Related to the exhibition
Curator Tour
Roger Medearis: His Regionalism
July 11 (Wednesday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.
Join curator Jessica Todd Smith for a private tour of the exhibition “Roger Medearis: His Regionalism” and gain insights into this uniquely American artist who was passionate about painting the places and things he knew best. Members: $15. Non-Members: $20. Registration: 626-405-2128.

“Roger Medearis: His Regionalism” is supported by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment and funds from Steve Martin for exhibitions of American art.

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The VIRGINIA STEELE SCOTT GALLERIES of AMERICAN ART
Susan and Stephen Chandler Wing
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
June 16–Sept. 17, 2012
With a title inspired by the artist's unpublished book, *My Regionalism*, “Roger Medearis: His Regionalism” explores the career of American painter Roger Medearis (1920–2001) through 34 works, highlighting the generous gifts made to The Huntington by his widow, Elizabeth Medearis, as well as loans from private collections and a painting borrowed from the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Examples of Medearis’ accomplishments in various media, including paintings, prints, drawings, and sculpture, along with letters and photographs, demonstrate the breadth of Medearis’ life’s work, from his beginnings as a student of Thomas Hart Benton at the Kansas City Art Institute through the development of his own distinctive style in California later in life.

Born in 1920 in Fayette, Mo., Roger Medearis, the son of a Southern Baptist minister, moved with his family from town to town in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Norman Rockwell’s magazine illustrations inspired Medearis to pursue art, as an early *Self-Portrait* (1938) attests. With the reluctant consent of his family, who worried about the Bohemian atmosphere of the Kansas City Art Institute, Medearis enrolled in the fall of 1938.

His soon-to-be mentor and teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, was already a national celebrity who had been on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1934. Along with Grant Wood and John Stuart Curry, Benton was a vehement spokesman for Regionalism, an American artistic movement during the 1930s and 1940s that rejected European abstraction, took subjects from everyday rural life, and aspired to bring art to a wide audience through public art commissions and low cost reproductions. Over the course of his long career as an artist, Medearis remained committed to Regionalism, but he was not simply a Benton disciple. Indeed, early on as a student, with his accomplished painting *Breaking Ground at Bethel* (1940), Medearis set out on his own path. In this picture, the modern world is held at bay and enters in only a few places: fashion—especially the men's short ties, then à la mode—and automobiles. However, serious contemporary events also intrude on the painting's largely insular scene. A newspaper being used by a grey-haired woman to wrap flowers has a partially obscured headline that reads “French Accept Nazi Terms;” Along with the rest of Western Europe, France fell to the Germans in the summer of 1940. In a remote section of Missouri and in a country still committed to neutrality and isolationism, World War II is referenced by an incidental detail. The sotto voce quality of the headline—speaking to the viewer and not to the characters in the painting—is something unimaginable in Benton, who favored strident moralizing in his paintings, especially those produced in response to war atrocities.

In the fall of 1941, Medearis did not re-enroll at the Art Institute, knowing that a war was on the horizon. After the United States entered the war, he joined the effort, first drawing Navy charts and maps and later enlisting in the Army. On discharge in November 1946, he moved with his wife and newborn son to a rural property outside of Chester, Conn. He returned to painting and had two successful solo exhibitions at Kende Galleries in New York City. During this time, he made a definitive step away from Benton’s influence, evident in the still lifes on exhibit. They depict rotting fruit, old shoes, a torn newspaper, a rusting enamel cup, a mossy jawbone, and brown autumn leaves, speaking to themes of decay and obsolescence. Small and quiet, these paintings are hard to square with the boisterousness of *Breaking Ground at Bethel* and the brilliantly colored *Godly Susan* (1941) of a few years before. In the eeriest of the still lifes, *An Arrangement of Old Things* (1950), a rag floats, ghost-like, and seems sentient, as if the holes were eyes looking out. *Still Life with Green Chair* (1950) speaks to ruination and decay: the wooden chair is splitting, and yarns dangle from a frayed rug. Moreover, the floral arrangement feels dry and sterile. Perhaps, the melancholy tone of these paintings stems from Medearis’ exposure to similar work in New York City, an easy commute from his new Connecticut home.

Indeed, the unsettling imagery of Surrealists, like Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, and Max Ernst, who had decamped to the United States during the war and exhibited frequently, might have nudged Medearis in a new direction. There were also American and American-immigrant artists who blended the Surrealists’ uncanny and anxiety-ridden imagery with a commitment to precisely rendered representational art, including Victorian homes, ramshackle furniture, and domestic scenes, all subjects in common with Medearis. Dubbed the Magical Realists, they were artists of similar sensibilities whose work was exhibited together during the 1940s, including Paul Cadmus, Peter Blum, Louis Lozowick, and Andrew Wyeth.

Years later, Medearis reflected on the late 1940s as a difficult time professionally and personally. Although he had seen some financial success, critical consensus was firmly stacked against Regionalist art, and he could not support his family through the sale of his artwork. With the success of Jackson Pollock, another Benton student,
and abstract art’s ascendance, Regionalism had had its day and now faced detractors. In 1946, the art historian H. W. Janson, later the author of Janson’s History of Art, published a vitriolic essay on American Regionalism in which he went so far as to say that “many of the paintings officially approved by the Nazis recall the works of regionalists in this country.” Even though Medearis’ work had strayed far from Benton’s, he nevertheless was pigeonholed by critics as a Benton protégé and found himself linked to a movement that by the late 1940s was largely ignored if not condemned. At the same time, his marriage was in crisis. In the winter of 1949, he left his family in Connecticut and returned to Missouri with a mission as much personal as artistic: to produce, in his words, a series of quickly worked “simple investigative studies” in oil that would “define the essential character of the American Scene” and “find [Regionalism’s] very essence.” Three landscape studies from that furore campaign depict farmhouses and the steel grey skies of a Missouri winter. If in these landscapes Medearis returned to his Midwestern roots, it was to a bleak countryside far removed from the idyllic scene in

Still Life with Green Chair, 1950. Tempera on board, 20 x 30 in. Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Gift of Elizabeth Medearis.

Breaking Ground at Bethel. The leaden tone of many of them suggests his personal difficulties. Though completing the series, he stopped painting later that year to climb the corporate ladder of sales, abandoning the art world for more than a decade.

After working as a traveling salesman for Sealright Co., he and his new wife, Judith Dettling, relocated to California in 1958, and a year later, he took a position with the Container Corp. of America in Los Angeles. In 1961, he furtively returned to art by experimenting with abstractions in his Monterey Park, Calif., studio garage. He described this work as “gorgeous—grotesque, exciting, and decorative—but meaningless,” and he destroyed it. The abstraction of his contemporaries, like painters Helen Frankenthaler and Sam Francis, had no appeal. With no tie to memory, abstraction was, for him, merely colorful patterns with no emotional substance. Thus, in the ‘60s, he returned to his own Regionalism, the basis of which was a personal connection with a subject that evoked, for him, the memory of a particular place.

With the exception of transitional paintings like Gregg’s Barn (1968), which are based on studies from the winter of 1949, his early and later work might seem to be by two different artists, yet a closer look reveals that meticulous planning and careful execution thread through Medearis’ work creating a subtle sense of continuity. In drawings like Road to Lompoc (1979) and Native Oak (1979), dramatic graphic gestures are simply not present, rather it is as if pencil has condensed, like dew, rather than being applied by a cumbersome human hand. With their evenly worked surfaces, his paintings across the decades exhibit a pattern of extraordinary control. It is likely that his early work in the unforgiving egg-based medium of tempera required this level of discipline. Tempera gained widespread popularity in the 1920s and ‘30s. Benton, Medearis, and other American artists referred to Italian Renaissance sources, like Cennino Cennini’s Il libro dell’arte (1437), for recipes to concoct it. Composed of roughly one-half egg yolk and one-half pigment with a little water added, tempera dries quickly and forms a durable surface. Because of the medium’s tendency to crack if applied too thickly, the artist must use short, small strokes to build up a paint surface rather than the thick and broad strokes allowed by oil paint. Besides the tendency to crack, tempera also has a translucence that means that mistakes cannot simply be painted over. Preparatory models and sketches are required to map the overall composition, though variation and invention are also part of the process.

Another distinctive aspect of his artistic practice is his use of different media to develop or replicate compositions. First, like Benton, Medearis modeled high-relief sculptures as studies for his paintings; that is to say he “sketched” sculptures in preparation for his paintings. Benton had picked up the idea of making clay models for paintings from an article on Venetian Renaissance artist Tintoretto (1518–1594), who built wax models draped in fabric. In partial perspective, Río Chama (painted bronze, 1985) falls between the flatness of a painting and a freestanding full relief sculpture, and it is also a model for the painting Río Chama (not on exhibit) and closely related to Crossing the Chama (1992). Second, when he finally settled on a composition, Medearis often reproduced it in different media with very few alterations. Besides showing his strong personal attachment to subjects, the repetition of compositions suggests a fascination with the manual artistic process—the repetitive act of marking over and over again. This is especially apparent in Farmer Takes a Wife on display as a pencil drawing (1940), a painting (1941), and two lithographs (both 1989), one in plain black ink and the other hand colored. Having thought through the image’s basic form,
The Beach, 1970. Acrylic and egg tempera on canvas bonded to panel, 30 x 48 in. Private collection.

The Hushed, Moody Light of Effacing Restraint, as seen in the minute, stippled dots of yellow in April Hillside (1998) and Mustard Flowers (1982), or the hushed, moody light of Rainy Evening's smoothly painted surface (1998), have the unexpected effect of making a deeply personal subject accessible to everyone. To put it another way, Medearis' subjects might be personal, but they are not idiosyncratic as a result of his devotion to craft. Although Medearis' special brand of Regionalism required that a subject be significant for him, the care that he took in producing them meant that the images could, in fact, resonate nicely even for those who have never seen the San Gabriels, a Midwestern winter, or a picnic in rural Missouri.

James Glisson, Bradford and Christine Mishler
Assistant Curator of American Art

Checklist of Works in “Roger Medearis: His Regionalism”


Church Meeting, 1939. Graphite on paper, 14 1/2 x 18 in. Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Gift of Elizabeth Medearis.

Breaking Ground at Bethel, 1940. Egg tempera and oil on board, 20 1/2 x 27 1/2 in. Collection of Glenn and Patricia White.


Products of Autumn, 1949. Egg tempera and oil on board, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Collection of Elizabeth Medearis.

Still Life with Mosly Bone, 1949. Egg tempera and oil on board, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Collection of Elizabeth Medearis.

Still Life with Rotting Quince #1, 1949. Egg tempera and oil on board, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Collection of Elizabeth Medearis.

Still Life with Rotting Quince #2, 1949. Egg tempera and oil on board, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Collection of Elizabeth Medearis.

Old McIntosh, 1949. Oil on masonite, 14 x 18 in. Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Gift of Elizabeth Medearis.


Still Life with Green Chair, 1950. Tempera on board, 20 x 30 in. Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Gift of Elizabeth Medearis.


The Beach, 1970. Acrylic and egg tempera on canvas bonded to panel, 30 x 48 in. Private collection.

Comfield, 1974. Acrylic on paper bonded to panel, 16 x 24 in. Collection of Tom and Edwina Johnson.


Mustard Flowers, 1982. Alkyd resins on panel, 12 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. Private collection.


Left to Right:


Series

Farmer Takes a Wife


Native Oak
