The Contours of the Unknown Smith

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Rudolf Wittkopf (d. 1722), Covered Beaker, 1698, Silver, partly gilt, filigree, 26 × 12.3 cm (h × diam), 1029 g (weight). Gift of Märtta Christina and Magnus Vahlquist through the Friends of the Nationalmuseum 2020. Nationalmuseum, NMK 156/2020.

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The period 1810–50 in Danish art is so rich in talent that art historians have been able to comfortably ignore the numerous painters who belonged to the second tier. Thus, there are still many overlooked artists to discover for those who look at the period through fresh eyes, and one of the most recent artists to be reassessed and reinstated is the painter Ludvig August Smith (1820–1906). Up until the 1990s, Smith was largely unknown, so much so that he was not even represented at the important exhibition *De ukendte guldaldermalere* (The Unknown Golden Age Painters) in 1984. Not until ten years later, when the Hirschsprung Collection arranged the exhibition *Den nøgne guldalder* (The Naked Golden Age) did Smith receive some attention for his nudes painted under the tutelage of C.W. Eckersberg (1783–1853).

In recent years, the Nationalmuseum has acquired four early paintings and two drawings by Smith, and given that the Museum now owns the largest collection of his works found anywhere, it is incumbent on us to seek to expand the sparse knowledge available about his life and endeavours.

**The years at the Art Academy**

Ludvig August Smith was born in 1820 in Copenhagen as the son of skipper Morten Peter Schmidt (c. 1776–1836) and Magdalene Dorothea Schmidt, née Scheel (c. 1780–1853). His parents were immigrants from Kiel in the Duchy of Holstein, and at one point they changed the spelling...
of their surname to the more Danish-looking Smith. At the age of thirteen, L.A. Smith enrolled at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he quickly moved up through the various classes: in December 1835 he reached the so-called “second free-hand school”, in July 1836 he advanced to the plaster school, and a year later he was ready for the most senior class, the “model school” – meaning life classes. Along the way, he befriended a number of the other academy students including portrait painter J.V. Gertner (1818–1871), landscape painter Vilhelm Kyhn (1819–1903), the versatile illustrator and painter Lorenz Frølich (1820–1908) and the Swedish portrait painter Nils Månsson Mandelgren (1813–1899).

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, Smith took part in the classes arranged at the Academy’s school of painting, studying under professors Eckersberg and J.L. Lund (1777–1867). When taught by Lund, the students were usually given the task of painting studies of faces after fully clothed models, while Eckersberg’s teaching was based particularly on studies after nude models. By 1833, Eckersberg had begun holding special life classes using female nude models during the summer months, and Smith attended these sessions over the course of several summers. Three of the works in the Nationalmuseum collection are associated with these summer exercises. The earliest dates from a life class held in August 1839, where Eckersberg and a small group of students painted after the model Cathrine Nielsen. Participants usually formed a semicircle around the


Fig. 3 Ludvig August Smith (1820–1906), *Seated Model*, signed 1843. Pencil on paper, 29.2 × 23.5 cm. Purchase: Magda and Max Ettler Fund 2018. Nationalmuseum, NMH 44/2018.
model, with Eckersberg preferring a seat furthest out at one end with the row of students on his side, usually the left. From this particular session three paintings are known, of which Eckersberg’s belongs to the Louvre, while Smith’s version was acquired by the Nationalmuseum in 2016 (Fig. 1). Generally speaking, Danish painting from around this time is characterized by clear but diffuse daylight, but in his nude Smith demonstrates a different conception of form, richer in contrast; he sought, to a greater degree than his peers, to reproduce the effect of dazzling bright sunlight. In conjunction with the frontal composition, the strong contrasts in the bare skin contribute to giving the young model a sculptural touch and a pronounced sense of heft. The Eckersberg school of thought aimed at representing the true picture which nature let the artist glimpse, and which in-depth knowledge of nature and its laws allowed the artist to perfect. Applying this method, the professor and most of his pupils came up with a way of portraying women that was infused by an elegant frailty; Smith was almost alone in emphasizing physicality and monumentality. The choice of composition and the effects of the light also caused his study to become what may be the most psychologically intense of all the Danish model paintings of the time.

Drawings by Smith are rare today, but a few found their way into the hands of Danish art collectors during his own lifetime: in February 1856, Smith held an auction together with Vilhelm Kyhn, and the art collector Benjamin Wolff was among the buyers. Having been passed down from one generation to the next in Wolff’s family, the collection was eventually dissolved in 2018, at which point the Nationalmuseum secured two of Smith’s model drawings. The oldest dates from life classes held in the weeks between 20 August and 11 September 1840, during which Eckersberg posed the model Florentine as if she were stepping out of the bath (Fig. 2). Undoubtedly serving as the basis of a now-unknown painting, Smith’s drawing have a distinctive feature: he has marked out the abrupt transition between highlight and shadow with a contour line, a device rarely seen in Danish figure drawings from the time. The second newly acquired drawing hails from life classes held in the summer of 1843 and is finished in much greater detail (Fig. 3). The only other known work from this session is an oil study by Eckersberg, which can now be dated thanks to Smith’s drawing. However, Smith’s name does not feature among the account of the participants, so it is possible that he only sat in briefly and did not depict the figure in oils.

**Portraits in the 1840s**

In 1841, Smith won the Academy of Fine Arts’ minor silver medal followed by the major silver medal the following year, signifying that he had formally graduated. However, he apparently continued his studies.
In the years that followed, Smith was often commissioned to produce portraits, and up until 1849 it was the only genre he exhibited at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts’ annual juried salons. In 2017, the Nationalmuseum acquired an excellent example: a portrait of a young man, dated 1841 (Fig. 5). The model’s age and penetrating gaze indicate that it is a self-portrait, and indeed the picture was handed down through generations of Smith’s family until 2013. Sadly, it will hardly be possible to confirm the identity of the person portrayed with certainty before we unearth the drawn self-portrait that once belonged to another Smith collector, the organist R.C. Rasmussen (1820–1904).

Indeed, the year 1841 was an important year for the 21-year-old Smith in many respects: he also had the good fortune to do a pair of portrait drawings of the famous author Johan Ludvig Heiberg and his no less famous wife, the actress Johanne Louise. The drawings were reproduced in popular woodcuts, which attracted the attention of the writer Ludvig Joseph Flamand (1800–1879), who had shortly before begun to publish historical works illustrated with lithographic portraits. Smith was commissioned to do portrait drawings of celebrities, which were then reproduced at the largest lithographers’ studio of the time. Three years later, this prompted a major commission for portrait drawings of sixteen members of the Jutland Assembly of the Estates, which the bookseller C.A. Reitzel intended to publish as a single, large lithographic print. Introduced in 1834, the Assemblies of the Estates (Stænderforsam lingererne) were an important centre of the democratic debate during the last fourteen years of absolute monarchy in Denmark. Smith agreed and spent the entire summer travelling around Jutland to seek out the most important politicians. With this spectacular group portrait, he firmly established his name as a confident creator of good likenesses in a small format. He also offered his own modest contribution to the political currents.
that would, four years later, lead to the introduction of democracy in Denmark.

The bourgeoisie, which Smith can be said to have represented and portrayed in his art, had their mouthpiece in the satirical oppositional newspaper Corsaren, its republican views constantly teetering on the edge of censorship. Smith too felt their lash: when the second of the Nationalmuseum’s two portraits (Fig. 6) was exhibited in the spring of 1847, it met with the newspaper’s ridicule. At the exhibition, the portrait hung opposite a genre scene with a young bride painted by Edvard Lehmann, and the reviewer stated that the woman in Smith’s picture looked displeased because she had not been invited to the wedding. It has not been possible to identify the woman, and so we look in vain for an explanation for the painting’s strikingly introspective, almost melancholic tenor and the significance of the floral motif. It is possible, however, that Smith – perhaps drawing inspiration from the Holstein painter Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854) – envisioned the subject as an allegory of the transience of youth or of eternal love.

Genre scenes
Although he mostly called himself a portrait painter by this time, Smith began to expand his range of subjects in the late 1840s and up through the 50s. He now also embarked on genre paintings, occasionally even venturing into literary subjects, the latter with varying degrees of success. For many years, the Smith family had lived in Gothersgade in a flat overlooking the King’s Garden, and from his windows he had been able to follow the bourgeoisie on Sunday walks in the park. Here he found material for countless small anecdotal genre scenes of everyday life, but he was constantly overshadowed by Wilhelm Marstrand’s (1810–1873) satirical genre paintings, which were hugely adored by audiences and critics. In 1865, one of the country’s most significant art historians summed up Smith’s endeavours in a single sentence as mere “intimations of a skilled and sharply, albeit poetry-forsaken and ugly satire [...]”

Smith’s scenes of domestic life were among his most successful images created after 1850, and especially the painting En københavnsk familie (A Copenhagen Family) won great popularity at the 1861 exhibition. The sixth and final work by Smith work in the Nationalmuseum collection is such a depiction of intimate, bourgeois home life (Fig. 7). The living rooms of the urban middle class had been a popular subject for painters up through the 1820s and 30s, with bird-cages and windows being particularly favoured as elements that lent symbolic emphasis to the safe but restrictive nature of home. Smith’s charming painting pulls these motifs into a new era in an almost naïve fashion.
ACQUISITIONS/THE CONTOURS OF THE UNKNOWN SMITH

He would spend his next fifty years insisting on the relevance of everyday scenes of city life, which took on an increasingly stale air of obsolete Biedermeier gentility from the 1860s onwards. Here, however, we are still on solid ground, and in Smith’s hands the genre has given rise to a study in various light effects. Outside, the weather is foggy and gray, prompting the mother to move to the window niche to properly see her sewing. Her attention, however, is turned towards the girl playing with the canary, and Smith has very clearly amused herself by depicting various forms of transparency in the feeding glass of the cage, the vase of flowers, the gossamer curtains and the child’s light dress – and, of course, the misty air.

One of the reasons Smith has been overlooked for so long is undoubtedly the fact that his late, rather uneven production has overshadowed his actually rather remarkable works from the 1840s and early 1850s. Another reason is that his studies and drawings were not – as was the case with many of his colleagues – sold after his death, meaning that they could not circulate and advance his reputation among collectors and art dealers. However, the Nationalmuseum’s six new acquisitions offer hope that many more of Smith’s best works will surface, thereby helping to outline the contours of an interesting and underrated artist.

Notes:
1. Smith’s birth and baptism are recorded in the church records of the Garnisonskirken church on 18 March 1821; his father’s death and funeral are entered in the same records on 7 and 11 November 1836; his mother presumably died in the cholera epidemic of 1853.
3. Fortegnelse over en Samling af Malerier, Studier, Skisser, Haandtegninger, Kobberstik, Raderinger, Lithographier, hvilke ved Auction bortsælges Tirsdagen den 19de Februar 1856 og følgende Dag […] Copenhagen 1856. The drawings addressed here were sold as lot no. 68, Studie af en kvindeelig Model (Study of a Female Nude) and possibly as lot no. 90, Modelfigur (Model Figure).
6. Smith’s travels are documented by the published steamboat passenger lists run in Berlingske Tidende on 28 June and Aarhus Stifts-Tidende 16 September 1844. The finished lithograph was advertised for sale in early December that same year. A similar commission followed seven years later when Smith, following Denmark’s victory over the Schleswig-Holstein rebels in 1851, was commissioned to do portraits of a dozen prominent Danish officers; see L.J. Flamand, Slagene ved Fredericia og Idsted, Copenhagen 1853.
7. Corsaren, no. 347, 14 May 1847.
8. Beginning in 1849, Smith had himself listed as a “Portraittmaler” (Portrait painter) in the Copenhagen directory, and he stated the same title in the Danish census of 1855.

Fig. 7 Ludvig August Smith (1820–1906), Interior with Mother and Daughter by the Window, signed 1853. Oil on canvas, 47.5 × 41 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund 2016. Nationalmuseum, NM 7318.