

*Crimson Cascade, acrylic, 20" by 48"*

*"Autumn heralds the time for grizzly bears to bulk up for their winter hibernation. I have observed their quest in both Yellowstone and Glacier National Par. Grizzly bears are truly symbolic of the unspoiled wilderness and one of my favorite subjects to paint."*

## THE EVOLUTION CONTINUES

*By Sara Gilbert*

In less than a week, Daniel Smith will be in Africa, taking pictures of lions, leopards, elephants, and other animals destined to be painted someday soon. But on this balmy summer day in July, he is at his home in Bozeman, Montana, where two tiny deer have just stepped up to the salt lick outside his studio window.

"Two little newborn spotted fawns are out there," Smith says. "Adult deer we see all the time, but we don't usually see the babies. That's pretty cool."

Even after almost a quarter century as a wildlife artist, Smith continues to be amazed by all the animals he's encountered during the course of his career. He continues, in fact, to seek them out, to study them and to try to understand everything about them. That's why he moved from his native Minnesota to Montana, where elk, moose, and whitetail deer rou-

tinely wander into his back yard. It's why he makes frequent trips into Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Grand Tetons, why he regularly travels to Canada, and why he and his wife Liz are making another journey to Africa.

"The more time you spend with the animals, the better," Smith says. "You're like a sponge. You don't realize it, but you're absorbing all this stuff that affects your decisions when you start thinking about a painting."

That intimate understanding of his subjects is reflected in Smith's work—highly detailed, anatomically accurate renderings of both North American mammals and African species. After years of studying animals of all sorts, he has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of what certain animals do in certain situations. When he sits down to paint, all of that experience pours onto the canvas.

"Basically, what I'm doing is communicating my experiences," he says. "The field trips are the heart and soul of it for me. If you're not out there gathering experiences, then what do you have to say?"

Smith has been gathering experiences since he was a child. He grew up in Mankato, a small river town nestled among the gently rolling hills of southern Minnesota, and spent much of his time outdoors. By the time he reached high school, his two favorite hobbies—art and animals—had already fused.

Smith's timing couldn't have been

*Autumn Acappella, acrylic, 24" by 30"*

*"Finding perfect symmetry in the natural world is rare. This head on bugling bull had a great set of symmetric antlers that I couldn't resist painting. This magnificent specimen is a denizen of Jasper National Park in Alberta, one of my favorite haunts for elk and bighorn sheep."*



*Winter Stalker, acrylic, 13" by 26"*

*"I'm fascinated with big cats. This painting exemplifies some traits of the mountain lion that I most admire—cunning, power, and grace."*

better. After his graduation from high school in 1972, he enrolled in a vocational-technical school and then spent the following decade working in illustration. During those years, he also was painting wildlife and, in 1974, when fellow Minnesotan David Maass won the Federal Duck Stamp competition, Smith started to think about his own future in the field. "I went to an exhibit and met Dave," he says. "I asked him if he thought there was room in the market for one more. And he was just super gracious and encouraging."

At the time, Smith was making his living as an illustrator, drawing everything from nuts and bolts to album cover art. By the time he turned 25, he had a focus. "That's when I realized that what I wanted to do was paint wildlife," he says. "I knew no one was going to bring it to me, that I was going to have to make it happen myself. And, when you're 25, it's hard to discipline yourself to sit down and paint in the evening instead of going out with your buddies. But that's what I did."

Smith's discipline paid off quickly. Within a year, he had found himself

a print publisher—Wildlife Interiors, a small organization based in Minneapolis. He also had also entered his first two duck stamp contests—the Federal and the Minnesota state competitions—and had placed second in both. Shortly after his first daughter, Danielle, was born in 1982, Smith won the Minnesota Pheasant Stamp contest. The proceeds from that competition allowed him to leave his job as a commercial artist and devote all his time to duck stamps.

For most of the next decade, Smith was all about stamps. He painted more than 30 of them, including the 1988 Federal Duck Stamp, and with the income they generated he was able to support his growing family—which by then included a son, Adam, and daughter, Nicole. "That worked out well," he says. "But all along I was painting on the side, which eventually turned into a print career."

In 1991, as the stamp phenomenon was beginning to fade, Smith signed on with a Florida-based publisher of limited-edition prints, and soon established himself as one of the



country's preeminent photorealistic wildlife painters. For the better part of 15 years, he was a favorite among print collectors. But then the market softened, and he decided it was time to make yet another career move, this time into the originals market.

"It is just so different," says Smith, who has exhibited at the Masters of the American West exhibit at the Autry National Center for the past



*Just Chillin', acrylic, 20" by 20"*

*"Grizzly bears and water go together like peanut butter and jelly. Salmon runs attract bears from many miles away. Moving water is one of nature's most challenging elements for me to capture in paint."*

three years. "Now I'm exhibiting in such eclectic shows where wildlife is just a small part of it. This is a brand new market for me, and many of these people didn't know my work at all. No one has any preconceived notions about who I am or what I do."

Not that who he is has changed. Smith is still painting wildlife, still in a tight, realistic style. But, now 52 years old, he says that his art has evolved as he's grown older. He's incorporating new subjects—from

African animals to Maasai warriors, and even still lifes.

And Smith is relying more on the illusion of detail, he says, than on the photographic fur-and-feather detail for which he was originally known. "It's part of the whole evolution," he says. "If you think about being an artist for a lifetime, it makes sense that, as you get older, you get better. I'm finally grasping the fact that knowledge is cumulative. It makes perfect sense. The more you know

and understand, the more it shows in your work."

Although he's toyed with the idea of trying to paint more loosely, Smith has accepted that his tight, realistic style is directly tied to his personality. "I'm one of those very controlled people," he says, "and I think my personality is linked to my painting style."

In some ways, Smith says, his style has been a benefit during his transition into the originals markets. It sets



*Cold Smoke, acrylic, 24" by 36"*

*"The setting for this piece is about 100 yards from my house. The open water in the stream created hoar frost that transformed the mundane into magical. I often have the privilege of observing our resident elk herd from my front window."*

*Zero Tolerance, acrylic, 42" by 55"*

*"There is no love lost between elephants and lions. Lions wouldn't dare challenge an adult elephant, but they would prey on their young if given the opportunity. This cantankerous old bull is charging the lionesses, simply because he can. I'd wanted to paint a charging elephant for several years but didn't want to rehash the same idea done by so many other artists. I had this concept in mind, but didn't have the appropriate reference for the lions. I was fortunate to photograph the lionesses on a recent trip to Kenya. They were scrambling from an aggressive charge by a large male lion, and it gave me the perfect attitude for my concept."*


him apart from most of the other artists at many exhibitions. "I'm an anomaly," he says. "I do this tight, realistic work in a sea of impressionistic paintings." It also allows him to play with textures and nuances in a way that looser painters can't.

"There's a whole lot of beauty that doesn't always get brought out in less tight styles," Smith says. "There's a lot of interesting things about textures and colors, a lot of subtle things that can't be portrayed impressionistically. I did a bison portrait, just the head and shoulders, that wouldn't be as interesting if it were impressionistic; it's all about the textures and the differing colors of the fur. My style helps to convey that."

The challenge, Smith says, is to strike a balance between too few and too many details. "When you paint tightly, you have to be careful not to overwhelm the viewer with too many details," he says. "My job is to edit it down, to turn it into an art form instead of just copying a photo.

I want to make it look believable and realistic, but not overwhelming."

There's also the issue of time. Smith has found that he has to spend more time painting now than ever before, just to keep up with the demand for his work. "If you want to make a living as a gallery artist, you have to be prolific," he says. "And looser painters can probably finish a painting in about a third of the time it takes me to do something."

That's OK, Smith says. The end result is worth the time. "I've tried coming up with ways to be faster, but I've pretty much exhausted my options," he says. "There's really no way to cut corners and still do what I do." 

*Sara Gilbert is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.*