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Exhibition note

by [Hilton Kramer](#)

"David Smith: A Centennial" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

On the occasion of "David Smith: A Centennial," the marvelous exhibition that has been organized this winter at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum by Carmen Giménez, I am obliged to declare an interest. For it would be improper for me to pretend to write about Smith with an attitude of critical impartiality. I have not only admired Smith's work since I first encountered it half a century ago, but I also have written a good deal about it. I had the good fortune of having many conversations with Smith about his life and work, and often visited his studio, which he called the Terminal Iron Works, in upstate New York.

In 1960, when I was working as the editor of *Arts Magazine*, I devoted a Special Issue of that journal to Smith's work—a decision that was not then universally acclaimed, to say the least. Smith had never enjoyed the kind of celebrity that came early to Jackson Pollock and certain other Abstract Expressionist painters—the artists whom Smith himself considered, rightly I think, to be his counterparts in creating a distinctive school of American modernism.

Moreover, the very methods and materials Smith employed in creating his sculpture—welded metal open-form construction—were still suspect among the many artists and critics who believed that the art of sculpture was limited to the practice of carving and modeling. As a consequence, there were highly influential critics on the international art scene—among them Sir Herbert Read, a power in his day, who flatly refused to acknowledge that welded-metal construction could even be considered sculpture at all.

This judgment, which now seems so benighted to us, was also shared by many well-known artists—among them, the English sculptor Henry Moore, whom I used to see a good deal of on my visits to London. Moore's work was then a great favorite among American collectors, but he too was very disparaging about Smith's sculpture, which (I believe) he knew only from photographs. Was there an element of national pride (or prejudice) in this refusal to acknowledge Smith's achievement? I think there was. The London cognoscenti attempted for a time to promote the reputation of the English sculptor Reg Butler, whose spindly, cage-like forms were a feeble attempt at open-form metal construction. Butler was even awarded a cash prize of £4,500 for his design of a work to be called the *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner*, but the monument was never built. There is a model of it, however, in the collection of the Tate Gallery in London. Nothing about the model suggests that its realization would have approached the achievement of David Smith.

Fortunately, the current exhibition does not stint in providing viewers with a comprehensive account of Smith's oeuvre. With over 120 sculptures, drawn from the years 1932 to 1965, and an ample selection of the artist's drawings and sketchbooks, this "Centennial" show is by far the most

definitive account that anyone has yet attempted, and the show's installation has been beautifully adapted to the Guggenheim's unconventional exhibition space.

While we are constantly reminded of the sources Smith drew upon for inspiration—among them, cubism, primitive art, surrealism, abstract expressionism, and the sculpture of Picasso and González—we are also constantly amazed by the fantasy, invention, and clarity that Smith brought to his sources. In the end, those sources are eclipsed by the sheer American energy and forthright American accent that give his achievement its special distinction.

Smith was a master of the kind of sculpture that came to be called “Drawing in Space.” This three-dimensional draftsmanship encompassed an amazing variety of motifs, from anecdotal narrative of family life to broad vistas of landscape, and it was executed with an unfailing elegance and brio. In my experience, anyway, it has never been surpassed, despite the many imitators who attempted to rival Smith's achievement. For connoisseurs of modern sculpture, “David Smith: A Centennial” is an exhibition that is not to be missed. It remains on view at the Guggenheim Museum through May 14, 2006, and is accompanied by an excellent, well-illustrated catalogue.

Hilton Kramer is the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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