



# art smith

1917-1882





Inspired by surrealism, biomorphicism, and primitivism, Art Smith's jewelry is dynamic in its size and form. Although sometimes massive in scale, his jewelry remains lightweight and wearable. His jewelry dates from the late 1940s to the 1970s and includes his most famous pieces, such as a "Patina" necklace inspired by the mobiles of Alexander Calder; a "Lava" bracelet, or cuff, that extends over the entire lower arm in undulating and overlapping forms; and a massive ring with three semi-precious stones that stretches over three fingers.

One of the leading modernist jewelers of the mid-twentieth century, Smith was also an active supporter of black and gay civil rights, an avid jazz enthusiast, and a supporter of early black modern dance groups.



Arthur Smith was born to Jamaican parents in Cuba in 1917. His family settled in Brooklyn in 1920 and Smith showed artistic talent at an early age, winning honorable mention as an eighth grader in a poster contest held by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Encouraged to apply to art school, he received a scholarship to Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. There he was one of only a handful of black students, and his advisors tried to steer him towards architecture, suggesting he might readily find a job in the civil sector of that profession. His lack of proclivity for mathematics eventually forced him to abandon this path, however, and he turned to commercial art and a major in sculpture, training that would prove invaluable.

After graduating in 1940, Smith worked first with the National Youth Administration and later for Junior Achievement, an organization devoted to helping teenagers



find employment. He also took a night course in jewelry making at New York University. That and the friendship with Winifred Mason, a black jewelry designer who became his mentor, set him on the course of his adult artistic life. Mason had a small jewelry studio and store in Greenwich Village, and Smith became her full time assistant. He subsequently moved from Brooklyn to the Village's Bank Street. In 1946 Smith opened his own studio and shop on Cornelia Street in the village with the financial assistance of a near-stranger who wished to undermine Mason because of bad feelings over business transactions. Cornelia Street was an "Italian block" then, and Smith suffered racial violence from some of his neighbors.

His store-front windows were smashed on one occasion and he was made to feel dangerously unwanted. Soon after, he moved to 140 West Fourth Street just 1/2 block from Washington Square park, the heart of Greenwich Village where as an openly gay black artist he felt more at home. Though his jewelry was clearly not mainstream, he had business relationships with several other stores including



Bloomingdales and his work was featured in Vogue, Harpers and the New Yorker. Considering that Smith was a gay, black man designing avant-garde jewelry in the 1950s, it's a testament to his skills as a designer and artisan that his work was admired and commissioned outside of the downtown, bohemian world in which he lived and worked.

The new store was better located business-wise and socially, and Smith's career began to take off. In addition to selling from this new location, he started to sell his wares to craft stores in Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago, and by the mid-1950's he had business relationships with Bloomingdale's and Milton Heffing in Manhattan, James Boutique in Houston, L'Unique in Minneapolis, and Black Tulip in Dallas.



An important early influence on Smith's career was Tally Beatty, a young black dancer and choreographer. Beatty introduced Smith to the dance world "salon" of Frank and Dorcas Neal, where he became acquainted with some of the city's leading black artists including writer James Baldwin, composer and pianist Billy Strayhorn, singers Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, actor Brock Peters, and expressionist painter Charles Sebree.

Through Beatty, Smith also began to design jewelry for several avant-garde black dance companies, including, in addition to Beatty's own, those of Pearl Primus and Claude Marchant. These commissions encouraged him to design on a grander scale than he might otherwise have done,



and the theatricality of many of his larger pieces may well reflect this experience.

In the early 1950's Smith received feature pictorial coverage in both *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and was also mentioned in *The New Yorker* shopper's guide, "On the Avenue." For many years thereafter he ran a small advertisement in the back of *The New Yorker*. By the 1960's he had begun to use silver more readily in his jewelry, and as his client base increased so did his custom designs. He received a prestigious commission from the Peekskill, New York, chapter of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People, for example, to design a brooch for Eleanor Roosevelt, and he made cufflinks for Duke Ellington that incorporated the first notes of Ellington's famous 1930 song "Mood Indigo."

In 1969 he was honored with a one-man exhibition at New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Art and Design), and in 1970 he was included in *Objects: USA*, a large traveling exhibition organized by Lee Nordness, an influential early





dealer in craft objects. After his death 3 major exhibits were organized celebrating his work; “Arthur Smith A Jeweler’s Retrospective” at the Jamacia Arts Center in Queens NY, 1990, “Sculpture to Wear; Art Smith and his Contemporaries”, at the Gansevoort Gallery, NYC, 1998, and “From the Village to Vogue” at the Brooklyn Museum., 2008.

Art Smith wrote in the 1969 catalog of his one man exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Craft: “A piece of jewelry is in a sense an object that is not complete in itself. Jewelry is a ‘what is it?’ until you relate it to the body. The body is a component in design just as air and space are. Like line, form, and color, the body is a material to work with. It is one of the basic inspirations in creating form.” ■