

This photo is available in
the print version of *Aging*.

With a singular charm and colors not typical to portraiture, “Godly Susan” invites us to consider a different type of beauty that can only be revealed as we wait in this grandmother’s quiet presence.

A Grandmother's Beauty

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Roger Medearis portrays his grandmother in what first appears to be a scene from Americana. *Godly Susan*, Medearis' final project as a student of Thomas Hart Benton at the Kansas City Art Institute, was painted as a gift for his parents. The young artist combines affection for his grandmother, Susan Mynatt Carns Medearis, and respect for her dignity and the years that she has lived.

"Descendant of two Baptist preachers and mother of three more," notes Elizabeth Prelinger, "she was known as 'Godly Susan.' Medearis would wheel his grandmother, disabled by stroke, up a ramp in his studio, where he made detailed sketches while she sat, often falling asleep. In her left hand she held a lemon because she loved the tangy taste of the fruit."[†]

The contours of the objects in the composition have an unusual curvature to them. Susan Medearis' crippled hands, for instance, are elongated in the style of the Italian Mannerists of the sixteenth century to denote an odd, but elegant loveliness. This stylized "beauty" can be traced in the pink knit sweater, the lines of her dress with its meticulous white lace collar, the foliage and plant life to her right side, and the tree behind her head. She almost seems to be growing out of nature in the lower left corner of the composition.

Godly Susan's personal beauty is not obvious but is revealed through an inner calm. Her face is stern, and focused on something beyond the picture frame. We are in her quiet presence, but we are not the object of her attention.

How many times are older people who resemble Godly Susan avoided by children, or even adults, because of the stern exterior? Medearis offers us a painting with a singular charm and colors not typical to portraiture. He asks us to consider a different type of beauty that can only be revealed as one looks for awhile at Susan Medearis, who has reached a point in life where she finally has the time to just sit and think—about God.

NOTE

[†] Elizabeth Prelinger, *Scenes of American Life: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Watson-Guptill Publications, in cooperation with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2001), 76.