

Francis Wilford-Smith SMILBY (Rugby 1927 - Ledbury 2009)

Joker and a Suit of Cards: Cover Artwork for Punch Magazine

Pen and ink and watercolour, with collaged paper, on Saunders board.

Signed smilby in black ink at the lower left.

Previously overlaid with a mount sheet inscribed Cover for November 19th. in the bottom margin and Title & price / in this colour at the lower left, as well as dimensions and printing instructions. Also previously overlaid with a transparent sheet inscribed with the Punch logo and the price 9d in black ink.

291 x 235 mm. (11 1/2 x 9 1/4 in.) [image]

526 x 380 mm. (20 3/4 x 15 in.) [sheet]

This is a rare cover design by Smilby for Punchmagazine, and was published on 19th November 1958. It was with Punch that Smilby had his big break. When his first submission was accepted, after many failed attempts at the magazine, Russell Brockbank, the Punch editor at the time, wrote ‘You’ve arrived’ on his acceptance slip. The seminal weekly magazine ceased publication in 2002, and most of its archive was acquired by the British Museum two years later.

Literature:

Punch, 19 November 1958, reproduced on the cover.

Artist description:

A British cartoonist, illustrator and graphic designer, with a career that spanned nearly fifty years, Francis Wilford-Smith began drawing cartoons while at school. He served as a radio operator in the British Merchant Navy during the Second World War, while also working as an undercover agent and courier for US Naval Intelligence. After the war, Wilford-Smith enrolled in the Camberwell School of Art, studying under John Minton and Edward Ardizzone, among others, and made a speciality of illustration and wood engraving. After a brief period as an animator and an art teacher, he began achieving recognition for his work as a cartoonist, with his drawings appearing in the satirical magazine Punch. He soon became a full-time cartoonist, signing his work with the pseudonym 'Smilby'; a contraction of his surname with that of his wife, Pamela Kilby, whom he married in 1949. By the early 1950s his cartoons were appearing regularly in Punch, as well as Picture Post, Sketch and Spectator, and later in the Daily Telegraph and Playboy. He also worked extensively for publications in America and Europe, including The New Yorker, Esquire, Look, The Saturday Evening Post, Lui, Paris-Match and many others. Indeed, at one point in Smilby's career his drawings were published in over fifteen different American magazines.

As the artist's wife later recalled, 'Francis's method of work was to have a 'thinking day' each week. He would withdraw to the bedroom where there was a Victorian red-velvet chaise lounge and settle himself down with a flask…and a pile of books or magazines to leaf through for subject matter for cartoons… Meanwhile, I would tiptoe around the house…When a rough was agreed for publication – say a full-page, full-colour cartoon – he would spend a week to ten days before he was satisfied with the finish. I had the nerve-racking task of packing it up for air-mail. Such is the cartoonist's life that one never ever received acknowledgement of its safe arrival and we could only uncross our fingers when the cheque arrived!'

Wilford-Smith also worked as graphic designer and book illustrator, and served as a freelance consultant to advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson, designing advertising campaigns for Boots, Guinness and ICI. He also published a history of early pin-up magazines, entitled Stolen Sweets; The Cover Girls of Yesteryear, under the name Francis Smilby, in 1981. Together with his well-known work as a cartoonist and illustrator, Wilford-Smith was also a pioneering record producer, writer and archivist in the field of rare blues and gospel music. He continued to draw until 1998, when the onset of Parkinson's disease forced him to stop, and died in 2009 at the age of eighty-two. An obituary noted that, 'As a cartoonist Smilby cited his first artistic influence being André François but he felt he also owed much to Saul Steinberg, Leslie Illingworth, Arthur Watts and the French Art Deco artists [André] Marty, [Georges] LePape, Charles Martin and [George] Barbier. He worked in Indian ink and Winsor & Newton Artists' watercolour on Saunders (or Daler) board or Arches watercolour paper.' Wilford-Smith exhibited his cartoons and illustrations in galleries in London, Munich and New York, while his work is also represented in the collection of the Cartoonmuseum in Basel, Switzerland.