



Night Heron

**David Bates, American, born 1952
1986, Oil on canvas, 96 x 78 inches**

**Collection of Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum Purchase, The
Benjamin J. Tillar Memorial Trust**

About the Artist

David Bates was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1952. He graduated from Southern Methodist University in 1975. While teaching part-time at Eastfield College, he began work on his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1976 at SMU. That same year, he had his first one-man gallery exhibition, and in the fall, he was chosen to participate in an independent study program at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

During his time in New York, he was exposed to many personalities, influences, and works of art. At that time, his unique style of figure painting and sculpture was not appreciated by the New York art world, so he experimented with a variety of styles and media. He returned to Dallas in 1977 and completed his graduate degree at SMU. He studied several periods of art history as a part of his program and renewed a lifelong interest in folk art. He admired the folk artists subject matter drawn from everyday life and surroundings.

Bates first visited Grassy Lake in southwestern Arkansas in 1982. This place immediately began to influence his art.

About the Art

Night Heron gives the viewer a representation of the vegetation of a swampy area and one of the birds that lives in that place. As we look for a broader meaning for this painting, we might consider what the heron, his survival by means of searching for prey, and the abundant vegetation of the place in which he lives can represent to the viewer. The struggle for survival in nature is a story with which humans have always been concerned. As we view this elegant bird, we are reminded of the cycles and systems of the natural world of which we humans are also a part.

Night Heron is one of many paintings done by David Bates that focuses on the life of Grassy Lake and other swamps and lakes of Arkansas, Louisiana, and East Texas. Bates is a fisherman and hunter, and the dense vegetation, the shifting light, and the life-and-death struggle evident in these areas captured his imagination.

Additional Information

The bird in *Night Heron* is from a family of graceful birds with long, sharply pointed bills that extend almost to their eyes. They are similar to cranes in appearance with narrow heads, long slender necks and stork-like legs. Herons usually nest and roost in flocks, but they hunt for their food alone. Their nests, built of loose, crude masses of sticks, are found close together in rookeries called heronries. The females lay from three to six eggs, and young herons are helpless for a few weeks before they learn to fly. To search for food, herons stalk along the shores of streams. Sometimes, they stand for a long time with their head drawn between their shoulders as if asleep, while they wait for fish, frogs, or small reptiles. When the heron spots its prey, it makes a lightning dart to catch the victim in its spear-like beak.

About the Time and Place

Bates work has been described as a form of Regionalism because his works are often about specific geographical and cultural subjects. His paintings of the people, the landscapes, and the activities of these places are done with warmth, good humor, and enthusiasm. He has also done paintings of snakes, fish, alligators, and dogs. David Bates likes dogs. He did a very affectionate portrait of his own dog, Emmy.

The ever changing light, water, trees, and wildlife of the lakes of Arkansas and East Texas fascinated David Bates, and even as he returned to see familiar subjects and sites, each experience was a fresh one. Speaking about this series of works, Bates says:

"My work in the last few years has been a process of allowing myself to paint subjects that I really cared about - finding my own place that is special to me. My Grassy Lake pictures are more than a series of paintings for me. They represent the ongoing life of an ancient lake swamp in which I am privileged to participate."