



Dinah Maxwell Smith: An Artist Combing the Shores of Time

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by Annette Hinkle

You could say Dinah Maxwell Smith is at home at the beach—both literally and artistically.

Not only does Smith live near the ocean in Southampton, the beach is also one of her favorite subjects, and over the years she has created countless oil paintings that reference seaside living.



“Snow fence Dog” by Dinah Maxwell Smith.

But the artist does not limit her view to what she sees at local beaches near her Hamptons home. She is more interested in imagery that reaches across the Atlantic and back through time. Her paintings are populated by people and animals at the seashore and many of them evoke the feeling of Victorian-era European beach culture. And the work itself is reminiscent of [French Impressionism](#), Smith said.

“I call it ‘neo impressionism’ because the Impressionists didn’t paint exactly like this,” Smith explained recently. “It could only be done now because I have the benefit of looking back at 100 years of painting.”

The artist’s work is currently featured in the “Hail to the Beach: Paintings by Dinah Maxwell Smith” exhibition at the Southampton Historical Museum. On view in an upstairs gallery in the museum’s Rogers Mansion are a dozen or so examples of Smith’s beach-inspired oils on paper. Not only does Smith’s loose impressionistic painting style reference an earlier artistic movement, so too does her subject matter: a range of beach-goers captured in distinct moments in time.



“What did you find?” by Dinah Maxwell Smith.

Smith’s scenes feel as if they could have been plucked from anywhere in the late 19th to mid-20th

century. Women in long, colorful billowing skirts enjoy the ocean view from wooden chairs situated near striped beach cabanas; children gather treasures carried in on waves or play with a dog in the surf; 1920s and '30s Gatsby-era bathing beauties lounge on beach towels; men in sports coats and straw hats consider a distant view.



“Three Men on a Bridge” by Dinah Maxwell Smith.

These scenes are filtered through Smith’s imagination from sourced material — a collection of historic postcards and old photographs that began with her own family’s keepsakes.

“My mother died when I was 23 and my father sold our house in Connecticut and moved to France,” Smith said. “My brother lived in Michigan, so I was given the job of cleaning out all the stuff, including the photographs.”

And in those photographs, Smith discovered the glamorous social life that her parents enjoyed prior to her birth.

“My parents were very elegant before they became my parents, but I didn’t see that part of their life,” she said. “It was a history. My mother was a socialite and my father drop-dead gorgeous.”

In those family photographs, Smith also witnessed her parents living in an era before her time. As a result, she became fascinated by historic images of the well-heeled set enjoying themselves in social settings or posing for the camera. She started adding the family photographs of friends to her collection and visited thrift stores and street markets, both in the United States and abroad, in search of vintage postcards and historic photographs to use as source material for her paintings.

“I’m as much a photographer as a painter,” Smith confessed. “I’m gaga for photographs. There’s a truth in black and white photos that still blows me away. I love the honesty in them.”

Smith has also created paintings that mimic photographic portraits—with stark whites and shadowy darks like a photo taken in strong sunshine at high noon. Some of these portrait-inspired paintings, like that of a squinting child standing at awkward attention in front of an American flag, look as if they come directly from a posed family photo taken in a too bright setting. It is the suggestion of a family narrative that lends an endearing quality to the artist’s capturing the moment in time.

“I love the fact that photographs tell you about history,” Smith said. “But not every good photo makes a good painting. Some things work better as photographs.”

Smith’s love for historic photographs is evident in her paintings, especially her beach scenes. And the paintings also reflect Smith’s love of French culture. It’s an influence that began with her first trip to France at the age of 15, and was nurtured for several years thereafter by annual trips to the country with her parents.

“For my mother, there was no such thing as plain vacation, so we signed up at the Sorbonne for philosophy courses,” Smith recalled, adding that she discovered her passion for painting after she stepped into L’Académie Julian in Paris for the first time and smelled the linseed oil.

“France is ingrained and deeply rooted in my soul,” she said. “It’s still very important to me. I never stop thinking about it. I love the smell of France, the age of the country, the textures—you touch a wall and it’s 1,000 years old. I love the dignity and self containment of the French. I love their language ... though their humor alludes me.”

“I always had a hard time readjusting when I came back,” Smith said.



“Old Silver Beach” by Dinah Maxwell Smith.

Though the paintings on view at the Southampton Historical Museum represent Smith’s artistic focus from 1986 until now, she admits that she senses an approaching change in her style.

“There was a sense of irony before. Now I want to go somewhere that’s more abstract mentally, which means I may or may not be physically abstract,” Smith said. “I don’t want to depict children doing things anymore. I love kids and remember being a kid. That did do it for me at one time. But now it’s not where I want to go. I don’t know where that is, but I’ll keep working.”

BASIC FACTS: “Hail to the Beach: Paintings by Dinah Maxwell Smith” is on view from May 10 to October 18, 2014 at The Rogers Mansion at the Southampton Historical Museum and Research Center, 17 Meeting House Lane, Southampton, N.Y. 11968. www.southamptonhistoricalmuseum.org.

Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$4 (free for members and 17 and under).

Information on Dinah Maxwell Smith can be found at www.dinahmaxwellsmith.com.