

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

