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Doris R. Dant

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Gary Ernest Smith: Invitation to the Viewer

Doris R. Dant

The rural images by Gary Ernest Smith featured on our cover reflect the artist's upbringing on a cattle ranch and farm in northeastern Oregon, an area that produces potatoes as well as cattle. After obtaining an MFA, Smith taught art at Brigham Young University from 1970–73, served as art gallery director for two years, and did commission work. He decided to leave the demands, and the security, of academia and commissioned work because he wanted “to go out and be an artist,”¹ to paint his own ideas full time.

Depending on the same habits of hard work, long hours, and self-reliance he learned as a boy, he evolved a style and a rural focus that earned him further critical acclaim and the label of neo-regionalist. He believes that the nostalgic appeal of his paintings arises from the fact that Americans generally know “someone—grandparents or uncles—who came from the farm or maybe still lives there. I think that's part of what touches people.”² Below the nostalgic appeal, he notes, “there are layers that may be peeled off, revealing information about the individual artist and the psychology of his era.”³

He draws his rural subjects from childhood memories and from observations made during visits to Oregon. One critic believes that Smith's style varies according to which of these sources is used. Subjects from Smith's childhood tend to be heroic and impressionistic. More recent subjects tend to be “less rosy” and surrealistic.⁴ Commenting on the paintings featured here, Smith noted that *Potato Digger* is in his “better-known style” and *Potato Peeler* is in a starker, surrealistic style emphasizing shape and color.⁵

When painting from observation, Smith makes sketches but avoids painting on the spot because then “I'm influenced by what I see rather than what I feel. I prefer to take from reality and re-create in my head. I wind up with a more symbolic than graphic approach.”⁶ Re-creation often means simplification: treating only one person, in effect isolating

the individual; detailing body language but not facial expression; and using color to imply heat, dust, and sweat. The fields and faces are painted without distinctive features, sometimes with no features at all, evoking the mystery of the earth and its people. Paradoxically, a field is also transformed into a field each of us knows or thinks we know, and a person becomes an icon inviting us to re-create the subject and review our own reactions, challenges, and meanings.

Thus we of *BYU Studies* identify with the farmer on the front cover; we have in a sense unearthed the harvest and heaped it up. We stand back from it proudly, with our pitchforks thrust forward and into the soil of a field where more harvests are yet to come—we are still wearing our work clothes. As the curved horizon announces, this is our world. To adapt a Gary Smith comment on his works, we view this issue as “a moment in time, frozen to be observed and studied.”⁷

Those hundreds of you who have contributed to *BYU Studies* are also like the harvester. As a group, you have spent over thirty years in intellectual and spiritual labors, digging in archives, raking through the somewhat sparse and then burgeoning corpus of print about the world of Mormonism, cultivating your insights, and nourishing us with them. In this index, your past works are gathered together. But, as in the painting, they are less significant than the type of people you are. We have enjoyed your company. May you have many more harvests.

You, our readers, can be like the woman on the back cover. You can take from the harvest what you need, prepare it as you choose, and put it to your own uses. As the painting reveals, there is dignity, strength, and serenity in such pursuits.

That is how we view these paintings. Probably, however, you will accept Gary Smith’s invitation and re-create these figures in your own image.

NOTES

¹ Interview with Gary Ernest Smith, Highland, Utah, April 21, 1992.

² Lynn Pyne, “Gary Ernest Smith,” *Southwest Art* (March 1991): 63.

³ Pyne, “Gary Ernest Smith,” 63.

⁴ Pyne, “Gary Ernest Smith,” 64.

⁵ Interview. Smith wrote earlier that he simplifies his subject and places “emphasis on shape and color.” See *Journey in Search of Lost Images: Neo-regionalist Gary Ernest Smith* (n.p.: Ray E. Johnson, 1989), 17.

⁶ Pyne, “Gary Ernest Smith,” 65.

⁷ *Journey in Search of Lost Images*, 22.