

STRAIGHT

AT THE

HEART

CHARLES SMITH'S AFRICAN/AMERICAN HERITAGE MUSEUM

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**CHARLES SMITH'S
AFRICAN/AMERICAN
HERITAGE MUSEUM**

A catalogue to accompany the exhibition

**Wright Museum of Art
Beloit College
Beloit, Wisconsin
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CURATORIAL STATEMENT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The exhibition *Straight at the Heart: Charles Smith's African/American Heritage Museum* was inspired by re-

peated visits to Dr. Smith's Aurora environment and by the conversations held with Dr. Smith during those visits. To convey the spirit and passion of Smith's mission and museum, we assembled a set of documentary photographs and ten selected sculptures for temporary installation in the main court gallery in the Wright Museum of Art. Our purpose was twofold: to celebrate the energy, will, and talent of a single man of commitment and to urge our visitors to the exhibition to make their own trip to the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive.

The curators of this exhibition would like to thank the many people who made our endeavors possible. We are grateful to Henry Moy, Director of the Museums of Beloit College, for hosting the exhibition and lending the assistance of his able staff. Many other individuals and organizations from the College provided their support, as well as their encouragement, to bring our plans into reality. We would like to acknowledge Victor E. Ferrall, Jr., President of College; the Students Active for a Better Education; Gail Pizarro, Pearl Leonard-Rock, and the Educational Development Program; Brenda Atlas, JoAnn Polito, the Help Yourself Program, and the Beloit Academy; Bob Obrohta and the Upward Bound Program; Mary Ashby Girard and the Arts Coop, and the Art History Program for their generosity. Additional support has come from the Patricia Collette Fund and the Art League of Beloit.

Other individuals have lent their skill and knowledge as well as their enthusiasm. We would like to thank Nancy A.

McDowell, Dean of the College; Kenneth Crawford, Assistant to the President; Connie M. Schroeder and Lisa Worsh of Student Activities; and Eddie Fergus and the Black Student Union. Our special gratitude goes to David A. Ulaszek, Coordinator of the Performing Arts and Great Lectures Series for his support and guidance and to Connie Truesdale and the members of the Cultural and Community Affairs Committee of 1993-94 for helping to develop the idea at its earliest stages. The catalogue was designed by Bonnie Zahn of News and Publications, and the manuscript was prepared with the help of David Heesen, Joan Salzburg, Ken Bertholomey, and Emily Nie. We would also like to thank the office of News and Publications, especially Pete Maiken, Elaine Barreca, and Connie Jones, for their help with publicity.

Two more people need to be recognized. We thank Revin Fellows, Programs and Project Director of the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive, for his organizational and informative assistance. And, of course, we thank Dr. Smith, whose generous nature and prodigious vision was our inspiration and our point of departure.

David Kargl, Debra N. Mancoff,
Thomas Skwerski

Nadja Aksamija, Zoë V. Arcidiacono



CHARLES SMITH'S PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give praise and honor to Almighty God and his Son the Lord Jesus Christ for this unique gift of art. The exhibition scheduled for 15 January-11 February at the Wright Museum of Art of Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin, will be my first major exhibit, for which I would like at this time to thank from the depths of my heart those that made it possible: Dr. Debra N. Mancoff, Associate Professor and Chair, Mr. David Kargl, photographer and supporter, Thomas Skwerski, Exhibit Preparator, the students, especially Nadja and Zoë. My gratitude is also to the faculty, alumni, and the student body as a whole.

A host of friends also have been strong supporters of my efforts by way of encouragement. Mike Noland, artist, Professor James M. Zanzi, Chicago Art

Institute, Mrs. Susan Moran, Taft Robinson Jr., Mr. Jerry Lyons, Ms. Belvin Smith, Mrs. Mary Golden, Ms. Betty Williams, Dough Smith, The In'tuit Art organization and its members, Lisa Stone, the

Honorable Mayor of Hoffman Estates, Michael J. O'Malley, and his capable Assistant Village Manager Wil J. Parker, and all those that have visited the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive and left words of encouragement. Finally, I would like to give a very special "THANK YOU" to Mr. Revin Fellows our program and project coordinator. Brother Fellows has been to me and my art what "Theo" was to Van Gogh, what Caleb was to Joshua, and what Jonathan was to David. Without his efforts none of this would have been possible. May God bless each of you.

**YOU DON'T NEED A
DEGREE TO UNDER-
STAND THIS PLACE,
YOU JUST NEED AN
OPEN HEART**

Dr. Charles Smith's African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archives is an indoor-outdoor museum situated inside and around Smith's house in unincorporated Aurora, Illinois. The museum is an art environment featuring numerous small and large sculptures executed in mixed media and arranged to trace and commemorate the Black-American history from slavery to the present day. Today the site in Aurora contains over a hundred sculptures; it grows and changes constantly, conveying Smith's always "deeper and deeper" messages of both pride and shame of the African/American community.

The museum in Aurora is not an isolated species of its kind. All over the United States there can be found examples of "outsider" art environments. These sites are all very different; yet what unifies them is that they have all been created by artists who had a strong sense of mission, who ignored artistic conventions, and who brought their visions into being through unconventional media. Most of the artists who created such environments had no prior art training and had begun their artistic endeavors after retirement from other professions. Environments such as Fred Smith's *Wisconsin Concrete Park* (1949-1964) with sculptures depicting the local life, S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden* (1920s-1930s) with limestone and concrete sculptures of Biblical allegories, Simon Rodia's *Watts Towers* (1930-1957) reminiscent of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, and Grandma Prisbrey's *Bottle Village* (late 1950s-1960s) with rows of colored glass bottles and dolls placed on metal rods, are only a few examples of art environments in which the artists materialized their visions. Charles Smith's African/American Heritage Museum is undoubtedly a realization of his vision, a vision

divinely inspired and kept alive through Smith's daily labor.

The museum was founded in 1986, when Smith created his first sculpture titled *We Shall Overcome* to honor 7,226 African/Americans who died in Vietnam. The inspiration to make an enormous figure of a black Vietnam soldier kneeling came from Smith's own pain and anger. Having lost his job because of an injury and the post-traumatic stress after the Vietnam war, Smith sought to face the issues of racism and injustice through art, in his words "the most powerful statement in the world." Through what he believed to be divine inspiration, he recognized himself as an artist-minister whose mission was to correct many years of racism. Smith approached his mission from a historical perspective and dedicated himself to fighting racism within the community at large. Since 1986, he has been working day and night to cast off the chains of hatred and oppression and bring back understanding and love to people.

The appearance and the messages of the African/American Heritage Museum are quite distinctive from other "outsider" art environments. In order to guide people through African/American history and the experiences of black people in the United States, Smith gives the visitors a tour of his museum. He starts off at the boundary of his property facing the street at Kendall Avenue. In this corner sculptures such as the *Slave Ship* depict the pain and suffering of Africans brought over as slaves in the seventeenth century. Slavery is also addressed in works representing a hanging slave and a slave bent to serve as a foot-stool for his master. Smith continues the tour either inside or outside of the garden. Outside the garden fence at North Avenue, one can see Smith's sculpted mail box, the installation *Schindler's List* showing a man with wounds from whipping, and the sculpture *Just Say No* representing a man chained to the ground from his neck.



However, the real richness and variety of sculptural works appear in the area around Smith's house. Among these are the *African Holocaust*, featuring a screaming black head, and *3/5th*, depicting a black man reduced to three-fifths of a man. These and other neighboring ensembles are dominated by a large figure of *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which is definitely one of the most remarkable sculptures in the museum. This large work is attached to a tree, and it shows Dr. King in a contemplative pose, dressed in a black suit with rings on his fingers. Smith thinks that, the death of Dr. King, as well as of other leaders, led to the rise of gangs and drugs. In Smith's opinion, Dr. King's dream that "we all come together and live as brothers and sisters regardless of race, creed, and color" needs to be restored. Smith placed one of his easy chairs under the Dr. King sculpture, making it a personal shrine of contemplation and remembrance.

The Lawyer, a seated figure serving as a hot plate, *Whoopi* with a widely-open mouth and a lamp inside her, *Ms. Sassy*, a nude African female, and *Memorial to Jazz Singers* which

pays homage to New Orleans street singers, are among works placed next to the entrance to Smith's house. Close to these works are pieces such as *Soledo* which serves as a lamp and a crucifixion of a black man with blood dripping down his body. Across from these sculptures can be seen *The Best* depicting Michael Jordan, *Trust God* portraying a crying head, and *Emancipation* representing a chained man with whipping marks on his back.

As the tour continues, visitors view even more powerful works such as the *We Shall Overcome* memorial wall, *Apartheid*, and *Mogadishu* on the right, and *Starvation* and *Roots* on the left. The recent genocides in Rwanda and Somalia are commemorated in several neighboring sculptures. Smith addresses the problems of violence in a memorial wall titled *Gangs and Drugs* and a piece titled *Lord How Long?* dedicated to the role of the church in the community. The tour ends with the remarkable figure of Rodney King chained to a tree and bleeding from many wounds on his body.

Smith's house is an essential part of the museum as well. Every part of its structure was

either built, or in some way, altered by the artist. There are sculptures on the roof and in Smith's bedroom; even the walls which consist of staring faces are one large sculptural work. It is hard to distinguish the working from the living space. Sculptures as well as objects to be incorporated into future projects are scattered all throughout the house. The gems of the indoor installation are *Mardi Gras* and *Cleopatra*, which are richly decorated with colorful necklaces and fabrics. Yet the most touching work can be found in Smith's bedroom, where a sculpture of an old woman in contemplation named *Grandma Hands* sits on his bed.

Smith believes that his museum serves to teach, inspire, and change the lives of young people, as well as to show what is supposed to be done within the black community. He thinks that by becoming a multi-cultural center and a "training place" for black leaders and preachers, the African/American Heritage Museum forges the missing link between the black and the white communities. Smith calls it a "shelter for ancestral identity" and a "healing place which touches the spirit."

Smith tries to reach out to people, to have them come and see his museum. Indeed, many people have experienced the site and heard its messages; student, school, and church groups are the museum's most common visitors. What angers Smith the most is that his audience is 90% white, and that the black community does not have much interest in his work. He feels that if his efforts were supported more by the black community, the common acts of vandalism against the museum would not be as frequent.

"Only God and art combined can change lives of people, and those are the only two things I believe in," says Smith about his mission. He believes that it is his God-given task to teach, inspire, and promote education and positive leadership which would solve many of the problems faced by both black and white communities. Smith wants to make a difference; he wants people to know that "Charles Smith was on this Earth." He states that his divinely inspired work has been designed to last indefinitely, because the messages it conveys need always be present so that the mistakes from the past do not repeat again.

N.A.

DR. CHARLES SMITH: LEARNING FROM LIFE

Charles Smith's sculptures illustrate African/American history. But more importantly, they illustrate his knowledge and beliefs. The stories from African/American history that he chooses to tell through his sculptures are often intertwined with his own life experiences. This is especially apparent when Smith speaks about his sculptures. His forceful voice is full of passion for his art. When he speaks about each piece, it's like he's talking about old acquaintances.

As with so many self-taught artists nothing in Smith's early life predicted his creative inclination. Charles Smith was born 22 November 1940 in New Orleans. His father died when Smith was only fourteen. Shortly after, he moved with his mother and two sisters to the Chicago area, where he has lived for most of his adult life. He earned a bachelor's degree in social sciences at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and became an ordained minister at Virginia Black Training Academy. He has used his degrees in a number of positions that all have had the same purpose: they all have been concerned with uplifting the human condition.

Although Charles Smith is new to his career in the arts he has a long record of public and community service. Smith has worked as a Veterans Employment Representative. He has helped Vietnam veterans get jobs and make their transition back to society, work, and family. He has also served as a rehabilitation counselor for the state of Illinois. In this position he provided counseling, and job development, and he authorized medical exams and placement for the blind.

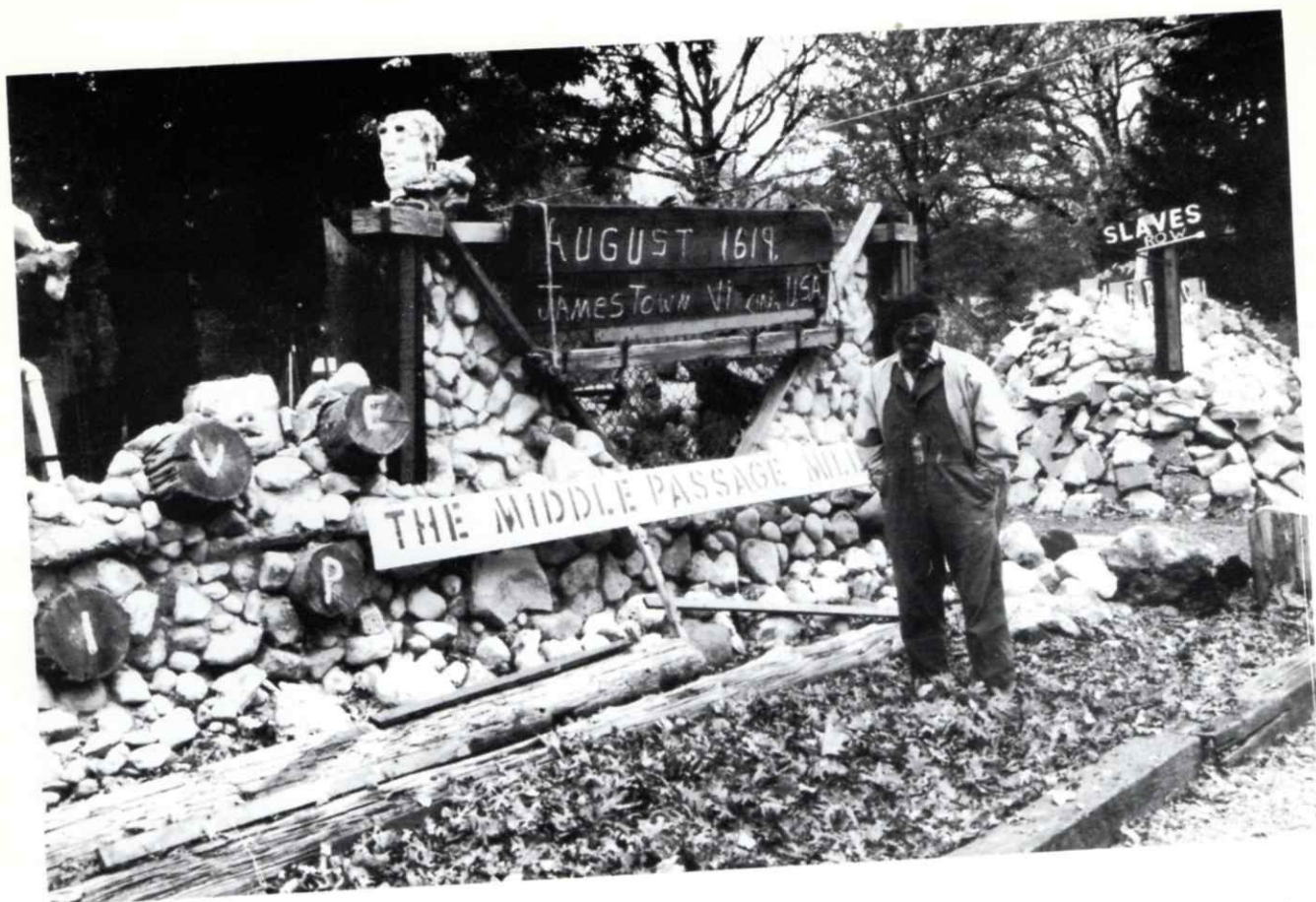
In January 1966, Smith was drafted into the United States Marine Corps, and

he served as an infantryman in North and South Vietnam. He was honorably released in 1968, receiving a Presidential Unit Citation and a Purple Heart. His experiences in Vietnam left a permanent impression on him. Something as simple as a long, hard rain now reminds him of enduring combat during the monsoon season in Vietnam. But, it is not just the weather that he recalls. It is also the anger and hatred he felt in combat, an anger and hatred he has struggled with ever since.

After his discharge Smith took his experiences as a veteran and used them as the National Executive Director of the African/American Association (AAA). For the AAA he coordinated communication with the congressional Black Caucus and the Congress members from Illinois. He also lectured about the experiences of the black veterans who served in the Vietnam war.

He fulfilled his religious calling as Pastor-Chaplain at God's House of Prayer and Holiness Inc., an interdenominational, penitentiary church. Here Smith aided prisoners' smooth transitions back to society. He counseled, ministered, helped through guidance, taught the scripture, and trained laymen, ministers, and pastors in the function of the church in an urban setting.

His most recent job was for the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services, where, in 1986 he suffered a back injury that forced him to leave his job on permanent disability. Out of frustration from his inability to work and the turmoil he still felt from his experience in Vietnam, he created his first sculpture *We Shall Overcome*. The sculpture portrays a black Viet-



nam soldier on his knees underneath other black soldiers who died in Vietnam.

When Smith is asked what moved him to express his frustrations and anger through art he states "divine inspiration." Smith says: "God moves me. He shows me how to do it, where to put it and how to construct it." Smith has had no formal art training. He uses materials that are not typical to the fine arts: rocks, cement, twigs, house paint. Smith's art offered him a way to rid himself of the anger he was feeling, an anger he had harbored for so long.

When Smith created his first sculpture he had no intentions of becoming an artist, but his inspiration moved him along. "I believed I could make some art. I have so much on the inside." That is what Mary Golden, Smith's longtime friend, recalls him saying. For as long as she knew him, he never made art. He began by sculpting many small faces. At first they all looked alike, but Smith wasn't discouraged. He kept making more and more until his skill improved and each face had a life of its own. After making the sculpture *We Shall Overcome* Smith had no intentions of building a museum.

But he kept making more sculptures, working "at four in the morning...committed, non-stop, like a train."

As the museum grew he told the history of African/Americans through different events. Smith drew upon the whole history of the African/American people from the first slave ship to well-known figures such as Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. But, intertwined with these community icons, Smith also drew from his first-hand experiences. Figures such as *Mardi Gras* and a sculpture of a Haitian Voodoo Queen recall his childhood in New Orleans. The museum is also Smith's home and studio. The closeness of the two—in fact they are indivisible—embodies the closeness of his life and work.

Since opening his museum Smith's work has been exhibited in many places. In 1989 he began his first work outside of his museum. It was not a free-standing sculpture, but sculptural embellishments in the reinforced foundation of a private home in Dayton, Ohio. In 1991 he participated in the *Black Creativity Exhibition* at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

where he won first place for his piece *Crispus Attackus*. He often speaks at sites where his work is shown such as at the Peoria Public Library, where he temporarily installed *3/5th of a Man* (1993) and at the Triton Junior College (1989). He exhibits regularly in his hometown of New Orleans where, since 1990, he has shown his work each year, accompanied with a lecture on "positiveness" to children. In 1994 he exhibited with the BAGIT (Black Arts Group International) Gallery in Chicago.

Smith sees himself as an artist who draws inspiration from life and God's direction. He takes from history and adds his weariness of racism and hatred of war. Smith uses his art as a "weapon." It is something that will speak long after he is gone. And by sharing his life's worth of wisdom, by speaking with all who come to speak with him at his home and museum on South Kendall in Aurora, Illinois, we all gain from his knowledge.

Z.V.A.

DEEP ART AIMING STRAIGHT AT THE HEART

When visitors approach the African/American Heritage Museum they hesitate before they enter. Even at the perimeter of the property, the visual spectacle is overwhelming. Rugged rocks and broken concrete walls define the border between street and site. Sculpted figures reach out into real space, telling their tales with mute power and dramatic gesture. Signs evoke the landmarks of the history of human tragedy: "Slavery," "African Holocaust," "Rwanda," "Schindler's List." If the visitors linger too long outside the entrance, a strong, clear voice calls them in, inviting them to explore the wonders of the yard.

Come in. Come here and talk to me. Come see my portfolio. Come here and share our history. If we sit down and learn each other's history we can work out what's decent together.

That voice belongs to Dr. Charles Smith, whose warmth, will, and sense of mission is as spellbinding as the sculptures that surround him. Within minutes the visitors enter and share Smith's "positive dialogue," and they realize that the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive offers more than a visual tribute to a community's struggle toward recognition, redemption, and triumph; it is a personal testament to that struggle, proof that one voice can be heard and that one pair of hands can make a difference.

Smith's hands are powerful hands. With little or no help, in less than a decade, he has hauled stone, shaped concrete, and installed the vast array of massive sculptures that fill his yard, cover his house, and share his dwelling space. He works unceasingly, and return visitors to his site are always amazed at the changes, always astonished at the rate of his productivity. But his hands possess skill as well as strength. Each work is richly painted and finely detailed, often

embellished with found objects that blur the boundary between creation and real-

ity.

The scope, quality, and variety of works in the African/American Heritage Museum testify to Smith's commitment to his art. But it is his voice that offers testament to his grander objectives. As Smith leads his visitors on a tour through his site, he speaks with stentorian passion, his verbal eloquence full equal to his sculptures' gestural drama. He is a teacher, a counselor, a man eager to share his ideas and experience. And the sculptures are both the focus and the departure point for his exclamations.

This is Rwanda. Five thousand great souls in one grave. Three thousand in another. And here, they're droppin' them out the window with no remorse. We should take them to Rwanda and show them the graves and the murders and show them how bad it can be. That's deep art, hitting straight at the heart.

In work and words born of passion, relevance, and purpose, Charles Smith proclaims his artistic credo: "When you design a piece aim straight at the heart. If you aim at that heart, you're gonna hit 'em."

As a self-taught artist Smith discovered his craft through inspiration and instinct. He has drawn power and motivation from his deep spiritual commitment. His sense of mission is clear. "God started it. I didn't. I'm just his ambassador." In acknowledging divine inspiration for his work, Smith joins other self-taught artists who believe a higher force led them into a realm of visual expression. The Rev. Howard Finster turned his paint brush from repair work to art when his paint-stained finger transformed into a speaking vision, telling him to preach through images as well as from the pulpit. Gregory Warmack, now known as Mr. Imagination, traces the self-discovery of his own talent to an out-of-body experience during a critical operation to repair his wounds after a brutal mugging,

an operation that both saved and changed his life. David Philpott recalls hearing voices that drew him out of a state of deep depression and self-doubt, prompting him to pick up wood and a knife, to recognize his own worth and that of his African ancestry by carving staffs and creating his own unique interpretation of traditional objects. But self-taught artists are not alone in their claims that higher powers guide their hands. Through the centuries of Europe's early history monks labored in scriptoria, embellishing manuscripts for the glory of their God. Michelangelo described his work as the pursuit of the "Idea," believing that God trapped figures in prisons of stone but gave artists the vision and the skill to release them. In the twentieth century artist and teacher Philip Guston tried to instill his students with respect for the inexplicable powers that would move them, urging them to remember that their role should be that of trusting accomplices.

Smith supplements the source of his inspiration with a lifetime of experience as a community activist. His education in social work, his military service, his evangelical training, and his dedication to the welfare of returning combat veterans grounds his spiritual motivation in hard reality. Acting on Frederick Douglass's statement that "He who would be free must strike the first blow," Smith defines his work as an artist as his contribution to his community. Responding to the neglect of the study and celebration of African/American history and folklore in educational institutions, Smith seeks to teach heritage through his art. But he also seeks to instill the sense of pride and empowerment that knowledge of heritage and history brings. If he can help one man or woman, one troubled youth to a clearer view of worth and purpose, he feels his work is justified. He calls



his museum a "healing place" and declares his faith that it is "worth more than a million dollar work of art to motivate someone to move forward in negative times."

His working technique is unorthodox and, in his mind, inextricable from his desire to convey his message. He finds his subjects in history books, in newspaper headlines, or in community events. The material he selects for the core of the work—whether it is log, a block of stone, or a wire and concrete armature—provides the heart of the work, as well as its structural center. As he builds his figure he reflects on its overarching meaning, binding message and method

throughout his process. When he has completed the form, he applies the first layer of paint and places the figure outside to "weatherize." Through exposure to the elements, he discovers surface flaws and structural weaknesses, which he then repairs, with additional coats of paint, until the work is stable, and in his view, permanent. Weatherization also marks a kind of metamorphosis. For example, in *Grandma Hands: Heritage Figure* he feels that the surface erosion, which causes the face and hands of the form to flake and crack, emulates the natural process of aging skin. As the figures change through weather and will, Smith changes their location in the museum. His installation is vital, always in flux, and he prides himself on the energy and activity evident in his environment. He does not exaggerate when he proclaims "I'm a one-man machine. You got to return to the museum over and over to see what's been done."

His materials are as unusual as his methods. Smith uses discarded stone and concrete from building sites, railroad ties, wood scraps, and old furniture for the core of his sculptures. He embellishes them with clothing, garlands of ribbon, and hanks of yarn. They hold musical instruments, lamps, and tools, and often they are finished with wigs, hats, or caps on their heads. This process of reuse and reclamation marks a trait Smith shares with other self-taught artists, including Grandma Tressa Prisbrey (bottles), Eugene von Bruenchenhein (chicken bones), Nellie Mae Rowe (chewing gum), Mr. Imagination (sandstone), and David Philpott (tree branches). Smith delights in finding his materials in discarded goods. "Every time you throw garbage away you make a contribution to my museum. I recycle things for the environment to create the vision."

Like many creative people who single-mindedly pursue an individual vision, Smith has encountered obstacles in building his museum. He shrugs off his critics with pragmatism and humor. "Narrow minds," he says, "make broad ways clog up," and if people describe his museum as "that mess in his yard," he invites them in to have a look, to sit down, and talk about their differences. He never hesitates to remind his detractors that he is "full grown and in full faculty

of mind," and he challenges them to account for their opinions and their actions. With his powerful rhetoric and passionate delivery, he will often persuade people to reassess their first impressions. Although Smith calls himself an "outsider artist," he uses the term only to stress his lack of art training. He sees this as his advantage and as one of the main sources of his own artistic imagination. His roots are in his own heart and soul, not in an academic training that would prevent him from "going beyond institutional thinking" or conforming to an "institutional curriculum." For Smith the self-taught artist possesses true artistic freedom. Yet, when he speaks of his experience in promoting the appreciation and understanding of his efforts, he sees a parallel with the struggles of the early modernists. But Smith believes he will triumph in his endeavor. "My conviction goes beyond that of Van Gogh and Whistler and all those other brothers in the art historical context. Most artists make art. I made a museum!"

Smith never differentiates between his activism and his art. He is troubled about what the future holds for the African/American people, and he fears that "a complete denial of ancestral heritage" has planted "seeds of shame" in the present that will provide a bitter harvest in the years to come. Through his own recognition of heritage, as well as his own life as a black man and a black veteran in modern America, he sees solutions. "Pain, shame, or ill gain—I've been through it all. Losing the roots of the people, that's why we're having the problem. You don't let folks wander around, looking for the answer. Tell them the answer!" Just as Smith will not accept past injustice as a rationalization of present inaction, he does not advocate simple glorification of past achievement. The souls and spirits of past leaders must be used to instill strength and inspiration in the present and future generations. "Martin, Malcolm, Mandela. A man with the three Ms in him can't be beat." Nor can Charles Smith, who proves his own dictum "Conviction is contagious." His museum is a living testament to his philosophy of identity and empowerment. Smith aims straight at the heart, and his aim is true.

D.N.M.

CATALOGUE OF SCULPTURE IN THE EXHIBITION

The ten sculptures selected for the exhibition

Straight at the Heart convey

the spirit of the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive. Chosen by the curators, with the advice of Dr. Smith, each represents a guiding principle of the mission of the museum. These are: Freedom, Truth, Wisdom, Achievement, Culture, Character, Dignity, Honor, Salvation, and Remembrance.

The catalogue entries include Dr. Smith's own

observations, taken from artist statements written on 15 November and 1 De-

cember 1994. A series of interviews, conducted on 10 September, 22 October, 5 November, and 6 November, supplemented the interpretation. Due to the fact that Smith works continually on his sculptures, moving, modifying, and repainting them, specific dates cannot be ascertained. Also the appearance of individual works may change from that at the site or in the exhibition.

EMANCIPATION "THE SLAVE"

FREEDOM: *The state or quality of being free. Exemption from arbitrary restrictions on a specified civil right.*

Emancipation "The Slave" shows a man with fresh whip scars covering his back. He has been beaten by his master. As he sits, he looks down, away from the viewer. It is his body that proclaims his tragic story. He is one slave out of millions, one of countless men and women who were beaten this way.

It may seem surprising that Smith chose the image of a slave to represent freedom, but it is the denial of freedom that teaches its true worth. This work evokes the power of potential after a long era of denial.

A male slave reflects on his freedom. In a sitting position, he ponders his faith, future, and the whereabouts of his wife and children who were sold. The scars of many beatings dominate the character of his back, as well as the rope burns that he got when he was almost lynched for stealing a chicken to feed his family. Slave owners sought other remedies to control slaves who would violate plantation rules, selling families separate from one another to different plantations throughout the south.

The most important task a slave owner had was to convince a slave that he was a "SLAVE." Inferior to all whites, he was the master's property for life. Slaves only worked in two categories: "HOUSE-SLAVE and FIELD-SLAVE." House slaves slept in better quarters, ate better food, wore decent clothing, and took care of the plantation owner, his family, and all the interior of the property. They also ran

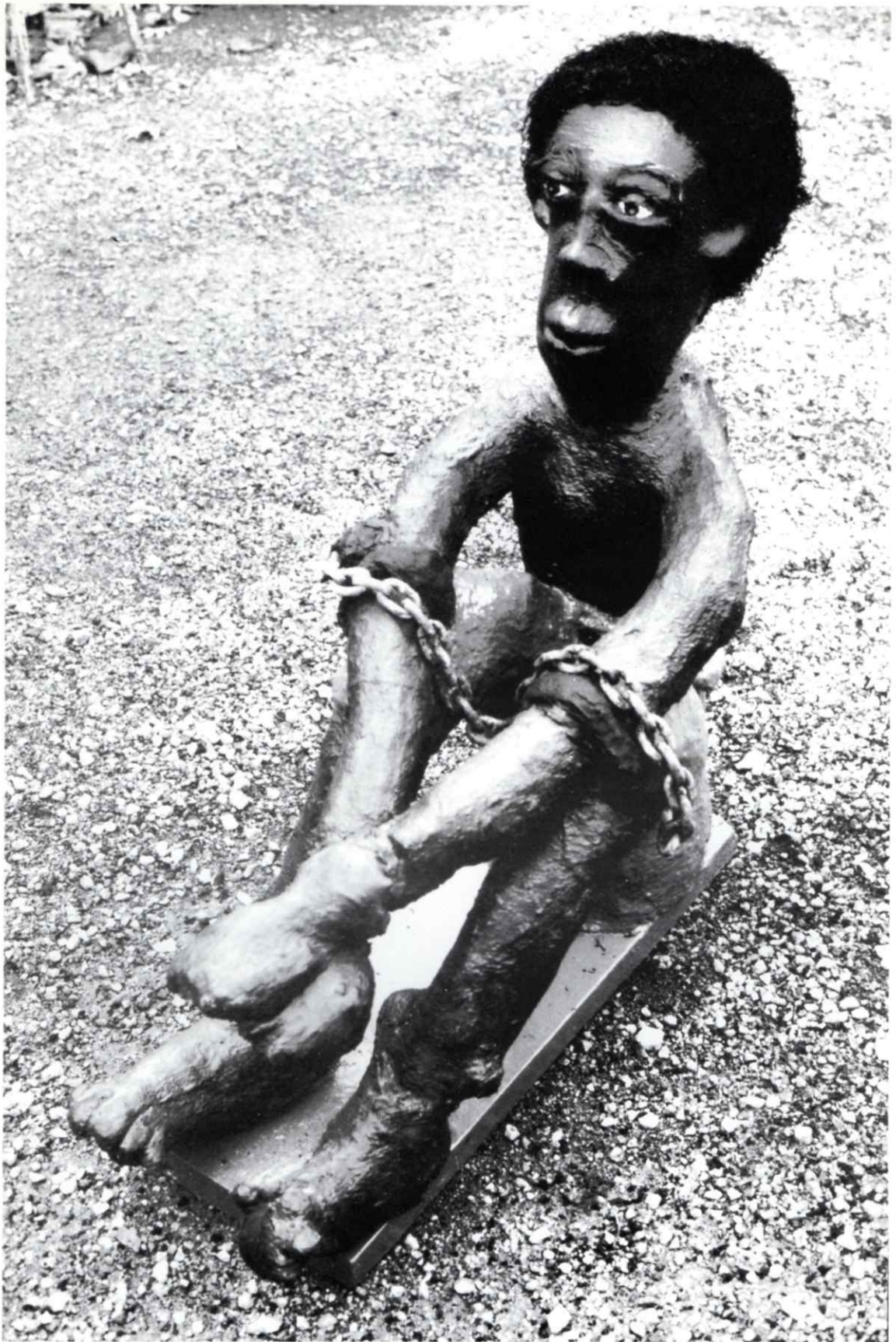
errands to other plantations and were expected to "RETURN."

Field Slaves' lives were quite different. Their sleeping quarters were poor and miserable; food was what came from survival skills, scraps from the master's garbage. Their labor was from sun-up to sun-down. Depending on house or field the children followed in the footsteps of their parents. The Emancipation Proclamation "FREED" the slave from physical restraints yet restricted his status as a full human being with rights and privileges.

While Smith notes that the Emancipation Proclamation gave slaves constitutional freedom, he credits African/American leaders with giving that freedom its true meaning.

The inclusion of the African/American in America's democracy was not because slave holders were tired of mistreating slaves, or wanted to clean their own houses, pick their own cotton, raise their own children. "NO." It was because of men like and women like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, and a host of "SLAVES" (male and female) NEVER MENTIONED IN HISTORY.

To start a new life the government promised each slave forty acres and a mule, but that promise was not kept. Instead, survivors of slavery bore a legacy of pain, wounds, and scars that never can be forgotten. The back of the figure *Emancipation* is gruesome and hard to look at, but Smith says "That's the way the man looks after emancipation. Those chains don't ever really come off. Those marks are on his back forever. Those are economic chains."



Emancipation "The Slave"
Freedom



HEADS OF "RWANDA" AFRICA

TRUTH: *The quality or state of being true; loyalty; trustworthiness; sincerity; honesty. The quality of being in accordance with experience facts or reality.*

This sculpture was originally painted in ten different colors, each representing a different group of people, a thing, or an idea. Each face was painted a separate color from the palest white to the deepest black. Each face was sculpted naturally because Smith wanted people to recognize someone they knew in this sculpture.

For Smith, *Heads of "RWANDA" Africa* represents truth. It shows all the men and all things that make up South Africa. It is all people's truth, not just the dominant power's version of truth.

The medium, design, and concept is "DIVINELY INSPIRED," all materials used are earthly. The eight faces of color represent a leaning tree of Africa. GOLD=youth, WHITE=relief agencies, supporters and volunteers, YELLOW=sickness and disease, GREY=slavery, BLACK=freedom fighters, RED is for the blood that was shed, the ultimate price for

"FREEDOM." (The face cries: "CRY FREEDOM" one single voice for all of

Africa.)

The extended arm is that of the Honorable Nelson R. Mandela, President. In a clenched fist is the balanced scale of: DEMOCRACY and JUSTICE FOR "ALL." The piece was completed May 1994 the day "APARTHEID DIED."

It also serves as a backdrop to a sculpture/portrait of the first democratic elected president of Africa, Nelson Mandela. Reflections of this piece are very educational because it identifies a people, their struggles, the country, and the price paid for freedom. For younger children, colors are used to "FACILITATE COMMUNICATIONS" and identify: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND EVENTS.

Charles Smith's work is always evolving, and the *Heads of "RWANDA" Africa* is an example of that. The entire piece is now painted blue, perhaps because all the people, places, and ideas this figure represents have at last found some tranquility. The "Kente" cloth wrapped around the base signifies a return to African ideals after 350 years of Apartheid.



Heads of "RWANDA"
Truth



LORD HOW LONG? (PRAYER)

WISDOM: *The quality of being wise; power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, and understanding; good judgment.*

A young man stands rapt in prayer. He lifts his face to the sky and his eyes gaze heavenward. He looks for an answer to the question that burdens his life, plagues his heart, and wearies his soul. With quiet dignity and true conviction, he asks a question as integral to his heritage as to his faith: "Lord How Long?"

Smith is a man with a strong spiritual focus. Through faith, Smith has found his mission, his sense of self, his empowerment, and his wisdom. He believes that faith has sustained the African/American people throughout their history of adversity. *Lord How Long? (Prayer)* testifies that true faith is the path to a special form of wisdom.

This work depicts the upper torso of an African/American youth. His base is an altar, with his prayer request clearly written. Part of the religious worship in many countries, Africa as well, believed that if a request was written to a higher source of authority the prayer would be answered more quickly.

Religion to slaves was a ritual for them. They had to perform to "CONFORM."

Obeying the letter of the Law is different than obeying the spirit of the law. That's what took place in the cotton fields, prayer closets, moments before beatings, lynchings, bigotry, and inhuman treatment. God responded with strategies for survival, leaders, (men and women), full of the spirit to do that which is right according to the "word of God." (Deuteronomy 28:1-14 K.J.V.).

Although *Lord How Long? (Prayer)* signifies the role of tradition in African/American religious practice, Smith endows the sculpture with a vital and ever-changing interpretation. When giving his tour of the African/American Heritage Museum, Smith will pause before the work, discussing its scriptural source, but he emphasizes its contemporary significance. He views it as a challenge to the current church leaders, asking them to seek wisdom rather than followers, urging them to clean up the "spiritual mess," which he believes is now oppressing the community. The secular message is embedded in the sacred form and is therefore more effective: "This moves from the artist's opinion to what people cherish: The Church. And you can't fight the truth." But the invocation "Lord How Long?" draws additional meaning from its context. It is not accidental that Smith installed this symbol of faith, patience, and wisdom right next to his tragical commemoration of the lives lost to gangs, guns, and drugs.



Lord How Long? (Prayer)
Wisdom



LOUIS ARMSTRONG

ACHIEVEMENT: *To succeed in doing a thing; a thing achieved by skill, work or courage.*

Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans at the turn of the century. In his early teens he was sent to the colored waifs home for general delinquency. While at the home he was given a coronet. Already a singer for five years in a barbershop quartet, his talent for the cornet was innate, and he found his voice in the horn. After his release he played under the wing of King Oliver, the best cornetist in New Orleans.

Armstrong embodies the ideal of achievement. He learned to make his cornet sing while he was in a delinquency home. For Smith, Armstrong is not only a fine jazz-musician, but he is also an exemplum of skill attained by work and courage.

This work depicts Louis Armstrong blowing from his horn. The face that supports his head is a memorial to the spirit of notable greats: Joseph (King) Oliver, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, W.C. Handy, Fats

Waller, Josephine Baker. I focus on these and others like them too

numerous to mention to point out the origin of jazz and Bop music for a statement to musicians to remember their roots in raw talent and to consider it for what it is: "A GIFT FROM GOD!"

All gifts of African/Americans should be utilized to motivate, perpetuate, and share our history through music. It is said that music is the language of the heart. Louis Armstrong "SATCHMO" said: "JAZZ IS COLOR BLIND."

This sculpture is one of a series in tribute to Louis Armstrong, a jazz musician who "made significant contributions to the world of music." As Smith says, "There's respect for him." That is why Smith choose him as a subject for his museum. There are several in this series, all blowing into their trumpets, pan pipes, and coronets. This one is dressed up with garlands of ribbons. It is also a candle holder and, in Smith's words it is appropriate for "late-night concepts or dinners; he's blowing to you while you're eating."



Louis Armstrong
Achievement



NEW ORLEANS STREET MINSTREL/ JAZZ MEMORIAL

CULTURE: *The ideas, customs, and, arts of a people or group that are transferred, communicated, or passed along, as in or to succeeding generations.*

The tilted head and swaying hips of the *New Orleans Street Minstrel* describe the vital rhythms of old time jazz. This lively figure has real energy. He lifts his shining french horn to his pursed lips, ready to captivate the crowds that gather to hear him play. His music is his life as well as his livelihood; it is the sound of his soul as well as of the streets.

Smith believes that jazz epitomizes the African/American spirit and that music was always an essential—and liberating—force in African/American culture.

Jazz is one of the many unique contributions of the "Negro" people to world culture. A proper salute of "JAZZ" belongs to the "FIELD/SLAVE." It was a way of relief of the complete, and total "INHUMAN" treatment, these OUR ANCESTORS, relied on former hums, hymns, and grunts, a religious means of worship found throughout Africa. The "COTTON FIELDS," and PLANTATIONS of America gave it a new name: "BLUES." After the Emancipation Proclamation, mixed with restricted freedoms, black mu-

sicians were allowed to play, buy, and make instruments, whereby;

African/American music fits into categories: original, blues, Gospel, bebop, and jazz, and now "RAP." Music is the artistic "SOUL" of the African/American.

The Street Minstrel's rich red and green costume marks two of the symbolic colors of African/American heritage. His gleaming, ebony hands and face complete the message. Smith describes this work as "a COLD, COLD 'GOLD' DEEP BLACK PIECE," opulent in appearance, but fully representative of culture and tradition. Part of the "Louis Armstrong Series," this dynamic musician pays tribute to a host of jazz greats: Earl Hines, Count Bassie, Erroll Garner, and above all, Nat King Cole. Smith holds the utmost admiration for Cole, and sees him as a model for cultural achievement, "not only because of his voice, music, class, and style, but his 'LIFE'." Smith also senses a kinship in his own art with these jazz musicians, for according to his view "There is no institutional training involved in a true SOUL SINGER, or INSTRUMENT PLAYER, or DANCER. It's in the GENES OF THE SOUL. It's THE GIFT OF GOD. (Jeremiah 1:5. K.J.V.)."



New Orleans Street Minstrel/Jazz Memorial
Culture



GWENDOLYN BROOKS

CHARACTER: *The pattern of behavior or personality found in an individual or group; moral constitution; moral strength, discipline, fortitude; reputation, good reputation.*

Poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917, but she was raised in Chicago, and she still calls that city home. She traces her life-long involvement with the English language to her own parents' outspoken reverence for education, as well as to her childhood preference for solitary reading over athletic play. Her long career in literature began at age thirteen, when her first poems appeared in print. Her collections of poems—sensitive and often wrenching evocations of black women's struggle with poverty and prejudice—have brought her community respect and national recognition. In 1950 Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for verse, and in 1968 she succeeded Carl Sandburg as Poet Laureate of Illinois.

To Smith, writers like Gwendolyn Brooks make a two-fold contribution to their community: they represent character in their actions and celebrate character in their words.

This sculpted bust is a salute to the many African/American writers and poets who

convey the African/American experience in the written

or spoken word.

It honors such writers as: Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison.

Writing is a deep spiritual emotion that captures the "Moment" in time, and conveys the message in writing for future reference and research.

We salute all who strive to perpetuate the love of writing, and those who enjoy the reading, we salute also.

By grouping Brooks with Wright, Ellison, and Hughes, Smith situates Brooks in the pantheon of African/American writers. But while the others wrote of the male experience—most notably Wright in *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) and Ellison in *The Invisible Man* (1952)—Brooks presents the female perspective. Works like *Annie Allen* (1949) and *Maud Martha* (1953) offer an intimate view into a black woman's life in mid-twentieth-century America. Smith feels that Brooks' words give form and force to African/American character, and to symbolize this, he designed an elaborate "kente" cloth headress to embellish the work when it is completed.



Gwendolyn Brooks
Character



MS. SASSY

DIGNITY: *The state, character, or quality of being worthy or honorable; elevation of character; intrinsic worth; nobleness; excellence.*

The most remarkable feature about *Ms. Sassy*, a sculpture of a nude African/American female, is the quality of her skin color. The warm and beautiful brown tone of the paint makes her body glow in the sunlight. The color of *Ms. Sassy's* body draws attention to the figure's facial and bodily features, as well as to her stance. The figure's face is distinctive as if it was modeled from life. Her breasts are prominently displayed. *Ms. Sassy's* body and pose illustrate her name: she is sassy, but she is also dignified.

To Smith the singular figure of *Ms. Sassy* portrays female dignity; and through it he depicts the beauty and the pride of women in various African cultures.

Regardless of her stature, of her ability, she is drawn deep within her cultural ancestry, the rich roots of proverbial teaching, to remain a woman of honor. She carries it in her dignity, her stance. When you drop

down to that level where you have reduced yourself beneath your dignity, you can't stand like that. She takes care of her hair, she cleans herself. She is not trying to be somebody she is not. She is proud of what she has, she stands there with total dignity. You put dignity in a woman real early—then she will let no man belittle her or fall beneath the level for which she stands. The face is distinctive because I stay close to the African/American features. Somebody knows somebody that looks just like her.

Aside from the more serious issues, *Ms. Sassy* reveals Smith's unique sense of humor. He treats the work as a mannequin for the future "casual wear" called the "flesh/tones." Smith says that "in 1994 New York City passed a law stating that if females wanted to go topless on the 'L subways' it is permissible. It was from the request to seek equality to be able to do as men." He also refers to many tribal cultures in Africa in which women usually do not cover their breasts. In Smith's opinion this practice is considered "sassy" in the United States because of "the attitude behind it."



*Ms. Sassy
Dignity*



THE LAWYER

HONOR: *The esteem due or paid to worth; high estimation; manifestation of respect or reverence; hence, fame; credit; good name; reputation.*

The Lawyer depicts a young man seated on a yellow pot. He wears a shiny green shirt, a pair of blue pants, and a big jaunty bow-tie. The figure's hands are placed on its knees, and they hold a book with a plate on it. The sculpture's most surprising feature is a pair of hanging chains which bind together the wrists and the ankles of the figure.

Smith views the opportunity to work in the field of law as one of the highest honors available to young men and women.

"The Lawyer" shows a young man caught in the pose of study; he is in the sitting position. His historical statement is a tribute to the early founders of the Legal arm of the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Spottswood Thomas Bolling, George E.C. Hayes, James Nabrit Jr., and Thurgood-Marshall, who later became the First African/American to be appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States of America. It is from the foundation of struggle of our ancestors in the chosen vocation of "LAW" that African/American students

of law should acquire their commitment, dedication, and their sense of purpose to: God, the Supreme Judge, the Community for which they serve, and to make continuous inroads for the advancement of Colored People. The greatest weapon against racism, bigotry, discrimination, and hatred is the "LAW." We, as African/Americans must pursue any and all forms of education. However, the highest pursuit in law is in the Laws of God. ("These things I command you, that ye love one another." St. John 15:17. K.J.V.)

The sculpture represents David Philpott, a law student who was beaten to death when he was doing his "pro bono" work in the black community, a cause to which he had dedicated his life. Smith describes him as "a young man that has entered and is pursuing the field of law." *The Lawyer* has a functional purpose as well. Smith describes: "This piece is a hot plate. When I'm having coffee and I'm outside working, I hook up the piece, and use it as a hot plate, which keeps my coffee or my food warm. All functional pieces serve two-fold purposes, and that is to give the highest honor to the profession that every young black men must be introduced to...your first pursuit is to get you a law degree. Once you're a lawyer you can have anything come up. That is deep."



*The Lawyer
Honor*



SALVAGING THE CHILDREN: THE GOOD SAMARITANS

SALVATION: A saving or being saved from danger, evil, difficulty, or destruction, rescue. A person or thing that is a means, cause, or source of preservation or rescue.

A man and a woman stand together and embrace a child. As their lithe arms encircle one another they draw the child to them and between them. The circle thus formed is one of family, of strength, warmth, and love. Within the harmony of the perfect family there is an element of contrast. The parents are white and the child is black. *Salvaging the Children: The Good Samaritans* pays tribute to interracial adoption, a practice that has become a flashpoint of dispute in the African/American community.

Smith views adoption as the sole means of saving the lives and ensuring the futures for abandoned children and he firmly believes that racism can be defeated by the power of love.

"Salvaging the Children: The Good Samaritans" is a sculpted piece depicting three individuals: A white male, a white female, and a black child. With one arm of both couples surrounding and supporting one another, the other extended towards the black child lifting him from poverty, shame, and most certainly an uncertain future. I completed this piece to honor these families that have looked beyond themselves, in the midst of ridicule from both sides (black and white) to give a child a chance at life.

This piece is titled "THE GOOD SAMARITANS"

because no other title would fit. Jesus made this clear in the Gospel of St. Luke 10:30-37. The only difference in the parable is: The man was attacked by thieves, and left on the road to die. Devout elders passed him by. In this case it's "CHILDREN" whose biological families for some reason have left them in orphanage centers, government agencies, alleys, and hallways. The actions of love exhibited towards these children by people of other races, culture, should be held in high esteem, supported, and prayed for.

Smith's conviction that interracial adoption can save a child without compromising that child's sense of heritage and identity is unshakable. He sees love and security as a strong foundation for a sense of self-worth and a commitment to community. And, he dismisses the opposing view as racist. "Right doesn't need approval," Smith argues. "Color isn't important for salvation." To Smith discrimination in any form is a sign of disease and he strives to maintain his own spiritual health. "My heart is clean. I don't pick up the cancer." Smith conceived this work for the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and through it he extends his deep appreciation to Barbara J. Hellmer, ACSW, Director of the Evangelical Child and Family Agency, and all who support the cause to save the children regardless of race. Even the design reflects the message, for as Smith says, "The meaning is relevant because the color is clean."



~~~~~ Salvaging The Children: The Good Samaritans ~~~~~  
Salvation



## GRANDMA HANDS (HERITAGE)

**REMEMBRANCE:** *The act of remembering; holding in mind, or bringing to mind; recollecting.*

*Grandma Hands (Heritage)* is a small sculpture of an older woman seated in a contemplative pose. Her hands—the left on her left knee and the right on her chin—are large and strong. They reflect the woman's age and her life experience. Her wide-open eyes stare off into distance; she is lost in memories, lost in thought. Although her white dress is painted, a man's hat and shiny golden earrings enrich her ensemble. The sculpture is now sitting on Smith's bed with a blanket around her to "keep her warm during the cold winter months."

To Smith, the older generation carries the remembrance of a better time, when family was strong and a child's legacy did not have to imply tragedy.

*"Grandma Hands (Heritage)" depicts an aging, African/American female in a state of wondering, wondering 'WHAT HAPPENED?' 'LORD WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?' 'IS THIS DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING'S DREAM?' Regardless of their race, all grandparents' ultimate hope is that their grandchildren grow, prosper, educate themselves, and become "SOMETHING." Right now, in 1994, the African/American is on the world's stage, born of a people that have lost all the basics that have kept them strong, productive, and most of all a survivor. BLACK on BLACK crime is a daily occurrence throughout America. Families are devastated from the pain of death, especially among our youth. Even this morning the local newspaper stated that a*

*"12 year old" was caught selling COCAINE (a deadly drug that has taken the communities like a plague). Fear has virtually all society in its grips. Many homes are without "FATHERS" to guide, supervise, advise, correct, and counsel young boys to "MANHOOD." This lack of presence of men in the home has resulted in "GANGS." Neglect within the home is the first insult to the community as a whole. What reflects in the environment of your home is what you bring into the community and the world at-large. WHEREAS, it is incumbent upon all church strategy to focus on the HOME and each individual member of the "FAMILY."*

The inspiration for the *Grandma Hands (Heritage)* figure came from an article Smith read in the *Chicago Tribune*, which described a black grandmother whose nine grandchildren were killed by gangs or died from drugs. The piece reflects upon all mothers and grandmothers who hope that their children can get an education and live an honorable life. Unfortunately, these women are faced with gangs and drugs which kill their children and deteriorate the black community. *Grandma Hands* is a visionary of the African/American future in the United States; she looks into the future of her children with concern and ponders the shame her children caused her. Smith has carried this work to the Black Family Reunion held in Chicago in September of 1994. He says: "What I wanted to share with them at the Black Family Reunion was how can you have a Black Family Reunion when so many of the black families have fallen apart? What are we going to do to help renew the roots of family unity and love, and guidance and respect?"



*Grandma Hands (Heritage)*  
*Remembrance*





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## Exhibition List:

1989, Group Exhibition; Triton Junior College, Forest Park, Illinois.

February 1990, *Black Creativity Exhibition* at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, Illinois (juried exhibition; first prize).

1990, Happiness Is Lounge, Bellwood, Illinois.

February 1991, Group Exhibition; Siza Art Gallery, Evanston, Illinois.

February 1993, Installation and Lecture; Peoria Public Library, Peoria, Illinois.

1990-94, Annual Installation and Lecture; S.T.O.P. (Standing Tall on Positiveness), New Orleans, Louisiana.

1993-94, Group Exhibitions; BAGIT (Black Arts Group International Gallery), Chicago, Illinois.

August 1994, Black Family Reunion, Installation at South Shore Cultural Center, Chicago, Illinois.

1994, Continuing Installation; Frame Shop, Elburn, Illinois.

February 1994, Installation and Lecture; Aurora West High School, Aurora, Illinois.

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