

The Freedom Business: Connecticut Landscapes Through the Eyes of Venture Smith

The Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut

June 3, 2006 - June 24, 2007

Painting, poetry and history come together at the Florence Griswold Museum to tell the inspiring story of Venture Smith, a former slave who rose above his circumstances, purchased his freedom and became a prosperous landowner in the late 1700s. The exhibition uses the combined power of visual art and poetic language to tell its moving story of strength, courage, and triumph against all odds.

The Freedom Business: Connecticut Landscapes Through the Eyes of Venture Smith features fourteen poems by Connecticut's Poet Laureate Marilyn Nelson, accompanied by Connecticut landscapes from the Museum's permanent collection. Nelson's soulful poems describe Venture's long struggle to reclaim his identity and purchase his freedom, his family's and that of three others. The paintings, chosen by Ms. Nelson to inform and propel her writing, evoke the landscapes and seasons in which Venture traveled, toiled, and eventually triumphed. A free audio version of the poems narrated by the author is available in the gallery, adding depth and resonance to the exhibition experience. Venture's difficult labors, the prejudice that followed him even out to sea, his love for his wife and family, his failed attempts at freedom, disappointment in his fellow man and finally the peace and satisfaction of his success, are brought to life in Nelson's expressive re-telling of his story.

The exhibition begins with "*How I came by my name*", the only poem unaccompanied by a painting. This important piece sets the tone for the exhibition, describing Venture's painful awareness of the profit motive that reduced his identity to a matter of business. Emil Carlson's beautiful *Night Old Windham*, illuminated by a single light in the center of a darkened house, is paired with "*Meg*", a lyrical poem about Venture's longing for his native culture. "*December Moonrise*" a litany of the work and weariness of saving money for freedom, is accompanied by Clark Greenwood Vorhees' cold New England landscape with a pale moon rising in the distance. And finally, "*The Freedom Business*", illustrated by Edward Rook's idyllic spring landscape *Laurel*, reveals Venture's hard-won understanding of the economic realities of American life, which nonetheless lead him to conclude (in Nelson's words), "Freedom is definitely not a matter of funds. Freedom's a matter of making history, of venturing forth toward a time when freedom is free".

The Freedom Business also includes Venture Smith's large wooden tool chest, a testimony to his physical size and strength, and a first edition copy of his life story: *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself.*

A limited edition exhibition catalog and copies of Venture Smith's book are available for purchase at the museum.

For museum information and directions: www.FlorenceGriswoldMuseum.org or 860-434-5542