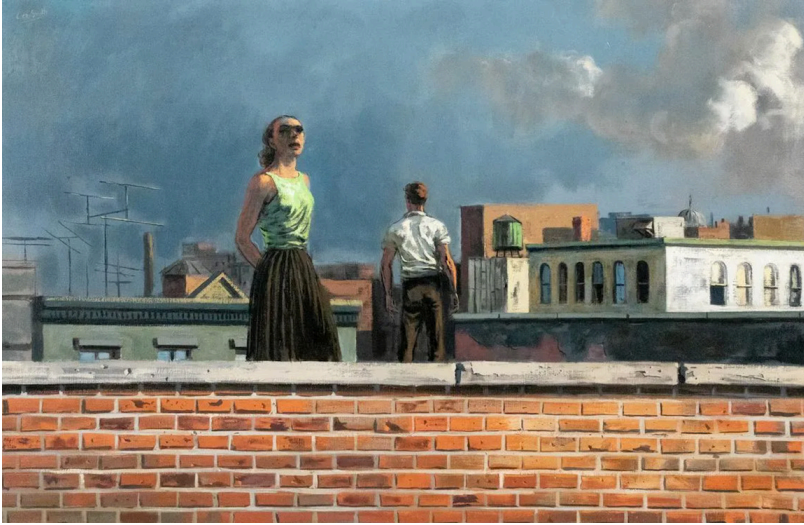


AUCTION CENTRAL NEWS

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HUGHIE LEE-SMITH FOUND ART LURKING IN LONELINESS

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This circa-1961 Hughie Lee-Smith painting, 'Rooftops,' achieved \$55,000 plus the buyer's premium in November 2019. Image courtesy of Treadway and LiveAuctioneers.

NEW YORK — Isolation and solitude are pervasive themes in the paintings of Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999), an African American artist who often painted figures with their backs to the viewer or set them against desolate backdrops with foreboding skies. Grappling with existential and surrealist themes, Lee-Smith explored his place in society and the art world at a time when only white male artists were accepted as full professionals, able to choose their subject matter as they pleased, while Black artists were pushed to document the Black experience.

Lee-Smith was born in Florida and raised in Ohio by his grandmother, and once explained that his affinity for flat and thin landscapes set against cold, dark skies stemmed from enduring many gray Midwestern winters.

While his art is in several prominent museum collections today, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Detroit Institute of Arts, Lee-Smith didn't really make it in the art world until the 1950s, when he had a solo show at Howard University and won a prestigious art prize in New York.

"The complexity and subtlety of Lee-Smith's work made it difficult for critics to classify, and this phenomenon, combined with his location in the Midwest, contributed to Lee-Smith's relative obscurity on the East Coast for much of his early career," according to the website of the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York City.

Later, he was represented by New York's Janet Nessler Gallery and received

retrospective showings at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton in 1988 and the Studio Museum in Harlem. He was also the second African American artist to be elected as a full member of the National Academy of Art and Design (Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first).

In most of his paintings, the figures are pictured at a distance and often reflect themes of alienation. During his early years painting in Detroit in the 1940s, however, Lee-Smith did create traditional portraits and still lifes, such as an untitled 1949 oil-on-Masonite portrait of a young girl. It sold for \$42,000 plus the buyer's premium in October 2021 at Swann Auction Galleries.

By the 1950s, however, his style had evolved toward romanticized and atmospheric landscapes, often with man vs. nature themes. An example is the crumbling stones that might be a house foundation in *Cliff Grass*, a circa-1950s oil on canvas that made \$29,000 plus the buyer's premium in May 2021 at Black Art Auction.

Signature motifs in Lee-Smith's works not only include cracking concrete piers but also flying ribbons, as demonstrated in an untitled oil-on-linen painting depicting a man in a red shirt at the seashore that made \$70,000 plus the buyer's premium in February 2022 at DuMouchelles. Similar to the composition of one of his most famous paintings at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, *The Stranger*, the man in the untitled painting is cut off from the mainland and civilization by a feature of the landscape — in this case, the sea. Lee-Smith masterfully conveys a sense of psychological and social alienation in these works.

His focus on metaphysical themes increased after his wife died in 1961, ushering in a period in which his art explores the universality of loneliness. "Although his feelings about racial inequities or disharmonies have been inspirational, he seeks to create images that articulate his emotions about social and cultural disparity as it relates to all of humanity," according to a biography of the artist on the Smithsonian museum's website.

He likes to portray his subjects in a moment frozen in time, leaving the viewer to speculate what might be happening in the scene or what occurred shortly before. A fitting example is when he juxtaposes two figures who are not interacting at all as in *Rooftops*, a circa-1961 oil on canvas that realized \$55,000 plus the buyer's premium in November 2019 at Treadway.

In his later years, around the time he had a major retrospective at the New Jersey State Museum, Lee-Smith created a series of works presenting actors and musicians on stage that reference his time working at the Playhouse Settlement in Cleveland, the country's oldest African American theater, during the heyday of the WPA Federal Art Project. Teaching at the Playhouse Settlement for a year to fulfill the conditions of a scholarship, his interest in art grew to include dance, theater, music and literature. The theatrical elements he was surrounded by — much like the carnivals his grandmother forbade young Lee-Smith to visit, branding them as dens of iniquity — figure prominently in his late-in-life paintings. *Curtain Call* is one of the works in this series. The 1989 painting brought \$80,000 plus the buyer's premium in October 2021 at Swann Auction Galleries.

Imbued with an air of mystery and enigma, Lee-Smith's paintings continue to interest those who appreciate and collect art today. The themes of racial disparity, loneliness and alienation are as relevant today as they were when the paint was fresh on these canvases.