

You are standing before *Peeling Onions*, which was painted around 1852 by Lilly Martin Spencer. This mid-19th century oil painting is a realistic portrayal of a young woman standing in a dark kitchen preparing a meal. This oil on canvas painting is 36-inches tall by 29-inches wide and set within an ornate gold frame.

In the center of the painting, the cook stands facing us behind a rustic wood table covered with a still life of fruits, vegetables, and an unplucked chicken in the foreground. With her muscular left hand, the woman grasps a partially sliced red onion in the center of the table. She rubs her right eye with her raised right hand. The cook's pale skin is illuminated, drawing our attention to the profile of her face and her tearing left eye.

The woman, who occupies about two-thirds of the painting, wears a grey-blue dress pleated in the bodice with tiny white flowers decorating its V-shaped neckline. Three straight pins are stuck in the left shoulder of the dress. Her rolled-up sleeves reveal muscular arms and hands with clipped nails. Her right arm is bent at the elbow and is raised to the right side of her face, rubbing her eye. In the same hand, she holds a table knife, which is pointed toward the ceiling with the blade facing away from her face. Her left eye, which is hazel, brims with tears as it peers out at us. Two tears drip down the left side of her nose and one rolls to the right side of her rosy cheek. Her lips are closed and her mouth is turned downward. A gold hoop earring dangles in her left ear and casts a shadow on her jawbone. Her dark brown hair is parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun. The light color of her neck is in stark contrast with the dark brown walls behind her. The details of the background are difficult to distinguish. We eventually discern behind the cook on our right against the back wall, a wooden cabinet with a drawer. A small silver pitcher and a patterned crock are placed on top of the cabinet.

While the cook is most central to this painting, a still life on the table fills the foreground and the lower third of the painting. Starting at the back left of this tabletop still life, a pottery crock stands behind a copper saucepan with a long handle. Placed immediately to the right is a glass bottle with a shaker top. In front of these items, an arrangement of fruit

takes up most of the left foreground. There are several plums, eight rosy-orange, fuzzy peaches, three green, shiny apples, and two small bunches of green grapes. Arranged in front of the apples are a stem of red grapes and four plums. On a diagonal, in front of the fruit, a silver tablespoon appears to hang over the edge of the table, as if protruding from the painting.

Almost at the edge and in the center of the wooden table, a yellow apple blemished with brown spots and a bunch of green grapes are positioned apart from the other fruit. The grapes lie to the right of the apple partly on a white, damask tablecloth pushed aside to make room for the produce. Directly behind these grapes rests the woman's hand holding the onion. In front of her hand are the peelings from one onion and a whole red onion is located close-by. To the right of the woman's right arm is piled a bunch of large, bright orange carrots still bearing their willowy, green tops. In front and to the right of the carrots, a large eggplant blends in with the background. To complete the still life on the table, the feathered, unplucked chicken sits in front of the carrots with its head at the edge of the table.

Lilly Martin Spencer, an American painter born in England, lived from 1822 to 1902. The painting came to the Memorial Art Gallery as a gift of the Women's Council in honor of the 75th anniversary of the gallery.

Version 11-10-2010s