

This passageway brings together artifacts of Smith's life. Ranging from the 1940s to the 1970s, the works on view here demonstrate his engagement with the local and universal, the temporal and eternal.

After a period of self-directed research among the Lummi (Lhaq'temish) and Swinomish people of the Pacific Northwest during his youth and a brief stint studying anthropology at the University of Washington in Seattle, Smith relocated to Berkeley in the mid-1940s and then moved to San Francisco, where he joined a small circle of avant-garde filmmakers. Inspired by Surrealism and the work of European modernists such as Wassily Kandinsky, he experimented with abstract painting, incorporating mythic archetypes from a wide range of cultures. During the same period, he developed his own filmmaking techniques, which included painting directly on film stock and using stop-motion collage to animate images on the screen.

In 1951, Smith moved to New York at the encouragement of Hilla Rebay, the first director of what is now the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In the city, he deepened his experiments with abstraction, film, and mysticism and worked at Inkweed Arts, a greeting card company founded by dancer, illustrator, and model Joanne Ziprin and her husband, Kabbalah scholar and poet Lionel Ziprin.

Smith's range of interests was vast, and much of his time was spent looking at cultural traditions—as evident in his collections of string figures and folk music records—including those of Black, Indigenous, and Orthodox Jewish communities of which he was not a part. His devoted search for universal truths—in art and in life—can be understood as an effort to illuminate not only patterns and continuities between people and the things they create but also their singularities and distinctions.

# Anthology of American Folk Music

The highly influential multivolume *Anthology of American Folk Music*, first released by Folkways Records in 1952, marks Smith's unparalleled efforts to preserve American song as both art and artifact. As Smith would later reflect: "The whole anthology was a collage. I thought of it as an art object."

As a recent arrival in New York and in need of money, Smith tried to sell Moses Asch, the owner of Folkways Records, part of his extensive record collection. Asch instead encouraged him to produce a compilation, which resulted in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Smith divided the work into three sets of two LPs—"Ballads," "Social Music," and "Songs"—and accompanied each with an illustrated booklet of notes. In these notes, Smith used language that was common at the time, describing songs for the African American market as "race music" and as "hillbilly" or "old-time" for the Southern white listeners and Northerners with roots in the South.

The eighty-four songs on the anthology were made between 1927, when electric recordings made accurate music reproduction possible, and 1932, when the Great Depression halted folk music sales. Smith included songs that displayed distinct regional qualities, both rhythmic and verbal, and were originally intended for local rather than national audiences.

A pivotal influence during the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s, Smith's anthology inspired Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia, and Pete Seeger, among others. In 1991, Smith received a lifetime achievement award at the Grammys for his preservation and promotion of folk music. After receiving the award, Smith noted: "My dreams came true. I saw America changed through music."

Songs from Smith's anthology play in this space, while the video monitors display his detailed liner notes for the corresponding track.

# Film No. 18: Mahagonny

Smith's epic film *Mahagonny* (1970–80) is a four-screen translation of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's 1930 opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*), a political satire set in an imaginary American metropolis that prioritizes indulgence over lawfulness and concludes with the city's total destruction. Shot from 1970 to 1972 and edited by Smith for eight years, the film pairs the opera's score with four categories of images—people or portraits (P), animation (A), scene or symbols (S), and nature (N)—that appear on screen in the following order: P.A.S.A.P.A.S.N.A.P.A.S.A.P.A.N.S.A.P.A.S.A.P.N.

Most of the film was shot in the Chelsea Hotel, where Smith lived from 1968 to 1977, and features notable avant-garde figures such as poet Allen Ginsberg, filmmaker Jonas Mekas, and musician Patti Smith. These appearances are intercut with shots of New York landmarks, works from Robert Mapplethorpe's studio, and Smith's own animations. The film merges scenes from Smith's life and work with recognizable symbols of nature and humanity that he intended to be universally accessible.

Originally composed of a grid of four 16mm-images, the film was redesigned by Smith as a multiscreen projection to allow for fanciful modes of display. One of those—a boxing ring that echoes the original set of Weill and Brecht's opera—is referenced here.