

Harvard Art Museums

Fogg Museum
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Press Release

David Smith's *Medals for Dishonor* Series Acquired by Harvard Art Museums



A visitor with David Smith's *Medals for Dishonor* (1938–40), in June 2023. Artwork © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Caitlin Cunningham Photography.

Cambridge, MA
December 14, 2023

The Harvard Art Museums today announce the gift of *Medals for Dishonor*, a critical early work by preeminent 20th-century sculptor David Smith (American, 1906–1965). The gift from the artist's estate comprises 14 cast bronze narrative reliefs from a profoundly political and satirical series that addresses anti-war and anti-fascist themes. The 15th medal in the series has been placed on long-term loan by the estate. These works join a large group of sculptures, paintings, and works on paper by Smith in the Harvard Art Museums collections. Harvard is now the only institution with the ability to show the *Medals for Dishonor* as a unified group.

"This transformative gift allows the museums to continue to exhibit, study, and teach with these critical early works in the way that the artist himself envisioned," said Sarah Kianovsky, who recently retired as Curator of the Collection in the Division of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Harvard Art Museums.

Kianovsky, who has published extensively on the work of David Smith, initially arranged for the loan of the medals from the estate in preparation for the reopening of the Harvard Art Museums in November 2014, after a major renovation and expansion project. The medals have been on display since then in the museums' Social Realism gallery on Level 1, where they are regularly used in university courses ranging from history to sociology and economics. They draw the curiosity and sustained attention of many general visitors as well.

Smith began work on the elaborately detailed figurative medals at the same time (1938–40) he was preparing for his first solo exhibition of abstract steel sculptures. Turning the notion of the military medal on its head, he created instead a searing examination of the causes and effects of war that was informed by his recent travels in Europe and the Soviet Union, by the political commentary in Picasso's *Guernica* and *The Dream and Lie of Franco*, and by his work in the sculpture division of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration. The texts accompanying the medals, by turns pointed and poetic, illuminate Smith's desire to maintain a critical stance toward American culture while acknowledging the moral imperative of American involvement in world events, particularly the expanding war in Europe.

Candida Smith and Rebecca Smith, co-presidents of The Estate of David Smith, said: "The family of David Smith is convinced, as was the artist himself, that there is no better place for the *Medals for Dishonor* than the Harvard Art Museums, which contain a large collection of artworks and archival objects relating to David Smith's life and work. We are immensely gratified to know that the *Medals for Dishonor*, during their residency at the Fogg Museum, have been viewed regularly by art and history students alike."

The Harvard Art Museums' comprehensive collection of works by Smith comprises 14 sculptures, 37 drawings, 6 paintings, 6 photographs, and 3 prints. The majority of these were the gift of collector Lois Orswell, who maintained a yearslong correspondence with the artist, letters that are now housed in the Harvard Art Museums Archives. This correspondence makes clear that the artist understood Orswell's plans for her collection and recognized the importance that the collection would hold for future scholars and lovers of his work. In early 1961, he wrote, "Wherever you 'will' your collection . . . I want to consider my Medals for War . . . so there would be one set—housed and unified—either before or after I die."

"We are thrilled that David Smith's entire *Medals for Dishonor* series will now have a permanent home in the Harvard Art Museums collections," said Martha Tedeschi, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums. "I am all the more delighted that we are able to mark Sarah Kianovsky's recent retirement in this way, after her distinguished 30 years of thoughtful research, mentorship, and leadership at the museums."

The Estate of David Smith is dedicated to preserving the legacy of the artist through the promotion of exhibitions, publications, and research. The estate encourages new scholarship of Smith's work while preserving an extensive archive containing historical documents and photographs related to Smith's life and career. davidsmithestate.org

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, comprising three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries;

and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on art from Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Together, the collections include over 255,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. The Harvard Art Museums have a rich tradition of considering the history of objects as an integral part of the teaching and study of art history, focusing on conservation and preservation concerns as well as technical studies. harvardartmuseums.org

The Harvard Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Hours and Admission

Open Tuesday–Sunday, 10am–5pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission is free to all visitors. For further information about visiting, including general policies, see harvardartmuseums.org/visit.

For more information, please contact

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