

FATHER, GRANDFATHER, ARTIST:

A T R I B U T E T O W A R R E N D E N N I S





ABOUT FATHER, GRANDFATHER, ARTIST: A TRIBUTE TO WARREN DENNIS

This exhibition commemorates the life and work of prominent Southeastern artist and retired longtime Appalachian State University professor Warren Dennis, who died April 13, 2021. *Father, Grandfather, Artist: A Tribute to Warren Dennis* comprises paintings from the personal collections of family members.

An additional exhibition is being featured at the Carlton Gallery, where Dennis has been represented for decades and will also feature a memorial selection of his oil paintings in its Spring Group Exhibition, on view from May 29 to July 15.

[Click here to read an article about the exhibition in the Mountain Times](#)

ABOUT WARREN DENNIS

As a young man Warren Dennis left the small cotton town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, to attend Mississippi Southern University, where in 1950 he was awarded the opportunity to study for the summer with artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi in Duluth, Minnesota. Dennis then entered a newly established graduate art program at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, aka Ole Miss, where he studied with and worked as an assistant to artist Jack Tworkov. Both Tworkov and Kuniyoshi were powerful influences on young Dennis. In 1955 he accepted his first teaching position at Judson College in Marion, Alabama.

In 1965, Dennis and his family moved to Boone, North Carolina, where he became a transformative force for the Appalachian State University Department of Art. When he arrived, he was one of only two professors in the department. Dennis served on faculty from 1965 to 1993, and was department chair from 1980 to 1984. His tenure at Appalachian saw burgeoning enrollment and numerous innovations under the leadership of Herbert Wey, whose name graces Wey Hall, the home of the Department of Art since 1976.

As a professor, Dennis taught art history with a specialization in American art, drawing, painting, and lithography. In addition to teaching on campus, he and his wife Mary Kate organized student art tours to Europe and frequently hosted student groups at Appalachian's residences in New York City and Washington, D.C.

An active and prolific artist into his nineties, Dennis exhibited widely. With over 60 one-person exhibitions to his credit, his paintings can be found in numerous galleries, museums, and private collections, particularly in the southern United States. Dennis also worked on several special projects, including a mural for Burke Mission Station in Morganton, North Carolina, in September 2001. His work continues to be shown at Carlton Gallery, his longtime representative.



Dennis' prime painting years corresponded to the heyday of American Abstract Expressionism and, while he pushed the boundaries of paint on canvas all his life, he was a consummate draftsman who never abandoned the human figure. In a signature style marked by dry wit, Dennis' paintings capture the humanity and the humility of subjects ranging from simple moments of family life to the great themes of art history, classical music, and Southern literature. Dennis was humble when called an expert on conductor Arturo Toscanini, author William Faulkner, and artist Pablo Picasso, among others.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "W. Dennis". The signature is written in a fluid, cursive style with a large, prominent "W" and "D".



THE VACATION

1975

This painting has always held a special significance to me and as a result has hung in my home for many years. I've always associated the imagery with my own childhood and our many family walks. There is a carefree quality to both the parent and child figures that is reminiscent of the way I remember the time I spent with my parents, particularly the time before my siblings were born. Like much of my father's artwork, this painting evokes a particular feeling and experience that feels deeply personal.

ANNA SARTIN, DAUGHTER

THE TOWN

1978

Of all of the Warren Dennis originals I am lucky enough to have hanging in my home, "The Town" is the artwork that makes me feel most connected to my grandfather. Of course the subject matter - the town of Boone - will always have a special place in my heart, but beyond that, the deliberate & thoughtful composition of the work reflects a passion for art history that my grandfather shared with all of his grandchildren and which ultimately became a passion of my own.

The treatment of the landscape in this work reflects the influence of Hopper and other American Realists. The scene is quiet, reflective, somber but beautiful in its simplicity. He combines this stylistic approach with an undeniable nod to the masters of modernism (Cezanne, Picasso and Braque) by including the frost creeping along the edges of the window of his studio, framing the view of the town below with overlapping, angular shapes of icy, opaque gray. It is a reminder of his physical presence in the work and the fact that the view is uniquely his own and deeply personal.

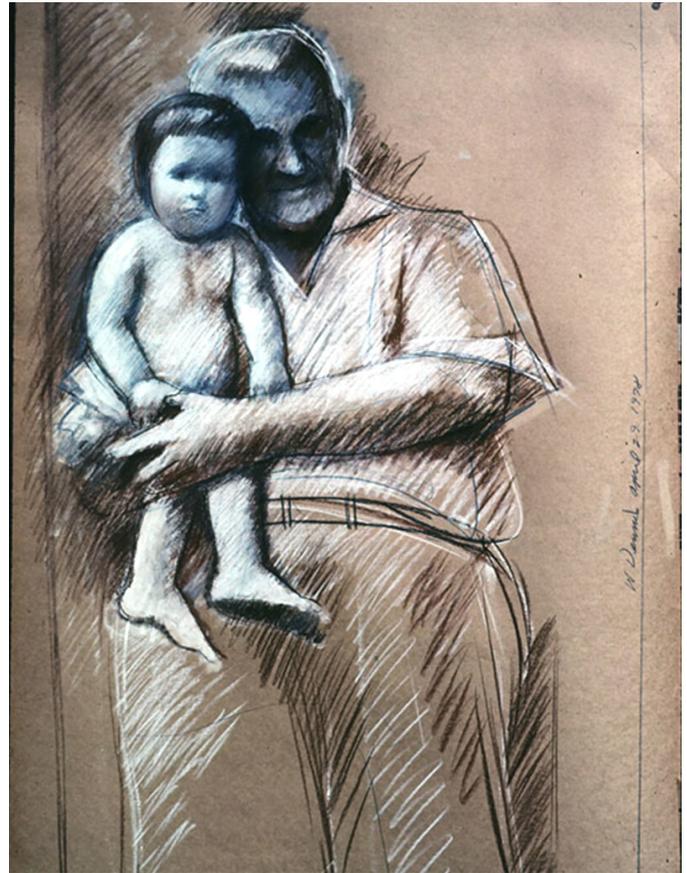
And so, when I look at this painting, I can almost imagine I am standing beside him - like we stood in so many galleries and museums - while he points out what's important and this time tells his own story.

KATHRYN SARTIN DRUM, GRANDDAUGHTER



GRANDDADDY AND MARTHA

1978



I have always been amazed at how my father could capture a likeness of someone even in a simple cut-out silhouette. Over the years, I became increasingly aware of the veracity of Dad's vision. His eyes and hand were so in tune with one another that he was able to simply and succinctly capture the essence of a person with a simple stroke - many times in the void between the strokes. Drawing came easy to Dad. He made everything look easy, but I know how hard he would wrestle with an image, creating study after study. I use the word "wrestle" because he mentally fought with his art until it was - as he would say "just right".

Family was a recurring theme in Dad's art. This image is of my mother's father ("Granddaddy Lowrey" as we called him) holding little ole' me. Our mother was particularly fond of how well it captured the warmth of her father Edwin Stovall Lowrey. Because this piece had hung in our family home since 1978, I believe Dad certainly felt this one made the ranks of "just right".

MARTHA DENNIS, DAUGHTER



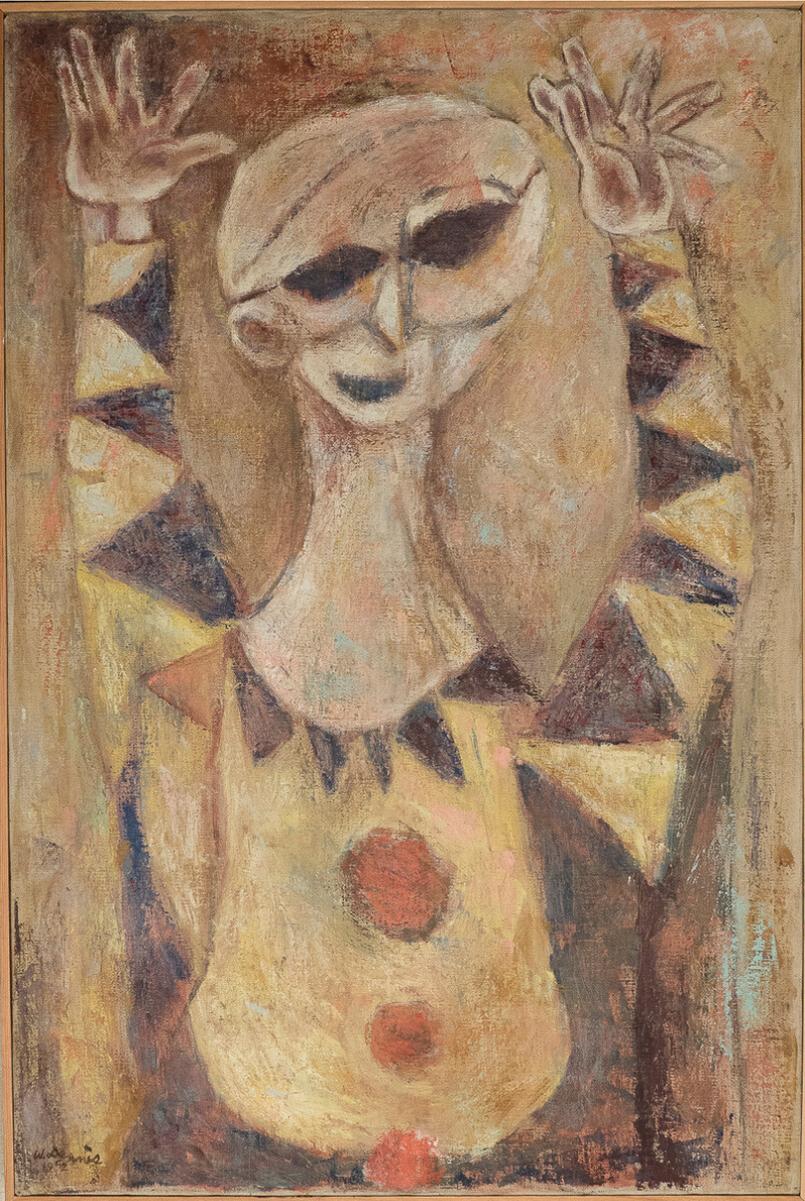
THE PLAYROOM

1960

The boy in this painting is probably based on me. The room he is standing in, perfectly matches my memory of our house in the tiny Alabama college town named Marion. Even though we moved away before I turned eight, I remember a lot about that house. In 1960 my Dad was 33 years old. He was starting both his family and his teaching career and still finding time to paint. I remember a room that Dad used for his studio, that was strictly off-limits to us kids. The closed door didn't stop the aroma that I always associate with my father, turpentine.

W. CAMERON DENNIS, SON

THE SIX-FINGERED CLOWN



I heard about this piece long before I saw it. It hung in my Dad and Uncle's bedroom for a time when they were kids, and it scared them. Cameron eventually asked why the clown had 6 fingers? Only then did granddad realize there was an extra finger. Much later, when we were moving everything from Boone, I came across the painting. It had been in storage for some time, and was missing part of the frame. Granddad wanted to throw it away.

We're often our own harshest critic, but sometimes what the artist considers imperfect or wrong is just a piece waiting for someone who can love it completely. This clown is a prime example. My father and uncle saw it as "The scary 6 fingered clown" and my Granddad saw it as trash. I asked to keep it and Granddad was surprised. "You don't want that one," but I did and still do. I love the story behind it and it reminds me that just because I don't like something I made, that doesn't mean no one will.

ANDREW DENNIS, GRANDSON

BOY HOLDING SPARKLER

1985

My father loved fireworks. It was a simple pleasure he allowed us every 4th of July, when we would make a pilgrimage to the Tennessee line for some real fireworks, or when we stopped at "Joker Joe's" on our long trek home from summers in Mississippi. We'd watch dancing chickens and head home with a string of Blackcats ready to blow up the world!

When I look at this painting I see my father's childish joy. Children brought this out in him, and it was something all of his kids benefitted from. These were moments of absolute freedom. Sparklers and bottle-rockets liberated us from the law, from the oppressive Delta, and from financial stress. We were allowed to burn money! We'd light the fuse and poof, all that our grandparents had given us for our college educations went up in smoke. It was the stuff of pure reckless abandonment. This was my childhood, this was the life Warren Dennis gave me.



EDWIN DENNIS, SON

LA BOHEME: RODOLFO AND MIMI

1978



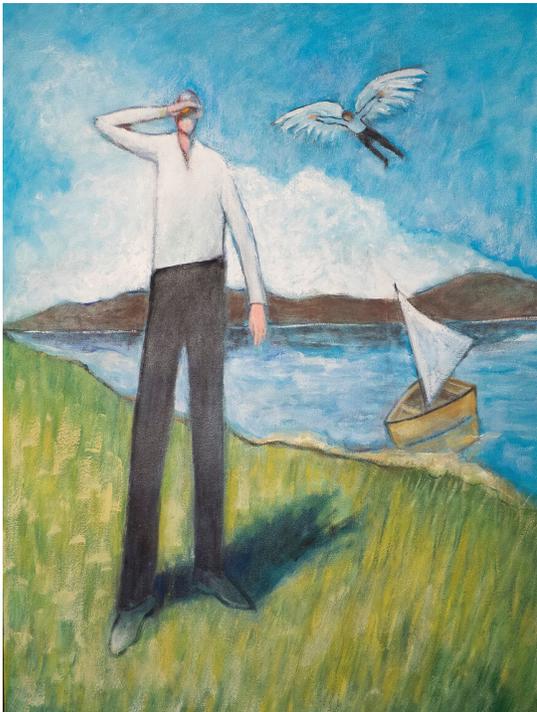
When I was young and would visit Grandmomma and Granddaddy, movies were always on the agenda. One of the first movies I remember ever seeing in the movie theater was Ghostbusters II with Granddaddy and my cousin, Ian.

As I got a little older, Granddaddy introduced me to musicals. I was hooked and we would go to Blockbuster whenever I was visiting to pick out one I had never seen, or to re-rent one of my favorites like The Pirate, or Singing in the Rain.

And as I got older still, musicals lead way to operas. La Boheme became a favorite of mine, and this beautiful painting of Rodolfo and Mimi was the first piece of art Granddaddy gifted to me. Around the same time, I became very involved in my High School concert choir, so for Christmas one year, I was given several additional, very meaningful gifts; the vocal score for La Boheme as well as an audio recording (CDs) of La Boheme.

I cherish the wealth of artistic experiences I was lucky enough to have with Granddaddy over the years, but I am also profoundly thankful for the unique experiences he cultivated specifically for me as he saw my passion for music emerge. In his infinite wisdom, as the teacher he was at his core, he found a way to connect with me and grow my love for art, across a variety of genres. After all, there is no more perfect blend of music and art than opera.

MARIANNA SARTIN, GRANDDAUGHTER



LOOKING FOR ICARUS

2004

When I was maybe nine or ten years old, my grandfather completed a massive canvas, an incongruously modern Icarus wearing one of the ruffled “cheap suits” characteristic of many of his male figures. An additional panel was bolted onto either side to display Icarus’s full wingspan. As a fan of Greek myth and absurdist humor (the latter owed largely to Granddaddy), I immediately tried to stake my claim on it, giving little thought to where this huge painting would hang if I could even get it home in the first place. The natural compromise was to wait and see if I’d grow up to own a mansion (nope), and he would continue exhibiting it in the meantime. It sold several years later, and I was touched when Granddad asked my permission first.

On my 23rd birthday, Granddaddy presented me with “Looking for Icarus.” It was actually painted for me as a replacement for the original and, as far as I know, this is the first time it’s been shown. Icarus is off in the background, not unlike Bruegel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, a painting that certainly came up in one of those meandering, half-lecture conversations that whiled away summers and Christmas breaks and formed the bedrock of my art historical education. It’s a chicken/egg thing in my memory now- were we talking about Bruegel because I was already a fan, or did Granddad introduce me, as with so many other things? Either way, I still feel like we’re in direct dialogue whenever I look at this painting, and I’ve never had any trouble finding a place to put it.

IAN DENNIS, GRANDSON

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This piece jumped out at me as I was looking through Grandad's backlog because it was an unexpected window into a time and place I hadn't revisited for many years. Some of my best memories were made at the top of these steps, as they no doubt were for the grandkids before and after me. I also vaguely remember an elusive and intriguing cat poking its head out on rare occasions, although I can't say if this cat is the same. It looks as if it's trying to adopt the role of one of grandad's faceless, larger-than-life protagonists. Even if the effect was unintended I'm reminded of grandad's sense of humor when I view this alongside his depictions of musicians, circus performers, and ordinary domestic life. In many of those paintings a character's complicated inner world is exposed to the viewer with light and color in ways that are quite arresting, whereas the cat feels entitled to hog the same spotlight and remain steadfastly uncomplicated. I also feel a trace of guilt owing to how I treated the reedy little tree by the road, but swinging around it always gave ten year old me an opportunity to course correct during an intense game of tag, much to the dismay of any adult watching. I hope it's still doing alright.

My grandad was always eager to connect with me over art whenever possible. His love for music, literature, cinema and everything in between gave him an avenue to share his passion with just about everyone. I owe my exposure to Tarantino, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplain, and many others to him. However, while our affinity for visual art was a uniquely personal touchpoint, our conversations on it were always made a bit stilted by an enormous gap in years, taste, and familiarity with our practice. Nonetheless, through the enormous body of work he left behind, I feel blessed knowing that our dialogue can continue for the rest of my life.

MAX DENNIS, GRANDSON

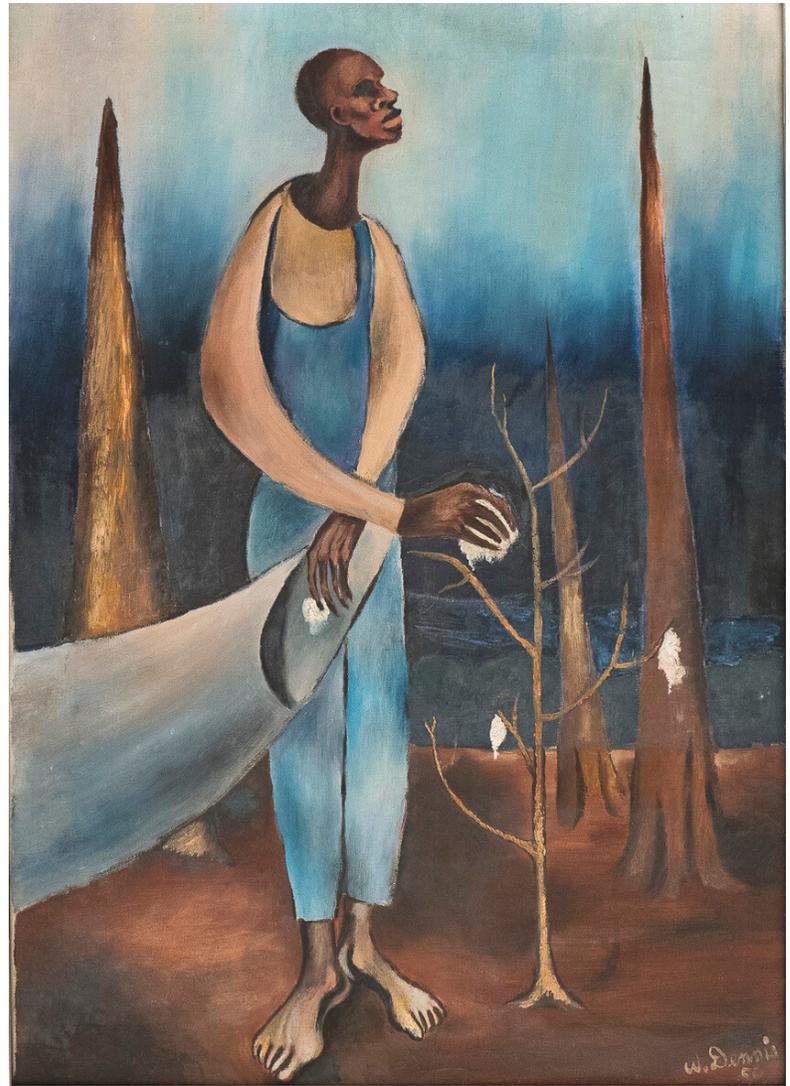


CAT ON STEPS

1993

LEM

1950



Lem is one of the paintings by my grandfather I remember the most for how unlike most of my grandfather's paintings it is. As a painting that hung in my family home growing up, trying to figure out what the subjects of the painting were or where it could possibly be was difficult at times. In my younger years I was in some ways terrified by this painting but in other ways transfixed. Growing up my grandfather was a light in my life, in my younger years we would bounce on the stairs and make boats to sail in the rivers of price park. Every year without fail he would do everything to make Christmas great for the grandchildren. "Lem" represents a side of my grandfather I never knew and one of my biggest regrets is not asking him about it.

MICHAEL DENNIS, GRANDSON



MARY KATE

1973

Our parents shared an affinity for self enrichment. They read, wrote, talked and traveled and through their loving partnership they offered their four children a magical childhood and later shared that same magic with their 6 grandchildren. On February 17th of this year they had been married 70 years.

Our wonderful mother is a beautiful, intelligent, proud, vibrant individual. She was also a wonderful partner to our father. Sadly, like so many others, dementia has diminished many of her qualities but not all. Her role in our lives is immeasurable. Even though she could not physically be here – she had to be here.

In this drawing, our mother – Mary Kate – is looking out the living room picture windows of our Boone home. This is one of our mother's iconic poses in an iconic place in our lives all captured beautifully here by her husband.



THANK YOU

FROM THE TURCHIN CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts at Appalachian State University engages visitors from the university, community, nation and beyond in creating unique experiences through dynamic and accessible exhibition, education, outreach and collection programs. These programs inspire and support a lifelong engagement with the visual arts and create opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

