

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

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NATIONAL GALLERY INSTALLS GRAND NEW SCULPTURE IN FRONT OF THE EAST BUILDING

Washington, D.C. -- A massive, 15,000-pound steel sculpture, The Snake Is Out by American artist Tony Smith (1912-1980), has been acquired by the National Gallery of Art, J. Carter Brown announced today. Measuring fifteen feet tall and twenty-three feet long, the painted black sculpture has been installed in a prominent position near the front entrance of the East Building. It is a gift of the Estate of Tony Smith and the Patrons' Permanent Fund.

"The Snake Is Out is among the most beautiful and powerful works created by Tony Smith, one of this century's greatest American sculptors," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art. "After seeing a cast of the sculpture in this splendid position five years ago during our exhibition of twentieth-century masterpieces from the Nasher Collection, we are enormously pleased that the Estate of Tony Smith has enabled us to acquire this remarkable work of art and place it here permanently as a gift to the nation."

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A forceful interplay between solid and void and between horizontal and vertical projections, The Snake is Out was created in 1962 while the artist was exploring the use of tetrahedral and octahedral shapes. These modules, he expressed, took him "further and further from considerations of function and structure and toward speculation in pure form." Echoing the geometric angles of the East Building, the sculpture now stands in lively contrast to the curved forms of Henry Moore's Knife Edge Mirror Two Piece, installed on the steps in 1978.

The National Gallery's sculpture is the fourth and final cast fabricated of The Snake Is Out, created by Smith in 1962. Earlier casts are at the Albany Mall Project, Albany, New York (1967); at Rice University, Houston (1979); and in the Nasher Collection, Dallas (1981). The title of the work derives from the similarity of its form to that of a crawling snake.

Trained as an architect, Smith became a pioneering sculptor of the abstract expressionist generation. Born in Orange, New Jersey in 1912, he studied at the Art Students League in New York from 1933 to 1936, and a year later at the New Bauhaus in Chicago with the school's founder, László Moholy-Nagy. Following a two-year apprenticeship with architect Frank Lloyd Wright, Smith practiced architecture for two decades beginning in 1940. By the late 1950s he had turned his attention to painting and sculpture, focusing on elementary modular forms. His first solo exhibition took place in 1966.

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While a student in New York, Smith had worked at his father's New Jersey iron-works factory, where he learned metalworking skills on an industrial scale. His large monolithic steel sculptures were significant forerunners of the primary structures of 1960s minimalist artists. An influential teacher, Smith taught at several American universities, including New York University; the Pratt Institute, New York; and Princeton.

The National Gallery owns two other works by Smith: Untitled, painted in 1962, and Wandering Rocks (1967), a five-part sculpture on view outside the East Building along the Mall.

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