

# Daniel Smith

## A Study in Versatility

BY MICHAEL SCOTT-BLAIR

If anyone wanted to follow in the footsteps of someone skilled in making a handsome living in the oft changing and sometimes fickle world of professional art, he or she might do well to study the path taken by the pragmatic and practical Daniel Smith. Today, Smith lives in a beautiful home set in the hills surrounding Bozeman, Mont., enjoying the life he wants—as a respected and acclaimed artist, painting that which gives him the most pleasure in art—the wildlife of the world.

But it certainly wasn't always that way for Smith, whose versatility covers almost the full range of talents involving brushes, paints and canvas. "As market demands have shifted, I have reinvented myself four times over recent decades, changing from a commercial artist to one who focused on duck stamps, then to limited edition prints on virtually any subject, and finally to my ultimate passion—wildlife fine art," he says.

Daniel Smith looks like he is being stalked by the leopard in his painting *Fatal Attraction* (acrylic, 28 x 36").



Through it all, Smith, a self-confessed “control freak,” has kept a sharp focus on the two most important forces in his life—his family and his art. He and his wife, Liz, have three children, two girls and a boy, and the family’s comfort, well-being and security have been the major driving force in his life. To that end, he has taken a long view of his art, guiding it along a double path. On the first path, he has watched the art market almost as carefully as a stockbroker tracks Wall Street, making certain he was precisely placed to take the best advantage of whichever way the art world moved, thereby guaranteeing the security of his family. And on the second path, he spent all his free time nurturing his skills and polishing his talent, knowing the day would come when those skills and talents would guide him to the ranks of the top artists in his field, with the freedom to call their own shots.

### *Early Works Track Progress*

Many artists say they look back at some of their early creations with a measure of horror, wishing they could gather them all together and have a ceremonial bonfire—but not Smith. “I can look at my earlier works and track my progress. Each piece shows me where my development as an artist was at that point in time; I can see how and where I grew,” he says. Smith refers to one of his earlier paintings, which now hangs in the laundry room (there is another story in there somewhere), and to him that piece is just one marker on his orderly track to excellence. “When

you look at an artist’s early efforts, don’t look at the subject of the piece, look at the artist’s work. When you compare an individual’s work over a period of time, it will tell where the artist has been and where the artist is going. For the artist, it is a learning curve well worth studying,” he says.

Smith is not one of those artists who fell out of the cradle while reaching for pencil and paper. Yes, he was considered to have artistic ability in grade school—“I was the one who drew the Christmas tree on the classroom blackboard in fifth grade, and I sold my first piece in sixth grade. My aunt bought it for a dollar, but I don’t think she knew I did it. I still have it somewhere, but it is not really a painting. It looks like some kind of wading bird made up of cutout pieces of paper, rather like a mosaic.”

One of his first introductions to wildlife art was through his father, who used to burn wildlife scenes into false tabletops that were put on top of regular tables as an attractive surface for games of poker. It was also his father who introduced him to the wonders of wildlife, taking him on hunting and fishing trips around the family home in Mankato, Minn. “My father, now in his 80s, is still an avid outdoorsman,” Smith says.

Throughout high school, Smith recalls doing some watercolors, but he did not actually complete scenes and renderings. “I was into cars big time. I graduated from high school and moved to Phoenix, where I got a job as a mechanic for work and for fun. Actually, my son has been bitten by the same car bug and he has been bitten real bad. Then, one day I said to myself, ‘This is crazy. I don’t want to do this as a lifetime thing.’ I found myself



*In Your Face* (acrylic, 14 x 20")

Image courtesy of Mill Pond Press, Inc.

gravitating back to art, for which I was developing a passion, and I decided I had to figure out how to make a living in the art world."

Smith had a brief stint in college where "I quickly realized that commercial art was functional art—doing art and getting paid for it," and that was the practical thing to do. "I spent five years in that first incarnation," says Smith, during which time he illustrated everything "from nuts and bolts to album covers."

## Duck Stamp Era

In the early and mid-1980s, Smith discovered the world of wildlife conservation stamps, starting with a duck stamp, which won second place in a competition and launched him into his second incarnation. "It was a huge business, very lucrative and based on people seeking collectibles," says Smith. By the time he moved on, Smith had won the Federal Duck Stamp competition in 1987, four first-of-state stamps, and two first-of-nations to amass a collection of more than 30 successful duck stamp works. Along the way he collected two trout stamps, two pheasant stamps and was commissioned to do Australia's first duck stamp. Despite his



Image courtesy of Mill Pond Press, Inc.



(Above top) This acrylic image of a snow goose won the Federal Duck Stamp Contest in 1987.

(Above) During the era of limited edition prints, *High Ridge* (acrylic, 24 x 36") was one of Smith's most popular and was used as a fund-raiser to support the reintroduction of the wolf into Yellowstone National Park.

remarkable run of success, Smith says, "That's history. I really don't talk about it these days."

And, in any event, the wind of change was blowing again and although stamps were still popular, the age of limited editions was blossoming and Smith was ready for his third incarnation, which lasted more than a decade. Throughout his commercial and duck stamp periods, Smith had continued to work on his varied skills so that he was well positioned to take advantage of the huge variety of subject matter that poured across the nation through the limited edition era. "It was fun. I enjoyed it, but about six years ago, I could see the writing was on the wall for the end of the limited edition market, and I moved into my fourth incarnation," Smith says.

This move brought him back to wildlife art, which had been his underlying love throughout his career, but now it had a new twist—he went to Africa and has since visited that continent five times. "My goal is to go at least once each year

*Zero Tolerance* (acrylic, 55 x 42")



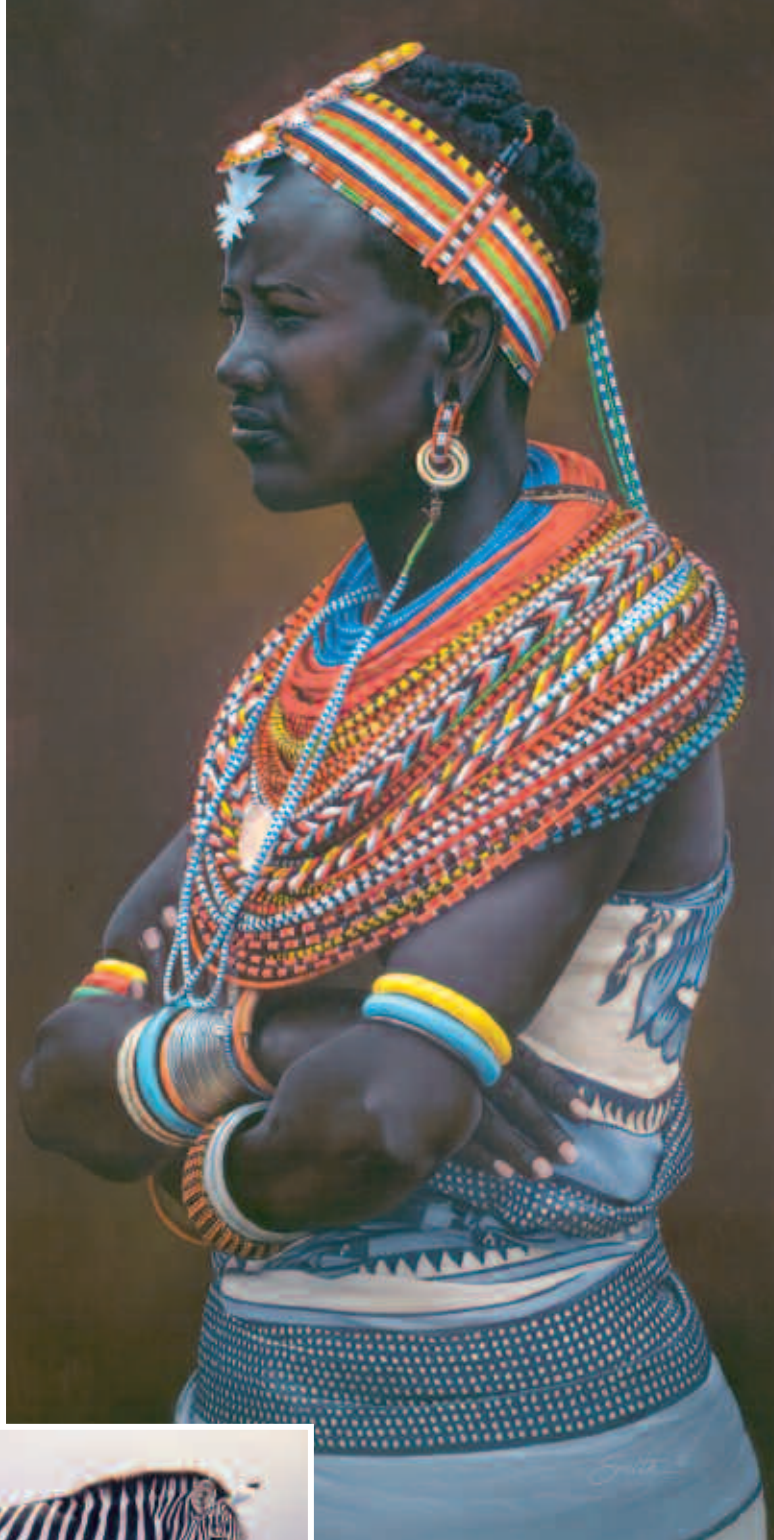
whenever possible. I got my first taste at a Safari Club International show in Reno, and knew then that Africa was in my future. I never really got passionate about the animals of North America, but there is something very different about the wildlife of Africa. There is an incredible diversity, and the animals live in such close proximity to each other—both the predator and the prey. Zoos are fine, but there are big differences between the behaviors of animals in the wild and the acclimated behaviors of animals in the zoo,” says Smith. “It is most noticeable when you make eye contact—you can see that the wild animal is looking at you as a meal; it can be a very intense and chilling moment.”

One of his greatest pleasures, Smith says, is being out in the field, studying the animals and their environment, taking in the dust and the smells, the rain and the snow. “I have friends who are wildlife photographers and sometimes I envy them because they seem to spend more time in the outdoors, searching for their subjects. I have to do a balancing act between being out there and being here in the studio.”

### *Wildlife Art Is Final Choice*

Wildlife fine art is his final incarnation, with a few experiments and sojourns into related fields, Smith believes. “There are some places where I would like to push the envelope. However, you quickly learn that you cannot push it too far,” he says. “I did a landscape miniature one time, and it sold. But the gallery owner called to remind me that I am known as a wildlife artist, and he suggested that the next time I do a landscape, I should stick some kind of animal in it somewhere. I will always be centered in wildlife, but there are other areas I would like to try.”

One such area includes the people and culture of Africa, as well as the wildlife. “I just find the people and the life of Africa to be so vibrant. There is so much color in their fabrics and beads. Nature, for the most part, offers a pretty limited and subdued palette, but the African cultural palette is huge—I love to paint it,” says



*Colors of Kenya* (acrylic, 28 x 14")



*Risky Crossing* (acrylic, 21 x 41")

Smith, who has already done several pieces of this type. “I would like to try something looser, maybe impressionistic—I think I could be good at it. But whatever I do, it will always be grounded in my wildlife roots.”

Smith sees his style as “representational rather than photo-realistic, though some people say that my work looks like a photo. But if you look closely, you will see that I like to



create the illusion of detail. I am trying, as an artist, to keep the eye focused where it should be and not wandering around looking at things that are not important—that is true of the whole composition. I try to keep the focus and the energy on the main event in the painting, and you will find more detail there; the rest is like a theatrical background. It is not that I am fudging on detail—I am doing it with shadow and atmosphere and composition and elements that are simplified in the supporting areas of the painting. It's a fine line I walk, trying to make it as believable as possible, but without gimmicks. The eye does not see a fraction of what the camera sees, which makes me move in the direction of subtlety rather than photo-reality."

Young or emerging artists should take the time to find out what they can be passionate about, Smith says. "Change is fine as you search for your mission and your passion. But above all, make sure it is YOUR mission and YOUR passion—passion in an artist shows through the work and communicates with the public and the buyer. Once you have found it, don't let outside forces pull you away from it. Painting in different styles might be fun for the artist, but it confuses your marketplace."

## Art World Opens Up

"Before the days of African wildlife being popular, I went to a show where two of the top artists had African pieces. At the same show a year later, half the booths included African art—it really was a hoot," says Smith. "When people buy art, they don't want to see the artist jumping all over the place. They want something that will still be related to the artist 10 years from now—incidentally, they want the artist to still be around 10 years from now. They know the artist's skills will improve and expand, but they want to be able to see the seeds of the artist's



*Sovereign Repose* (acrylic, 10 x 10")

latest work alive in the piece that has been hanging on their wall for the past decade."

Smith says that today he concentrates mainly on the market for originals and sees "an exciting expansion in the world of art. For a long time it was somewhat compartmentalized, based on peoples' personal interests. But now I am seeing the lines being blurred between those compartments. I am exhibiting with a more eclectic group and not just wildlife artists. It is incredibly inspiring to see these different artist groups coming together with mutual appreciation for what each is doing."

The direction of art is "an interplay between the artists, collectors, galleries and the public." No group can ignore the other, Smith says. "Artists can't just go ahead with blinders on, painting their art for the sake of art. I hear artists say that they are not influenced by other forces, but that is not true unless they live in a bubble. I have some of my own galleries tell me they are not interested in African art. I don't change my style, but it does affect the kind of works I make available to those galleries."

Outside the artist's studio, large snowflakes started to fall—an attention-getting event for a writer who has lived in Southern California for more than 30 years. Smith glanced over his shoulder and looked out the window. "Pretty, isn't it?" he said.

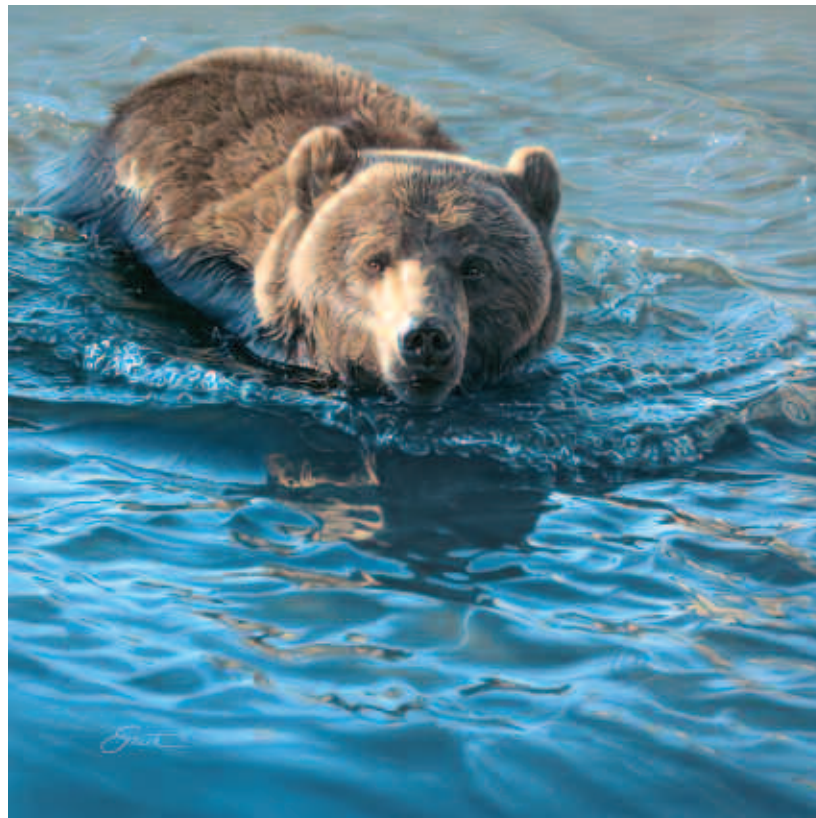
"Er, yes. By the way, if this continues, do you have a spare corner in your garage for me?"

"Dear me," said Smith. "It would get awfully cold in the garage."

"Oh!"

Fortunately, it quit snowing. [WA](#)

Images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.



*Just Chillin'* (acrylic, 20 x 20")