

20: Mortimer Smith *Home Late* (1866)

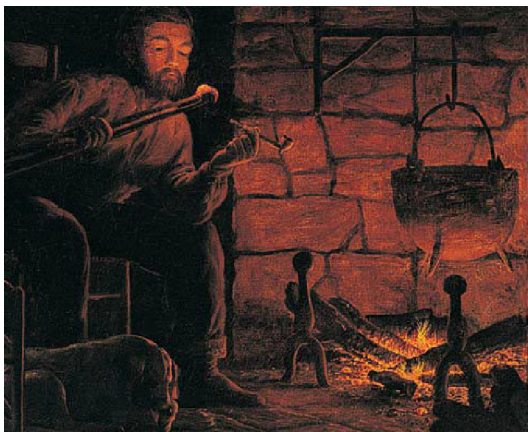
Kerry Schaubert

The little family shown in Mortimer Smith's 1866 painting *Home Late* does not at first invite a comfortable reading. The artist depicts a frozen moment when a young boy returns home on a snowy night; the father, lighting his pipe with an ember from the fireplace, has not yet noticed his son's appearance. Will the boy receive a scolding for staying out to play, or will he be warmly received? The child himself is unreadable, his face hidden by shadow; even the family pets don't react to his arrival. Still, the interior of the cabin, with its homey touches, is made to appear inviting, especially compared to the ice-blue of the snow outside. The father seems to have earned his fireside respite; his rifle hangs from the ceiling along with slabs of meat, indicating his skill at providing for his family. Other details of the interior seem to carry hidden messages—the painted china pitcher on the table indicative of a striving toward a more polished way of life, the sewing basket on a chair conjuring the absent mother.

Mortimer Smith was born in Jamestown, New York, but as an adolescent moved with his family to Oberlin, Ohio, then to Sandusky, and ultimately to Detroit. Smith's father, Sheldon, was an architect and art teacher, and the only certain source of his son's art training. By the time Smith and his family reached Detroit, in 1855, the city was booming; just a few years previously, the railroad had connected the city to Chicago, and barges had passed on the Erie Canal for some years already.



Mortimer Smith,
1840–1896
Home Late, 1866
Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
75.139



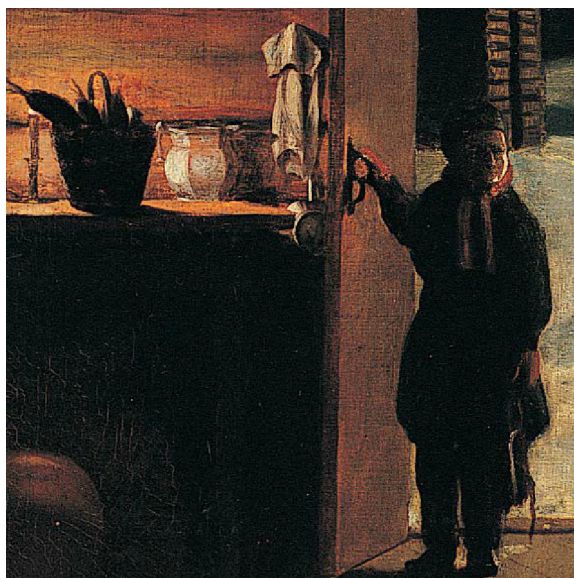
Mortimer Smith,
1840–1896
Home Late (detail), 1866
Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
75.139

Metal and chemical manufacturing provided the goods to be shipped. In addition, Detroit was a gateway for settlers making their way from the east coast, and many of them stayed instead of moving on toward the unclaimed western territories. The size of the city, in both area and population, doubled between 1850 and 1860, making the city attractive to an up-and-coming architect such as the elder Smith.¹

Although Mortimer Smith's "home scenes" were sufficiently well known to merit a mention in his obituary, *Home Late* is the only one known today.² A large work by Smith with a similar subject, a five-by-eight-foot canvas called *Frontier Home* (location now unknown), was exhibited at the 1867 Michigan State Fair, and proved so popular that it was exhibited again at the next year's fair and raffled off to a fairgoer.³ From this detail, it is evident that Smith's cabin scenes reached a large and receptive audience. Michigan was still a young

state, incorporated into the Union in 1837, but immigration—both from inside the country and from Europe—was already booming. The lifestyle depicted in the genre paintings would have been left behind by thousands of city residents, or their parents, in search of work or the other opportunities offered by urban living. In this era, when settlers were still moving west, views of frontier living varied. It could be seen as an independent and authentic way of life, liberated from the social strictures of the city, or as a backward and outmoded lifestyle, soon to be superseded by civilization. Those living on the frontier were often viewed in the same broad terms, as either heroic, resourceful pioneers, or as rough, uneducated farmers, and genre paintings of this time often depicted those extremes. While Smith offers a domestic scene instead of a loaded social commentary, he makes it clear that the figures seen here are not soft Easterners who have just staked their claim. The cabin is fully stocked and furnished, laden with meat and herbs, and warm with the glow of a fire. The frontier life was not so far removed from contemporary viewers, who might have looked at such a scene with a fond nostalgia rather than distaste for its rural hardships. Smith avoids commentary on the recent Civil War, lending the scene of a family in a moment of leisure a sentimental tint.

Smith's contemporaries also depicted rustic interiors. For instance, Eastman Johnson's *The Pension Agent* (1867, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco) and *The Boyhood of Lincoln* (1868, University of Michigan Museum of Art), as well as work by earlier American artists such as Richard Caton Woodville and William Sidney Mount, placed rural figures in stage-like interior scenes. But it seems likely that Smith's location informed his work in another way: his father—Smith's only teacher—had opened Smith's School of Design during the family's brief tenure in Sandusky. The school had shared a building with the Cosmopolitan Art Association,



Mortimer Smith,
1840–1896
Home Late (detail), 1866
Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
75.139

which had an exhibition space and also organized traveling exhibitions. The Cosmopolitan was a proponent of the Düsseldorf school of painting, with its thin layers, brown tonality, and emphasis on observed details. The Düsseldorf Gallery had been opened in New York in 1849, to support and disseminate the style and its artists.⁴ It seems likely that Smith would have been exposed to works from the German school as a teenager, while attending his father's school, as well as later, in Detroit, which had a large German population at the time of the family's arrival. The popularity of the style, which included an emphasis on genre painting, may have added to the acclaim awarded his early work in the Detroit newspapers.

In addition to any debt owed to the Düsseldorf school, Smith cleverly makes use of a convention from seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting in which an interior is shown with an open door at the back wall, so that the view through the doorway effectively expands the scene into the space beyond. As in *Home Late*, Dutch interiors not infrequently included a figure, often a child, peering or stepping through the open door (for a famous example, see *The Bedroom*, by Pieter de Hooch, 1658/1660).

By 1861 Smith had followed his father into an architectural career; his training in draftsmanship is evident in *Home Late* in the ruled geometrical rhythm of the beams in the ceiling. Smith considered giving up architecture entirely to pursue a career in painting, but never did so.⁵ The early interiors—MAG's is his earliest known work—gave way to snowy landscapes, an interest hinted at by the view through the cabin door here. By 1893, his moment seems to have passed; a critic describes Smith's current work with the dismissive phrase "two oil paintings of the old realistic school."⁶ Smith's will mentioned forty-eight paintings; others can be added from mentions in contemporary reviews. Today less than a dozen are known.

"His pencil made him a livelihood, his brush made his life beautiful," noted Smith's obituary, describing the dovetailing of the artist's professions. "He delighted in home scenes, but his most admired paintings represent winter scenes."⁷ It may be that Smith moved to such landscapes when the popularity of his paintings of the rural home had passed, along with the nostalgia of a culture at a crossroads.



Pieter de Hooch, Dutch,
1629–1684

The Bedroom, 1658/1660

Oil on canvas, 20 x 23½ in.

Widener Collection, ©2006,

Board of Trustees, National

Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Kerry Schaubert is Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Paintings, Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Harvard University Art Museums.