



USITT EXHIBIT:

The Designs of Oliver Smith

New exhibit offers rare insight into
this prolific master scenographer

BY PATRICK M. FINELLI

Camelot (1960), Act II, Scene 8,
Battlefield, Arthur's Tent (rendering).
© Rosaria Sinesi, from the Oliver
Smith Collection in the Music Division
of the Library of Congress.

The USITT exhibit of Oliver Smith's artworks is a rare opportunity for professional theatre designers and students to see selections from the archive of a master scenographer. In the pantheon of 20th century American scenic designers, Oliver Smith is unmatched for his breadth of work in theatre, dance, and opera. During his legendary career, he was honored with eight Tony Awards, including two in the same year (1961) for Best Scenic Design of a Musical (*Camelot*) and Best Scenic Design of a Play (*Becket*). Smith's Broadway set designs began in the era when settings were primarily painted backdrops and spanned the period that featured more unit settings. While a consummate artist in the "painterly" tradition, Smith had a keen sense of stage space and anticipated the contemporary emphasis on architectural design.

This new exhibit of selected artworks by Oliver Smith was made possible through the generosity of Rosaria Sinisi (who owns Smith's intellectual property rights and supervises revivals of his works onstage, as well as his personal papers and photo archive) and Dan Carter, who approached us with the idea for an exhibit after seeing a 2012 article by Patrick M. Finelli in *Performing Arts Resources* about the Oliver Smith Collection at the Library of Congress, Music Division. Carter and Finelli agreed to serve as co-curators and send the exhibit on a short tour before the giclée prints take up permanent residence at Pennsylvania State University, where Smith studied architecture as an undergraduate.

The team met in the lobby lounge of the Park Central Hotel in New York City in February 2017 to select drafting and color images that represented the range and diversity of Smith's designs. Sinisi had carefully maintained, augmented, catalogued, and stored more than 10,000 pieces of Smith's artwork and, prior to their conveyance to the Library of Congress, had digitized about 1,200 of these images to facilitate use by scholars. These she presented to the curators in a thumbnail catalog for review. She also brought two portfolios of giclée

prints, and a selection of Diazo prints made from the original pencil on vellum technical drawings, as well. Fortunately, it was a weekday morning and the bar was empty and had plenty of table space available to roll out and examine the breathtaking artworks.

Sinisi offered to make giclée prints on watercolor paper from high-quality scans of the original artwork. The term giclée was coined by Jack Duganne,

who used this adaptation of the French *gicleur* (inkjet nozzle) which sounded more linguistically appropriate for fine-art works. Sinisi printed the renderings for this exhibit at about the same size as the originals, with the backdrop elevations slightly smaller. The texture of the watercolor paper is virtually identical to the surface on which Smith painted, and the high resolution of the giclée prints makes them close to indistinguishable from the

"ONCE, IN ANSWERING A QUESTIONNAIRE CONCERNING THE WORKING METHODS OF THEATRE PEOPLE, I WAS ASKED WHAT OLIVER SMITH DID WHILE PREPARING FOR A SHOW. I REPLIED, 'TWO OTHERS,' AND ADDED 'AND A DELIGHTFUL SIX-DAY TRIP.' **WHY DO PEOPLE PUT UP WITH ALL THIS? BECAUSE HE'S JUST THAT GOOD.** THEY WANT HIM. PRESENT OR ABSENT, HIS SCENERY IS DELIVERED ON TIME, AND IT WORKS. HIS BEST SCENERY MAKES THEATRE HISTORY." – AGNES DE MILLE



© Rosaria Sinisi, from the Oliver Smith Collection in the Music Division of the Library of Congress

Gigi (1973), Eiffel Tower (backdrop). This backdrop for the café scene is notable for the perspective and scale of the Eiffel Tower. It is a selectively translucent drop so that the lamp posts and sky are illuminated from behind, adding a romantic glow to the dusk.

originals. The team determined that 21 fine art images and seven Diazo prints would fit comfortably on 560 square feet of wall space, about the size of the Theatre 2 Lobby Gallery at the University of South Florida. Penn State theatre design professors Daniel Robinson and Milagros Ponce De Leon took the responsibility for framing the drawings and preparing them for touring to the University of South Florida, the 2018 USITT National Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, the University of Texas at Austin, and finally back to Penn State where Sinisi agreed to their exhibition in perpetuity.

Extraordinary Range

The current exhibit contains fine examples of Smith's extraordinary range, from the backdrop elevations for *On the Town* (1944), *High Button Shoes* (1947), and *Swan Lake* (1967) to the Diazo print drafting of the fire escapes in *West Side Story* (1957). His realistic rendering of the unit setting for Tennessee Williams *Night of the Iguana* (1961) evokes the heat of the tropics. The delicate Islamic

architecture motifs for *Kismet* (1976) show Smith's versatility. He came up with a simple and elegant cross-shaped ground plan for Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, the opening production at the Kennedy Center in 1972. *The New York Times* reported that Smith considered *Camelot* (two renderings in this exhibit) his most elaborate production, "conjuring up a fairy-tale vision of the Middle Ages with parks, terraces, jousting fields and castles in colors that ranged from soft pastels to sumptuous gold" ("Oliver Smith, Set Designer"). Every theatre designer knows that drawings and renderings are not the end product, but a vital step in communicating the visual elements to the director and other artist collaborators. Color elevations express the scenic design in a way that enables the construction and painting of the setting. This exhibit includes a photograph of Smith supervising the painting of a backdrop for *Take Me Along* in 1959 in Nolan's Scenic Studio while holding in his hand the backdrop elevation displayed beside the photograph.

This exhibit also contains a reproduction of Irving Penn's 1947 gelatin silver print photograph of Oliver Smith, Jane Bowles, and Paul Bowles. Bowles wrote the score for *The Wind Remains*, which Smith had designed for the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Bowles was Smith's cousin, and after Smith moved to New York, he and Bowles lived in the same rooming house, a brownstone located at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn Heights and owned by George Davis, an editor at *Harper's Bazaar*. The house has a colorful history filled with luminaries from literature and arts including W. H. Auden (who collected the rent), Carson McCullers, and Gypsy Rose Lee (Shtier). Here, Smith began to make contacts that would further develop his career in theatre.

Smith supported himself in New York with a series of odd jobs as a clerk in retail stores, an usher in a movie house, and a clerk at the Brooklyn Public Library. But he kept painting, and you can see what he saw in two fine art paintings in the exhibit, a Coney Island

gouache and watercolor of the Brooklyn Bridge painted in the 1940s. Smith also enjoyed painting the ships that docked near the Brooklyn Bridge and sold some of these works to their captains.

Smith had been fascinated with theatre and hotel ground plans since he was a child, obtaining the plans to the Paris Opera, the Metropolitan, and Radio City Music hall, along with the deck plans of ocean liners. His cousin Paul Bowles suggested that since he could draw and liked the theatre, he should paint for the stage. His first effort was for a Massine ballet *Saratoga* (1941) at Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo; that production was a flop, but his design attracted attention. Then he designed sets for a series of one acts; his work was panned by the critic George Jean Nathan. Yet he persisted, and his iconic design for Agnes De Mille's *Rodeo* (1942) followed by successes working with Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein designing *On the Town* and *Fancy Free* in 1944 put him in the top tier of scenic designers. His success enabled him to purchase a stately home in Brooklyn Heights, immortalized in Truman Capote's short story *A House on the Heights*, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Depending upon the decade of their execution, Smith's artworks may include watercolor, gouache, and Dr. Martin's dye. It was the dye that gave the intense punch of color. One of the hazards of Dr. Martin's is that it is susceptible to fading in sunlight; some of these pieces were exposed to light in both scene shops and while hanging on the walls at American Ballet Theatre. Thus, some of the artworks may require digital color correction to accurately display their original appearance.

During his illustrious career, Smith created scenic designs for many iconic American musicals including *My Fair Lady*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Oklahoma*, *Brigadoon*, *Sound of Music*, and more than 60 others. He was co-producer with Lucia Chase for 40 years at the American Ballet Theater, where he collaborated with Agnes de Mille (*Rodeo*), and Jerome Robbins (*Fancy Free*). This exhibit features the iconic Corral Scene from *Rodeo* (1942), with uniquely styled horsetail clouds that are Smith's signature flourish and appear in renderings of scenes in the Midwest. Dance companies still perform the piece around the world, always

with Oliver Smith's decor.

Smith was art director for the motion picture *Oklahoma!*, as well as three films for MGM (*The Band Wagon*, *Guys and Dolls*, and *Porgy and Bess*) and was a consultant on the Oscar-nominated feature film, *The Turning Point*. When he was offered a lucrative position to stay in Hollywood, he had to make a difficult choice: "I was intrigued, and at the same time homesick for New York," he said. "Every time I returned to New York I would feel like I was getting sprung. I served my sentence. Now I had to make a very important decision—whether to stay here and do a new musical called *My Fair Lady*, or go back to Hollywood and be a successful producer and have a big swimming pool" (MacKay 1982, 65). That decision propelled him into the era of big Broadway musicals.

Smith designed many productions for opera companies including the Metropolitan Opera (*La Traviata*) and Sarah Caldwell's Boston Opera (*Don Giovanni* and *Falstaff*). The Levee scene from New York City Opera's *Naughty Marietta* (1978) in this exhibit is a beautiful

example. Smith was also committed to bringing avant-garde work to Broadway, where he produced the first American version of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, as well as Jane Bowles's *In the Summer House* (which he also designed).

Oliver Smith's ability to deliver first-rate designs on a tight schedule made him a favorite of Broadway producers for decades. His work blended a distinctly American painting style with the grace of his moving scenery, creating designs that earned accolades around the world. Smith dedicated a portion of his later career to the education of the next generation of set designers, teaching in the MFA program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts for 22 years (Sinisi).

Prolific Career

Researchers and curators usually have little or no control over the initial, and most important, decisions of what may be included in material that goes to an institution. Rather, institutions simply assess what they are offered and accept or decline. In many cases, the artist's

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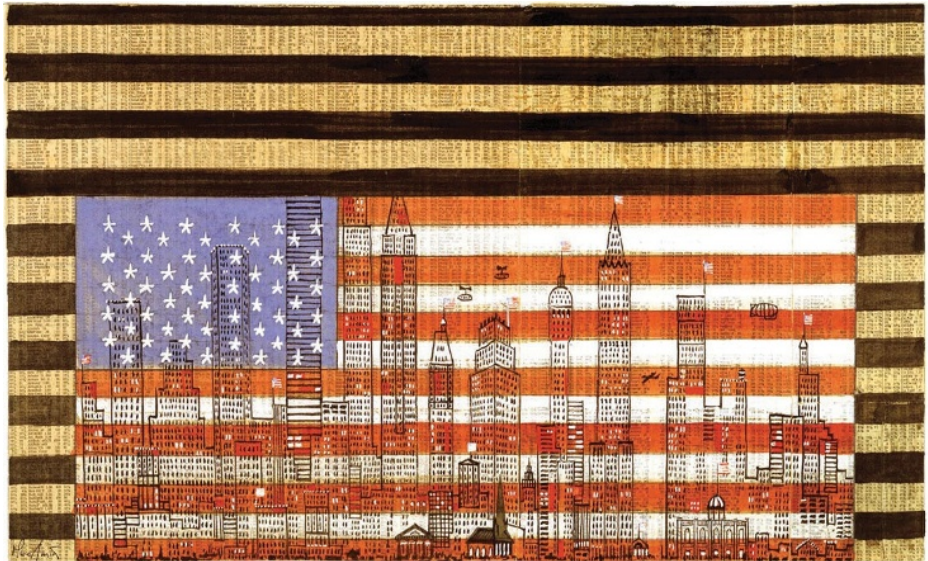
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How Now Dow Jones (1967) (show curtain). The original is a collage, painted on newsprint with stock quotes from the *Wall Street Journal*.

work may have already been appraised by those managing his or her estate, with some of the most interesting material having already been distributed to others or sold at auction. For example, several of Oliver Smith's renderings for *Camelot*, the 1976 production of *My Fair Lady*, and *The Sleeping Beauty* were auctioned into private hands by Sotheby's as part of the Jackie Onassis sale on April 25, 1996. The Opening Scene backdrop for *Camelot* (Lot 648) commanded the highest bid among them at \$43,125, which was 40 times the pre-auction estimate (Thursday's Winning Bids). He gave the renderings as gifts to Onassis, a notable patroness of American Ballet Theatre, which Smith co-produced for decades. Much of the remaining material for these productions may be found in the Oliver Smith Collection, and the pieces that were auctioned were recorded in high resolution for the copyright holder's archives prior to their sale.

A few years ago, I assigned my students a project to find copies of renderings by Oliver Smith. The students worked relentlessly, burning up search engines in a frenzy of activity in their quest for a hidden treasure of the designs for Smith's musicals and ballets. It was a vexing problem. They knew what they were looking for, but seemed to be walled off from access to the renderings. A few popped up on ArtStor, thumbnails of renderings that belonged to Robbins or De Mille. The objective was to let stu-

dents gain experience by going through the "finding" process to see if they could discover Smith's renderings on their own. It was a virtual game of hide-and-seek, and yet the process for the student researchers replicated what any professional researcher would do to uncover important primary sources.

Their struggles are not surprising, for there is a distinct lack of written material about him; these works include only one interview, two books with essays he wrote, and a bio-bibliography written by a former student. Patricia MacKay conducted a lengthy interview in 1982 published in *Theatre Crafts* in which Smith described his approach and methods while he was teaching at Tisch. This article also included black-and-white images of many design renderings.

Orville K. Larson's *Scene Design for Stage and Screen: Readings on the Aesthetics and Methodology of Scene Design for Drama, Opera, Musical Comedy, Ballet, Motion Pictures, Television and Arena Theatre* contains an informative essay written by Smith titled "Musical Comedy Design for Stage and Screen" in which he expressed the belief that "the American musical is the most complex of all theatre art forms, combining in a fluid yet compressed manner, vaudeville, opera, drama, and ballet. Design for the musical stage demands a sympathetic understanding and passion for these forms" (Larson 1961, 189). He was impressed with the profound influence of

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choreographers on musical design, particularly Agnes de Mille and Jerome Robbins, who “affected stage design since it demanded large uncluttered stage areas” (Larson 1961, 190).

There is one attempt at a biography: *Oliver Smith: A Bio-Bibliography* by Thomas J. Mikotowicz. Neither this nor Larsen’s book contains any images of designs by Smith or anyone else. Mikotowicz seemed to have cobbled together interviews with Smith, who was his professor at NYU, and created lists with annotated bibliographic references. On page one of the first chapter he says, “There is no designer who has created more shows than Oliver Smith. With credits for nearly 400 productions, including many revivals, Smith has put himself at the center of a large segment of twentieth-century American theater history” (Mikotowicz 1993, 1). Counting the shows listed in the book’s appendix reveals a total of 205, a figure cross-checked with the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Perhaps Mikotowicz had read MacKay’s interview where Smith states hyperbolically, “Once you’ve done

over 400 productions, you’ve almost said what you have to say” (MacKay 1982, 67).

There are a few black and white reproductions of Smith’s artwork in *Dance News Annual*, a 1953 book edited by Winthrop Palmer and Anatole Chujoy that features Smith’s essay titled “Ballet Design” (Palmer 1953, 92). In his explicit critiques of designs by Eugene Berman and Salvador Dali (whom he refers to as “easel painters”) and commentaries on his own ballet settings, Smith is candid, saying, “My random remarks hold no special significance. They will probably make me a pariah among my colleagues, where the rule is to be polite in print, if not in private” (92). The essay is illustrated with four black and white prints: Eugene Berman’s sketch-model for the décor of Act I of Ballet Theatre’s *Giselle*; a detail of Salvador Dali’s décor for Ballet International’s 1944 New York *Mad Tristan*; Oliver Messel’s décor and costumes in the prologue of the Sadler Wells Ballet’s *The Sleeping Beauty*; and Oliver Smith’s sketch for décor of Ballet Theatre’s *Fall River Legend*.

Smith “helped elevate Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre) to international renown while serving as its co-director (1945-80 and 1990-92)” (Miller 2011) and his essay expresses his ideas about the design process for ballet, musicals, and film. Smith proclaimed, “Designing for the ballet is more alluring to the artist than designing for the legitimate stage. It demands more imagination, more skill, more lyrical ability; by imposing more difficulties, it challenges the tenacity and inventiveness of the theater designer” (92).

Smith was candid in explaining his method of approaching the design process:

If it is a musical piece, first I listen to the score. If it is a musical comedy, I listen to the score and the lyrics. Never on a cassette. I cannot hear it that way. It has to be performed. I find listening to the score performed by the composer and lyricist, even if they play badly and sing off key – very few of them are particularly good – gives you an enormous emotional feeling. That generates

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(1969) Wall Street (backdrop). Act II, Scene 5. This modern downtown cityscape evokes a Renaissance perspective painted in luxurious hues with translucent windows on the buildings.

my excitement. Then I get my ideas. I relate very emotionally to music.

Now for a play. I don't like reading auditions. I read it alone quietly, in a room at my own speed. I think that it is a totally introspective experience. Working with a musical is more gregarious.

For dance first you listen to the music. That gives you the mood. Commissioned scores are very exciting. When we were doing Fancy Free, Leonard (Bernstein) played great sections of it as he was composing. For Rodeo, I went up to hear Aaron (Copland) playing it on the piano. If it is Mozart, you just get a good recording and listen to it over and over. I play it when I'm working. I can never hear enough of it. The music tells you what to do (MacKay 1982, 69).

Smith usually conceptualized a set design in 1/4 inch scale drafted form before handing the drafting over to an assistant, who would replicate the rough drafting in construction-ready 1/2 inch

scale technical drawings. Smith said, "I can do that myself, but I don't feel that's my role in life anymore. All the elevations are then put on boards for me to color. I do my own coloring" (MacKay 1982, 69).

Smith favored the painters Turner, Constable, Vuillard, Bonnard, and particularly Matisse, whom he used to cheer himself up, as influences on his own work. He said that *West Side Story* was a Renaissance palette and that, "A designer with eyes and a memory gradually sifts through the visual vocabulary that has accumulated and finds an affinity. It is not all derivative. But I believe that all designers who are honest are extremely eclectic, or else they would be painters" (MacKay 1982, 59). When he designed *On the Town* (drop elevation from the 1963 London revival, rough sketch and Diazo prints from the original 1944 production in this exhibit), he was influenced by Kandinsky, Klee, and Mondrian, and it is reflected in the exuberant orange and blue palette. Smith remarked, "I hadn't been in the big city very long, and I was influenced by the

advent of neon lighting" (MacKay 1982, 66). He credited costume designer Irene Sharaff for influencing him through her cool, intellectual sophistication in the show drop rendering for *High Button Shoes* in the exhibit, which evokes 19th century American folk arts and Currier & Ives. His versatility as a designer led the producer David Merrick to say of him in 1965: "Most designers are masters of a single color. So if the basic color of your show is red, you get so-and-so; if it's green, you get somebody else. You can get Smith for anything" ("Oliver Smith, Set Designer").

Finding a Home

Sinisi had searched for an institutional home for the Smith material for many years after Smith's death in 1994. One of the problems she encountered in placing the collection was its size; the acquiring institution needed sufficient resources (e.g., space, funds for preservation, and curatorial support) to make the material available to researchers. Storage space was a large issue for many insti-



© Rosaria Sinisi, from the Oliver Smith Collection in the Music Division of the Library of Congress

Swan Lake (1967), Act II (rendering). American Ballet Theatre's first full-length *Swan Lake* premiered in Chicago with Smith's artfully rendered décor.

tutions. While she had provided access for scholars on occasion (and contacted me in the first place to notify me of that fact), she was aware that she could not play the role of a research institution indefinitely.

Sinisi eventually placed Smith's 10,000-item collection of artwork (not including his technical drawings in Dizo print form, which were conveyed simultaneously) in the Library of Congress Music Division in 2010. The collection currently includes painted set elevations, renderings, sketches, blueprints, and technical drawings (Oliver Smith Papers). The associated correspondence, photographs, programs, and other material is still stored in New York City, but will eventually be transferred to the library. Context was important in selecting a home for the Oliver Smith Collection; and at the Library of Congress Music Division they are complemented by the Peggy Clark, Lerner & Loewe and Leonard Bernstein hold-

ings. Peggy Clark was Smith's former set design assistant and later became the lighting designer for many shows on which he designed scenery. The Clark Collection contains some of Oliver Smith's drafting and artwork for shows lit by Clark, with lighting documentation for those productions. Clark's family had donated the Peggy Clark Collection to the Library of Congress in 1997, after Clark passed away (Peggy Clark Papers). Apparently, the Library of Congress has already had a couple of visits to the Peggy Clark material by USITT researchers working on a volume on 20th century lighting designers.

The Library of Congress shared selected materials with library employees, principally the Music Division, as well as presentation specialists, to give a brief view of some of the material from the upcoming collection. A blog post by Walter Zvonchenko, a theatre specialist, announced a display of theatrical designs by Oliver Smith on May 17, 2011.

It featured an image of Smith's design for *Guys and Dolls*:

The acquisition of the Oliver Smith Collection constitutes a major expansion of the Library's holdings in theatrical design ...The collection includes watercolors, ground plans, ink sketches and elevations, and the material frequently provides a historical background to the development of design for a given production as well as the final scheme. Additionally, the collection includes designs for realized productions as well as designs for scenes that never made it into final production form. Multiple versions of scenes from productions that were mounted more than once are included. Some of the ground plans allow the researcher an opportunity to compare scenic presentation for the same production in different theaters. (Miller)

Isolated works had been exhibited

in conjunction with *West Side Story* at the Library of Congress, but this exhibit was the Library of Congress' first display drawn from its collection of Smith's artworks. While the collection has yet to be completely processed, a search of the Library of Congress database reveals many renderings among the American Ballet Theatre Collection. The Music Division of the Library of Congress has advised that the artwork and drafting may be made available to researchers prior to the conclusion of the cataloging process.

The current USITT exhibit and a handful of other historical exhibits provide access to his work outside of the Library of Congress. For the time being, the library offers on-site access only; researchers interested in seeing material stored off-site can review the catalog and request specific pieces, which will be brought in from off-site storage and be available to them within a couple of days. When the Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs mounted its exhibit "American Ballet Theatre: Then and

Now" at the time when Oliver Smith was inducted into the Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney Hall of Fame in July 2011, Sinisi also supplied giclée prints of a number of images, which are now in its permanent collection. But aside from the aforementioned exhibits, there have been few showcasing Smith's work, either before or after his death. There was a one-man show at the Touchstone Gallery in Manhattan in December 1977 featuring Smith's original drawings and watercolors. Sinisi advised us that Smith had loaned the Museum of Modern Art a couple of collages from the film *The Band Wagon* for an exhibit, but they had been returned after the exhibit and are now in the Oliver Smith Collection at the Library of Congress.

We are fortunate to have this unique selection of giclée prints to examine in this exhibit. Although full-scale production on the stage is the ultimate objective, many designers' renderings, including those produced by Oliver Smith, are works of art worthy of exhibition in a gallery or museum, providing

the opportunity to learn and enjoy. We can study the works as students, artists, designers, and scholars, or we might just want to luxuriate in the experience of viewing. For most of us, Smith's designs provoke many meaningful questions: What were the processes that he went through in order to create the design? How did he collaborate with his fellow artists? Were alternatives considered? What were the reasons why one version was accepted and others rejected? How did the designer, director, audiences, and critics see the design in its original context of production? What were the theatrical conditions for the shows? What is the historical and cultural milieu in which the design is viewed? How do we view the work now? In the case of Oliver Smith, my response always begins with awe.



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