

Tony Smith, 68, Sculptor Of Minimalist Structures

By GRACE GLUECK

Tony Smith, the sculptor noted for his monochromatic, Minimalist structures done on a monumental scale, died of heart failure yesterday at New York Hospital, where he had been in the intensive-care unit since Dec. 14. He was 68 years old and at his death was professor emeritus of art at Hunter College.

Mr. Smith, an architect by profession, was a late bloomer in the sculptural field. Though he had been known to the New York art world as a designer, teacher and theorist, he did not make his public debut as a sculptor until the age of 52, in a 1964 show called "Black, White and Grey" at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford.

Two years later, a work of his appeared in New York at the Jewish Museum in the famed "Primary Structures" show that established Minimal art.

Represented Throughout the World

He drew acclaim from critics and the appreciation of a broader public, and he was one of the best-known American sculptors, represented in museums, collections and public places throughout the world.

In New York, his large-scale steel "Cigarette" (1961), owned by the Museum of Modern Art, is on view in Battery Park. "One, Two, Three," a large work made up of three related elements, will soon be installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and a version of "Throwback," a 1978 sculpture in an edition of three — another is owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — has been purchased by the International Paper Company for display at its New York headquarters.

Although the Smith works are based largely on modular geometric units worked up into large-scale, close-packed tetrahedral and octahedral forms, their presence is powerful and dramatic. Reviewing a show of Smith sculptures in 1976, John Russell, art critic for The New York Times, wrote:

"They are, of course, distinctly of our own time in their preoccupation with new ideas in mathematics, new techniques in building and the use of modular components. But they also manifest from time to time an unrestrained romanticism; it is as if he had set himself, in the time that is left to him, to rebuild the Pyramids, du-

plicate Valhalla and drag Angkor Wat into the age of cybernetics."

Though highly skilled at formal design, Mr. Smith, a fanciful man who liked to draw his titles from the works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, approached his sculpture unprogrammatically. The complex shapes were arrived at by his playing with model-sized geometric components that came together in unpredictable configurations. Describing the genesis of a group of related sculptural forms, "Ten Elements," done in the mid-70's, he said:

"I use angles that are derived from different solids. When they go together, they do not follow any internal system. I assemble them, you might say, in capricious ways rather than systematic ways. You have to take each plane as it comes and find out in what way it will join the other planes."

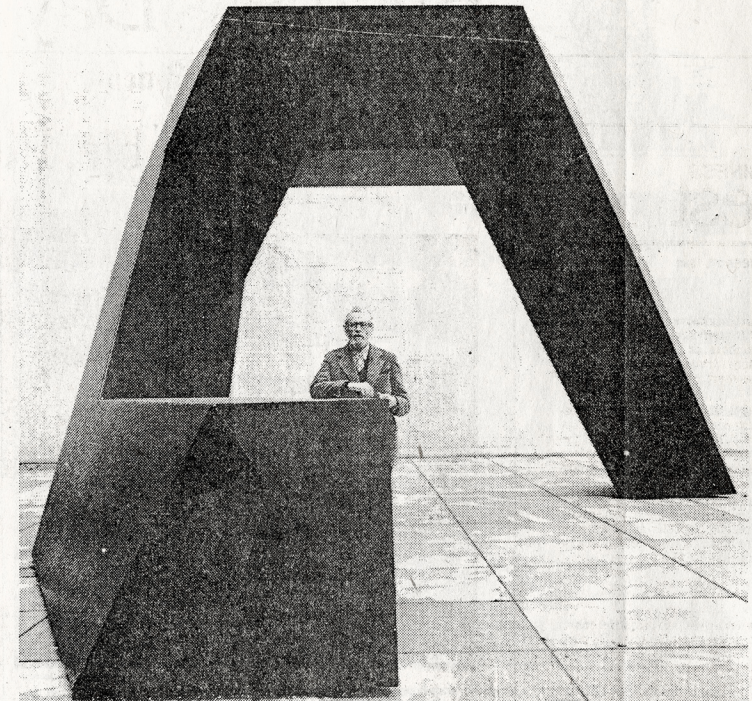
Born in South Orange, N.J., in 1912, Anthony Peter Smith was the oldest son of Peter A. Smith, a manufacturer of waterworks supplies. As a child, he was bedridden with tuberculosis and spent some years isolated from his five brothers and a sister in a small prefabricated house on the family property.

Started With Medicine Boxes

His earliest artistic efforts were "Pueblo Villages" he constructed from the small boxes his medicines came in. Educated by private tutors and Jesuits, he put in two years at Georgetown University before leaving to take night classes at the Art Students League in New York.

In 1937, he enrolled in the New Bauhaus, a Chicago school that briefly succeeded the celebrated Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany, which was closed by the Nazis in 1933.

A year later, the young student first saw the work of Frank Lloyd Wright in a special issue of Architectural Forum, the magazine. Impressed, Mr. Smith landed a job with Wright and was soon involved in helping the architect develop low-cost housing for the United States Government — "Usonian" houses, as Wright called them, with angled outer walls that rested directly on the ground, and which some critics have seen as key elements in



Tony Smith with his "Cigarette," part of the Museum of Modern Art's collection

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the later development of Mr. Smith's sculpture.

By 1940, Mr. Smith was practicing architecture on his own. His work included private houses for such clients as the art dealer Betty Parsons and the painter Theodoros Stamos on eastern Long Island.

'The Black Box' of 1962

Mr. Smith, a friend and supporter in the late 40's and the 50's of the burgeoning New York school of artists, which included Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, developed serious ambitions as a painter, pursuing his aims while still immersed in his architectural practice. His career as a painter never took off, but in 1960, while teaching design at Hunter College, he began to work with cardboard maquettes on sculptural projects. His first metal sculpture, "The Black Box," was fabricated in 1962, after his attention was fixed by a small black-painted index-card box on the desk of a

teaching colleague.

From there, Mr. Smith began to develop highly simplified forms and soon turned the backyard of his home in South Orange into an informal outdoor sculpture display, which had his conservative neighbors deeply puzzled. Yet if the neighbors did not understand Mr. Smith's work, there was excited anticipation of it by his artist friends.

In fact, at the 1964 Wadsworth Athenaeum show, Mr. Smith was described in the catalogue introduction by Samuel Wagstaff Jr., the curator who organized the show, as "one of the best-known unknowns in American art."

Mr. Smith leaves his wife, the former Jane Lanier Brotherton; three daughters, Chiara, Anne and Beatrice; a sister, Mary Crecca, and three brothers, Peter, Thomas and William.

There will be a mass Tuesday at 11 A.M. at Our Lady of Sorrow Church on Prospect Street in South Orange.