A Method of Painting in Oil

by Lela Smith — Wisconsin Rural Artist

To my Friends the McIntyres.
Lela Smith
1969

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of
PAINTING IN OIL

by Lela Smith, Wisconsin Rural Artist

At the request of my fellow painters, I should like to give a detailed account of what goes on in my head from the time an idea strikes until the complete work hangs for all to admire.

Lela Smith

FROM AARON BOHROD

I have known my fellow artist Lela Smith for the twenty years I have lived in Wisconsin and have served as artist in residence at the University. I early discovered that Lela was one of the shining gems of the rural art project; a fine painter and one of the motivating forces that gave shape and purpose to Wisconsin's unique aesthetic program.

Lela Smith's painting, of course, is well regarded by her professional and amateur colleagues and she has received the ultimate approval of the many collectors who have acquired her work. Less known publicly has been her dedicated labors with beginning and more advanced artists setting them on the road to personal accomplishment.

At this late date in her development the newspapers tell us she has blossomed forth as an abstract painter. While I haven't seen these works, I forgive her for them. This new experimental trend reflects her young heart and her dedication to extending her excellence in the art of painting–the endeavor which is most dear to her heart.

Aaron Bohrod
Artist-in-Residence
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

FROM THOMAS HENDRICKSON

Soon after I arrived in Platteville in 1949, I heard about an amateur painter in Lancaster who did excellent work. The following spring, as one of the judges for a tri-county rural art show, I was confronted by some paintings that were clearly beyond the technical grasp of what is termed the amateur painter. There was indeed a very capable artist in Lancaster, Wisconsin, and her name was Lela Smith.

At one of these tri-county art shows in the early nineteen fifties, it was my pleasure to meet Mrs. Smith and to find that the artist, as a person, was as warm and sincere as her paintings. As time went on, it became almost embarrassing to judge these shows because, in all fairness and standards of judgement, awards had to be given to Lela every year. This worried Lela more than it worried the judges. She has been her severest critic.

It is characteristic of Lela Smith to want to share her art with others. This she has done very effectively by modestly pricing her work and by spending many hours trying to transmit her painting know-how to other amateurs in southwestern Wisconsin. In this last endeavor she has produced what is really a "Lela Smith Landscape School" of painting.

Knowing Lela Smith has been one of the better things that has happened to me. The presence of Lela in the rural art program has been one of the better things for the State of Wisconsin.

Thomas Hendrickson, Head
Department of Art
Wisconsin State University
Platteville, Wisconsin

FROM JAMES SCHWALBACH

People in extension are always looking for experienced "grass roots personages." If anyone fills this bill, it is Mrs. Lela Smith of Lancaster. She was one of the first of a very small group of original amateur artists that the university contacted in connection with its program in the 1940's. Her interest, however, even pre-dated our program and went back to the WPA Project Days of the 1930's. I think, without doubt, the extreme interest in art in the Lancaster area can be laid at the door of her leadership along with that of a few others. Anytime we wanted to make assessment of our own efforts and activities in the Lancaster area, she was the person to see. Many of the things we initiated in that area came as a result of her stimuli. The whole idea of the John Stuart Curry Medal Awards grew out of contact with her and the other people in Lancaster. If the University has accomplished anything in the past in this area, it's people like Lela who should take the major credit.

James A. Schwalbach, Chairman
Department of Art
University of Wisconsin Center System
Madison, Wisconsin

PAINTING: HOW I DO IT

My art learning began at the same time the university launched the Wisconsin Rural Art Program around 1940. After ten years of gathering a little understanding from comments and criticism of amateur painting at the annual state rural art shows, terms of classes were offered by the University Extension Division under the instruction of University of Wisconsin graduate art students, plus the guidance of Extension Art Director, James Schwalbach and Artists-in-Residence, Aaron Bohrod and the late, John Stewart Curry.

For 28 years, I exhibited in state and regional shows, attended eleven terms of the extension classes, and any others that were offered locally. During all this time, we learned to appreciate such arts as "Pop" and "Op", but there was no one to tell us that we rural artists **had** to turn away from red barns in our beautiful Grant County settings. Many of us have stayed with those familiar subjects to help keep alive some of the pictorial history of the Midwest.

I feel privileged to be known as a product of the Wisconsin Rural Art Program.

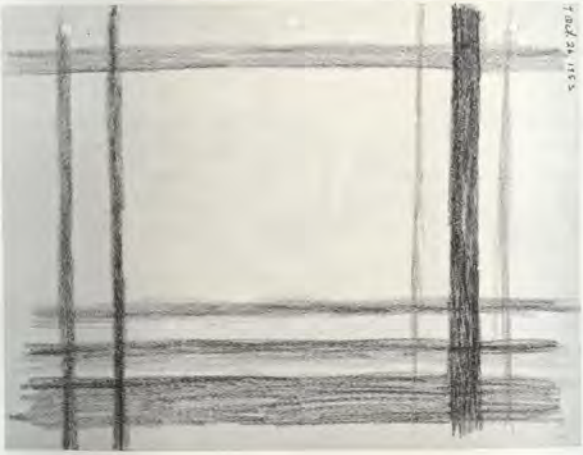
It takes a long time, but after awhile a painter becomes idea conscious and then ideas pop up from nowhere. One can live with something for years and really never see it, until all of a sudden, one sees it as a picture all framed and hanging on the wall. Once I visualize it, there is no holding up until I get to putting the idea on canvas.

I have an old book case in my living room with a glass door that distorts reflections. It always bothered me until one day I suddenly saw picture designs in it. The reflections from a window and the fast changing light outdoors throw a series of designs so fast that I could draw all day long and never have two alike. I am so afraid that glass on the door will get broken, I shiver when anyone goes near it. It is becoming quite famous as a source of subject matter for me.

There is no time to study the patterns as I work. The light squiggles the lines around so fast in the reflection that for ten minutes I draw only what I see and such good practice it offers in drawing! And such a variety of exercise it gives the imagination! People coming to my house are fascinated by the different things they see in my drawings when I lay them out on the floor. There is a camel in the desert, a child lapping a lollipop, a puppetier operating his puppets, a rabbit bounding in mid air and a cat hissing at a dog. It is really fantastic. Then the challenge is great fun when it comes to putting the designs on canvas in color and technique to suit the mood.

Drawing comes easy to me–I like to draw, and I like to create subjects just out of my head. I paint every day and I need many **many** ideas. Aside from painting cats, my favorite subjects are landscapes and farm scenes.

To me the important thing in landscape sketching is to look beyond the natural growth and manmade objects and see only the lay of the land. When I am commissioned to sketch a particular spot, such as an old Homestead, or someone's favorite spot on their farm, **that** is something else. I must then make it look familiar. But sometimes I like to go out sketching just for new ideas, and I find it fun to stand in one spot and turn-turn- turn-stop at each turn and sketch whatever I see before me. Then back at home I find it a further challenge to create different compositions to fit my sketches.



One of our extension class instructors told us that students must spend a lot of time on the important exercise of drawing plaid designs. Just straight horizontal and vertical lines to form plaids. Then study them for ideas in compositional arrangements. See an example from my notebook.

From this I composed a simple landscape and did it in water color. Someone liked it well enough to buy it.

Ones ideas may come from anywhere and it is not so much what the subject is as what we **do** with it.

For a demonstration to REA members on February 7, 1968, I chose one of my sketches showing nothing but the lay of the land, which in this case, is rolling ground that has more possibilities than just sky and flat ground.

Let me point out, that painters must be thinking every minute during the entire execution of a painting. So as early as this preliminary drawing, I kept in mind to alternate dark and light horizontal and vertical levels or bands. This is where the exercise in drawing plaids benefits compositions.

In this case horizontal bands predominate which will tend to give a restful feeling to the finished work. Note the darker high sky–the light band of middle and far sky–the ground which is always darker than the sky–the still darker middle ground–then a band of light as it catches the light from the sky–and finally the darker foreground nearest to us.

Another composition might have a diagonal movement such as in this sheep picture.

The clouds and group of sheep and the two sides of the triangle forming the bluff give an exciting diagonal movement and yet the horizontal lines of the rock ledges within the triangle help to give a restful, peaceful feeling, characteristic of all sheep pictures.

So much for thoughts that go into that portion of a preliminary drawing.

Now the fun begins. What to fit into these dark and light levels to make a pleasing landscape. I did a very successful landscape once from a spot west of Lancaster looking northward. In my twelve mile view, I could not see a man-made object. Not a building–a telephone pole–a windmill or a fence in all that space. Just rolling ground with trees, bushes, woodlots and color. It won awards in two shows and I sold it to a minister.

But I want buildings and life in the composition at hand, so my next concern is where to place them. I know I must keep the interest away from the direct center of the picture space, so I mentally divide the space into thirds, horizontally and vertically, which gives a rectangle in the center. Anywhere at, or beyond, the sides or corner of that center space is a safe location for interest. I nestled the buildings behind the slope in the right foreground.

Now it is time to think of perspective.

There are rules to determine the eye-level line which is a line directly across the vision as one looks straight ahead. All lines below slant upward to the eye-level line and all lines above slant downward to the eye-level line. My common judgment told me that I was standing high enough that I had to be looking downward to the buildings, so their roof tops had to slant upward to my eye-level line somewhere in the area of the small building I placed in the distance which put that roof top somewhat on the level. Otherwise perspective did not bother me, until aerial perspective which, as we know, means that colors and values fade as they go from foreground into the distance.

In composing the picture one cannot keep every thing light in the light band and every thing dark in the dark layer, so note that I have superimposed from one level to another. The group of buildings and trees extend upward into the level above. The taller trees extend through four layers of ground and sky. The fence rows extend from one level to another.

Most people like a bit of human interest in landscapes. I decided on a woman with ducks going toward the buildings. Another time I may use this same sketch, but make it a winter scene with a man and dog trudging through the snow.

Some artists I know will not paint anything in motion, like birds in flight, a panting dog, a rooster fight or people running, because they seem to never get any where and it is frustrating.

You will note here that I separated the barn from the house by painting a growth of trees between the buildings. Now the pencil drawing is done to my satisfaction. I turn my thoughts to what surface to use for the painting. I can use either a self-stretched canvas or an untempered masonite panel. I like one as well as the other, but can keep more brilliance in my colors working on masonite. To prepare the foundation, I lightly sand the masonite to give tooth for the size to stick to.

More people nowadays use a quick drying size and prime mixture on the masonite panel which is ready to paint on almost as soon as it is applied. I like to prepare my own ground, so I mix the glue size and cover the entire surface. I use rabbit skin glue dissolved in hot water. This has to dry ten to twelve hours. Then it is ready for two coats of prime. I use Dutch Boy white lead thinned with retouch varnish. The first coat dries in about twenty-four hours or when the thumb nail can scratch over it without picking up the paint. Then the second coat of Dutch Boy is applied and usually this takes longer to dry.

To paint the entire picture in color on the white panel is called an "alla prima" or done in one setting. That is just as legitimate as my method and of course, much faster. From my plaid design that I mentioned earlier, I did the "alla prima" shown in illustration.

Many artists use this method and turn out beautiful sparkling work. So much for the one-step method.

I prefer to build up my paintings on layers of warm and cool transparent undercolors, so I first proceed to darken the white foundation. With a charcoal covered paper, I transfer my drawing to the panel and roughly sketch over the lines with burnt umber color thinned with turpentine. Since I am working from a pre-drawn composition, I set the drawing up before me as a guide, and paint the entire picture with burnt umber and turpentine using a medium small brush and short strokes, copying the values as I have them in my drawing. See A of 3 step illustration.

You notice I have left plenty of the white foundation peeking through. Some people who have wished to learn my build-up method are so happy when they finish the first step of brown underpainting that they stop right there, perfect their technique and paint nothing but brown pictures. They are beautiful, they win awards and sell readily.

But I still like my method, so I go on with the second step of underpainting. The combination of transparent undercolors can be whatever pleases the artist. I've had most success with warm umber, cool blue and warm reds, in that order, so for many years have stayed with that combination. After ten or twelve hours the next step is to brush on a tint of cool blue over the brown. The cool blue adds a bit more depth to the brown. See B of 3 step illustration.

All through my learning I have been cautioned against using prussian blue in underpainting, or in mixture with other colors. The educators say it tends to turn black in time. So remember–I told you so–but I use it. No other blue satisfies me in my underpainting. I use turpentine as a medium throughout the entire underpainting because experience teaches us to keep the underpainting lean to avoid cracking in years to come. Overnight is long enough to let each coat dry.

A B C

While each coat is drying I set the panel where I can see it to study and make corrections in the successive steps. As I brush on the blue tint, I do not cover the brown entirely but I let some of the brown and also some white still peek through. See B in 3 step illustration.

By now the panel has become quite dark, but as I want to finish with a warm tint, I mix warm burnt sienna and cool alizarin crimson together for the third step of underpainting.

If you were to ask me "Why couldn't the brown, blue and reds be mixed together in the first place and applied as one coat to save the time of waiting three days for the three coats to dry separately?", or "What's wrong with applying one color on top of the other color while each is wet, without drying time between?", or "If I want it dark, why not paint the whole panel black?", I would have to say there is nothing **wrong** with **any** method that one uses. To mix all the colors together would give a solid neutral gray foundation. I like the textural quality that can be achieved by having the patience to give time to building up my paintings as the old masters did.

First I paint for the joy and satisfaction that comes with creating pictures. Next, I find even greater joy in knowing that people want to possess my work. So I have developed, and am cultivating, an impressionist style which comes from all the little brush strokes of individual warm and cool colors. It takes a great lot of patience, but it seems to be something many people like.

And I am not losing time by having patience because during that time, I begin new pictures. Once an idea strikes me, I sketch it in brown on a panel and I can set it aside to work on later. I work on twelve to sixteen paintings at one time and it takes at least two months to complete the group, and by that time I have that many more ideas sketched on panels ready for their successive steps. If you are quick at figuring that means that I paint around eighty five to ninety pictures each year. I have **had** to work this way for the past few years in order to have enough pictures to sell at the many shows I exhibit in each year. By now people are finding their way to my home. I find it less necessary to take my paintings to the many shows.

Now that the three under colors are applied and dry, they must be isolated to keep them from bleeding through into the top colors that come next. Even if the under colors were not isolated, the painting would not be ruined. It would only gray or tone down the final effect if the colors were allowed to blend together. I like to keep my colors as clear and brilliant as possible, so I use a spray retouch varnish over the underpainting. This dries in just a few minutes.

Now some of my worries are behind me and it's all been fun and easy. I've had time to study the values. Everything is arranged to my satisfaction. A critic might disagree with me, but I am happy in my ignorance.

Six months from now, I may work from this same sketch, but go at it from an entirely different approach and come up with a painting so different from this that it would not be recognized as being the same. That is what makes a painting so fascinating. We do what pleases us at the moment.

To begin the coloring I have a whole new trend of thought ahead of me. There never comes a time during the execution of a painting when **thinking** is not nine tenths of importance. Once a painter straightens out his thinking, there is never any more confusion.

I seldom experiment any more. Students and critics give my paintings one glance as they pass by at shows with such remarks as "all alike" or "stereotyped", but I can understand their thinking. I am there to sell my work and only one or two paintings will go into any one home, so I can have them all exactly alike if I wish.

I do not know whether I enjoy the coloring more than I did creating the compositions back in the drawing stage. It is all so very exciting.

I use the same palette for every one of my paintings because I have found that combination of colors harmonizes with the decor of any room. I begin each picture with a clean palette of colors, clean turpentine and medium and plenty of clean rags. I **never** swish a brush load of paint into the turpentine. One swish and the colored turpentine will affect the coloring to the end of that painting.

My favorite palette consists of only ten or twelve colors. They are burnt umber–raw umber–burnt sienna–yellow ochre–cadmium yellow, medium–lemon yellow–cadmium orange–alizarin crimson–viridian–prussian blue–ivory black and flake white.

My medium is equal parts of sunthickened linseed oil, Damar varnish and pure spirits of turpentine, I buy them in 2½ ounce size bottles, pour them together into a glass pitcher, mix thoroughly and pour back into the re-labeled bottles.

Finishing the painting is a simple matter of emphasizing and highlighting the values in color allowing much of the underpainting to serve as shadows and low key tones. Even though I cover the entire underpainting with the top opaque colors those transparent colors underneath can be seen or felt, which gives depth to the finished product.

Something that I always remember when I am coloring the picture, is to use warm against cool–cool against warm, dark against light and light against dark. Another thing to remember is that a tiny bit of yellow mixed with white makes white whiter than white and a tiny bit of alizarin crimson or prussian blue mixed with black makes black blacker than black.

Now the picture is not a **painting** yet until it goes through the process of over glazing to enrichen all the colors to bring a glow to the entire surface. For over glazing I use transparent colors the same as I used in the underpainting, except **now** I use them with the same oil medium that I have used with the top colors. Colors or portions of the painting that I want to enliven I apply a related color with the medium (either brush on or apply with a rag over the finger) then wipe off with a soft cloth leaving only a tinted film. Those portions or colors needing to be toned down, I brush on the color's complement with medium and wipe off. Areas that are already satisfactory I brush or wipe on just the clear medium without adding a color, and wipe off. The glaze must dry a few days then the surface must be protected by a coat of retouch varnish. It is too soon to use a permanent varnish. Retouch varnish is flexible and allows all the undercoats to dry gradually for six months to one year.

I have taken you on this painting trip, from an idea to this simple landscape. We will leave the old woman to lead the ducks down to the creek in the valley, and I will leave you with best wishes for

Happy Painting!

Lela Smith

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