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New Exhibition, “Smith on Wry: Jack Smith, Columnist for Our Times,” Opens Feb. 15, 2008

*Huntington Library installation will examine the late journalist’s life
and his impact on readers across Southern California*

SAN MARINO, Calif.—*Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith wrote daily for most of his 42-year career with the paper, producing some 6,000 columns about life in the city. Along the way he became one of the most popular newspaper columnists in Southern California history; reading him was considered a daily “must.” He died in January 1996, just a few weeks after the appearance of his last column, on Christmas Day 1995. A new exhibition running at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens from Feb. 15 to May 12, 2008, takes a look at Smith the journalist, family man, and social commentator. The Huntington acquired Smith’s papers in 2005.

“Jack Smith had a way of looking at mundane and everyday things and ruminating on them in ways that were accessible on the one hand and provocative on the other,” says Sara S. “Sue” Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts at The Huntington and the show’s curator. “His beat was L.A., but he wrote larger stories of the human condition, wry and pithy observations on the foibles of people in changing times.”

Hodson takes a page from Smith’s own columns, dividing her exhibition into the very same themes Smith explored in his columns: his Mt. Washington neighborhood; his family and household, including a passion for birds and disdain for cats; and his vacation house in Baja, with its incomparable landlord, Mr. Gomez. Columns in the form of corrected typescript and clippings will be on display, along with his reporter’s notebooks, subject files, photographs, speeches, and correspondence with readers. The exhibition takes place in the Library building’s West Hall gallery.

Smith was born in Long Beach in 1916 and grew up in Whittier, Bakersfield, and Los Angeles. He served in the Marine Corps during World War II and was part of the assault on Iwo Jima. Before and after the war he worked for a succession of newspapers, including the *Bakersfield*

Californian, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, and the *Los Angeles Daily News*. In this latter assignment he had what he called his finest hour as a newsman: He was the first reporter to use the phrase “Black Dahlia” to describe the notorious murder victim Elizabeth Short. He arrived at the *Times* as a reporter in 1953 and began his daily column in 1958.

Smith worked in the heyday of newspapers, when it was not uncommon for columnists to settle in for decades. Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mike Royko of the *Chicago Daily News*, and Jimmy Breslin of New York’s *Daily News* and *Newsday* personified their cities and newspapers while writing about social life or politics. But as *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert A. Jones observed in an appreciation of the beloved columnist, Smith lived in a city that was known less for its downtown sidewalks than for its backyards and patios. Smith wrote revealingly about his own comings and goings and in the process managed to carry on intimate conversations with thousands of readers. “The wonderful thing about your writing is that it is so conversational and communicative,” wrote reader Joan Miller in 1982. “It almost invariably makes a reader want to respond.”

“Smith was a blogger before that word existed, and before the Internet was widely in use,” says Hodson. As letters arrived at his desk in the days following a column, Smith would work them into subsequent columns, creating an endless dialogue on language and literature, Hollywood celebrity and sin, and what was perceived to be the strange way of life in La-La Land. “Critics have despised us in Los Angeles as worshippers of money, health, sex, surf, and sun,” Smith once mused. “Not quite true. We don’t worship those things; we just rather get used to them, since they happen to be so available.” He coined the term “the Big Orange” to counter New York’s Big Apple and to evoke a regional identity that outsiders seldom appreciated.

Smith also took those conversations into public libraries, where he accepted countless invitations to speak, all the while rejecting any fees. “In going through the process of cataloguing Jack Smith’s papers, we continue to come across the occasional uncashed check,” says Hodson. He was a vocal advocate for literacy, the legacy of which lives on with the Jack and Denny Smith Memorial Fund for Literacy. The organization is a funding agency that promotes literacy in the Los Angeles area (www.LiteracyLA.org).

Smith eventually collected his columns into eight books of his own, including *Smith on Wry*, *The Big Orange*, *How to Win a Pullet Surprise*, and *Alive in La-La Land*. *God and Mr. Gomez*, his bestselling book, tells the story of Smith’s small vacation house in Baja and the free-spirited landlord,

Mr. Gomez. The exhibition will include Smith's Baja diary as well as a photo of Gomez and Smith at work constructing the modest retreat.

In addition to the Jack Smith archive, The Huntington also is home to the archives of current *Times* columnist Al Martinez and the papers and drawings of former *Times* cartoonist Paul Conrad. Together with the *Times*' corporate archive, the collections provide a rich resource for scholars studying such fields as Los Angeles history, 20th-century culture, and modern journalism.

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based research and educational institution serving scholars and the general public. More information about the Huntington can be found online at www.huntington.org.

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: High-resolution digital images for publicity use are available on request.]

VISITOR INFORMATION [effective as of Jan. 1, 2008]

Hours: Open to the public Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday from noon to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. **Closed Tuesdays** and major holidays.

Admission on weekdays: \$15 adults, \$12 seniors (65+), \$10 students (ages 12–18 or with full-time student I.D.), \$6 youth (ages 5–11), free for children under 5. Group rate \$11 per person for groups of 15 or more. Members are admitted free.

Admission on weekends and Monday holidays: \$20 adults, \$15 seniors, \$10 students, \$6 youth, free for children under 5. Group rate \$14 per person for groups of 15 or more.

Members are admitted free. Admission is free to all visitors on the first Thursday of each month with advanced tickets. Information: 626-405-2100 or www.huntington.org