

# MISSISSIPPI

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82-year-old Collins artist Gertrude Smith's journey of discovery has led her from the primitive to the abstract

BY KARIN LEPERI

Gertrude Smith is an artist who paints, sculpts, and sketches as an expression of the heart, an extension of her soul. She also writes stories and pens poetry. "I believe true creativity comes from within the heart and soul and speaks a universal language," says the 82-year-old Collins resident. "To me, art and writing are adventures that satisfy an ageless drive for self-expression."



But there is more to her motivation to create. In that self-expression, Smith hopes that people see the good in her work and, at the same time, the good in the world. "It is my wish that those who view my art will be lifted from a common ground to a higher plane of artistic enjoyment," she says. She also wants them to see that the past is the future.

A conundrum, perhaps? Hardly. For Smith believes in honoring the past and the future in order to capture the spirit of the present. Emphasizing texture, design, and color on her canvases, Smith captures the essence of her environment and emotional connection.

As a 10-year-old child, Smith was offered a box of crayons as a reward for milking the cows. That simple treasure ultimately set her on an artistic journey that continues today. "...I can still smell those colors!" she says. "They caused me to inhale the essence of color...to begin a dream that would embrace a lifetime."



PHOTOS COURTESY RED BARN GALLERY

## COLORS of the South

Her past produced paintings of primitive images of rural Southern life, a celebration of simpler times and places. They were about form and boundaries, about convention and conservatism, reflecting farm scenes, flowers, and trees; they were about society and the expectations of society for a married Southern woman with a husband and four children. Yet her work focused not on the dreary but on nature, her faith, and the joys of childhood, sweet memories of long and lazy summer days, playful games, and family gatherings. That was then.

Along came the '70s. With the children grown and leaving home, Smith had more time for her cherished art, to stretch, to nourish her other side. "I had to get busy with my dream because it had lain dormant long enough! I began to paint with a vengeance—a feeling of coming home." But as a self-taught artist, she felt as if she were on a plateau; she was ready for the next level.

Visitors and art lovers—and even regional TV crews (top)—make pilgrimages to see Gertrude Smith and her some 1,000 paintings in the Collins studio and gallery she converted from an old barn (left).

## COLORS OF THE SOUL



Smith's body of work includes a variety of artistic styles, from the primitive, shown in "What's Your Trade?", a painting now owned by U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (top, left), to the dreaminess of the watercolor painting "Moonlight Waters" (above), to the bold colors and sharply defined shapes of one of her more recent mixed-media works, "Hopes and Dreams" (left).

The catalyst for her change was the Mississippi Art Colony in Utica, where she diversified into mixed media, experimenting with various techniques and styles. Smith speaks fondly of her time at the Art Colony: "During these few years, I have found an inner core where springs of living vision exist. I feel compelled to express these conceptions in my art."

It was during this time that she embraced the abstract as a way to honor her own soul. The outcome? Her paintings are about intangible feelings and emotions, a sense of place—subjective interpretations of color and design that use eggshells, torn paper collages, pieces of rope, sewing needles, or anything around the house as fair game. She often uses cake decorating tools, remnants of her former life as a baker, to create these unique pieces. "I love texture," Smith says, "like sand, rocks, or rope. It helps pop out the painting when you look at it."

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When painting in her Collins studio and gallery space, dubbed the Red Barn Gallery and Studio because of its beginnings as a cattle barn, Smith says she enters a state of mental detachment that is about something bigger than the individual—it is about community. “She goes into a trance but somehow is able to tap into common themes going on in the world,” says managing partner and granddaughter Johanna Burlingham. “But what’s strange is that Gertrude doesn’t watch television and she doesn’t go to the movies. It’s happening on a deeper level.”

This new style is meeting with much approval in the art world. “Her use of color and materials and the qualities of composition and scale are wonderful,” says Stephen Rosenberg, co-owner of Rosenberg & Kaufman Fine Art Gallery in New York. “Everything is where it’s supposed to be. It makes sense.” Kathy Dyess, director of the Lucile Parker Gallery on the Hattiesburg campus of William Carey College, adds, “Her artistic journey is indeed a treasure trove of visual beauty.”

Smith has exhibited in several juried and private shows, winning numerous awards and recognitions in the process. But things really took off when, in July 2003, she formed a partnership with Burlingham under the banner of Red Barn Gallery. The partnership has kick-started her art career, since she can fully concentrate on painting while her granddaughter handles the business side. There are more than 1,000 inventoried items in the gallery, with an average of 100 new paintings being added each year.

The accolades have continued to come in: In 2003, Smith received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Mississippi Poetry Society. Last year, she was given a creativity award as an “Ageless Hero” by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi, and she was honored at the Governor’s Mansion by the National Museum of Women in the Arts’ Mississippi Committee.

Among the many admirers of Smith’s artwork is U.S. Senator Thad Cochran. A favorite in his collection, “What’s Your Trade?,” shows two lines of children engaging in a childhood game of guessing jobs.

“My visit with Mrs. Smith at her studio near Collins was a real treat,” says

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Senator Cochran. “You forget immediately that you are in a barn. I have one of her early works, circa 1979, I think, on display in my office in Jackson. I plan to move it to my Appropriations Committee office in the U.S. Capitol so visitors there can enjoy the scene of children in brightly colored clothes playing a game that was popular in our state many years ago.”

“There is no doubt that Mississippi should be quite proud of this amazing native daughter,” says Rosenberg. “...Gertrude Smith is a remarkable and authentic American woman who teaches us that talent and creativity combined with a humanistic spirit is both a state of mind and a state of grace—at any age.”

Ever striving to capture her beloved South on canvas, Smith intends for her newest project to illustrate the changes she has seen in her lifetime, from horse-drawn buggies to the Internet. Smith hopes this multi-canvas undertaking, with the working title “A Lifetime of Southern Images,” will be her legacy for generations to come. “I want to capture the progressive spirit of the South,” she says. “I want to capture the resiliency and adaptability, while honoring both the past and the present.”

Still another new project will combine visual art with auditory verse. By pairing her paintings with her poetry, exhibitions will offer a more complete sensory experience. The union complements the parts yet creates a different wholeness.

Meanwhile, Smith is painting with fervor, knowing that there are thousands of paintings still inside her. From crayons to abstracts—her journey has been about growth, about developing the inner self. If you are passing through Collins, be sure to stop by and see this remarkable woman—artist, poet, writer, and sculptor. The detour will be memorable. m

The Red Barn Gallery is located on Percy Smith Lane, off Highway 49 in Collins. The gallery is open Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and other times by appointment. For more information, call 601/765-1133 or see [www.artbygertrude.com](http://www.artbygertrude.com).