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Leon Polk Smith, 91, Artist Loyal to Geometry, Is Dead

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Leon Polk Smith, a painter who furthered the development of American geometric abstraction, died on Wednesday at his home in Manhattan. Mr. Smith was 91 and also had a home in Shoreham, L.I.

In a career that spanned more than 50 years, Mr. Smith became known for paintings whose simplified shapes and brilliant colors were at once pure and playful, worldly and ascetic. Although never considered a major artist, he arrived at geometry before others did and remained steadfastly loyal to its principles, cultivating aspects of scale and simplicity that presaged the Hard-Edge and Minimal painting styles of the late 1950's and 60's.

By the mid-50's, his most characteristic works were often shaped, sometimes modular paintings that seemed barely to contain the bold forms painted on them, creating an expansive if sometimes graphic energy.

Several critics felt that Mr. Smith's big-scale simplicity and use of biomorphic shapes influenced younger artists like Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman and Al Held, all of whom visited his studio in the mid-50's.

Leon Polk Smith was born outside Chickasha, in what was then called Indian Territory, in 1906, one year before it was incorporated into the state of Oklahoma. He was the eighth of nine children of William and Samantha Smith, both of whom were part Cherokee and who instilled in their son a commitment to the concept of equal opportunity for all.

The Depression delayed his education, and Mr. Smith worked as a rancher and on highway construction for seven years after graduating from high school. In 1934, he graduated from Oklahoma State College in Ada (now East Central University). In 1936, he came to New York to pursue graduate study in art education at Columbia University Teachers College.

Mr. Smith's artistic development was set in motion during his first semester there, when one of his painting teachers took him to see the Gallatin Collection, then at New York University. The sight of paintings by Mondrian and sculpture by Brancusi and Arp was formative. As the artist later put it, "I set out from

Mondrian to find a way of freeing this concept of space so that it could be expressed with the use of the curved line as well as straight."

But unlike earlier artists who had been influenced by Mondrian, Mr. Smith pushed far beyond his influence, forsaking the grid and continually enlarging and simplifying the compositions of his impeccably executed works. His shapes were really parts of shapes -- truncated circles or triangles, or an inflated cross, as in the 1978 painting titled "Crossroads Gray" -- that gave the sensation of looking at something very large from close range.

Implicitly buoyant and optimistic, they had at times a connection to everyday reality that critics saw as quintessentially American. His paintings could be inspired by the sight of stacked canvases leaning on one another in his studio, or, as with his circular paintings, or tondos, by line drawings for tennis balls and baseballs in a sporting goods catalogue. Sometimes the influence was less obvious, as in 1960 when Mr. Smith acknowledged his lifelong support of liberal causes by giving the title "Black Anthem" to a painting of two rounded black shapes pressing in on a field of white.

Mr. Smith had his first show in New York City at the Uptown Gallery in 1941 and thereafter was affiliated with several prominent dealers, including Charles Egan, Betty Parsons, the Stable Gallery, La Chalette, Denise Rene and Joan Washburn. His work is represented in many museums in the United States, Europe and South America. In 1992, he gave a group of 27 paintings and works on paper to the Brooklyn Museum, where they are on permanent display. The museum organized a full-scale retrospective of Mr. Smith's work in the fall of 1995. An exhibition of Mr. Smith's work from the early 90's is on view at the Jason McCoy Gallery in Manhattan.

Mr. Smith is survived by his companion of 45 years, Robert Jamieson.

Photo: "No. 7612," painted in 1976. (The New York Times)