

# MADGE SMITH

New Brunswick

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*Madge Smith (1898-1974), photographe qui a travaillé  
à l'avancement des arts et de l'artisanat dans les provinces maritimes.*

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*'Madge' (Edith Marjorie) Smith, 1898-1974, was a photographer and art dealer and a friend of many Canadian artists. The three roles were so intertwined that it is difficult to discuss these activities separately.*



She was born in England but spent most of her life in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Her love of photography and other art forms began as a young girl. This interest in photography led her to spend six years working with Frank Pridham, who had bought Harvey Studio in 1918 from its founder John Harvey. (Harvey Studios Ltd. is still part of Fredericton life.)

The Madge Smith Collection, held at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Fredericton indicates her interest in the city of

Fredericton and in life in New Brunswick. Her pictures date from the late 1930s. At this time Fredericton was a city of approximately nine thousand people. Her gentle probing camera shows the life around her—the open air markets, ice-cutting on the St. John River, the Indians of New Brunswick, and various local ceremonies and celebrations. Her photographs perhaps romanticize and idealize this still idyllic-looking city with its stately elms, large mansions, and impressive stone Cathedral. Her photographs

Lynne Struthers Swanick

include Bill and Doll, identified as 'famous Fredericton fire horses' pictured in full regalia, seemingly aware and proud of their contribution to the community. Her series 'The Fredericton Exhibition and Racetrack, Sept. 16, 1937' depicts life in the stable area.

As Susan Sontag states: 'To photograph is to confer importance. There is probably no subject that cannot be beautified; moreover there is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects.'<sup>1</sup>

railway bridge and the flood of March 19 and 20, 1936 provide visual documentation of the history of the city in which she lived.

Madge Smith opened her art shop at 610 Queen Street in the late 1930s. (A gift shop selling native and imported crafts is still at that location.) She kept a register from 1939 to 1943 of shop visitors, and in it the signatures of prominent and lesser known Canadians and visitors from other countries appear. Her correspondence reveals that many friends needing a



Madge Smith sought subjects which may have appeared unconventional at the time. The more formal subjects are there—the Cathedral, the Odell Estate, private and public buildings, portraits—but so are the others—angling on the Southwest Miramichi, art classes in Fredericton, camps in the Fredericton area. 'Like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past.'<sup>2</sup> The Madge Smith series on the building of the

gift for an occasion would ask her to send something appropriate on their behalf. One friend simply states: 'You do make weddings less difficult.' These requests came from various parts of Canada and the United States, and she helped New Brunswick and Maritime crafts to become widely known and appreciated. Deichmann pottery, woven goods from the Madawaska weavers, and stone and silver jewellery from Nova Scotia were sent to many parts of Canada and the United States. This

demand for fine crafts has continued.

Madge Smith also received requests for her own photographs: a letter from Calgary asks for one of her tinted photographs of the Queen; a fellow photographer refers to that 'lovely tinted work of yours.' At a recent auction one of Madge Smith's tinted photographs of the Cathedral sold for \$45.00. Her many artist friends, whose work she sold, received her pictures and on receipt of one photograph a friend wrote back, 'Your photo of the market inflamed me'—a rather dramatic response!

tives is arranged in twenty-three subject categories at the Provincial Archives. Her letters, scrap books, souvenir books, shop registers, and numerous printed items are also there. The equipment she used is not, nor is there a record of it. Some of her photographs have been exhibited, and the first exhibition, arranged jointly by the University of New Brunswick and the Provincial Archives, was held in October 1970. Another exhibition entitled 'Fredericton—The Early Years'<sup>3</sup> opened April 2, 1974, not long after her death. This show



Her correspondence with artists such as Molly and Bruno Bobak, Miller Brittain, Jack Humphrey, Fritz Brandtner, Ted Campbell, Pegi Nicol McLeod, Ghitta Caissermann, and others suggests affectionate relationships. The artists comment on the progress of their work. Madge Smith was very much a part of the artistic life of the province, not only as an art dealer but as a friend and confidante.

The Madge Smith Collection of 1275 nega-

included some of her work and the work of two other New Brunswick photographers, George T. Taylor and Issac Erb.

Susan Sontag remarks that 'the knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism whether cynical or humanist,'<sup>4</sup> and enthusiasm for her subjects is apparent in Madge Smith's photographs. In looking at them, we can feel nostalgic for a way of life some recall and others never knew. ☉

<sup>1</sup>Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>A catalogue was printed for the occasion: *Fredericton—The Early Years* (Fredericton Provincial Archives, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 24.

