

# HANS LUDVIG SMIDTH

NAKSKOV 1839 – FREDERIKSBERG 1917

*Edvard Philip Smidth and Karen Catharine Berg had three sons. One became a doctor and died young; one became an engineer and industrialist, the founder of a firm known throughout the world under his own name, F. L. Smidth; and one was to have been a doctor like his eldest brother but suddenly broke off his medical studies to become a painter.*

*Hans Smidth was born in Nakskov in the west of the island of Lolland, where his father was an attorney. In 1848 the family moved to Kerteminde in northern Funen and then six years later to the town of Skive, south of the Limfjord, the area that was home to Christen Dalsgaard, and where Smidth's father had been appointed judge.*

*Smidth went through the cathedral school in Viborg, the ancient city just under twenty kilometres to the south, and in 1859 he started to study medicine at Copenhagen. Until then, according to all accounts, he had never evinced any desire to draw and paint, but a winter's teaching in the architect Ferdinand Jensen's school of drawing opened the way to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts to the scarcely twenty-two-year-old Hans Smidth. The year 1864 found him in the life school, with Wilhelm Marstrand, Jørgen Roed (1808–1888), and Niels Simonsen (1807–1885) as his teachers.*

*But then Smidth was called up for military service, though he never had to take an active part in the fighting. After being demobilized with the rank of lance corporal, he returned to the life school but was soon compelled to break off his training, presumably for financial reasons, and return home to Skive. The following year Hans Smidth looked for motifs while walking in the Limfjord region. In the modest circumstances obtaining at the time, he lodged with farmers and fishermen, accompanying them in their everyday lives and their festivities and becoming their friend. In Sallingland, on the island of Fur, and in the extensive moorland areas south and southwest of Skive he drew and, more especially, painted landscapes, interiors, figures, and animals. His paintings were inspired by Dalsgaard's art especially in its earnestness, but Smidth's figures are not wearing national costumes, and his portrayals of everyday life are devoid of any anecdotal content. They are human beings in their own sober realism, portrayed with understanding, respect, and warmth, and sometimes also with a touch of humor. Later, Smidth painted in the area around Aarhus and on the west coast of Jutland.*

*From 1867 he started sending paintings to the exhibitions at Charlottenborg, and this he continued to do every year from then on. About 1871 he took part in Vilhelm Kyhn's so-called Cave Academy with August Jerndorff and Karl Madsen (1855–1938). In 1875 Hans Smidth entered the Neuhausen Competition. His *Gæssene drives hjem* (The Geese Are Driven Home) did not win the main prize but was given a consolation award. Two years later, in the following competition, he achieved the desired prize on the basis of a slightly more staged work, *En fremmed spørger om vej i bondegården på heden* (A Stranger Asks the Way at a Moorland Farm), thus gaining the official recognition of the Academy.*

Nevertheless, Smidth was forgotten as an artist for more than twenty years. His unadorned portrayals of the frugal existence of the ordinary people and the farmers' and fishermen's closeness to nature found no resonance in the turbulent artistic life of Copenhagen, where the national Romantic movement was on its way out and the French-oriented international painting was gaining ground. Smidth was not at home in either of these groups. He went his own way, had never been a Romantic, and was not recognized as a modernist although many of his portrayals of real life had points in common with realism. Smidth could not have been ignorant of the new trends. We know that he was acquainted with the painter and art historian Karl Madsen and the painter Theodor Philipsen (1840–1920), both of whom were interested in the French *plein air* painting by the 1880s. We also know that in 1895 he lived and worked with Christian Mourier-Petersen, who more than ten years previously had established a friendship with Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) in Arles and the Impressionists in Paris.

After the father's death in 1878, the family moved to Copenhagen, from where Hans Smidth worked every winter after this. At first, he and the eleven-years-younger Frederik Læssøe Smidth (1850–1899) lived with their mother—even after Frederik had started a family. When their mother died in 1895, Hans Smidth continued sharing a home with his brother and sister-in-law and their children, for whom he became a much-loved uncle. He spent almost all his summers in Jutland.

He is known to have found motifs in the area surrounding Arresø Lake and Hillerød in about 1880—including, perhaps, that for the Loeb collection's charming picture of the stagecoach—and in Funen. His first and only journey abroad took him to the formerly Danish town of Flensburg during this period. In the middle of the 1890s he started illustrating the stories of the Danish Golden Age author Steen Steensen Blicher (1782–1848), stories set in the moorland regions Smidth knew so well. He now often stayed at Ry near Silkeborg in central Jutland, Vilhelm Kyhn's favorite area, and then at Skjeldal near Salten Langsø in the same region. Here he built a Norwegian log cabin by about 1898.

Toward the end of the century and until his death, Hans Smidth turned to larger and more complicated figure compositions, such as busy market scenes and dramatic episodes from the Convicts' War. This subject, in which Christen Dalsgaard had also been interested, was related to the deep sense of emergency among Jutlandic farmers who were preparing to defend themselves against convicts rumored in 1848 to have been freed by the Germans at Rendsburg in Schleswig and thought to be on their way north, pillaging and burning down property. Smidth also painted scenes reflecting Blicher and portraying fires in the night. In the case of these latter, he found inspiration in the Netherlandish masters, especially Aert van der Neer, (1603/04–1667) in the Royal Collection of Paintings.

In 1900 his breakthrough came at last. After Smidth had shown a few works in several prestigious exhibitions, including the Nordisk Kunststilling in 1883 and 1888 and the world fairs in Chicago in 1893 and Paris 1900, in all of which he achieved a modest success, the Kunstforening, at the suggestion of the painter August Jerndorff, arranged an extensive retrospective exhibition encompassing 300 works by Hans Smidth.

Both critics and the public had their eyes opened to the artist's unusual talent. His paintings, at

once bold and sensitive in colors, fascinated everyone who saw them. About 290 works were sold. “All these immediately coloristically pure and radiant works with quite ordinary and sensitively conceived motifs were a breath of fresh air in a period dominated by Hammershøi and the Symbolist painters” (Styhr, 1933).

In 1905, Hans Smidth received the annual Academy medal, and in 1906 he was awarded the Eckersberg Medal, at the same time becoming a member of the Academy Plenary Congregation. At his death in 1917 he left more than 1,000 paintings and countless drawings. We know very little indeed of Hans Smidth the man. He was taciturn, shunned all publicity and art politics, and never took part in social events, but even while he was still alive, his art was respected and admired, not least by fellow artists.

S.L.

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