

THE NEW YORK TIMES

MARCH 1, 1999

HUGHIE LEE- SMITH, 83, A PAINTER OF SPARE, BLEAK SCENES TOUCHED WITH MYSTERY

by Holland Cotter

Hughie Lee-Smith, a painter best known for his emblematic figurative scenes, died on Tuesday in a hospice in Albuquerque, N.M. He was 83.

Mr. Lee-Smith's paintings usually have spare settings suggestive of theater stages or bleak urban or seaside landscapes. Walls stretch out under gray skies. Men and women, as lithe as dancers, seem frozen in place. Most are dressed in street clothes; some wear exotic masks. Children frequently appear, as do props reminiscent of circuses. The work has an air of mystery associated with the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and Edward Hopper.

Hughie Lee-Smith was born in 1915 in Florida, but after his parents were divorced he moved to Atlanta to live with his grandmother, Queenie Victoria Williams. He said that memories from this time, particularly of carnivals, provided images for his later art.

When he was 10, he moved to Cleveland to join his mother, Alice Williams Smith. She enrolled him in classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art. He went on to study at the Cleveland School of Art (now the Cleveland Institute of Art) and taught at Karamu House, a center for black artists. He also performed with an interracial dance company.

Employed by the Works Progress Administration in Ohio during the Depression, he produced paintings and prints in a Social Realist style on political and patriotic themes. During a wartime stint in the Navy, he completed a mural, "History of the Negro in the U.S. Navy."

Eventually, he began to apply his conservative, academically grounded technique to a more emblematic painting style in which social tensions were implied through an atmosphere of psychological alienation.

In 1953 he won a top prize for painting from the Detroit Institute of Arts. "I was no longer called black artist, Negro artist, colored boy," he said in a 1995 interview. "When I won that prize, all of a sudden, there was no longer a racial designation. I thought that was a step forward."

He moved to New York in 1958 and taught at the Art Students League in Manhattan for 15 years. He was elected an associate member of the National Academy of Design in Manhattan in 1963, the second black member to be named, after Henry Ossawa Tanner, and he became a full member in 1967.

Mr. Lee-Smith's first career retrospective, however, occurred only in 1988. It was

organized by the New Jersey State Museum and traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, among other sites. In 1997, a second retrospective was organized by Michael Culver of the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in Maine. Mr. Lee-Smith exhibited in galleries across the country, including the June Kelly Gallery in SoHo in 1994.

His paintings are in many public collections, among them those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Howard University and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Manhattan, where he is included in an exhibition titled "Black New York Artists of the 20th Century." In 1994 he was commissioned to paint the official City Hall portrait of former Mayor David N. Dinkins.

Mr. Lee-Smith, who decided as a young man to hyphenate his name, is survived by his wife, Patricia; a daughter, Christina Smith; two stepdaughters, Stephanie Patterson and Karen Bowers; a grandchild and a great-grandchild.

Correction: March 5, 1999

An obituary of the artist Hughie Lee-Smith on Monday misidentified a Washington museum that has one of his paintings in its collection. It is the National Museum of American Art, not the National Gallery of Art.

A version of this article appears in print on March 1, 1999, Section A, Page 18 of the National edition with the headline: Hughie Lee-Smith, 83, a Painter of Spare, Bleak Scenes Touched with Mystery