



Harlem: The Vision of Morgan and Marvin Smith

Morgan Smith, John Smith

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In 1933, Morgan and Marvin Smith, twin sons of sharecroppers from Kentucky, arrived in Harlem. Despite the hardships of the Great Depression, they found a flourishing arts community and quickly established their place as visual chroniclers of the life of the city. For thirty years, the Smiths used their cameras to record the achievements of blacks in the face of poverty and discrimination. Rejecting the focus on misery and hopelessness common to Harlem photographers of the time, they documented important "firsts" for the city's blacks (the first black policeman, the first black women juror), the significant social movements of their day (anti-lynching protests, rent strikes, and early civil rights rallies), as well as the everyday life of Harlem, from churchgoers dressed for Easter to children playing in the street. The Smiths' photography and art studio was next to the famed Apollo Theatre, and it became a required stop for anyone making a pilgrimage to the community. There and elsewhere the Smiths photographed actors, musicians, dancers, artists, athletes, politicians, businessmen, and educators. They captured Maya Angelou early in her career as a Primus dancer, W.E.B. DuBois recording a speech in their sound studio, Joe Louis at his training camp, Jackie Robinson teaching his young son to hold a baseball bat, Nat King Cole dancing at his wedding, Billie Holiday singing for friends, Josephine Baker distributing candy to children, and many other prominent figures at significant and ordinary moments of their lives. Drawn from the collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Smith family archives, Harlem reproduces nearly 150 photographs by these important artists and chroniclers, bringing to life a vital community of great cultural, political, and economic achievement. Morgan Smith died in 1993. Marvin Smith died in 2003.

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