

>> *Melvin R. Smith*

Melvin R. Smith is a nationally known artist whose artwork has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the country. He grew up in the Oklahoma City community of Doffins addition, commonly referred to as “Sandtown.” At age 18, Smith left the neighborhood to join the Marines. He later earned his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Minnesota and married fellow artist Rose J. Smith. Together, the pair traveled, searching for the communities and experiences that would inform their artwork. This empowered them to become messengers of their African-American culture through their art. The Smiths’ journey came full circle when they returned to Oklahoma City and founded the Oklahoma Museum of African-American Arts.

Smith’s artwork is rooted in his personal experiences of growing up in the Sandtown community. Through his artwork, he engages his memory, recalling the magical moments of childhood and the innocence of youth. Images of the homes that lined the neighborhood and people who brought life to the community are often featured in his collage and sculptural works. Through the experience of exhibiting his artwork around the country, Smith has learned that the mission of his artwork, although personal, is actually universal. The sense of community can speak to all, no matter where they grew up.

Smith’s creative process began with collage and naturally developed into large sculpture with found objects. The same aspects of collage, constructing objects of various colors and shapes to create images, can easily be seen in his sculptures. He collects objects found in junk yards like old car parts and steel pieces to create bold structural masks, like *The Ford Mask*, featured in the Oklahoma State Art Collection. These masks are often portraits of the people from his old neighborhood, recalling the smiles, features, and spirits of his past. Smith’s artwork is an illustration of his explorative journey that brought him to his future. His images introduce viewers to the people and places that shaped his life. Through the objects that most people may see as junk, Melvin can evoke emotion and nostalgia.



The Ford Mask
by Melvin R. Smith

>> **Activity: Create like Melvin R. Smith****Supplies Needed**

- Old cereal boxes, cardboard, or heavy paper
- Scissors
- A Pencil
- Glue (Hot glue works well. Have an adult assist)
- Marker

Instructions

1. Using old cereal boxes or thin but stiff cardboard, draw an oval shape slightly larger than your hand. Cut this shape out with your scissors.
2. Next cut out a strip from the cardboard or other recycled material. The strip should be approximately two fingers wide and long enough to wrap around the head shape. You may need to glue strips together if it is not long enough. Now glue the strip to the back of the head shape allowing the colorful side to be the front. Hot glue works well for this. If you use hot glue, ask an adult to help. This will be the head.
3. Next, cut a small strip that is approximately the length of the head shape. Poke a small hole in the center of the strip to allow a pencil to enter. Fold the strip to fit under the head shape and glue it the underside of the head shape.
4. Using more of your colorful recycled cardboard cut eyes, a nose, and lips out for the face. Slightly fold these items to add dimension and character. Glue to the front, colorful side of your head shape.
5. Once the glue has dried, place your newly created face sculpture on your pencil.
6. You may choose to sign your work with a marker on the strip of cardboard that is wrapped around the backside of the mask.

Further knowledge: Melvin R. Smith uses discarded materials to make his art. He uses cardboard and magazines to make his collages and salvaged wood and metal to make his large masks like *The Ford Mask*. Use the Internet or library to research more work by Melvin R. Smith as well the art of Romare Bearden and Louise Nevelson. These artists create astonishing work with objects that would otherwise be recycled or worse – thrown away. Maybe you will be inspired to transform trash to treasure.