

FRANCIS
SMITH



IN SEARCH
OF LOST
TIME

INTRODUCING FRANCIS SMITH

Francis Smith (1881-1961), one of the most unique figures of modernism in Portugal, was born in Lisbon, but soon emigrated to Paris, where he developed a prestigious artistic career, participating, with critical and commercial success, in the most important Parisian exhibition circuits of the time. During his life time, he became the most renowned Portuguese artist in the French cultural scene. However, in Portuguese Art History, his work has been successively regarded as minor, due to its ingenuity, his taste for figurative depiction, and to the so-called collage to the vision of illustrated postcard the regime of the Estado Novo wanted for Portugal. Reduced, in Portugal and France, to an image of a painter of the "Portuguese nostalgia", his work has, however, many other interesting and artistically informed characteristics.

His intimate approach in painting reflects a certain immigrant sentimentality, keeping a crystallized and nostalgic memory of a traditional, almost folkloric, Portugal. However, this memory merges it with the daily modern French life. His own nostalgia clearly states his familiarity with the writing of Marcel Proust, and the mechanisms of memory, outlining, in a sensitive memorialist record, what we might call a "search for lost time" in painting. Combining aspects of modernity with a vision of his personal world, Smith is deliberately "naive". Trying to achieve the purity of a child's perspective, while being well aware that the perception of time and memory is a personal issue.

In this exhibition, we show that his commitment to the figurative record of his time reflects his social involvement with the themes of his choosing, combining literate and popular culture and presenting a personal synthesis between centre and periphery, or between Paris and its distant Portugal.



THE ARTIST'S INTIMATE LABORATORY. THE EARLY YEARS (1900-1920)

As in a toy theater, his work coherently ignores both the rhetorical proposals of verist academicism, and with the conceptualism of modernity. Confessional and prudish, everything within its scope demands purity of colours, formal simplicity, crafty humility, contrary to the exacerbated gestures, to the screaming chromatic stridency of geometric asceticism. On the contrary, permeated by affective sensuality, poetry of existential suspension, Smith's art says goodbye to the 19th century, without placing itself in conjunction with the avant-garde concerns of the first half of our century.

—Fernando Pernes on Francis Smith's painting (1986)

This epigraph introduces us to one of the structuring characteristics of all the artist's painting – his voluntary intimate and confessional tendency. With a chronological and geographically parallel career to the Parisian historical avant-gardes, the Portuguese painter opts for a more subtle and personal path towards modernity. In his early years, and until 1920, this intimate vocation shows its most everyday version – the painter represents his immediate environment: still-lives; domestic scenes; portraits of relatives and friends; and landscapes. It is a time of particularly intense experimentation, belying the criticism of innocence and ignorance, typical of the real naïve painting. In this sense, in this exhibition we emphasize the way in which he breaks the three-dimensional optical illusion of the classical perspective (*Still Life*, 1916) or the way in which, from different angles, in *Cena Interior*, from c. 1918, Yvonne Mortier (his wife) is depicted while sewing.



THE METHODOLOGY OF A “MEMORY PAINTER”

Francis Smith can be defined as a “memory painter”. Following a daily walk routine, Smith recorded in synthetic lines what he observed. These drawing notes would be reworked in the studio, being deepened and represented in a register with great emphasis on colour. *Les choses familières* (1959, drawing) shows the interior of his studio, metaphorically defining the personal introspection of his creative process.



AN OPEN WINDOW OVER A WORLD OF EVASION

Around 1920, there was a structural change in Francis Smith's painting. Until then, he mainly focused on domestic themes. After that, the painter began to include elements of memory, crossing aspects of his experience in Portugal and France, in works in which he creates a world half real, half dream. A sense of suspended time, and openness to an inner, personal, vision is clearly present in his work.

One of the essential pictorial elements in this universe is the window. On the parapet of each of them there are often vases and bunches of flowers, gentle guardians to an entry into a personal territory, of candid bonhomie, and the enjoyment of a feeling of eternal youth. In this flowery universe, as a counterpoint to the vicissitudes and restrictions of real time/space, we find a sense of perpetual security of a slow life, as well of continuous adventure and discovery, painted in pleasant colours, matching the ingenuous line that Smith chooses to use.



INGENUITY AS A MODERN EXPRESSION

Smith adopts the modern interest in the so-called primitivism, popular culture and, above all, to the child's gaze, in the sense of pure sensitivity, emotional disposition that allowed him a more authentic approach to the world. Such a perspective, related to his search for the lost and innocent time of childhood, leads to the creation of a complex artistic process, in which the simulated technical and conceptual ingenuity affectively expresses his personal universe, clearly evident in the extreme compositional and scenic care with which he conceives his "toy world".

Pretending to ignore the classical perspective, Smith creates, along with a Japanese influence, a spatial illusion of depth and distance. His alleged "ingenuism" is also expressed in the thematic predilection for the circus and for clowns in particular – characters related to the universe of childhood. In 1937, in the Christmas Special Issue of *Le Monde Illustré*, the artist freed his imagination, populating the pages of this newspaper with puppets, toy soldiers, angels, stable animals, and Santa Claus...



FROM SENSITIVE MEMORY

Smith's painting is based on the modern idea that memory is not an objective repository of the past, rather a personal *constructo* that changes over time. Philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) conceived two types of time: the physical, which science could measure, and the lived – that which human consciousness is capable of perceiving, but impossible to measure. This theory inspired writer Marcel Proust (1871-1922), in his famous saga *In search of lost time* (1913-1927). Like Proust, Smith understood memory as a human device of involuntary manifestation, depending on exterior causes such as time and space and interior ones like emotions. If, for the French writer, the sensitive memory is triggered by an olfactory stimulus, the famous cake, in Smith this breaking out of the past is made by visual impulses. As an example, a group photograph taken at Manuel Bentes' house, in Serpa, in 1909, inspires the composition *O Fado* (c. 1925).



FRANCE, THE FOSTER HOMELAND. *LA JOIE DE VIVRE*

France became the central theme of the painter's "toy world", in his expression of a sentimental emigrant geography. Contrary to Portuguese motifs, that mainly evoke long lost events, the painter's French-themed paintings deal with places and events from his adult, recent life, representing specific places and objects.

A witness to the experience of the Parisian artistic circuits of the interwar period, these works show habits, tastes and tendencies, in a modern frenzy of Parisian boulevards with their fast new machines, as well as the rise of a bourgeois society of consumption and enjoyment. Smith depicts the public performances (theatre, opera, circus, sporting events), leisure, tourism and fashion. As an inveterate Rambler, he offers a passionate itinerary through the countless places he visited in French territory. His invitation to travel offers a sensuous visual appeal to *joie de vivre*, that spans from the sunny south of hills, lush gardens, villas, bays and arenas opening onto the sea (Saint-Jean-de-Luz; Martigues; Marseille; Toulon; Saint-Tropez; Menton), to Normandy with its green fields and popular harbours and also through the Provence interior (Var; L'Isle-sur-Sorgue) and Auvergne (Nyons), where the painter took refuge during the Nazi occupation.



PORTUGAL, THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE “LOST PARADISE”

The artist's birthplace, Portugal is a privileged place in Francis Smith's affective topography. Voluntarily emigrated to Paris from an early age, the painter would rarely return to his homeland, wrapping its representations in a tender nostalgia, rooted in his childhood years. With time, this nostalgic universe crystallized into a “lost paradise”, with its precious yet imprecise traditional features: nostalgic (and inaccurate) descriptions of picturesque Lisbon's popular quarters (Alfama, Mouraria and Madragoa), and daily rural atmospheres, were populated by folkloric characters. Like other contemporary national painters (Sarah Affonso or Eduardo Viana, for example), Smith operates his primitivist “recycling” of the autochthonous imaginary inherited from the naturalist painters, returning to the ethos of a popular culture. In *Figurado de Barcelos* and *Bonecos de Estremoz* we recognize the models that will nourish his memories. In these exuberant, colourful sculptures, the artist seeks the freshness of the “people's” innocent gaze, while identifying with the national identity imaginary of the Estado Novo.



THE PORTUGUESE VILLAGE

From 1935 onwards, "Portuguese" paintings focused particularly on countryside landscapes and living. Isolated villages and small towns match a generic typological idea of a Portuguese village, an imagined encyclopaedic compendium of national attributes associated with the plain architecture and native landscape, and in the vague but familiar outline of its slopes and beaches. At the foot of small hills, inlaid between valleys and dirt roads, or at the top of plateaus, the silhouettes of Smith's villages are defined. The colourful houses surround the white body of the local church, around whose bell towers and endless paths and sidewalks, Smith's well-known folk puppets move, gathering at the end of mass, around the earth's fountain, or in improvised serenades – in the simple rituals of village life.



CAREER AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

In Paris, Smith developed a successful and long career spanning over 50 years, with critical and commercial success in the most significant and renowned salons (*Artistes Français, Indépendantes, Automne, Tuileries, Peintres Témoins de Leurs Temps*) and Parisian galleries of the time (Devambez and Berthe Weil, in particular), alongside renowned figures of international modernism. He had about 25 solo exhibitions and participated in more than a hundred collectives. The vast number of acquisitions of his paintings by the French State (more than 40 works were identified) enshrines Francis Smith as the Portuguese artist with the greatest presence in Parisian artistic circuits in the first half of the 20th century.

In Portugal, and despite his participation in some of the founding moments of modern art in Portugal (Exhibition of the Books, 1911; Galeria das Artes, 1916; 1st Salão de Outubro, 1925; 1st Exhibition of Modern Art, 1935), Smith kept an ambivalent relationship with the critics and with the Portuguese art market. Until 1934, when he had his monographic exhibition sponsored by the official Secretariat of National Propaganda, (Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional – SPN), Smith was little known among national critics and collectors. After this event, and despite the growing popularity of his work, Smith would never return to Portugal. His exhibitions here became rare. However, the propagandistic image of a painter of “Portuguese nostalgia”, who continued to venerate Portugal in his work, branded his work in Portuguese historiography, generating a perennial interest among Portuguese collectors, who saw in his work a clear expression of a popular imagination.



CHRONOLOGY



1881 Francisco Smith is born in Lisbon on October 10, 1881, into a family of English origin.

1899-1901 After an apparently happy childhood, spent on the family property of Olivais, Quinta do Castelo Picão, Smith concludes the Lyceum with the objective of following an administrative career in the Ministry of the Navy (both his father, João Smith, and grandfather were naval officers), which he began around 1900. Parallel to his activity of civil servant, he began an amateur painting practice, led by the private teaching of Luciano Freire (1864-1935), Constantino Fernandes (1878-1920), and José Ribeiro Júnior (1881-1956).

1902-1904 Following the advice of his son's teachers, João Smith decides to send him to Paris to pursue artistic studies. Until 1907, with his father's financial support, the painter would intermittently reside between the French capital and Lisbon, torn between the professional affirmation of his artistic career and the extension of the family labour tradition.

1905-1907 In the artistic bohemia of Montparnasse, he integrates the group of young Portuguese artists that Portuguese art historian José-Augusto França would define as the first modernist generation: Eduardo Viana (1881-1967), Manuel Jardim (1884-1923), Manuel Bentes (1885-1961), Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso (1887-1918), Emmerico Nunes (1888-1967) and Domingos Rebelo (1891-1975).

1908-1909 He attends the *Academia de la Grande Chaumière* and the workshops of the *Cité Falguière*. There, the painter would meet other important names of the Parisian international avant-garde: Moïse Kisling (1891-1953), Severini (1883-1966) and Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), along with his future wife, the French sculptor Yvonne Mortier (1883-1975).

1910 Between June and July, Smith visits England, Belgium and Holland, accompanied by Emmerico Nunes, Manuel Bentes and Eduardo Viana.



1911 In March, Francisco Smith shows his work for the first time at the group Exhibition Libre, in Lisbon, at Salão Bobone (in Chiado). On November 15, back in Paris, he married Yvonne Mortier.

1913 In February, his paintings are presented in Paris at the Salon de l'Oeuvre Libre, at the famous Devambez Gallery. It is his first major appearance on the Paris exhibition circuits, and the first time he adopts the artistic name of Francis Smith. The critic Louis Vauxcelles (1870-1943) praised his painting and the French State acquired his first work – *Paysage du Portugal*. On October 5th, his daughter Lyska is born in Paris.

1918 In November, Smith holds his first solo exhibition in Portugal, at the Bobone Hall. Contrary to their expectations, the show had little critical and commercial success.

1919 Solo exhibition at Galeria Devambez. The French State acquires another of his works and his painting is praised by the influential critic Gustave Kahn (1859-1936). On July 31, Modigliani paints his portrait.

1920 Smith exhibits his works for the first time at the *Salon des Indépendants* and at the *Salon d'Automne*, fundamental Parisian exhibition circuits.

1921-1922 He establishes contact with the famous gallery owner Berthe Weill (1865-1951). Surprised by the extreme sensitivity of some of his paintings, Weill suggests Smith to organize a solo exhibition in her gallery in February 1922. Until 1939, the closing date of the Berthe Weill Gallery, Smith is continuously invited to exhibit there, both in solo (1922, 1924, 1927, 1928, 1930) and group exhibitions. That same year, Francis Smith will be part of the ephemeral artistic group *La Fenêtre*. Like other theatrical ensembles of this period, it had a short life, producing only *La Profession de Madame Warren*, a play by Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), which opened in Paris on 7 May. Smith will be responsible for producing the set for the piece, of which today we only have one drawing published in *Comœdia*.



1924 Subsequently to Smith's monographic exhibition at the Berthe Weill Gallery, the critic André Warnod (1885-1960) writes that Paris has one more painter. It will be necessary to remember the name of Francis Smith when we want to bring together the true painters of modern Paris.

1925 At the invitation of Eduardo Viana, Smith returns to exhibit in Lisbon, at SNBA's I Salão de Autumn.

1931 Shows painting at the Colette Weill Gallery, within the scope of the *Peintures romantiques et naïves project*, group exhibition with artists such as Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), Camille Bombois (1883-1970), Louis Vivin (1861-1936), among others . At the end of 1931, at the request of Marshal Lyautey (1854-1934), Francis Smith painted, for the future Museum of Vincennes, thirty canvases representing each of the pavilions of the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition.

1933 Smith gets the title of Knight of the *Legion of Honor*.

1934 After a monographic exhibition at the Yvonne-Roy Gallery (1933), the painter returns to a solo exhibition in Lisbon, showing only works about Portugal. Organized by the Secretariat of National Propaganda, and inaugurated on June 12 at Salão Bobone, this exhibition is its first critical and sales success on national soil, largely thanks to the propagandistic instrumentalization that the newly created SPN would make of Smith's work, seeing him as a nostalgic product of a rural and popular Portugal, whose international success was due almost exclusively to themes of national representation. On this occasion, the Portuguese State would buy him two works for the National Museum of Contemporary Art, and another for the SPN collection.

1936 On February 8, in reaction to the artist's monographic exhibition at the André J.Rotgé Gallery, Louis Vauxcelles dedicates a long article to Smith's painting, published in *Le Monde Illustré*.



1937 Francis Smith integrates the team of artists responsible for the interior decoration of the Portuguese Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Paris, painting a fresco in the Section for Popular Art and Crafts, and the panel Almond trees in bloom, *Algarve* in the Sala das Provinces. That same year, he is invited by Pierre Mortier, director of *Le Monde Illustré*, to illustrate the special Christmas issue of this publication. He moves to an apartment at 62 Rue Blanche, where he will live until the end of his life.

1940 In the context of the Nazi occupation of French territory, on October 3rd, the Law of the First Jewish Statute is promulgated, applied to all persons originating from at least two grandparents of the Jewish race, and to their companions. Thus begins the anti-Semitic persecution that marked the Vichy Regime. This law would directly affect the Smith family, as both parents of the painter's wife were Jewish. Having been forced to travel with his family to the Free Zone, where this law had not been imposed, until the Liberation of Paris in 1944, the painter would take refuge in the south, between Provence and Auvergne.

1950 Smith's painting is part of the national artistic selection that participates in the XXV Venice Biennale.

1953 From this year on, until 1961, Francis Smith's painting is an annual presence at the *Salon des Peintres Témoins de Leurs Temps*, establishing its celebrity among the Parisian public and critics, and confirming its good relationship with the official French circuits of contemporary art. It also participates in the national team present at the *II Bienal de S. Paulo. Varinas (Evocação de Lisboa)*, one of the compositions presented in Brazil, is, on his return to Portugal, acquired by the National Museum of Contemporary Art.

1961 On October 8, Francis Smith dies in Paris. On the date of his death, the painter was unanimously recognized by the Parisian artistic circle as an essential figure in the so-called *École de Paris*, in the first half of the 20th century. The following years are of public and institutional praise and consecration. Also, in 1961, Francis Smith's Association des Amis was created in the French capital. Under the aegis of this association, a documentary film dedicated to the artist, directed by Fabienne Tsanck, would premiere on December 7, 1961, at the *Musée de l'Homme*, in Paris.



1963-1973 For about a decade, between Portugal and France, there were several exhibitions devoted to the artist's work: 1963 - Les amis by Francis Smith, Palais Galliera, Paris; 1966 - Hommage to Francis Smith, Le Portugal vu par les Peintres de l'École de Paris, Biarritz; 1967 - Francisco Smith, SNI, Lisbon; 1969 - Le Portugal dans l'oeuvre by Francis Smith, Casa de Portugal, Paris; 1971 - Dessins by Francis Smith, Casa de Portugal, Paris; 1973 - Francis Smith, Dinastia Gallery, Lisbon.