

Hughie Lee-Smith

Hughie Lee-Smith was born in Florida in 1915. He grew up in and attended school in Cleveland, Ohio. He graduated with high honors from the Cleveland School of Arts.

During the 1930's and 1940's he was employed by the Ohio Works Progress Administration (WPA) and at the Ford factory in River Rouge. He served in the United States Navy during World War II. He was stationed at the naval base in Chicago where he completed a series of paintings entitled "The History of the Negro in the United States Navy." He had his first one-man show in Chicago in 1945.

After leaving the navy, Lee-Smith returned to school and earned his Bachelor of Arts from Wayne State University in 1953.

He taught art in various venues in Michigan, New Jersey, Washington, D. C., and New York. His works were exhibited in galleries and museums including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the KIA.

A consistent theme in Lee-Smith's painting is the loneliness of decaying urban life. He paints an urban landscape with old buildings and structures in states of disrepair and neglect. Few people populate these landscapes and they seem disconnected from their environment and from each other. There is a somberness and feeling of desolation in these paintings. Lee-Smith attributes the tone of his work to the time he spent in Chicago. He said, "This part of the Midwest affected the character of my palette. The climate, the weather—dark, dreary, lugubrious days that darkened the colors. Those years in Chicago also affected the way I see things politically, socially, philosophically."

Many of Lee-Smith's works, including, *The Spectators*, portray this feeling of isolation and disconnect among people and emphasize the separation and tension between races.

Although he paints in a realistic style and displays fine draftsmanship, there is often a surreal quality to his work. He incorporates symbols such as ribbons, decaying structures, wooden poles which interrupt his horizontal landscapes but are unattached to anything, and remnants of festivity such as balloons and circus tents.

Lee-Smith was a contemporary of Jacob Lawrence and shared a similar background, but their paintings are distinctly different in theme and tone. While they both portray everyday urban life, Lawrence populates his paintings with people who are enjoying life and each other. He uses vibrant color and lots of action. Lee-Smith's city is dull and its occupants are despairing and disconnected.

These somber paintings are thought provoking. Lee-Smith says, "My paintings don't tell stories, they are about expressing emotion by means of form and color."

Hughie Lee-Smith was impeccable and proper in his speech, manner and dress and held a strong belief in the importance of education. He was a spiritual man who practiced meditation and studied philosophy. As an artist, he was accomplished in drawing with precision and accuracy and he demanded that his students practice and learn to draw realistically. Lee-Smith's themes and techniques remained consistent. He was not an experimental artist and continued to paint realistic figures and landscapes

during the era when abstract expressionism was most popular. He was influenced by and compared to Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico and American artist Edward Hopper. Hughie Lee-Smith died in 1999 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Barbara Vortman Report
on a work of art

The Spectators
by Hughie Lee-Smith

The painting, titled *The Spectators*, shows four men standing on what looks like a cement wall, perhaps a viaduct or some other long structure. It reminds me of the pier at South Haven. The wall is simple and substantial, but there are cracks and pits in the cement giving the feeling that it may not be as strong as it initially appears. There is little in the background to tell us where this wall is. We see the horizon, but there are no buildings, no water, nothing to give a hint. That lack of detail leads me to believe that the subject of the painting is of a universal nature and could be anywhere, anytime.

The men are all looking outward. There seems to be no interaction among the painting's subjects who stand in two clusters—one of three men, the other a lone figure. They are all dressed similarly in the simple pants and jackets common to the working class. They stare expressionlessly at something unseen giving no clue as to what it is they are looking at. Their impassive faces lead me to believe that whatever it is, it isn't all that interesting. Their hands hang at their sides. They do not talk about what they are seeing. They show no emotion.

The lone figure is dressed like the others and has that same lack of facial expression. There are three significant differences in him, however. First, he is standing apart from the other three. Second, he is holding a book in his hand. Third, he is an African-American.

There is a feeling of isolation here. Even though the four men are standing together, each seems lost in his own thought. There is a further physical separation of the African-American man from the others. The book represents his interest in education,

but this painting does not lead me to believe that education will make the men any more equal or bring them together in any way.

The use of a limited palette of dull colors adds to the somber mood. The lack of information in the background and foreground increase the feeling of uncertainty and isolation. The pier itself seems to be an island separating the people from the environment.

The artist, Hughie Lee-Smith who was born in Florida in 1915, grew up in Cleveland and knew from an early age that he would be an artist. He supported himself in the 1930's and 1940's by working for the Ohio Works Progress Administration (WPA) as an artist and at the Ford River Rouge plant in Detroit. During World War II he served in the United States Navy and continued to work on his art. For a time he was stationed at the naval base in Chicago and states, "This part of the Midwest affected the character of my palette. The climate, the weather—dark, dreary lugubrious days that darkened the colors... also affected the way I see things politically, socially, philosophically."

During that era, his peers, Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence were influenced by the vibrancy of Harlem and their paintings contrast greatly with Lee-Smith's. Bearden and Lawrence use vivid primary colors and abstract expressionism to show the joyful side of life. Their paintings tell stories and are replete with action and interaction. Lee-Smith's works don't tell stories. They stir emotions by showing the stark reality of the decaying urban landscape and the lack of connection between people.

The Spectators hangs on its own little wall, apart from any other piece of art. I admire the curator's selection of this spot for this particular painting. The separateness evokes Hughie Lee-Smith's view of the isolation of man in contemporary society.