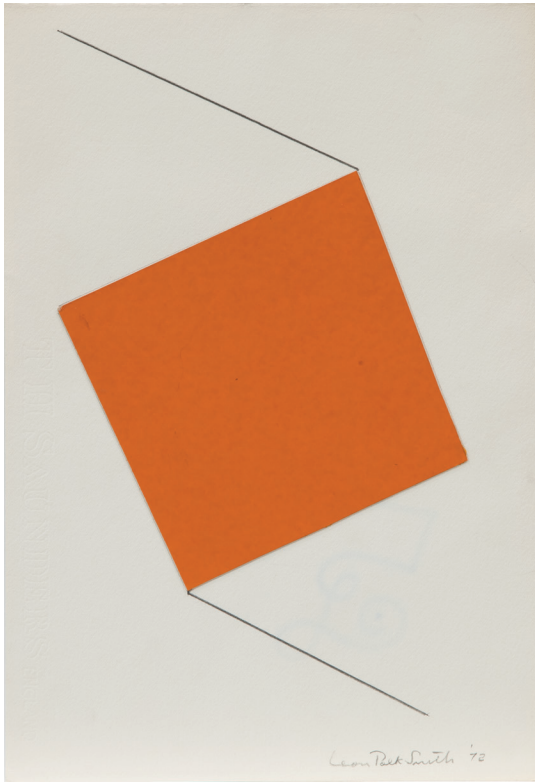


Fig 11

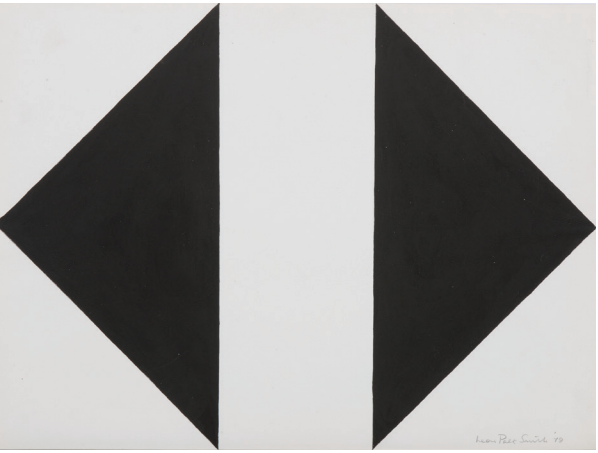
designs or structures that project or recede in space (Fig 11). The linear extensions—wood strips in the paintings—invoke radiating surface space. Where works from this series resemble diagrams or mechanical drafting, the *Form Space* compositions lean toward the structural character of architecture. Designating shaped canvases positioned on a white wall, the triangles of Untitled, 1979, in tandem with the intervening white paper, become the image of a building (Fig 12). By the 1990s, Smith had reduced the *Form Space* series to single rectangular and circular formats filled with simple geometric forms or lines that dominate solid-color or white grounds. Lines assume a thin but assertive character, positioned tangentially, in counterpoint to forms, or in sequences. Intended for a rectilinear painting, the composition of clustered black tape lines in Untitled, 1995, (Fig 13) plots out a three-dimensional space that is suggestive of a wooded landscape receding into depth.

THE LEON POLK SMITH COLLECTION of works on paper provides the backstory to Smith’s remarkable life and art.

As the drawings tell, he virtually became an artist overnight. His earliest drawings reveal him to be a prodigy who would pursue art with a single-minded passion. The Collection enriches our knowledge about Smith’s best-known periods and fills in important gaps in his development. Importantly, it reveals his dedication, capacity, and innovation over a lifetime. Working within the narrow formal parameters he established for his abstraction, Smith created an art that is at once cohesive yet dynamic and visually provocative, proving the adage that simple is not easy.

NOTES

¹ In a 1963 interview, Smith explained that he had no exposure to art before his discovery of a studio class when he was in college. He said his “only inkling” of his interest in becoming artist was that “I know as a child I liked to copy the cartoons in the paper, drawings.” Leon Polk Smith, Interview with Dr. K. Osis, May 28, 1963, p. 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Box 5, Folder 37.
² Brooke Kamin Rapaport, A Tape-Recorded Interview with Leon Polk Smith, transcript, July 12 & 21, 1993, p. 9, Archives, Brooklyn Museum of Art.
³ Brooke Kamin Rapaport, A Tape-Recorded Interview with Leon Polk Smith, transcript, July 12 & 21, 1993, pp. 37-38.
⁴ See Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*. First published in 1899, *Composition* served as a teaching manual complete with hands-on exercises. *Composition* has continued to enjoy a following and today is widely available online and in print and digital formats.
⁵ “The Paintings of Leon Polk Smith. A Conversation Between Leon Polk Smith and d’Arcy Hayman,” in Ina Prinz, *Leon Polk Smith in Arithmeum*, exhibition catalogue, Bonn, Germany: Bouvier, p. 19.
⁶ Leon Polk Smith, “Line, Color, and the Concept of Space,” 1961, in *Leon Polk Smith*, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein and Musée de Grenoble, exhibition catalogue, 1989, p. 9; “The Paintings of Leon Polk Smith. A Conversation Between Leon Polk Smith and d’Arcy Hayman,” p. 19.
⁷ Brooke Kamin Rapaport, A Tape-Recorded Interview with Leon Polk Smith, transcript, July 12 & 21, 1993, p. 40.



From top: Figs 12, 13

⁴ Leon Polk Smith, “Line, Color, and the Concept of Space,” 1961, in *Leon Polk Smith*, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein and Musée de Grenoble, exhibition catalogue, 1989, p. 9; “The Paintings of Leon Polk Smith. A Conversation Between Leon Polk Smith and d’Arcy Hayman,” p. 19.
⁷ Brooke Kamin Rapaport, A Tape-Recorded Interview with Leon Polk Smith, transcript, July 12 & 21, 1993, p. 40.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS*

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Fig 2: *On the Farm in Oklahoma*, November 1934, pencil and ink on paper, 17 x 13 ½ in., 2015.011.002.

Fig 3: *Oklahoma Cattle Brands*, 1937, poster paint on paper, 21 ¾ x 16 ½ in., 2015.011.017.

Fig 4: Untitled, 1943, crayon and ink on paper, 8 x 5 in., 2015.011.143.

Fig 5: Untitled, 1954, acrylic on board, 8 ½ x 8 ½ in., 2015.011.231.

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Fig 17: Untitled, 1968, acrylic on paper, 20 x 12 ½ in., 2015.011.652.

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THE LEON POLK SMITH COLLECTION

Oklahoma State University Museum of Art

*All works are Gift of Leon Polk Smith Foundation, New York, New York.

AN OKLAHOMA NATIVE,

Leon Polk Smith (1906-1996), pioneered the pared-down abstraction that became known as Hard-edge painting.

In the mid-twentieth century, this movement was part of a groundswell of interest in creating art forms of extreme economy. The subject was the fundamental elements of art, identified as the abstract building blocks of line, form, color, space, and composition. Yet to be fully recognized, the Oklahoma native's art and its groundbreaking contribution to twentieth-century abstraction recently have begun to receive increased attention, with works being added to museum collections and the number of exhibitions growing.

In 2015, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation in New York City brought the artist back home. Its gift of 756 works on paper has enabled the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art to join this community of revived interest. As the Foundation's designated archive, the Museum shares this collection with institutions across the state and nationally, organizes exhibitions, maintains a collection of research materials, and supports much-needed research and scholarship on Smith. In so doing, the Museum fulfills its primary mission of educating.

When asked about his drawings in a 1993 interview, the artist downplayed their importance, primarily discussing his collages and the drawing on canvas he did to start every painting. Works in the Museum's collection tell a very different story. The sheer number, from his student days to his late years, measure their major role in the development of Smith's art. He worked in a variety of materials and techniques, ranging from pencil and ink to watercolor and collage, rendered on paper scraps, cardboard, painted paper, and high-quality art papers.



Fig 1

Casual doodles, serial explorations of images or compositions, and more finished outcomes record his flashes of insight or inspiration, problem-solving exercises, rehearsals for and revisits of paintings, and, in rare instances, stand-alone works of art like the *Torn Drawing* series, which enjoyed a solo exhibition in New York in 1965 (Fig 1). Collectively this inventory conjures up an image of Smith drawing whenever he wasn't painting, a creative spirit ever ready to discover a new option or test a new possibility. Never widely exhibited or studied, the drawings also offer a more nuanced picture of Smith's development.

SMITH OVERCAME MANY CHALLENGES to become an artist.

The eighth of nine children, he was born near Chickasha, to parents who were both half Cherokee. The family lived a bare-bones life on homestead land.

Smith continued to help them out after finishing high school in 1924, working construction jobs in Oklahoma and Arizona for seven years, until the farm went bankrupt. Amid the financial challenges of the Depression years, he realized his dream to become a teacher and earned a degree in English at East Central State Normal School (now East Central University) in Ada in 1934. During this time, Smith also discovered his passion for art and turned it into a career goal.¹

He completed a master's degree in art and educational psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, in the summers from 1936 to 1938. Concurrently, he taught elementary and secondary education in his

home state and subsequently held full-time teaching positions in various locales until 1958. Beginning in 1952, Smith made New York City his permanent home, later adding a second residence on Long Island.

From the outset, Smith demonstrated a talent that was as extraordinary as his dedication to art, previewed in his command of naturalism by the time he graduated from college in 1934. During his first years of teaching and graduate studies, Smith drew much of his imagery from his daily life in Oklahoma, depicting cowboys, ranching, the dustbowl, and college life. His stylized treatment of figures and landscape, however, anticipates his later devotion to abstract form and pared-down compositions. Smith experimented with different approaches to simplify his forms, as seen in the curvilinear outlines of *On the Farm in Oklahoma* (Fig 2). The artist commented about his initial effort, "I knew from the time I started studying art that when I had trained myself to draw a horse and pig and person and a tree, that I was going to be through with drawing from nature."²

Fig 2



Drawings from the later 1930s document Smith's exploration of European modern art. A visit to Albert E. Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art in New York in 1936 introduced him to the first public collection of modern art in the country and an alternative source of insight. The novice artist was a quick study. Within six years from 1934 to 1940, he tried out the cubist and surrealist styles of internationally renowned artists Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, on view at Gallatin's gallery (Figs 3, 14).

By 1943, Smith was ready for something new. That new was the geometric abstraction of Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian, which he had first seen at the Gallery of Living Art in 1936. Relocating from Europe to New York in 1940, the Dutch artist created a new body of work inspired by his new hometown. Smith had numerous opportunities to update his knowledge through several exhibitions and representation in New York, including Mondrian's first solo show in 1942 and a memorial exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1945.

Works in the Museum's collection show how he reinvented the Dutch master's pristine compositions of ruled black grids and inserts of white and primary colors. Untitled of 1943 represents a painterly redo in a limited but less regimented color scheme (Fig 4). Freely drawn crayon strokes overlay the broken scaffolding of wiry, nervous ink lines and introduce striping and dots as well as solid color blocks to the cells. By contrast, with Untitled (1946) Smith introduced a color palette of red, orange, and gray and deconstructed Mondrian's trademark grid into stacks of "C," "L," and block forms that participate in an abstracted pattern of shifting spatial references (Fig 16).

Representing one of the deepest areas of the Collection, Smith's drawings from the 1950s track his shift from the stimulus of European modernism to that of homegrown visual models. As he widely acknowledged, he

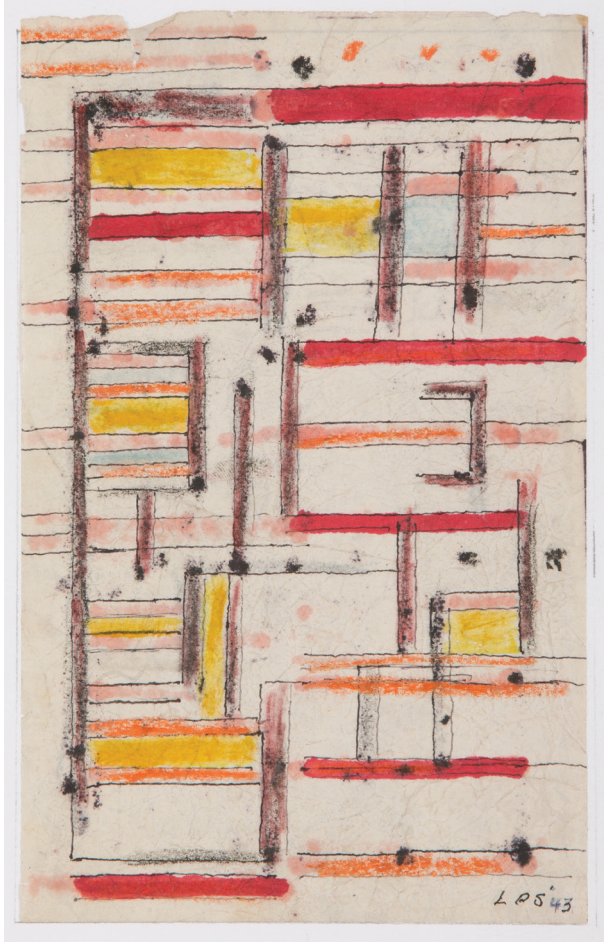
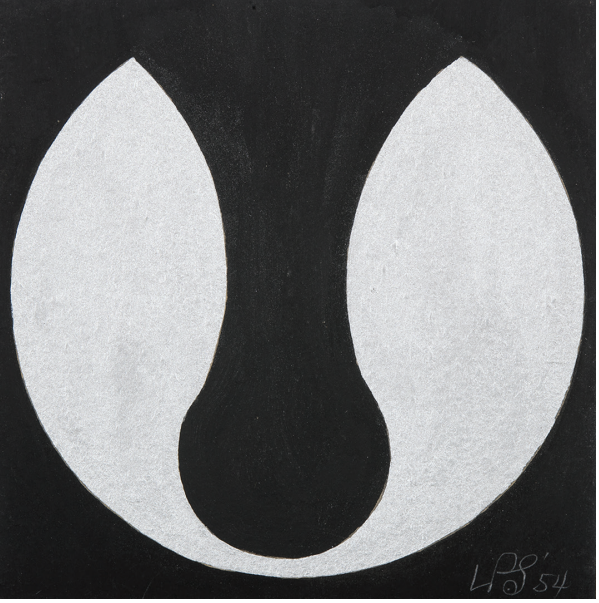
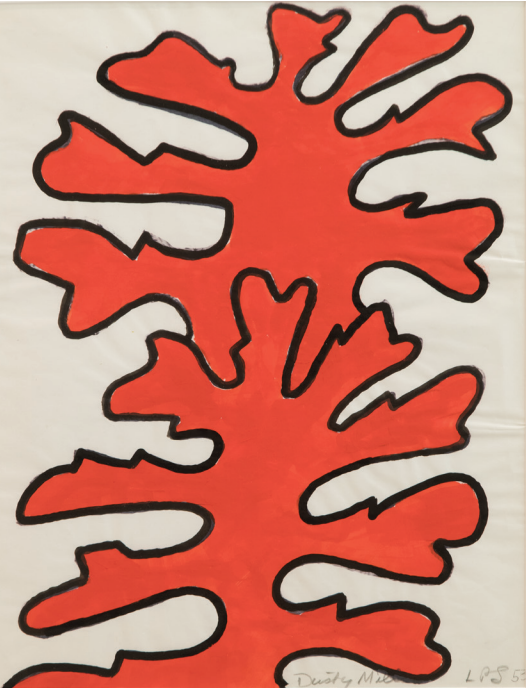
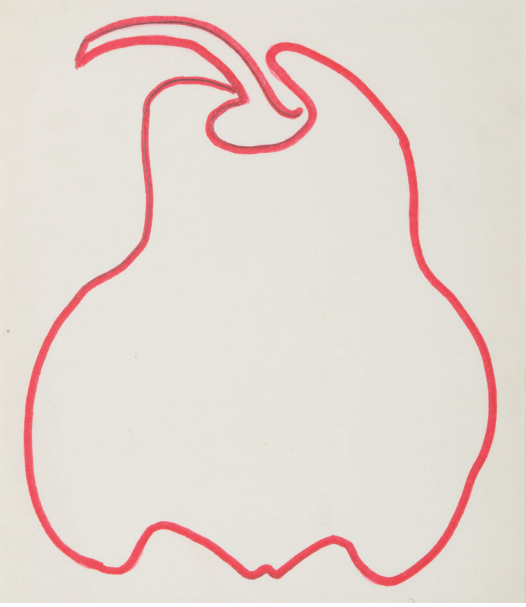


Fig 4

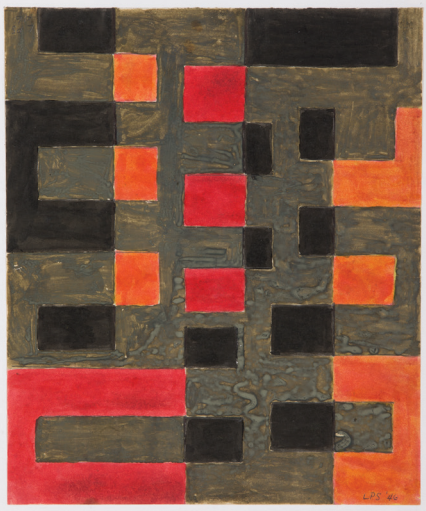
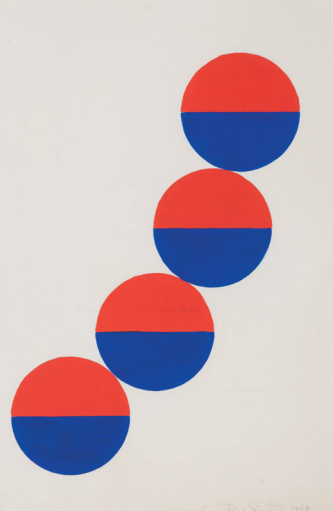
chanced upon one in the form of a Spaulding athletic equipment catalogue mailed to him in 1954. Initially, its line drawings of baseballs, tennis balls, and basketballs both captivated and repelled him. He soon realized they offered a solution to his Mondrian-derived challenge of using curved lines to achieve compositions whose forms and spaces were interchangeable.³ Within the same year, he transformed these sports emblems into icons of geometry, reducing seams to crisp lines or edges of color, repositioning or altering the seam patterns, and infilling selected shapes with color (Fig 5). Together, these formal adjustments led to a new order of visual dynamics born of shifting references to substance and space.



Clockwise from left: Figs 5, 6, 7



Numerous plant studies in the Collection chronicle another dramatic retuning of Smith's abstraction around 1951, which has not previously been recognized (Fig 6). These drawings indicate that the artist was revisiting the design teachings of art educator Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922), which he would have encountered as part of the fine arts curriculum at Teachers College. Dow's teachings were an early example of today's design foundations course and its building blocks of line, form, space, color, and composition in the abstract. Smith's plant studies echo Dow's strategies of "arranging lines in space," with attention to the framing and scaling of the image and distributing form, color, and values in all-over pattern spaces.⁴ Studies of the dusty miller plant demonstrate how Smith applied Dow's strategies to arrive at the economic abstraction that characterizes his mature work (Figs 7, 15).



Clockwise from top left: Figs 14, 15, 16, 17, 18



720 S. Husband Street / Stillwater, OK, 74074
405.744.2780 / museum.okstate.edu

This publication has been funded by the generous support of Malinda and Dick Fischer. The Leon Polk Smith Collection was a gift to the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art from the Leon Polk Smith Foundation, New York, New York, in 2015. All images by Phil Shockley.