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# THE ART OF PHILIPPE SMIT

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## FOREWORD

This study is an initial attempt to introduce Philippe Smit to a wider audience and to place him in an historical context. To a limited degree it also is a critical analysis of his work. The paper contains an updated chronology of his oeuvre that although not complete, is as up to date as is possible at this time. It also introduces new documents that were unavailable to his previous biographer. The 1955 manuscript by Kasper Niehaus tells the story of Smit's life and gives a feeling for his values: it is chock-full of data and is therefore indispensable reading for those who are interested in the artist.<sup>1</sup> However, it is totally lacking in documentation, which limits its usefulness for future studies of the artist. It is my hope that this essay will supply the needed documentation and inspire other people who are interested in Smit to do more research.

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<sup>1</sup> Kasper Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius" (unpublished manuscript, revised and edited by Marjorie Bell 1955).

## INTRODUCTION

In his book *Nederlandse Schilders in Paris 1900-1940*, Adriaan Venema reconstructs the Paris art scene from a nationalistic perspective chronicling over two hundred Dutch painters who worked in Paris and its environs in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Only two, Piet Mondrian and Kees van Dongen, are well known today. Yet Venema's book is intriguing because it has photographs of the lesser-known artists, their studios, and reproductions of their little known works. It also includes contemporary newspaper clippings and supplies the reader with biographies and bibliographies. This multi-faceted approach recreates the tenor of the times in a compelling way, documenting the exciting ferment produced by masses of aspiring artists working in close proximity. The book is a testament to the pervasive influence of the modern movement for many of these Dutch paintings are reminiscent of the work of Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Leger. Yet Venema's study also shows that a handful of artists chose to work in ways that continued the traditions of the French Academy or the movements such as Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Symbolism from the end of the nineteenth century.

Such an artist was Philippe Smit. This intriguing and prolific painter has one of the more substantial entries in Venema's book due to the foresight of his loyal followers who produced a biography of the painter shortly after his death in 1948. Smit's extant works which number over two hundred testify to a disciplined life devoted to his art. However, his work has had little exposure, let alone critical acclaim, due to some remarkable circumstances that provide fascinating insights into patronage at the turn of the twentieth century.

By focusing on the career of a single painter from Venema's study and determining what he appropriated and rejected from the fertile artistic environment at the

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<sup>2</sup> Adriaan Venema, *Nederlandse Schilders in Paris 1900-1940* (Amsterdam: Het Wereldvenster Baarn, 1980).

turn of the twentieth century, a more nuanced picture of the artistic activity of that time emerges. Smit's student days in Montmartre, of which little documentation survives, undoubtedly included experiences common to his contemporaries for his work shows that he was a product of his time. But fate presented him with opportunities that were unavailable to most of his contemporaries. The resulting body of work is an intriguing blend of adopted and original ideas.

## THE EARLY WORKS

Philippe Smit was born in Zwolle, Holland in 1886 of a Dutch father and French mother. Though he moved between the two countries throughout his life, it was the French culture he took to heart. His letters are written in French and his biography shows that he was well versed in the music, literature and art of his mother's homeland. He also loved the French countryside, rendering its chateaux, churches and forests; in addition, he painted still lifes made from flowers of the *paysage*. His early training in France was as a goldsmith, a trade he took up to help support his family. In 1910 when he was twenty-four, he went to two art schools in Paris to study drawing though no records as to which schools these were survive. There were many academies he could have chosen from, ranging from the large well-established schools such as the *École des Beaux-Arts* or the *Académie Jullian* to private ateliers where groups of pupils gathered around one master. His extant life drawings, done throughout his career, show that the traditional approach to the figure, rendering the volume of the form in light and shadow, appealed to him (Figs. 1, 2). During this period he lived in Montmartre and the names of artists he knew show that he was fully aware of the artistic trends of his day. Yet, he was essentially self-taught. The art books from his library<sup>3</sup> show that he studied the great masters and according to his biographer he frequented museums and galleries.<sup>4</sup>

In his capacity as a jeweler he learned to fashion small figurines and his on-going interest in sculpture is apparent in his early two-dimensional work. Smit's 1912 drawing of the seven year old Maryke Urban dressed for a costume party shows his familiarity

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<sup>3</sup> Smit's library is now in the possession of Corrine Pichon.

<sup>4</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 6.

with Degas' bronze ballerinas (Fig. 3,4). The extended leg, hands clasped behind the back and the full short skirt are unmistakable references to the dancers and Smit, like Degas, captures the ungainly proportions of an ingénue. This work is one of his initial attempts in the medium of pastel. The colored areas are simple and flat showing that he has not yet realized the rich potential of what would become his most expressive medium. Work from this period also shows the influence of Rodin whom Smit acknowledged as one of his favorite sculptors.<sup>5</sup> Smit's 1916 *Banishment from Paradise* has the same stocky proportions, horizontal neck position and wide stride as many of Rodin's works (Fig. 5, 6). The sense of emotional and physical weight are also reminiscent of the sculptor's work though in this pastel the young Smit is beginning to use cross-hatching and complimentary colors to achieve lively effects. Both of these early pastels show the influence of Picasso: the portrait of Maryke Urban is reminiscent of his early clowns and the *Banishment* of some figures from his Blue Period. Smit appropriates elements from specific Picasso works in his 1918 oil *The Innocent* (Fig. 6b) which is quite similar to Picasso's painting of the *Old Guitarist*) with its contorted pose and downcast face (Fig. 7). In addition, the extreme angle of the young man's hands brings to mind the pose of the couple in Picasso's *Frugal Repast* (Figs. 8). Niehaus confirms that Smit knew and admired Picasso.

In 1922 Philippe received a visit from Pablo Picasso who he had first met at Picasso's home in the Rue La Boétie, above the Rosenberg gallery. Picasso was charming in manner and expressed genuine interest in Philippe's work. Three years later when they met again at the Rosenberg gallery Picasso referred to the visit and the tea as one of the nicest times of his life, and said he never passed the place without thinking of it. Smit

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<sup>5</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 8.

was enthusiastic about the earlier work of Picasso, particularly his “pink” and “blue” periods, and greatly admired his clown paintings.<sup>6</sup>

Smit also knew the French Impressionist painter Claude Monet. The year after he started to study in Paris he mustered up the courage to go to Giverny and introduced himself to Monet.

... from this meeting with Monet grew a friendship which lasted for years, mostly through correspondence. Monet knew few of the young artists and was visited by few painters except Bonnard, Vuillard, and Philippe Smit. Twelve years later Philippe was again received at Giverny, and at a still later time he, with Mr. and Mrs. Urban, had the first thrilling look at Monet’s famous painting of the water lilies and the Japanese Bridge.<sup>7</sup>

It was typical of Smit, in spite of his reserved nature, to seek out people with whom he could exchange ideas. Though charismatic is not an accurate word for such a shy person, throughout his career Smit did attract a following of loyal supporters who were intensely interested in his art and made it possible for him to pursue it as a full-time occupation. His early and lifelong supporters included the journalist Anton Zelling who gave Smit advice and assistance (including financial assistance for a decade starting in 1914) along with Berendina and Nicolaas Urban who took Smit into their home and provided him with a quiet and supportive atmosphere in which his art could flourish.<sup>8</sup> This group shared a common love of music, literature, art and religion. Smit’s work up until 1918 centers on his family and friends playing musical instruments, listening to music or meditating. The eyes of these sitters often gaze upward, showing them in devout contemplation. This pose became a hallmark of Smit’s oeuvre. For example,

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<sup>6</sup> Niehaus, “Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius,” 7.

<sup>7</sup> Niehaus, “Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius,” 5. Unfortunately, these letters were lost during the war. The viewing of the *Waterlilies* was also in the studio at Giverny. Miriam P. Mitchell, interview at her home, Bryn Athyn, Pa., February 18, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> One source maintains that the Urbans, while on a trip to France, wanted a translator to take them through the Louvre and the young Philippe was hired. The same source maintains that Smit and the Urbans met Zelling at a van Gogh exhibit in Amsterdam. Notes from M. Guillemin, Philippe Smit file, Glencairn.

Smit's painting of his sister, *Emma at the Harp*, has a large crucified figure hovering behind her head. Her upward gaze implies that she is thinking about Christ's passion (Fig. 9). This juxtaposition further suggests that the music she is playing is soulful and the inclusion of an ambiguous red form behind her conjures up Christ's blood. By deliberately appealing to the senses, Smit evokes associations in the viewer's mind in a manner similar to the French Symbolists who were active in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This group was enamored with the notion of synesthesia, a crossover of the senses, where, for example, sounds conjure up tastes or smells bring up colors.

#### SMIT AND THE FRENCH SYMBOLISTS

The French Symbolist writers and painters attempted to fathom the inner world of the spirit rather than describe the optics of the physical world as the Impressionists had done before them. Although Smit came after its height, much of his early work is in sympathy with the Symbolist movement and his knowledge of specific paintings is often discernible. For example, in *Emma at the Harp*, the primitive manner in which Christ is rendered and his positioning in back of a prominent foreground figure brings to mind Gauguin's *Self Portrait with a Crucifix* as well as his *Yellow Christ* which juxtaposes four peasant women with the crucified Christ. (Figs. 10, 11).

Several other works from this period also spring from Symbolist soil. The 1918 painting *Emma Praying* conjures up the Symbolist notion of a pilgrimage since the young woman who has disembarked from a small boat is kneeling in prayer at the edge of a shore (Fig.12). Her prominent, world-weary eyes gaze upward and focus on an inner spiritual realm. Yet like the Symbolists, Smit leaves the exact nature of the women's

journey a mystery. One of the Symbolist artists greatly admired by Smit was Puvis de Chavannes. Though less well-known today, he was immensely popular at the end of the nineteenth century primarily because of the murals he painted in public buildings in Paris. One of these in the Pantheon depicts the miracle of Saint Geneviève (Fig. 13). The white robed saint is set off by a dark sail on a wooden boat, quite similar to the vessel Smit uses to set off Emma. Moreover, the sails of the boats in both works are cut off by the top edge of the frame and both works feature people kneeling on the shore.<sup>9</sup>

A third undated work *Meditation* also depicts a woman (Berendina Urban) looking pensively upward (Fig.14). The long garment she wears is timeless and unspecific. Though it may actually have been a dressing gown, its mantel-like shawl alludes to a common theme in Symbolist paintings: the notion of women as priestesses or novitiates. And all three of these paintings embrace the Symbolist concept of the “inward looking eye”<sup>10</sup> though unlike the common Symbolist practice, Smit never paints his sitters with their eyes shut.

The Symbolist view of the artist as a seer into a mysterious realm that is unreachable to most mortals is a lasting legacy from the movement, and it is a role that was applied to Smit by some of his early champions. For example, in 1922 the art critic J. M. Hondius wrote,

It probably seems unnatural to you that so great a human being and artist could live in Holland almost unknown; you may think it is fantastic, but it

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<sup>9</sup>Smit’s painting also brings to mind Puvis de Chavannes’ poignant painting the *Poor Fisherman* though the mood of Smit’s work is more hopeful. The juxtaposition of a young woman and a boat is also reminiscent of several of Odilon Redon’s enigmatic pastels that feature women and boats.

<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of Symbolist phrases and concepts see Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories, A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

is entirely true and you must not forget that only a few in our civilization have contact with the sphere of the soul ...<sup>11</sup>

Two years later the Dutch art critic Kasper Niehaus, writing in a monthly art journal about the holiness of a subject such as Christ's Ascension, said of Smit, "He is one of the very few painters of our time, who strictly speaking, should be allowed to deal with such a traditional holy subject." Later in the same article "Painters of saints must be saintly painters," and again, "only a few in our civilization have contact with the sphere of the soul."<sup>12</sup> Throughout his life people extolled Smit as an exceptionally spiritual man who needed to withdraw from the world in order to create his spiritually-based art. This verbal ordination offered Smit a mantle that he willingly donned and wore in earnest. In 1923 he wrote, "God has created a paradise for us, the happiness of which only a few are able to feel. For that reason true artists have the beautiful task of expressing this in their work."<sup>13</sup>

However, the quest for the ineffable is not easy and a gentle, but nonetheless pervasive, melancholy wafts through much of Symbolist art and literature.<sup>14</sup> Smit was no stranger to the longing that accompanied this solitary quest. He wrote,

Art is so difficult, it requires so much sacrifice of self, one is never satisfied. But in every painting one tries to give ones best. It is not easy to unite the reality of things with the dream, which for the pure artist can only be fulfilled if he is as true to himself as possible, if his work reflects the inner self.<sup>15</sup>

Echoing the sentiments of Maurice Rollinat, one of his favorite poets, Smit observed,

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<sup>11</sup> J. M. Hondius, "Philippe Smit and El Greco" *Het Gety* (1922). This article only exists in excerpts and can be found in the Philippe Smit file in Glencairn.

<sup>12</sup> Kasper Neihaus, "Philippe Smit," *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunsren*, (November, 1924): 321-327.

<sup>13</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 10.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 9.

At the moment there is a thin fog, giving a mysterious appearance to the things of nature and a languishing melancholy to the landscape which I adore. I prefer this to the midday sunshine because the least blade of grass and some faded heather evoke a charm which is destroyed in sunny weather.<sup>16</sup>

A final affinity in the work of the Symbolists and Smit is their preference for flat, tapestry-like surfaces as opposed to the Academic tradition of using oil paint to create lustrous depth. Smit's work could well be emulating the look of Puvis de Chavannes' frescoes or Gauguin and Van Gogh's flat oils. Moreover, he often painted on unprimed canvas which pulled the paint into the taut fabric and accentuated the flatness of the work.<sup>17</sup>

#### SMIT AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

The cosmopolitan life in Paris and the "cult of decadence"<sup>18</sup> were not aspects of the Symbolist aesthetic that Smit embraced. He preferred the quiet order of a cultured home. Yet his love of visiting museums and galleries led to contact with some of his more progressive contemporaries. Henri Matisse, Kees van Dogen, Jean Marchand and Luc Albert Moreau wanted him to be a part of their movement. Smit's aesthetic however, was deeply rooted in tradition and he was condescending when discussing their work:

... something is missing. Their work does not become sublime and that is through lack of emotion. They always want to make something new, but they do not understand that all great artists must be aware of a great

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<sup>16</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 8.

<sup>17</sup> It is also possible that on occasion Smit intentionally painted on unprimed surfaces in order to make his dream-like images literally impermanent and fleeting. This question was raised by Claude Renouard, curator *Le Mystère Philippe Smit*, interview in Noyers-sur-Serein, June 18, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See Paul Bourget, "Baudelaire and the Decadent Movement (1881)" in Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 128.

tradition. When that awareness is not present, then there is a limitation. It is so easy to have some originality, but the emptiness of it makes itself felt soon.<sup>19</sup>

He also confessed that he did not like Picasso's late work and acknowledged that "the general lack of depth in modern art is beyond me." He used the phrase "A variety of cubistic and futuristic daubers" to describe an exhibit of his contemporaries in Amsterdam.<sup>20</sup>

Smit respected few art critics. Most he found "weak in spirit and lacking in vigor and criticism" afraid to say that modern art was actually ugly. He was wary of their formulas and theories and felt that exhibits had become merely contests, not places where people could go to see beautiful things.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, Smit attracted art critics who were sympathetic to his views. In the first feature article about him which appeared in a 1924 issue of the Amsterdam art periodical the *Maandblad Voor Beeldende Kunsten*, the author distances Smit from the modern "cult of weirdness."<sup>22</sup>

Clearly Smit and his followers had a different vision than the new seers of the modern movement.

## SMIT AND EL GRECO

In the work of in the sixteenth-century Mannerist painter El Greco (1541-1614) Smit found an aesthetic that resonated deeply with his own developing perceptions. He came to his artistic maturity during the popular El Greco revival that occurred at the

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<sup>19</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 7.

<sup>20</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 7.

<sup>21</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 9.

<sup>22</sup> Kasper Neihaus *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunsren*, 321.

beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> His library includes one of the first scholarly books on El Greco published outside of Spain, August L. Mayer's 1926 German treatise.<sup>24</sup> Smit's copy of the *View of Toledo* was probably done from one of the monochrome plates in this hefty volume since he uses a palette of warm browns and golds unlike the cool green and gray coloration of the original painting. In 1920 Smit saw four original El Greco's that were in the private collection of the Spanish expatriate painter Ignacio Zuloaga.<sup>25</sup> Zuloaga owned the dynamic *Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse* (now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York) which Smit copied though probably again not on-site since the color is somewhat different from the original.

Yet it was two other works from the Zuloaga collection that imprinted most deeply into Smit's psyche, *Mary Magdalen in Penitence* and *Saint Peter in Tears* (Figs. 15, 16). These earnest saints, portrayed in the act of sacred contemplation, are the prototypes for many of Smit's protagonists. Throughout the rest of his career he was able to renew his memory of the originals by referring to the plates in his copy of Mayer. Smit's *Singing Angel* circa 1922 is a good example of his knowledge of the multiple

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<sup>23</sup> Though an undisputed master today, El Greco was virtually unknown outside of Spain until King Louis Philippe looted cartloads of paintings from Spanish churches and museums and set up his Galerie Espagnol in the Louvre in 1835. When the king's collection was dispersed a decade later, many Spanish works found their way into the European art market. Two widely read sources made El Greco's name a household word however. The first was an anonymous article based on his painting *Lady in a Fur Wrap*, "la Fille du Greco", *Magasin Pittoresque*, September 1860. It alleged that the young woman in the painting was El Greco's long-suffering daughter who took care of her crazed, genius father. The painter's fame was further spread through a travelogue written by the German connoisseur Julius Meir-Graefe *The Spanish Journey* published in 1910 (English edition 1926).

<sup>24</sup> August L. Mayer, *Domenico Theotocopuli, El Greco*. Kritisches und illustriertes Verzeichnis des Gesamtwerkes (Munich: Hanfstaengl, 1926).

<sup>25</sup> Zuloaga's biography shows that he and Smit, who were almost exact contemporaries, had much in common. A comparison of their biographies gives fascinating insights into the attitudes and tastes of the times. See M. Diaz Padron ed. *Ignacio Zuloaga*. (New York: Meadows Museum, 1991).

versions of the El Greco Magdalens reproduced in Mayer (Fig. 17).<sup>26</sup> The angel's flowing blond hair, turned-upward gaze and slightly opened mouth are elements shared with all the Magdalens El Greco painted as are the dramatic clouds in the upper left-hand portion of the composition. Smit appropriates these elements, though he replaces the storm clouds with a rainbow and opens his protagonist's mouth more widely to show her in song. He also combines details that are found in other versions of the Magdalen such as the opened book from one and the fabric that flows diagonally across Mary's shoulder from another.

From the fourth painting in the Zuloaga collection, one of El Greco's Crucifixions, Smit appropriated El Greco's manner of elongating figures.<sup>27</sup> Beginning in the 1920s his work increasingly takes on a weightless, other worldly feeling and, like El Greco, he often uses the verticality of the canvas to juxtapose heaven and earth. In the *Singing Angel* Smit fuses his El Greco prototypes with the Symbolist notion of synesthesia by including burning incense, to imply smell and the opened mouth of the angel to suggest sound. In the 1920s he also introduces a new concept that became his leitmotiv: angels that look decidedly human and have the same pastimes as mortals such as singing, reading and knitting. Smit greatly admired Millet's paintings which were capable of transforming a knitting peasant into a monumental statement (Fig. 18).<sup>28</sup> But Smit's protagonists exist in a decidedly spiritual world: their upward gaze, often set off

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<sup>26</sup> El Greco appropriated the Magdalen image (and many others) from Titian whose work he saw when he was studying in Venice and Rome. See *El Greco of Toledo* (New York: Little Brown, 1982) and José A. Lopera ed. *El Greco: Identity and Transformation, Crete, Italy and Spain*. (Milan: Skira, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> El Greco's attenuations are a hybrid version of the Italian Mannerist style which he was introduced to when he was a student in Rome.

<sup>28</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 7.

by dramatic light, shows their awareness of a divine presence.<sup>29</sup> In this period he first uses the motif of wings that look amazingly uncontrived, often wrapping around the angel like a feathered shawl.

He continued to use this convention throughout his career. For example, a late work done during World War II, *At the Close of Day*, shows an angel with limp, dark wings glancing up at a disturbingly dramatic sky (Fig.19).

What is more surprising is Smit's depiction of famous people as angels. In his 1924 study *Homage to Chopin* based on Delacroix's double portrait of the composer and George Sand, Chopin is depicted as an angel who continues to play the piano in the afterlife (Fig.20). In the finished pastel with the same title, the identification of the pianist is less specific though the sound of his nocturnes is evoked by the setting sun (Fig. 21).

Compared to the models in Smit's earlier works these gracefully attenuated protagonists seem hopeful though they are still pensive and often have an enigmatic air about them. His large oil *Angel at Twilight* (circa 1930) is the masterwork from this series (Fig. 22).

#### SMIT'S EARLY EXHIBITS

Early in his career when he lived in Laren, Holland, Smit occasionally opened his studio for people to come and see his work, although he was often not present as they browsed. His work was also shown in the shop window of the firm that framed his work.

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<sup>29</sup> Both Smit and El Greco knew of the writings of the Pseudo Dionysos who associated colored light with spirituality. Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 15.

The Maatschappij voor Beeldende Kunsten exhibited his works and in 1924 published a feature article about him. He also participated in group shows of artists in the Gooi region around Laren. At one time the art dealer Fteer showed some of his work in Amsterdam but only one exhibit, held in the gallery of J. Goudstikker, was commented on in the Amsterdam press. In 1933 Jan Engelman wrote in the periodical *De Tyd*,

Another too little known figure is Philippe Smit, who works in France, rich is his imagination, robust his mastery of paint ... His canvasses give witness of an artist who enriches his image of nature without making it unreal. His "Autumn in the Forest" with large yellow leaves, which seem to have been painted in a dream is magnificent.<sup>30</sup>

After the nineteen thirties, despite positive reviews, Smit stopped exhibiting his art in public and turned to his friends for encouragement and support.

#### SMIT AND THEODORE PITCAIRN

As Smit was developing his artistic philosophy, he was fortunate to meet a man who shared his passion for art that illustrated a tangible spiritual world. This was Theodore Pitcairn, a young American who was a priest in the Swedenborgian church and at that time a pastor of several groups in South Africa. Smit knew of Swedenborg prior to meeting Pitcairn for it was another Swedenborgian minister Ernst Pfeiffer (a friend of Zelling's) who introduced the two men.<sup>31</sup> The ensuing friendship that developed between Smit and Pitcairn resulted in the artist becoming an avid reader of the Swede's writings.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jan Engelman, "Philippe Smit," *De Tyd* (1933). This review exists only in excerpts and can be found in the Philippe Smit file in Glencairn.

<sup>31</sup> He was probably familiar with some of the ideas or at least with the name of Swedenborg, before he met Pfeiffer, through the works of Charles Baudelaire who was of one of his favorite writers.

<sup>32</sup> Smit's library has a collection of Swedenborg's works, several of which are profusely underlined and annotated. The patient scholar could determine to a fuller extent what aspects of Swedenborg inspired Smit. My initial perusal of his annotations in the summer of 2000 showed some interesting notes on color in his copy of the first volume *Apocalypse Explained*.

Pitcairn on the other hand was thrilled to find an artist who was capable of bringing visual form to the teachings he cherished and had committed his life to promulgating.

Like Smit, Pitcairn was not a worldly or sophisticated man but unlike him he was a man of substantial means. He was also a nascent art collector following in the footsteps of his older brother Raymond who was in the process of amassing a collection of French medieval stained glass and sculpture.<sup>33</sup> In a 1921 letter to his sibling it is clear that Theo's tastes parallel Smit's.<sup>34</sup> He tells Raymond that the poignant and attenuated twelfth-century Burgundian crucifix in the Louvre is "the most beautiful thing I have ever seen" and mentions liking works by El Greco, Rembrandt and Cezanne.

Later in the same letter, in the same unequivocal spirit, Theo mentions being introduced to Smit by Pfeiffer and writes, "I feel certain that he is the greatest living artist, quite a young man. I wish he could come to B. A. and paint the Elder Bishop. I met him and liked him very much." The young pastor was on his way to South Africa but bought two large pastels from his new friend, the 1917 *Young Woman on a Couch* (Fig. 23) which is a fetching portrait of the adolescent Maryke Urban and the 1922 *Singing Angel* (Fig. 17). He sent both of these to his brother Raymond in Bryn Athyn. Prophetically, at the end of his letter Theo mentions in passing "I met the girl who is the subject of one of them."

Smit was very nervous about the works being shipped and several letters written for him by his English-speaking friends instruct Raymond on how to unpack them. In

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<sup>33</sup> The elder Pitcairn was overseeing the building of a Cathedral in the Swedenborgian community of Bryn Athyn, north of Philadelphia, and wanted the color and style of the windows (which were being designed and made on site) to imitate twelfth-century glass. On the same 1924 trip when he met Smit, Theo bought seven pieces of Egyptian and early Greek art from Joseph Brummer, one of the few dealers Raymond trusted.

<sup>34</sup> Letter Theodore Pitcairn to Raymond Pitcairn, August 6, 1921, Glencairn, Theodore Pitcairn File.

one Pfeiffer adds, "I can assure you, there are many people in this country who are convinced that these two pastels belong to the most remarkable works of art ever produced."<sup>35</sup> With such an effusive introduction it is not surprising that Raymond was somewhat disappointed when the pastels finally arrived; nevertheless, he did agree to bring Smit over to Bryn Athyn for an eight-month stay in 1923 to paint both the old and the new bishops.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the well-traveled Theo, Smit was a homebody so the commission was a mixed blessing for him. About traveling he wrote,

One is not oneself. Moving and traveling always mean dying a bit to me, because in the depth of my being I am a home bird and I love nothing more than a familiar landscape around which I can weave my daily thoughts. Travel, fatigue, meetings, in short all the usual ceremonies, waste the time of your dreams.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, he was entering a community that noticed outsiders, especially ones who came with advance, exuberant praise, a loyal entourage (the Urbans and their two daughters) and financial backing from a prominent family. When the bishops' portraits were finished the community of Bryn Athyn, and evidently some people in the international Swedenborgian community as well, were polarized as to their opinions of Smit's talent (Figs. 24, 25). The negative assessments were magnified by the existence of a superb portrait of the elder bishop, Willard F. Pendleton, that had been done fifteen years before by the well known American portraitist Thomas Anschutz (Fig. 26). Smit on the other hand, had little experience doing formal portraits. Therefore, when composing the image of W. F. Pendleton, he turned to El Greco's paintings of Spanish clergy and saints with their long, carefully positioned fingers, unnaturally turned heads,

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<sup>35</sup> Letter Ernst Pfeiffer to Raymond Pitcairn, November 27, 1921, Glencairn, Raymond Pitcairn File.

<sup>36</sup> Letter Raymond Pitcairn to Theodore Pitcairn, April 5, 1922, Glencairn, Theodore Pitcairn File.

<sup>37</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 13.

attenuated bodies and large open books for a precedent (Figs. 27, 28). This fact was not lost on the painter Jean Jacques Gailliard, a member of the Swedenborgian church in Belgium, who saw a photograph of the portrait of W.F. Pendleton. He wrote to an acquaintance in Bryn Athyn,

I have seen a photograph of Mr. Deltenre's presenting the portrait of the old bishop, and I do not appreciate this work at all. Does it resemble him or not? I cannot tell about this, not having seen the old bishop, but I can affirm that the painting (and of course I don't know anything about the colors in it) is not good at all. It is enough for me to examine the manner in which the hands have been portrayed, the manner also in which the drapery has been portrayed, and the poverty of design, and in its entire structure to make me instantly say that this painting is very bad. And why also have they thought about El Greco? Once again this is reminiscent of an old time.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, I deplore that this commission should have been given to a painter who is not in the New Church.<sup>39</sup>

Gailliard goes on to explain why *he* would have been a better choice though he concedes that Smit is "truly a genial person."

The portrait of Bishop Nathaniel D. Pendleton drew even more criticism.

According to his daughter, the family had not wanted Smit to do the portrait, judging from what they had seen of his previous work.<sup>40</sup> But they were close friends with Theo and the portrait was made in spite of their misgivings. They were not happy with the results. Though Smit's facile use of the pastel medium captures the luster of the Bishop's red velvet chasuble and white linen robe, his gaze, unlike those of Smit's angels, seems strained, an expression that many people in the church felt was inappropriate for their new leader.

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<sup>38</sup> Gailliard mentions earlier in the letter that the whole Bryn Athyn Cathedral project was inappropriate for a religion that was ostensibly forward looking.

<sup>39</sup> Letter Jean Jaques Gailliard to Mr. Iungerich, January 14, 1926. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Pendleton Ebert, interview by phone, June 30, 2000.

For Winfred Hyatt, who was the principle designer of stained glass for the Bryn Athyn Cathedral, the controversy around this imported artist warranted a printed commentary.<sup>41</sup> In a 1924 church periodical he wrote an article titled “The Art of Philippe Smit” in which he says that,

... Mr. Smit’s pictures have not been received with unmixed admiration, in fact there is quite a stir about them, breaking the peaceful monotony of Bryn Athyn’s everyday existence, and everywhere one goes the pictures are for the time being one of the chief topics of conversation. It was not known before that Bryn Athyn could be so violently partisan on such a subject as art.

Tuesday evening, the seventeenth of June, the Rev. E. Pfeiffer gave a lecture entitled Greco and Philippe. El Greco, to the minds of many of the moderns, the greatest painter of the Renaissance and Mr. Philippe Smit! The natural reaction from this to say the least, most generous comparison after one has seen the paintings which caused it to be made, is to indulge one’s sense of humor.<sup>42</sup>

However, even though Hyatt was later commissioned to do a second portrait of N. D. Pendleton, it was Smit (in a manner of speaking) who had the last laugh. On January 26, 1926 Theo Pitcairn married twenty-two year old Maryke Urban and the children they produced eventually became charming subjects for some of Smit’s most successful portraits. He made some of these on several subsequent visits to Bryn Athyn where he worked in a magnificent studio that Theo had built.<sup>43</sup> And finally, objections such as Gailliard’s were halted when Smit and all the Urbans were baptized into the New Church in 1926.

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<sup>41</sup> Hyatt had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Art with the American portraitist Thomas Anschutz.

<sup>42</sup> Winfred Hyatt, *The Bulletin*, Vol XII (November, 1924) 33-34, 42.

<sup>43</sup> The architects were the Romanesque revival firm of Mellor, Meigs and Howe.

## SMIT'S PORTRAITS

In 1927 some delicate studies of the Pitcairn's first child, Miriam, inscribed "Ma Chère Petite Miriam" show Smit's initial foray into capturing the softness of a child's plump features (Figs. 29, 29b). In his portrait of Karen Pitcairn, Raymond's daughter, done the same year, he stresses her prim delicacy by painting her in a pink dotted-Swiss dress in front of a sturdy, horizontal, green bench (Fig. 30). A large (4' x 6'), formal, pastel portrait of Miriam done circa 1933 is a classic period piece done in the late Shirley Temple era when tiered taffeta skirts and satin bows placed on one side of the head were ubiquitous (Fig. 31).

As Smit honed his skills for depicting the delicate vulnerability of children, his fondness for Mannerist elongation found a perfect fit in the lanky proportions of the growing Pitcairn children. The 1946 pastel of Deana (Fig. 32) is a delicate homage to adolescence: the not-yet-graceful hands dangle self-consciously at the end of her long arms; her drawn-out, hourglass shape seems insecure and uncomfortable in the tilted, ill-proportioned chair; even the horizon line is disjointed at either side of the picture. Smit had drawn the well-chiseled lips and striking brow some thirty years earlier, when he made the portrait of Maryke that Theo so favored. But unlike the earlier work, the young Deana seems unaware of her charm as she looks out at an unknown world.

In the 1938 portrait of Eshowe, Smit places the lithe young girl on a tall vertical chair and further accentuates her slender physique by the yellow vertical tailoring that runs down her brown dress (Fig. 33). Though the faraway look on her face was probably due to her absorption in the stories that were read to her as she posed, the portrait

ultimately is a tender study of childhood introspection. An earlier study of Eshowe's head captures her fawn-like fragility (Fig. 34).

The charcoal and pencil portraits that Smit did before the final colored versions reveal his close rapport with his models and for that reason are some of his most compelling works. An early study of Berendina and Lottie Urban shows his careful scrutiny of their features and delicate rendering of the texture of lace and jewelry (Fig. 35). Far more probing than the stiff 1928 portrait of his father seated in an oversized chair is the undated drawing that focuses solely on the man's pensive face (Figs. 36, 37). In it Smit closely observes the interplay of aging bone and sagging flesh. A similar veracity shows itself in the two separate, undated charcoals of Nicolaas and Berendina Urban (Fig. 38, 39). The latter is a study for the delightfully lavish, pastel portrait of the down-to-earth but nonetheless regal matriarch of the Pitcairn/Urban family, but it is much more imposing in its unadorned portrayal of her warm countenance (Fig. 40).

## SMIT AND VAN GOGH

Smit's library contains Julius Meier-Graefe's *Vincent*, one of the early monographs on van Gogh, which was most likely the source for his copy of the *Portrait of Doctor Gachet*.<sup>44</sup> In a 1913 letter Smit is enthusiastic about an exhibit of van Gogh's work that he saw in Amsterdam mentioning works from his Dutch period, works done under the inspiration of the Impressionists and those that showed a Japanese influence. But he especially liked the pen and ink drawings.<sup>45</sup> Several of Smit's ink drawings

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<sup>44</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent. A Biographical Study*. (London-New York: 1922).

<sup>45</sup> Letter Philippe Smit to Kasper Niehaus (?) 1913. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File. Most of Smit's letters exist in excerpted transcriptions that do not always record the recipient, place or date of the letter.

imitate the look of van Gogh in both their subject and style such as the undated study of a straggly tree lined lane leading to a wobbly church (Fig.41) and the undated view of a farm (41b). In the latter Smit creates texture with van Gogh-like dots and dashes. Smit probably went to the two major van Gogh exhibits held in Paris in 1927 and 1937. Several of Smit's works from the late 1920's show his admiration for his fellow Dutchman who like himself had spent so much time in France. Yet, a common heritage and benefactors named Theo are about the only things the two artists had in common. A comparison of each painter's rendition of sunflowers reveals Smit's preference for supple leaves and rounded forms that exude a cool contentment in contrast to the angst-charged angularity of the hot van Gogh florals that became expressionist icons for the twentieth-century (Figs. 42, 43). Yet Smit was pleased when a passerby acknowledged the similarity between the piece he was working on and the landscapes of van Gogh.<sup>46</sup> This piece may have been the pastel titled *The Reapers* that is rendered in short, energetic strokes and depicts a yellow hayfield under a thin ribbon of blue sky (Fig.44).

As he did with Zuloaga's El Grecos, Smit had occasion to study several of van Gogh's paintings in a private collection as Theo (Pitcairn) bought four of them: the lovely portrait of the young *Mlle. Ravoux*, *Sorrow*, a version of *The Sower* and a *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. In the nineteen-twenties Theo also bought four El Greco's: the portrait of El Greco's family, one of his Crucifixions, a head of St. Luke and a version of John the Baptist.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Johanna Arrimour interview at her home, Bryn Athyn, PA, February 22, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> The latter is now thought to be from the School of El Greco.

## FLORAL STILL LIFE AND LANDSCAPE WORKS

Smit's floral works draw enthusiastic praise from those who know his work.

Many are large for that genre, such as the 47" x 42" oil *Bouquet of Roses* that combines voluptuous pink roses with swags of prickly blackberries (Fig. 45). Berendina Urban was known for her splendid flower arrangements and the works are a tribute to their combined flare for color and drama. In a 1929 pastel a variety of species including wild roses, poppies, bachelor's buttons, golden rod, delphinium and iris form a refulgent cascade (Fig. 46). An undated piece using a similar combination makes a horizontal S-shaped sweep (Fig. 47). The vibrant colors Smit used were mixed specially for him.

A French pastel maker, Henri Rocher, who loved Smit's work, went to great trouble to make new shades for him, exactly those the painter wanted. He invented the process of putting pastels in tubes, to be applied with a brush like oils. Smit used this form of pastel as under painting. Before it was quite dry he covered it with the pastel stick; some of his pastels have many layers of color. This technique produced for him more light and brilliance, though it had the disadvantage of being fragile and perishable.<sup>48</sup>

Bright flower arrangements also appear in the corner of some of Smit's portraits such as the burst of poppies and Queen Anne's lace in the corner of the 1932 portrait *Maryke in the Park*. (Fig.48). In this case the exuberance of the flowers is in marked contrast to the brooding introspection of the young woman, a parody of Manet's *In the Greenhouse* (Fig.49). Flowers as they appear in nature are beautifully rendered in a delightful portrait of Maryke's sister Lottie lounging in a boat as she floats on a lily pond (Fig. 50).

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<sup>48</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 14.

Home movies of the Pitcairn/Urban clan show them at their home in the United States or on summer vacations in Holland and France. Theo bought several estates in the region of Seine-a-Marne, one of them a working farm. In a section of one movie, a common occurrence is recorded: Smit and Theo leave the bustling family after lunch and stroll off through the broom and heather. The picturesque area is captured in several of Smit's works such as *Heather and Broom in the Forest at Fontainebleau* and *Path in the Forest at Fontainebleau* (Figs. 51, 52).

In each section of the home movies there seems to be another child (Theo and Maryke had nine) with an increasing entourage of nannies and friends. Theo routinely moved this group back and forth across the Atlantic and the scenes of rides through French villages in large open touring cars or outings in the countryside capture the carefree and privileged life between the World Wars. Philippe Smit frequently appears amongst the children, often playful but rarely the center of attention.

#### SWEDENBORGIAN AND OTHER RELIGIOUS THEMES

The basis for the lifelong friendship between Smit and Theo was their earnest belief in a spiritual world and their mutual desire to fathom its depths. Smit's youthful, Symbolist-rooted longing for truth found comfort and fulfillment in his mature study of Swedenborg's works. The young man's literary hero Charles Baudelaire had a superficial grasp of Swedenborg's concept of correspondences but Smit rigorously

studied the Swede's writing on the subject.<sup>49</sup> Several of his beautifully bound, leather volumes of Swedenborg's writings have copious underlinings and marginal notes.<sup>50</sup>

Theo's lifelong study of the finer points of Swedenborg's writings is legendary in the Swedenborgian community. He wrote four books in addition to numerous sermons.<sup>51</sup> An idea of the nature of Smit's and Theo's discussions can be gleaned from the title of Theo's first monograph *The Book with the Seven Seals: The Bible or Word of God Unfolded and Explained* which was published in Dutch and English the same year Smit was baptized. The book includes reproductions of Smit's charcoal portrait of Theo in the frontispiece and a study for *Angel at Twilight* which depicts Maryke as the angel on the cover (Figs. 53, 54).<sup>52</sup>

As he read Swedenborg, Smit developed a new convention to show the importance he placed on a written revelation: he put his protagonists in a room that has an opened book on a shrine-like table. Often the book is near a lit candle, with a second type of light visible through an open window that is framed by a drawn-aside curtain. Smit paints his father in such a space (looking like an Old Testament prophet) gazing at a large open book, the heavenly content of which is personified by the angel who plays a harp in the foreground (Fig. 55). In the distance another angel stops to gaze down at the water as she crosses a bridge. Smit's 1931 *Woman by the Window* has similar elements

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<sup>49</sup> See Martha Gyllenhaal, *Swedenborg's Influence on the French Symbolist Painters* lecture given at the INCS Conference, University of Paris, Nanterre, June 23, 2000. Copy in Glencairn, Gauguin File.

<sup>50</sup> I was only able to quickly peruse these books. A more thorough study of Smit's notes, some of which appear to be color coded, may prove to be a valuable tool for understanding his paintings.

<sup>51</sup> *The Book Sealed with the Seven Seals; The Bible or Word of God Unfolded and Explained; The Ten Commandments; The Seven Days of Creation; and My Lord and My God*. In 1937 he was one of the founding members of The Lord's New Church which is Nova Hierosolyma, a group which broke away from the main body of the Swedenborgian church because of different interpretations of the nature of Swedenborg's writings.

<sup>52</sup> Since all angels are humans according to Swedenborg, they are often pictured without wings in Swedenborgian art.

and in addition the light in the sky outside is shining through a bank of clouds (Fig. 56).

This innovation may well be in response to discussions of clouds in Swedenborg's

*Apocalypse Explained* which Smit annotated. Swedenborg explains,

Behold, He cometh with the clouds, signifies that the Lord is about to reveal Himself in the Word through the internal sense ... That "clouds" signify Divine truths in ultimates is from appearances in the spiritual world. There clouds appear in various kinds of light; in the inmost or third heaven in a flaming light, in the middle or second heaven in a bright white light, and in the outmost or first heaven in a light more dense; and everyone there knows that they signify Divine truth from the Lord ...<sup>53</sup>

These three kinds of light appear in the last painting Smit ever made, *The Vacant Armchair* (Fig.57).

Smit made a few works in which Swedenborg himself appears (Fig. 58). He is shown sitting with a scroll in much the same way the Evangelists and Saints appear on Romanesque church facades. His squared head is also reminiscent of a twelfth-century convention. Theo and Smit were well acquainted with the medieval churches throughout France and they greatly admired the anonymity of the sculptors who made their art in the service of religion. Smit painted the cloister at Lys several times such as in his 1942 *Ecstatic Dance* where a male figure leaps among the lilies in the cloister garden (Fig. 59). A rare watercolor by the artist shows his fondness for the sturdy columns he found in a Romanesque crypt (Fig. 60).

Smit also owned several wooden statues from the period. Though damaged, they still exude the innocent strength typical of twelfth-century sculpture. One of them often appears in paintings of the artist's studio and is still in his family today (Fig. 61).<sup>54</sup> He

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<sup>53</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation) No. 36. Ver. 7

<sup>54</sup> Collection of Florence Castellani (Guillemin).

sold the other to Theo in 1924 who placed it in the studio he built in Bryn Athyn and later used it for the cover of his 1967 book *My Lord and My God* (Fig. 62).<sup>55</sup>

Along with a shared interest in religion, Smit and Theo possessed a similar philosophy of life and opinions about art. Both were idealists and viewed the world as being in spiritual decline. Smit wrote,

How difficult it is to bite into the bitter lemon of the ideal, but what would life be like without God and without beauty, which is the same. Art is a reflection of heavenly things. When I see the disorder in art it often makes me think how little remains in men, and how the little which does remain is attacked by evil. It is hell that seems to reign.<sup>56</sup>

And Theo wrote,

The sophisticated tend to hide their real feelings behind high-sounding words; but in the arts the real spirit of the age appears ... If anyone doubts the reality of hell, he needs only to regard what is called modern in all the arts to be convinced.<sup>57</sup>

## WORLD WAR II

The hell in the art world must have paled in comparison with the one the French endured during World War II. The Pitcairn/Urban family was split apart on two continents with no way of communicating. The members of the French household initially fled to the south of France, taking Smit's paintings with them. In order not to be separated, Smit married Berendina Urban, who had been divorced from her husband for some years. However, necessities were scarce in the Pyrenees so they eventually returned to the estate in Thoury-Férottes where they could grow their own food. The

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<sup>55</sup> Letter Raymond Pitcairn to Philippe Smit, September 19, 1924. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File, enclosed with the payment for the piece.

<sup>55</sup> Theodore Pitcairn, *My Lord and My God* (New York, Exposition Press, 1967).

<sup>56</sup> Niehaus, "Philippe Smit, Unknown Genius," 10.

<sup>57</sup> Pitcairn, *My Lord and My God*, 18.

property was occupied by German, and later American, officers. It was from the latter that Theo first heard of his family and friend's survival of the war.<sup>58</sup>

During the war Smit painted *The Nameless Tomb*, unusual in his oeuvre because of its conflicting diagonals and the sprawled position of the young man (Fig. 63). It shows a weeping woman who has brought flowers to place on a tomb. Her head is set off by the dark foliage in the background. The fallen soldier lying across the tomb is just awakening in the spiritual world. His eyes are opened and he reaches up to a smiling angel whose head is set off by clouds that have cleared to form a blue sky. The angel holds one of Swedenborg's books that teaches about the eternal nature of true love. In it he explains that when couples are parted by death, it is only temporary: they are reunited in heaven and love each other more tenderly than they did while on earth.<sup>59</sup> Smit reinforces this idea by placing a pair of turtledoves in the tree above the woman.

## AFTER WORLD WAR II

After the war the Pitcairn family could again visit France but their European travel was less frequent because of the purchase of their summer home in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The households in France were eventually sold and the contents divided among relatives or sold at auction. Smit's paintings, many of which Theo had purchased, were divided among the family but the majority were eventually shipped to the United States. Leo Hubscher, Theo's estate manager, was responsible for the safe transport of the works across the Atlantic as he had been during the war, no small task given the

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<sup>58</sup> Eshowe Pitcairn interview at her home, Bryn Athyn, PA, July 27, 2000.

<sup>59</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Conjugal Love* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1996) No 45-6.

quantity and large size of the pieces. It was he who made the first and subsequent inventories of Smit's work.

However, in 1948, before their departure from France, Theo arranged for a retrospective exhibition, a total of ninety-two works, in the Galerie Pierre Maus, in Paris. Smit's reserved nature made this endeavor difficult for him, and the trauma was compounded when the truck that was transporting the works was in an accident. Several paintings were damaged and required quick retouching which proved extremely upsetting to the artist.

The catalog from the exhibition has a forward by Le General Requin who singles out Smit's "incomparable pastels" and comments on his expression of "the strongest emotions and deepest and finest thoughts." It ends with an unequivocal statement about Smit that is typical of those who believed in his greatness.

He is, in the time in which we live, the only example of a true artist who has protected his personality from outside influences and who has known how to avoid everything that might put a blemish on the purity of his art.<sup>60</sup>

The four reviews of the exhibit from Parisian newspapers are favorable and several echo Requin's opinion that Smit sheltered himself from outside influences. The *Point de Vue* reported, "The personality of the painter is free from foreign influence and is completely pure."<sup>61</sup> *L' Aube* commented, "This painter in his solitude has forged a considerable body of work, apart from any school, from any influence," and, "They seem out of time,

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<sup>60</sup> Le General Requin, *Philippe Smit, An Exhibition of Works by a Twentieth Century Dutch Master* (Springfield: 1957).

<sup>61</sup> *Pont de Vue*. February 12, 1948. This review exists in the form of a translated excerpt. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File.

away from all dogmatism and bathing in a sovereign serenity under the scrutiny of their author.”<sup>62</sup>

These are curious statements given Smit’s life-long study of the great French masters and his intentional and obvious appropriation of artists such as el Greco and van Gogh. Yet an exhibition of this size in the capital of the country, by an artist virtually unknown to French critics, evidently seemed unprecedented. That it had “points in common with Odilon Redon”<sup>63</sup> and was “impregnated with metaphysics”<sup>64</sup> shows that the critics saw Smit as being out of the mainstream of the modern movement.

Sadly, the stress of the exhibition, not to mention the residual trauma of the war, did not sit lightly with Smit. A few months after the exhibit was over, he died suddenly in Thoury-Férottes.

An article from a local paper published a reproduction of his painting *Angel at Twilight* and gives a glimpse into how the aging Smit was viewed by the people in his town. The headline reads “Un grand peintre est mort.”

... At times an elderly gentleman with kind eyes, talking little, left his “paradise” for a short walk. For the inhabitants of the village Mr. Smit; for others a stranger, for a few privileged ones a magnificent artist ...

It is difficult to compare him with other painters. Using mostly pastel, he brought forth from this material extraordinary and brilliant tone, and anguished creatures, vagrants and angels.

I think his *Merry-Go-Round*, [64a] which renders so well the heavy sadness of the traveling shows, is of an almost surrealistic atmosphere and his *Ferns* [64b] are worthy of Courbet. Ph. Smit called himself a “symbolist”, which explains the literary aspect of some of his paintings however, he seems to me to be rather in line with the great German romantics. Real masterpieces like his *Portrait of the Artist* with a

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<sup>62</sup> L’Aube, February 11, 1948. This review exists in the form of a translated excerpt. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File.

<sup>63</sup> One of the major French Symbolist painters who like Smit did colorful pastel florals.

<sup>64</sup> L’Aube, February 12, 1948. This review exists in the form of a translated excerpt. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File.

red beret [Fig. 64c] or his *Portrait of a Zulu Minister* [Fig. 65] belong among the richest paintings.<sup>65</sup>

#### EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLICATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Theo's deep belief in the importance of Smit's work took on new momentum after his friend's death because he was convinced that these spiritually-based paintings presented a healthy alternative to what he saw as the godless art of the modern movement. Theo remained confident that Smit would take his rightful place among the great masters if his work became known to a wider audience. To help spread the knowledge of his friend and protégé, Theo set about to produce an illustrated book that would document Smit's life and art. In order to assure accurate reproduction of the vibrant colors in Smit's works, he sought out what was then state-of-the-art color photography and sent his nephew, Michael Pitcairn, who was a professional photographer, to Europe to record the works.<sup>66</sup> For the text he turned to Smit's life-long champion Kasper Niehaus. This was a logical choice since Niehaus had corresponded with Smit for years and had written about him before. But the journalist's circuitous writing style was problematic in a full-length biography, and Theo had to bring in an editor to keep the manuscript focused.<sup>67</sup> His close involvement in the project is evident in his marginal notations and deletions in his own hand.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> This newspaper clipping is in the Philippe Smit file in Glencairn but the name and date of the French newspaper has been cut off.

<sup>66</sup> In a letter (Leo A. Hubscher to Raymond Pitcairn, June 4th 1952, Glencairn, Philippe Smit File) Hubscher thanks Raymond for inquiring into the possibilities of selling reproductions of Smit's works. The elder Pitcairn brother had put Hubscher in contact with a retailer from Sessler's book store in Philadelphia. Though interested, she told Hubscher that it would be difficult to sell reproductions of a totally unknown artist. Hubscher ends the letter by saying, "I realize more and more the difficulties we are up against ..."

<sup>67</sup> The manuscript was written in Dutch and translated by Leo A. Hubscher.

<sup>68</sup> Pitcairn wisely crossed out extraneous paragraphs and in a few cases indicated in the margins that the information in the text was "from a letter." Unfortunately this is the only documentation supporting that

The final version of Niehaus' original manuscript was translated by Hubscher and revised by Marjorie Bell in 1955. Yet, though the text and the photographs were complete, the book was never published. Apparently the cost of color reproductions proved too prohibitive even for the generous Theo. Eventually, Smit's loyal benefactor used the text and reproductions as the basis for several other more modest publications.

One of these was the catalog that accompanied a 1957 exhibition in the Museum of Fine Art in Springfield, Massachusetts. Theo's dream to introduce Smit to an international audience was realized in this chronologically arranged exhibit that featured thirty-six pieces whose dates ranged from 1912 to 1944. Though the text is based on Niehaus, his unabashed admiration is replaced by a more professional perspective from the museum's director. Frederick Robinson draws the public's attention to Smit's creativity and life-long dedication to his craft. He comments on the unprecedented use of pastels and his use of brilliant color, and acknowledges Smit's use of symbolism and spiritual content.<sup>69</sup>

Theo made sure that Dutch newspapers knew of the exhibit. A clipping from the Amsterdam daily the *Telegraaf* is a favorable review with the headline "Philippe Smit, the antithesis of abstract art." The Dutch paper reproduces his *Homage to Debussy* (Fig. 66).<sup>70</sup> From an insert in the article which includes summaries of reviews from two

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the text is taken from anything other than oral accounts. See Theodore Pitcairn Files, Feodor Pitcairn collection.

<sup>69</sup> Frederick B. Robinson, *Philippe Smit, An Exhibition of Works by a Twentieth Century Dutch Master* (Springfield: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1957).

<sup>70</sup> Philippe Smit, "Tegenpool der abstracte Kunst." *De Telegraaf*, Woensdag, 8 January, 1958.

Springfield newspapers, an idea of what American critics wrote can be determined. They mention Smit's "virtuoso" use of pastels<sup>71</sup> and his "religious spirit."<sup>72</sup>

Shortly after the Springfield exhibition, Theo negotiated with the Philadelphia Museum of Art to have an exhibition of his private collection of master works. The museum already had his Rembrandt self-portrait on a long-term loan and he offered to lend the rest of his collection, Monet's *Garden at Sainte-Adresse*, four paintings by van Gogh, several by El Greco, a Sisley, some Greek figurines and of course his collection of Smits.<sup>73</sup> It was a large show of forty-three paintings, most of which were Smit's, who was given a room to himself though a few of his works were hung next to the more famous paintings for comparison. When arranging the dates for the exhibition, it is clear that Theo wanted as many people as possible to see Smit's work. He asked that the show run into the fall so that people would have a chance to attend when they returned from their summer vacations.<sup>74</sup> He also gave the addresses of three Dutch newspapers to the museum to insure coverage in Smit's homeland.<sup>75</sup>

A review by Dennis Leon in a Philadelphia newspaper is an example of why Theo disliked art critics (Fig. 67). Leon prejudices his audience by pointing out that Smit is Theo's father-in-law then adds,

Smit uses a style of poignant representation generously referred to in a catalog of two years ago as "allied to Tolstoy's definition of the arts." That his paintings do communicate is unquestionable, but what they communicate amid their sentiment and thin drama is scarcely a revelatory investigation of human experience. If ever one wanted to clarify criteria

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<sup>71</sup> Donald Mac Phee, *The Springfield Daily News*.

<sup>72</sup> Wayne C. Smith, *The Springfield Union*.

<sup>73</sup> This portrait is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's permanent collection and has been reattributed to Jan Lievens

<sup>74</sup> Letter Theo Pitcairn to R. Sturgis Ingersoll, January 15, 1960. Archives Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>75</sup> Letter Theo Pitcairn to Henry Marceau, May 4, 1960. Archives Philadelphia Museum of Art.

by which work should be judged, the dispersion of the Smit work among those of El Greco and Rembrandt will at least remove the notion that a personal or individual scale is even relevant.<sup>76</sup>

Leon's assessment is not without precedence though it is even more caustic than Hyatt's opinion printed some forty years earlier. The *Philadelphia Museum Bulletin* is more polite though the entry about the exhibit is short and no reproductions are included.<sup>77</sup>

A loan of Theo's master works to New York's Metropolitan Museum in 1965 may well have been a final attempt to pave the way for an acceptance of Smit's work in a larger venue. But the Philadelphia showing of Smit's work was the last during Theo's lifetime. Smit's loyal benefactor died in 1973. In the margin of an inventory drawn up to divide the Smit paintings among his children, Theo says that he wants several of the works around him until he dies. This list includes an early self-portrait of Smit. (Fig. 67b).<sup>78</sup>

After Theo's death, the paintings remained for the most part in the chapel and meeting hall of The Lord's New Church in Bryn Athyn and in the homes of the Pitcairn/Urban families. Their large formats sometimes necessitated the addition of special rooms to house them. Interspersed with many of the sturdy antiques from Theo's estates in France, Smit's works tie the various homes together, distinct landmarks of their shared heritage.

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<sup>76</sup> The date and name of the newspaper has been cut off, but it was either the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* or the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Glencairn, Philippe Smit File.

<sup>77</sup> *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, Summer 1961, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Theodore Pitcairn Files, Theodore Pitcairn collection.

In 1988 new interest in Smit developed when Glencairn,<sup>79</sup> a museum on the campus of The Academy of the New Church, included seven of Smit's works in its exhibition titled *New Light: Ten Artists Influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg*.<sup>80</sup> The project was in conjunction with an interdisciplinary conference *Swedenborg Symposium '88*, which drew scholars from all over the world to speak on a wide range of topics relating to the Swede's influence. For the first time, Smit was seen in a context that was sympathetic to the fundamental message of his art. Juxtaposed with other Swedenborgian artists, instead of the great masters whose style Smit had imitated, the work took its rightful place in an emerging genre.

In the last decade of the twentieth century Glencairn acquired fifteen of Smit's works for its permanent gallery of artists influenced by Swedenborg. The archive associated with the gallery is a constantly expanding research facility that has three hefty files on Smit. In 1993 the museum held a small exhibition to mark the addition of Smit's *The Celestial Army* to its collection (Fig. 68).

Interest in Smit has also arisen in France. In the summer of 2000 the Musée Municipal, Noyers-sur-Serein Yonne borrowed works from members of the Urban family and presented over a dozen of Smit's works to the public. A colored brochure including five of Smit's works reintroduced the works to the French public.

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<sup>79</sup> Glencairn is the former home of Raymond and Mildred Pitcairn and houses a collection of religious art from different ages including his impressive collection of medieval stained glass and sculpture.

<sup>80</sup> Martha Gyllenhaal, ed. *New Light, Ten Artists Influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg*, 1988.

## CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this paper will aid and inspire other people who are interested in Smit to do further research. Study of his annotated books would be a fruitful field to peruse. In addition, a concerted effort to gather any extant letters or documents into a central archive would allow for a more complete synthesis of the existing information. The Glencairn Museum is an ideal center for depositing this data because it has a staff that can catalog and make documents accessible to anyone who is interested.

The career of the expatriate Dutchman is easier to study than most of the artists in Adriaan Venema's study thanks to a handful of people who championed Smit, took care to preserve his work and write his biography. The nature of Smit's personal contacts with the artists and events of his times make him a novel subject for art historians, a window through which to view the large sweep of history. In addition, his values and his relationship with Theo Pitcairn are fascinating components in the life of an artist who is eminently worth studying.

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### Abbreviation Key

CP – Corrine Pichon	DPD – Deana Pitcairn Duncan
EPP – Eshowe Pitcairn Pennink	GM – Glencairn Museum
LNC – Lord’s New Church	MM – Mimi Mitchell
MP – Mark Pennink	SYH – Siri Y. Hurst

WORKED AS A JEWELER SCULPTING FIGURINES until		1911	
STUDIED AT ACADEMIES		1910	
VISITED MONET		1911	
<i>Maryke au Chateau de Pierrot</i>	Pastel	c. 1912	MM
<i>View of Paris</i>	Pastel	c. 1912	MP
EXHIBITION OF H. VAN DAALHOFF IN AMSTERDAM		1913	
EXHIBITION OF VAN GOGH IN AMSTERDAM		1913	
<i>Family Portrait</i>	Pastel	1913	
<i>Flowers</i>	Pastel	1913	
<i>Maryke Pitcairn as A Child</i>	Pastel	1914	
<i>Berendina Urban</i>	Pastel	1914	MP
<i>House of Dreams</i>	Oil	earlier period	
<i>Self Portrait</i>	Oil	c. 1916	
<i>Le Banissement du Paradis</i>	Pastel	1916	CP
<i>The Pilgrim (GM)</i>			
<i>Emma Combing her Hair</i>	Oil	1917	SYH
<i>Les deux Soeurs</i>		1917	
<i>The Artist and his Sister</i>	Oil	1917	
<i>The Prodigal Child</i>	Oil	1917	
<i>Jeune Fille au Divan</i>		1917	
<i>Sister of the Artist with a Shawl</i>	Oil	1917	
<i>L’allée ou le vent pleure</i>		1917	
<i>Scene in Paris with Fountain</i>	Drawing	1917	
<i>The Innocent</i>	Oil	1918	
<i>Emma at the Harp</i>	Oil	1918	
<i>Mrs. Urban Bathing a Child</i>	Pastel	1919	MP
VISITED ZULOAGA TO SEE HIS EL GRECOS		1920	
<i>Homage a Maurice Rollinat</i>		1920	
<i>Forest in Fontainebleau</i>	Pastel	c. 1920	

<i>Young Woman with a Fan</i>	Pastel	c.1920	EPP
VISIT FROM PICASSO WHO HE KNEW EARLIER		1922	
<i>Singing Angel</i>	Pastel	c. 1922	
<i>Bouquet of Flowers</i>	Pastel	1923	
<i>Homage to Chopin</i>	Pastel	1924	
<i>Fontainebleau with rocks &amp; gentians</i>	Oil	1924	
<i>Rev. Theodore Pitcairn (head)</i>	Charcoal	1924	GM
<i>Rev. Theo Pitcairn (in suit)</i>	Pastel	1924	MP
<i>N. D. Pendleton</i>	Pastel	1924	GM
<i>Bishop W. F. Pendleton</i>	Oil	1925	LNC
<i>Study for Angel at Twilight</i>	Drawing	1925	
<i>Study for Angel at Twilight</i>	Oil	1925	
<i>Portrait of Emma Steiger Asplundh</i>	Charcoal	1925	
<i>In the Forest of Fontainebleau</i>	Pastel	1925	
<i>The Lady of the Manor</i>	Pastel	1925	
BAPTIZED INTO SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH		1926	
<i>Portrait of Rev. Pitcairn</i>	Oil	1926	LNC
<i>Path in the forest of Fontainebleau</i>	Pastel	1926	
VAN GOGH EXHIBIT IN PARIS		1927	
<i>Two studies of Miriam as an infant</i>		1927	MM
<i>Karen Pitcairn</i>	Pastel	1927	
<i>The Rev. Theo. Pitcairn (in robe)</i>	Pastel	1927	
<i>Lottie Urban</i>	Pastel	1927	
<i>Mrs. Urban</i>	Pastel	1928	
<i>Portrait de Pere de L'Artist</i>	Pastel	1928	
<i>Portrait of Rev. Moffat</i>	Pastel	1928	CP
<i>En Bateau</i>		1928	
<i>Vieux moulin a St-Ange</i>	Pastel	1928	MP
<i>Portrait of the Father of the Artist</i>	Pastel	1928	
<i>Homage to Rollinat</i>	Pastel	1928	
<i>Nicolaas H. Urban</i>	Drawing	c. 1928*	In the
<i>Forest at Fontainebleau</i>		1928	
<i>La Petite Fille a la fleur</i>		1929	MP
<i>Bouquet de Fleurs (Red Poppies, Pink Roses, One Yellow Iris)</i>	Pastel	1929	
<i>Automne en Foret</i>		1929	

<i>Annunciation</i>	Pastel?	1930	
<i>Head of a Fawn</i>	Drawing	ca. 1930	SYH
<i>Flowers and Branches of Shrubs</i>	Pastel	1930	
<i>Trunk of a man</i>	Drawing	1930	
<i>Centaur</i>	Drawing	1930	
<i>Self Portrait</i>	Oil	1930	
<i>The Sacred Dance</i>	Pastel	1931	CP
<i>Madone a la fenêtre</i>	Pastel	1931	
<i>Stone Bridge with Guinea Hens</i>	Oil	1931	CC
<i>Man Kneeling</i>	Drawing	ca 1931	MP
<i>Boats at Ploubazlauec</i>	Pastel	1931	
<i>The Abbey of the Thoronet</i>	Pastel	1932	JP
<i>Pegasus, 1932</i>	Oil	1932	
<i>Maryke in the Park</i>	Pastel	1932	DPD
<i>Angel at Twilight</i>	Oil	1932	GM
<i>Miriam Pitcairn</i>	Pastel	c. 1932	MM
SMIT EXHIBIT IN AMSTERDAM		1933	
<i>Rocks at Reclose in Spring</i>		pre 1933	
<i>Trees Among Ferns Autumn (title MG)</i>	Pastel	1933	
<i>Cistercian Columns (title MG)</i>	Pastel	1933	
<i>Floral with Pansies, Primrose in blue &amp; white pot (title MG)</i>	Pastel	1933	
STAYED IN BERGEN- AAN ZEE FOR 3 MONTHS		1934	
<i>Autumn in the Forest</i>	Pastel	1934	TPH
<i>Rocks and Heather in Flower-In the Forest at Fontainebleau</i>	Pastel	ca.1935	
<i>Dutch Farm</i>	Watercolor	ca. 1936	
VAN GOGH EXHIBIT PARIS		1937	
<i>Le Vagabond</i>		ca 1937	
<i>Eshowe Pitcairn</i>	Drawing /Pastel	ca. 1938	EPP
<i>Study for painting (previously listed)</i>	Drawing	ca. 1938	EPP
<i>Le Concert d'Ange</i>	Pastel	1938	MM
<i>Gloria Hubscher</i>	Drawing	1938	
<i>Eshowe Pitcairn</i>		1939	EPP
<i>The Celestial Army</i>	Oil	1939	GM

<i>Meditation</i>		later period
<i>Soupir (Melancholy)</i>		
<i>L'Ange du Crepuscule (Angel at Twilight)</i>	Oil	“same period in Laren”
<i>La Tombe du Jour</i>		during WW II
<i>L'Après-midi d'un Faune</i>	Pastel study	
<i>L'Après-midi d'un Faune</i>	“Major work”	
<i>Recueillement (Contemplation)</i>	Pastel	
<i>Homage a Debussy</i>	Oil	1941
<i>Danse Extatique</i>	Oil	1942
<i>Yoked oxen</i>	Pastel	1944
<i>Concert of Angels</i>	Pastel?	1944
<i>The Carrousel</i>	Pastel	1945
<i>Pastoral</i>	Pastel	1945
<i>Springtime- inspired by Pastoral Symphony</i>		1945
<i>Deana Pitcairn</i>	Pastel	1946
<i>Studio scene with El Greco painting</i>	Pastel	1947
<i>The Vacant Arm Chair</i>	Oil	1948 “last work”

## UNDATED WORKS

<i>Bouquet de Roses</i>		
<i>Portrait de Mme. Smit en Meditation</i>	Pastel	
<i>Portrait of Mrs. Smit</i>		
<i>Berendina and Lottie Urban</i>	Drawing	EPP
<i>Portrait de L'artiste</i>		
<i>L'artiste au Beret Rouge</i>	Pastel	
<i>Etude pour Vision du Seigneur sur un Cheval Blanc</i>	Drawing	
<i>Etude pour Femme a la Fenetre</i>	Drawing	
<i>Portrait de Mlle, Gloria Hubscher</i>	Drawing	
<i>Etude pour L'apres-midi d'un Faun (x2)</i>	Drawing	
<i>Deux Anges se Tenant par la Main</i>	Drawing	
<i>Berendina Urban study</i>	Drawing	GM
<i>Circus</i>		
<i>The Lord is My Shepherd</i>		
<i>Jacob and Esau</i>		
<i>Residence "Joigny"</i>		
<i>Three Angels with Instruments</i>		
<i>Study of men on horseback- inspired by music from Debussy</i>		
<i>Study of Angel with Trumpet</i>	Drawing	
<i>Female nude</i>		
<i>Standing Knitting Angel</i>		
<i>Still Life - Clematis</i>		
<i>Standing Angel with Doves</i>		
<i>Two Pitcairn Sisters</i>	Drawing	
<i>Study of Angel with Trumpet</i>		
<i>Portrait of a Girl (Lottie?)</i>		
<i>Study for Vision du Seigneur sur un Cheval blanc</i>		
<i>Fontainebleau</i>		
<i>Still life</i>		
<i>Still life</i>		
<i>Through a window with Lottie Urban</i>		
<i>Still life</i>		
<i>La Chatelaine</i>	Pastel	
<i>L'Ame de la Riviere</i>	Oil	
<i>Tete de Mme. Smit (avec des dentelles and Chale)</i>	Drawing	
<i>Vue de L'etude</i>	Pastel	
<i>Nature Morte (Citrons, Assiette)</i>	Oil	
<i>Etude pour le Soupir</i>	Drawing	
<i>Les Deux Soeurs (Maryke et Lottie)</i>	Pastel	
<i>Reclose avec des Arbres Fruitiers en Fleurs</i>	Pastel	
<i>Etude for Le Vagabond</i>	Drawing	
<i>Eglise dans les Champs en Hollande</i>	Pastel	

<i>Chateau du Brouchet</i>	Pastel	
<i>Portrait de l'Artiste en Pastel Blanc</i>	Drawing	MM
<i>Les Lavandieres du Paradis</i>	Oil	
<i>La Source</i>	Oil	LNC
<i>Ascension dans une Nuit Etoile</i>	Oil	
<i>Les Tziganes de L'eau</i>	Oil	
<i>Roses dans un Vase</i>	Oil	
<i>La Chatelaine</i>	Oil	
<i>Clair de Lune a Reclose</i>	Oil	
<i>The Path where the Wind Cries</i>	Oil	
<i>Sail Boats on Lake</i>	Pastel	
<i>Rocks with Gentian</i>	Pastel	
<i>Khiser Kronen</i>	Oil	
<i>Village of Reclose</i>	Oil	
<i>Vision d'une Ascention</i>	Oil	
<i>Fenetre dans le Studio avec le Fauteuil Vide</i>	Oil	
<i>Apparition</i>	Oil	
<i>Danse Extatique dan la Cour des Lys sur le Brasier Ardent</i>	Oil	
<i>Le Tombeau sans Nom</i>	Oil	
<i>Nuit d'Ete</i>	Pastel	
<i>En Bateau</i>		
<i>Mere et Fille Regardant Lampions</i>	Pastel	CP
<i>Le Manoir du Songe</i>	Oil	
<i>L'Archange Dechu</i>	Oil	
<i>Ange Se Promenant dans la Lumiere Doree</i>	Pastel	
<i>Pieta</i>	Oil	LNC
<i>Anemones</i>		
<i>Bouquet de Fleurs dans un Vase Gris</i>		
<i>Bouquet de Fleurs</i>		
<i>Vase with Roses</i>	Pastel	
<i>Fleurs dans un Vase</i>		
<i>Maryke a la Rose</i>	Oil	
<i>Head of Grandfather Smit</i>	Drawing	GM
<i>Mrs. Smit Bathing a Baby</i>	Pastel	
<i>Portrait de l'Artiste au Livre Jaune</i>		
<i>Portrait de l'Artiste au Palet</i>	Oil	
<i>Portrait de Mme. Smit</i>	Pastel	