



China or the Devil

**Lee N. Smith, III, American, born 1950
1987, Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 70 1/4 inches**

**Collection of Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum Purchase, The
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About the Artist

Lee Smith was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1950, and lived there until he was six. When his family moved to Dallas, Texas, they lived in a suburb east of the city that was near open farmland. His mother encouraged him to use the public library, and it was in history books with paintings of battle scenes that he first learned about art. Smith had no formal training, but he began to paint in 1974 and had his first one man exhibit at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1979. He had a show at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in 1981 and at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston in 1986.

In 1984, Lee Smith was one of 26 artists to represent the United States at the prestigious Venice Biennale in Italy. During the late 1980s, he spent two years in Paris. Since then, he returns periodically to work in France.

One writer wrote, Lee N. Smith still thinks like a kid. His paintings are about things that were important to him as a boy, and they remind us of our own similar childhood experiences.

About the Art

From his memories of boyhood, Lee Smith paints works that remind us of our own childhood experiences. In *China or the Devil*, the viewer sees a group of boys digging a hole. Light is glowing upward from the hole illuminating their green faces. The strange, otherworldly colors and the strong contrast of light and shadow give the scene a feeling of the tension and excitement of the moment. The mysterious quality of the painting can remind the viewer of the feelings of excitement during our own childhood adventures.

Additional Information

Lee Smith's boyhood was typical in most ways. He was a Boy Scout and participated in

camping trips and other traditional Boy Scout activities. He was also a member of “The Warriors,” a secret club of neighborhood boys who performed initiations and other rituals in the hayfields near his home. Many of the experiences we see depicted in his paintings are references to the activities and the adventures he experienced with these two groups. He claims most of his paintings are based on actual experiences. His work shows the viewer not only the usual boyhood experiences, but also the world of mystery and imagination that lies just below the surface of everyday happenings during that time in our lives when we are between childhood and adulthood.

Smith feels that the unusual, almost science-fiction colors of his paintings are the result of his playing in a rock-jazz band and his work in a commercial print shop. When he began to paint, the late night hours of the band became a problem. He enjoyed painting so much that he gave up music for painting.

The Dallas Museum of Art also has a painting by Lee Smith. Its title is *Fire and Ice*, and it shows an initiation ritual being performed for entrance into the boys club. While one initiate waits, the first watches a wire glowing in the campfire, supposedly in preparation for branding. However, beside the fire is a container of water into which the hot wire actually will be plunged. The first boy is expected to scream at the appropriate moment when the hot wire and cool water meet with a hissing sound, scaring the second initiate who sits blindfolded and at a distance from the action.

About the Time and Place

In *50 Texas Artists*, Lee Smith speaks about his work, saying:

"My pictures deal with a certain time and place. It was a time when all was ruled by parents, church, and school. The place was the very edge of known suburbia. Through the front door, there was row after row of almost identical houses--measured spaces which comprised the world of expected behavior. Through the back gate, escape was easy as we stepped across the Dallas city limits into the unexplored regions of endless hay fields. The simplicity of the landscape allowed us to see with our imaginations. Engulfed in the vastness of the fields, every stone, stick, branch, and piece of cardboard we found was prized. Metal pieces of junk became treasures. To claim the land we dug burrows into the earth and connected them to each other with tunnels. The scraps of wood and branches were used to support the roofs of hay and dirt. Like the prairie dogs we had seen, we were able to vanish through hidden entrances into another world. With found rope, wire, and trees--cut down and hauled back from the creek--we erected towers to rise above the ground. From places like these emerged the rituals by which our adventures were ruled."