

Robert LeRoy Smith

1927-2001

A Biography

I was born February 22, 1927, and raised on a small farm on the outskirts of Independence along with two older brothers and four younger sisters. My interests were, and still are: drawing, painting, print making folk ballads, poetry, and puppetry.

On completing William Chrisman High School, I obtained a job in a Kansas City art department painting backgrounds for windows, signs, sculpting papier mache, advertising layout, and art, etc., while attending night classes in painting and life drawing at the Kansas City Art Institute. I moved to the South after two years where I continued similar pursuits in Shreveport, La., Atlanta, Ga., and Houston, Texas. During these nine years, I began singing folk concerts, drawing on the folk songs and ballads I learned from my mother. Carving and making marionettes was also very important to me. In Houston, I took classes in lithography and other forms of print making.

I lived, studied and continued working with all these art forms in San Miguel de Allende, Aix en Provence, and Florence. After spending one year in each of these locations, I continued my endeavors for the next nine years while living in Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Palo Alto.

From 1965, I had my studio in San Francisco, California. Woven into my other interests, I formed a Marionette Company with Edith Hartnett as a partner. I was located in Cole Valley below Twin Peaks, near the Haight-Ashbury, and Parnassus Heights. We took the name Parnassus Marionettes, for our troupe and performed within a radius of 100 miles in the San Francisco Bay area. I took etching classes at Fort Mason and later bought an etching press in order to work privately in my own studio. I began experimenting with materials and unorthodox methods of print making, and turned exclusively to producing monotypes. At the same time I was working with Serigraphy.

In 1991, I moved back to Independence, where I now reside. I continued with my various pursuits while presiding as Artist-in-Residence on the faculty of the Music/Arts Institute. I taught marionette construction, playwriting and performance for the following five years. Currently, I make marionettes for other puppeteers by commission, and I still perform marionette shows occasionally.

After returning to Independence, Robert also joined the local Puppetry Guild and worked with the Hazelle Project to establish a Puppetry Center. A founding member of the Puppetry Arts Institute steering committee, he wrote, created and performed a marionette puppet play about Hazel Rollins which was presented at their Charette. Although diagnosed with cancer in 2000, he continued to create marionettes and work with the steering committee, volunteering his marionettes for the first exhibit in fall 2001. Robert LeRoy Smith was honored with a reception at the Puppetry Arts Institute in August 2001, attended by his family, students, friends and fellow puppeteers. He passed away October 3, 2001.