

Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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Landscape Artist Harry Craig Smith and Bakersfield Polymath Lew Suverkrop

v2

By Gilbert P. Gia

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This is about a friendship of 60 years ago between two self-taught artists-- Harry Craig Smith (1882-1957) and Lew Suverkrop (1895-1965). Their stories and examples of their work follow.

Suverkrop studied mining engineering, served in WWI, and in the Twenties moved to Kern County to work as a consulting geologist for oil companies. During the Second World War he manufactured precision parts for the Army in his hobby machine-shop behind the Suverkrop home at 109 H Street in Bakersfield. Besides being a geologist, inventor, and draftsman, Lew Suverkrop was also an artist.

By the Thirties, Harry Smith was already a well-known Southern California artist living at Glendale who also designed hand-crafted frames.¹ Smith's medium was oil, and his favorite subjects were the mountains and deserts of California. His work appeared in showings at Exposition Park, the Painters & Sculptors Club of Los Angeles, the Spectrum Club at Long Beach, and at the Santa Monica Art Association. Today Smith's paintings can be found around the world.

Before WWII he was living at Bakersfield, where he tutored and taught



painting to friends, and that led to the formation of an art association for men. At the first meeting Smith waved-off motions to make him president; his preference was to work behind the scenes. The men's club evolved into the Bakersfield Art Association, which is a fact now disappearing memory.²

In the late 1940s Lew Suverkrop joined the painting club, and there he met like-minded business and professional men. The price of becoming a member was to create a picture and show it at a meeting –whether the work was good, bad, or otherwise. And that was it. The club was a relaxed, humorous collection of individuals completely lacking in pretention. Members took turns leading the

¹ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 1, 1944

² Bakersfield Art Association was started in 1944. (Bakersfield Californian, May 27, 1944)

meetings, and at the end of each session appointed a new leader. Smith's club had three rules: (1) men only, (2) no dues, and (3) no other rules.

Lew Suverkrop, Charles Tracy, Dr. Constantine Marsili, Dr. Clarence B. Vigario and other dedicated members safeguarded the club against stuff-shirtedness. Bakersfield Californian manager Jim Day noted, "After club members have had a good dinner, they sit around and look over the art exhibits produced by the artists and offer their criticism, which is free and easy, and truthful, from what I've been told."³

Suverkrop's son, Don, recalled, "I'd already started my career with Hoppers⁴ when my dad was with the club, so I can't tell you much about what went on. Just imagine, [*motioning to a wall*] these four Smith paintings have been hanging in my home for more than 50 years, and I don't know anything about them! I do remember that from time to time my dad visited Smith at his cabin in the mountains, at Glennville, and I understand that on one of those occasions he swapped a fifth of whiskey with Smith for a painting. Don't know which one it was. Maybe there were three different bottles."⁵

He continued, "At one time I hoped to get one of Dr. Marsili's painting that hung in his waiting room. I told him how much I liked it, and later I gave him a metal table that I had welded up at Hoppers, but he never offered me the painting."

"Sorry I don't know more about Smith, but I can tell you a story about the men's painting club. In 1950 my sister Mia's little daughter was showing some artistic ability, and Mia sent my dad one of her daughter's pictures. Lew had it framed and took it to a club meeting. The topic that month was modern art, and for all I know Lew might have been the chairman for the meeting and could have decided the topic himself. Anyway, the picture brought about a lot of scholarly argument on the intrinsic value of modern art in society until somebody finally asked who the artist was. My dad must have enjoyed building up to the answer that it was painted by his three year-old granddaughter."

³ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 21, 1952

⁴ *My Life With Hoppers, Inc., 1952-1985*,
<http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/business1.html>

⁵ Gilbert Gia interview with Don Suverkrop, Jan 27, 2013



Harry C. Smith "Mojave Desert," about 1954
Oil on canvas, 21 x 27-in, in Smith's frame

CUNNINGHAM MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
BAKERSFIELD ART ASSOCIATION
FREDY THROON, Chairman
HARRY C. SMITH
Memorial Exhibit October, 1957

1. Name of picture. Mojave Desert
2. Date picture was painted. About 1954
3. Lended by - LEWIS MORTON
4. Address. 109 H ST.
5. Date picture was returned.
6. Size

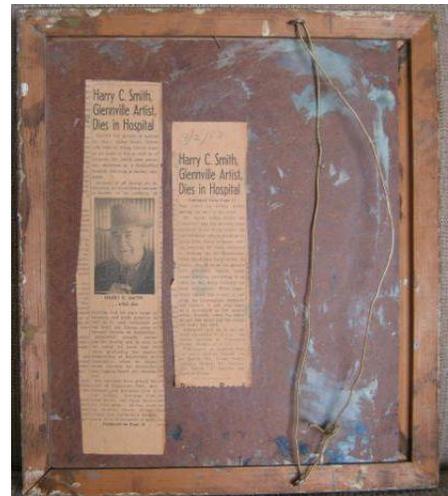
(Exhibited Oct 1957, Cunningham Memorial Art Gallery)



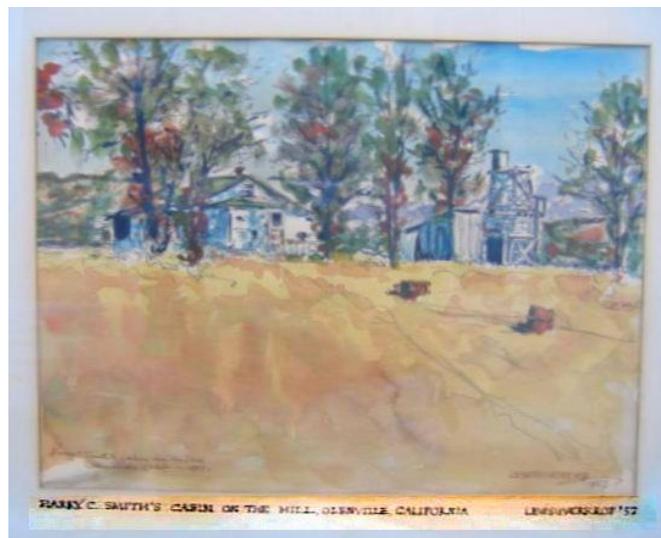
Harry C. Smith, untitled, undated
Oil on Canvas, 18x21-in, in Smith's frame



Harry C. Smith, untitled, undated
Oil on Canvas, 23-1/2 x 27-1/2-in, in Smith's frame



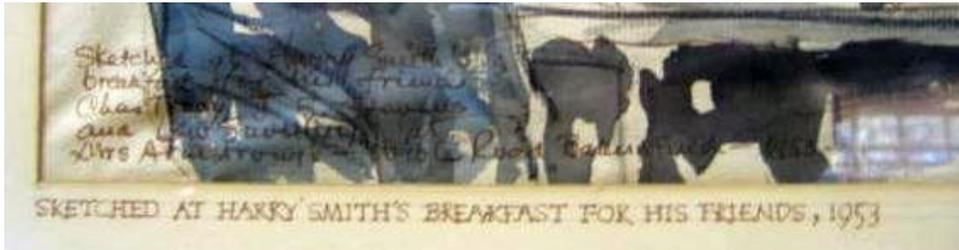
Harry C. Smith, untitled, undated
Oil on Canvas, 12 x 14-in, in Smith's frame
(reverse, right)



Lew Suverkrop, "Harry C. Smith's Cabin on the Hill,
Glennville, California" 1957
Ink and watercolor on paper, 18x22-in, in commercial frame, title on mat



Lew Suverkrop,
"Sketched at Harry Smith's Breakfast for his Friends, 1953"
Ink and watercolor on paper, 18x22-in, behind glass in commercial frame
Annotation in lower left quadrant, as expanded below: "Charles Tracy, J.B. Stevens
and Lew Suverkrop at Mrs. Armstrong's - Wible Rd. Bakersfield, 1953"



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