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“Spirit of Rondo” sculpture commemorates peaceful integration and African-American excellence.

Melvin Smith’s 40-foot tall steel sculpture “Spirit of Rondo” stands resolute in the Western Sculpture Park.

Becca Most – March 19, 2021



Artist Melvin Smith constructed his sculpture out of steel in 1997-98 at D.G. Welding in Eagan. (Courtesy photo)

In Western Sculpture Park, a tall figure rises above the tree line. Titled “The Spirit of Rondo,” the 40-foot-tall sculpture is a gift to the city of St. Paul from Eagan artist Melvin Smith as a way to bring attention to and honor the legacy of African-Americans in the city.

Tall and sleek, the reflective glint of the metal is designed to capture the sun’s rays, serving as a sort of beacon.

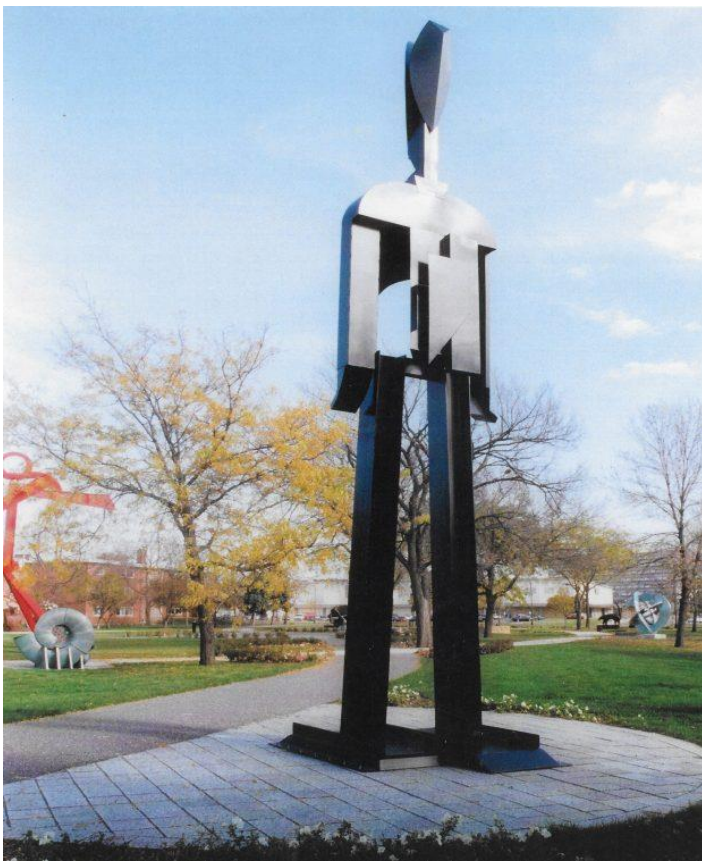
JAMES THOMPSON, EARLY ST. PAUL SETTLER

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The sculpture draws on the influence of many African-American leaders, scholars and pioneers, especially James Thompson, Smith said.

Born into slavery in Virginia in 1799, Thompson won his freedom in 1830 after he came to Minnesota as an English-Dakota language interpreter for Methodist missionary Alfred Brunson. He later went on to work as a carpenter and ferry boat operator, and became the first person of African descent to settle in what would then become St. Paul.

Thompson also donated the supplies, money and land needed to establish St. Paul's first Methodist church. Smith said it's not right that people don't know about Thompson. With his sculpture, he hopes to create something permanent that will serve as a reminder of not only Thompson's accomplishments, but as an example of early peaceful integration in the state.



Melvin Smith's "The Spirit of Rondo" is in St. Paul's Western Sculpture Park. He'd like to move it to Dale and St. Anthony, so it's visible from I-94. (Courtesy Melvin Smith)

"People hadn't considered us at all. They didn't know what we were about," he said. "I use steel because it's strong. I wanted it to last through the ages. I want people to know that this is the spirit of civil rights. The spirit of integration started here."

CELEBRATING RONDO

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Melvin and his wife, artist Rose Smith, said their art is influenced by African-Americans who came out of St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood, a thriving African-American community that was destroyed in the 1960s to make way for the construction of Interstate 94.

A series of paintings, mixed media and sculpture created by the two were featured in an exhibition at the Weisman Art Museum in 2019. Through art, the two worked to celebrate Rondo for the memories, people and places they remembered while living there for many years.

Growing up in Rondo, Melvin said it was there where he first learned how to play tennis, made art and met his wife. Memorializing the place and the people that made it special keeps Rondo alive, he said.

"The Spirit of Rondo," which Melvin constructed in 1998, took nearly five months to build and cost an estimated \$8,000. Rather than be commissioned to do this work by the city, Melvin said he and Rose chose to create the piece using money from their own pocketbooks because it was important to give back.

"Everything I do today, I got from Rondo," he said. "So that's why I put up this sculpture piece, because Rondo gave me so much."

FOLLOWING THE JOURNEY OF THE "LOST TRIBE"

When Melvin and Rose married in 1968, Melvin Smith said they decided to travel around the United States in order to follow the journey of a "lost tribe." The tribe they referred to was African-Americans, who because of violence and slavery, often don't know where their ancestors came from. Their travels took them to places like Harlem, New York and the south side of Chicago.

In the future, the couple hope to move "Spirit of Rondo" to the corner of Dale Street North and St. Anthony Avenue in the Summit-University neighborhood so drivers on I-94 will be able to look out at the piece and remember the people and community that once lived there. An official with St. Paul said the city is considering the statue's relocation, although formal approval has yet to be finalized.

"Our artwork represents the coming together of history, social observation, artistic commentary, and childhood reminiscence," Smith wrote in a statement he gave to the St. Paul Pioneer Press. "The work is like a mold in which to capture what we have witnessed during our life time, the shining, elusive element which is life itself — life hurrying past them and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose, and too horrible to forget."