**Mary W Smith, Artist (1904-1992) – an account written by her son, Henry (Harry) Smith**

**Family**

An account of family history is best begun with a certain Sidney Smith, the first of three men of that name who figure here. Sidney no. 1 had a son, also called Sidney (no. 2), and a daughter, Hannah. Sidney Smith no. 2 (1846-1935) married Ellen Brooker (nee Crouch), and their son was Sidney Smith no. 3 (1889-1979 - my father). Hannah married Joseph Parker, and their son was Henry Wilfred Parker. My father and Henry Wilfred Parker were thus first cousins. Henry Wilfred Parker married Helen Durley (nee Yates). Mary Winifred Parker (my mother) was the fourth child and only daughter of Henry and Helen, and was born on 29th February 1904. Early in 1927, Sidney Smith no. 3 (my father) married Mary Winifred Parker (my mother), his cousin once removed (see further below).

Joseph Parker founded a cotton bleaching mill at Elton, Bury, Lancashire. On Joseph’s death the directorship of the mill was taken over by his son, Henry. The mill was closed after the Second World War.

**Mary’s career as an artist**

Mary showed artistic ability at Bury High School, and moved on to Bury Art School, where Mr. Knight, the master, advised her to apply to the Slade School of Art at University College London, where she was accepted in 1923. Her parents were, however, anxious at the prospect of her living alone and inexperienced in London, and so Henry Parker asked his cousin, Sidney Smith no. 3, who was by this time an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, to visit, befriend and help Mary in case of need, a request to which he willingly acceded. Mary’s career under Henry Tonks and Wilson Steer at the Slade (1923-1926) was a success. Not only did she win the First Prize (Equal) in 1926, but she was also invited to assist Rex Whistler with murals for decoration of the Atlantic liner Queen Mary, an invitation which she was ‘too shy’ (her own words) to accept. She was not, however, too shy to make a memorable visit to Paris with Sidney, and become engaged to him. The marriage took place early in 1927. I was born on 14th June 1928.

Late in the autumn of 1928, Gertrude Bell, the great writer and founder of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and the Iraq Antiquities Service, died suddenly. The British Embassy in Iraq telegraphed the British Museum and asked them to second a trained successor to her in these posts. Sidney Smith was chosen, and, after much consideration, Mary decided to accompany him and to place me in the care of the Norland Nursery. Mary sketched and painted (mainly in gouache and egg tempera) in Baghdad. The painting of New Street (now Rashid Street), Baghdad, formerly owned by my parents, was eventually given to their friends, Max and Agatha Mallowan (formerly Christie).

My father was recalled by the British Museum to replace H. W. Hall, deceased, as Keeper of his department, and my parents returned to England in January 1931. They bought a house at 7 Fellows Road, Belsize Park, NW3, where Zoe, my sister, was born in 1933. Throughout our life there up to 1939, my mother, with my father’s encouragement, considered herself a professional painter, exhibiting frequently at the Royal Academy, London Group and New English Art Club. During this period, she continued to sign her pictures Mary W. Parker. Her time, however, was restricted, with two children, my father’s elderly parents and my father (a diabetic from 1934) to look after. During the 1939-1945 war both my parents engaged voluntarily in war service as well as continuing their professional careers as far as possible. In 1941 our house was badly damaged by a blast from a nearby landmine, and when, in 1943, my father was offered a residence at the British Museum, the family moved thither, living there until 1948. In 1939-40, my mother, Zoe and I spent a year with my mother’s parents in Bury. In 1940, Zoe was evacuated to the USA, from which she returned in 1944, while I spent the period 1940-46 at boarding school.

In 1948 my father retired from the British Museum and relinquished his house there. My parents and sister moved to a flat in South Kensington, where my mother continued to paint (in a confined space on the top floor landing!) and exhibit regularly, adding the Women’s International Art Club to her venues. During this period, she signed her pictures Mary W. Smith, and her subjects were mainly still-lifes and portraits (including those of my sister Zoe now at Bury and Manchester Art Galleries). In 1955 my father retired from his Professorship at London University, and my parents moved to Barcombe near Lewes in Sussex. In 1958 my sister Zoe married John Ellingworth, and bore two sons, Giles and Casey. They have lived most of their lives in Australia. My mother continued to sketch and to paint into the 1970s, but exhibited increasingly rarely. During this period she tended to sign her pictures simply Mary Smith. My father died in 1979, whereafter my mother began to show signs of senile dementia. In 1982 she went to live with Zoe and John in New South Wales, but her condition deteriorated rapidly and she had to be placed in professional care. She died in 1992.

The reasons why, despite so much endeavour, Art Detective has had difficulty in locating Mary’s pictures are, I think, the following. First, throughout her career she regularly overpainted her works for economic reasons, even some of those that had been exhibited. Secondly, several of her earlier works were damaged or destroyed by bomb-blast in 1941. Thirdly, she never kept any records of her paintings, where they were exhibited, or to whom sold/given. I was her executor and could find no lists or memos. Throughout her life, she gave several paintings to family members and friends (I have a few, and my nephew Giles, who has contacted you, also).