

# SEEING AMERICA: Lilly Martin Spencer's *Peeling Onions*, ca. 1852

**P**eeling *Onions* presents a sympathetic view of mid-nineteenth-century domestic life in America by an artist who knew that world intimately.



Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)

*Peeling Onions*, ca. 1852

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Women's Council in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Memorial Art Gallery, 88.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

## The Art

*Peeling Onions* presents a single figure dramatically highlighted against a dark background. Her left hand grasps the offending onion, while a **still life** of fruits, vegetables, and chicken awaits her attention. A closer look reveals the spots on the apples, crumbs on the table, a cooking pan and bottle. One object in particular draws the viewer into the woman's space—a stirring spoon that appears to hang off the edge of the table. The realistic objects reflect the artist's attention to the details of everyday life.



Who is this woman? She is looking out at the viewer but seems lost in her own thoughts. Her blue dress with its sewing pins on the shoulder suggests other household roles along with her kitchen tasks. Her muscular arms and worn reddened hands imply a woman used to hard work, yet her costume, regal posture, pensive expression, and classical facial features suggest there is more to her character and life story. The warm foreground light, the careful modeling of the face and body

### Glossary

**still life:** Painting that depicts inanimate objects that are typically arranged in a certain formation by the artist.

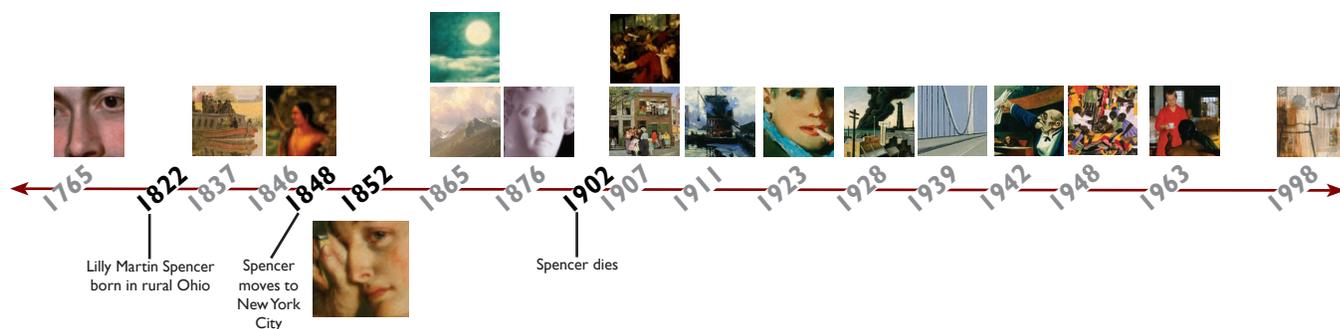
as well as the assorted objects, the strong linear contours and the traditional triangular composition all reflect Spencer's formal art training. The central presence of the woman is familiar in formal portraits; however, the painter has added the contextual and narrative details that made her work particularly popular with the public.

Lilly Martin Spencer often used her family and her domestic help as models in her paintings. In a work with a similar theme, *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, also known as *Making Preserves*, Spencer shows the imagination and variety of her paintings of everyday life.



Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)  
*Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, 1856  
 Oil on canvas  
 A. Augustus Healy Fund, 70.26  
 Brooklyn Museum

## The Artist



Lilly Martin Spencer was a successful American painter at a time when, though views of domestic life were extremely popular, women artists faced obstacles unknown to male painters. Angelique Martin was the only daughter of French immigrant parents who were not only highly educated, but also very progressive in their attitudes toward women. They themselves schooled Lilly and her two brothers in their rural Ohio home. With her parents' encouragement, Lilly moved to Cincinnati to study art with James Henry Beard and to paint; in 1848 she and her new husband, Benjamin Spencer, moved to New York City, a necessary move if she was to study art and to sell her work. Unlike most American artists at that time, Spencer chose to forego a trip to Europe, but instead studied the work of the new European artists at New York's many galleries. She seems to have learned the most at the Düsseldorf Gallery where she saw the realism, attention to details, high surface finish and hard contours espoused by the new German artists. Spencer's success won her admittance in 1851 into the **National Academy of Design** as "Honorary Member, Professional."

Lilly Martin Spencer was the sole provider for her family; her husband had abandoned his own pursuits to support her career as business manager and occasional painter of backgrounds. They realized that their financial success necessitated both a rapid production of paintings and a specialization in popular **genre scenes** rather than the allegorical and literary presentations Spencer had been painting. She struggled to balance her role as artist with those of breadwinner, housewife, and mother of thirteen children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. She had to produce paintings quickly to keep her family out of poverty, and, since societal norms and maternal duties kept her in the home, she found her subjects close at hand. She ultimately came to



Lily Martin Spencer  
*The War Spirit at Home*, 1866  
 Oil on canvas  
 Purchase 1944 Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund  
 Collection of the Newark Museum 44.177

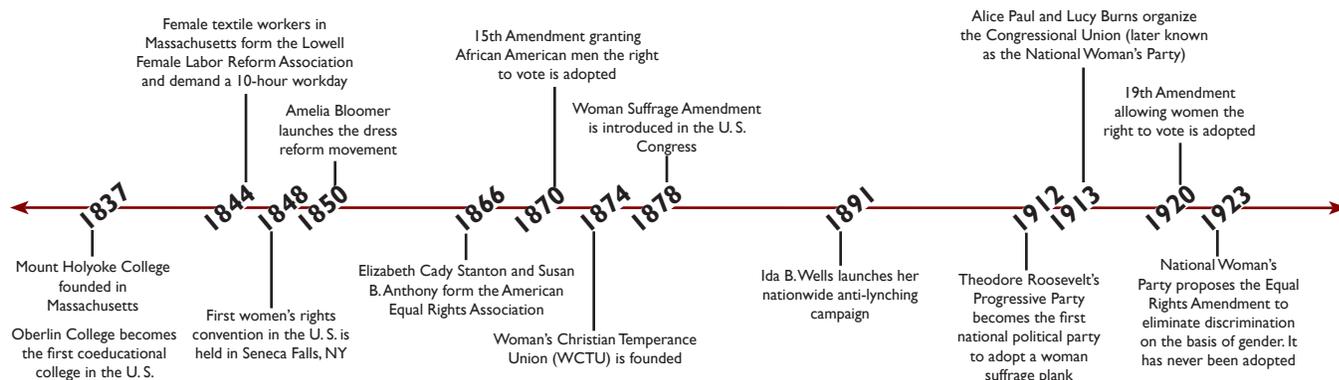
### Glossary

**genre scenes:** Depiction of people and everyday activities.

**National Academy of Design:** Founded in 1825, as a professional organization of artists, its annual exhibition in the 19th century was the premier venue for American artists to show their work.

specialize in domestic genre scenes, often depicting women in the midst of domestic duties. Later in life, as genre scenes declined in popularity, Spencer turned to still lifes and portraiture. She is today acknowledged as one of America's premier genre painters.

## America



American art reflected society's interest in the domestic scene. Story-telling genre pictures were quite popular until the end of the nineteenth century. New patrons of the arts—the growing middle class—wanted scenes they could identify with; particularly popular were carefully rendered views of domesticity and the familiar physical world.

The idea of a “woman's sphere,” a specific set of gender roles that limited women to the home and private life, was a staple of mid-nineteenth-century thought. The public arena and workplace were designated for men. Undergirding this social structure, a cult of domesticity glorified the traditional role of the American homemaker. As the keepers of society's conscience and morality, it was women's responsibility to teach the young to be good and productive citizens. Thus, women played an essential role in America's democracy, and artists portrayed them as capable and self-assured people. But if a woman was proficient in the arts herself, it was seen as a genteel accomplishment; she was not expected to make a serious commitment to it or to any profession.



*The Woman's Sphere*  
Godey's Lady's Book, March 1850  
University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections

In reality, in 1850, 10 percent of women did work outside the home, usually in teaching, nursing, domestic service (as in *Peeling Onions*), and low-paying factory jobs. These were primarily unmarried women; once married, women were expected to stay at home, and their husbands assumed ownership of their wives' property. But changes in women's and family life were coming. Although higher learning for women was not widespread, Ohio's Oberlin College permitted women to enroll with men in 1837 and in the same year the first women's college, Mt. Holyoke, opened in Massachusetts.



Unknown photographer  
*Mount Holyoke Students, circa 1890*  
The National Women's History Museum

After the Civil War, rapid urbanization and industrialization in the United States hastened societal change. Jobs as stenographers, telephone switchboard operators, and assembly-line workers attracted women out of the home despite societal pressure to stay out of the public realm. Love matches began to replace arranged marriages, less time was spent in bearing and

raising children as urban families grew smaller than traditional families, and women sought opportunities in social clubs, reform organizations, and other areas of the public arena. And women's full equality in the country's public and professional life would become one of the twentieth century's most important movements.

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See also Elizabeth L. O'Leary, "Lilly Martin Spencer: Peeling Onions (ca. 1852)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 55–57.

## Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

### Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you when and where this is?

How has Spencer created the illusion of a real place?

How does knowing the title, *Peeling Onions*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



### Comparing and Contrasting

Lilly Martin Spencer often used her family and her domestic help as models in her paintings. In a painting with a similar theme, *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, or *Making Preserves*, Spencer shows the imagination and variety of her paintings of everyday life. Compare two paintings both completed in the 1850s. What important similarities and differences do you find? Consider the subject, the figures, the composition and the setting. How has the artist used composition, color and line, light and shadow, pose, gesture and facial expression to tell the viewer about the subject? Describe the life of the American woman as seen in these two works.



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Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)

*Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, 1856

Oil on canvas

A. Augustus Healy Fund, 70.26

Brooklyn Museum

## Exploring the Context/Drawing Conclusions

These six portraits of American women reveal a century of great change in the lives of American women. Why did people have their portraits painted? What do the poses, expressions, clothing, setting and other objects reveal?



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Kathleen McEnergy Cunningham (1885 – 1971)  
*Woman in an Ermine Collar*, 1909  
 Oil on canvas

Gift of Joan Cunningham Williams, Peter Cunningham, and Michael McEnergy Cunningham, 83.13  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925)  
*Mrs. William Shakespeare*, circa 1896  
 Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 57.14  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Ammi Phillips (1788 – 1865)  
*Old Woman with a Bible*, ca. 1834  
 Oil on linen

Beatrice M. Padelford Trust, 84.22  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Gilbert Stuart (1757 – 1828)  
*Elizabeth Perkins Sturgis* (1756 – 1843), ca. 1806  
 Oil on canvas

Purchased through the R.T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 41.35  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Mary Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878 – 1942)  
*Windy Doorstep*, 1910  
 Bronze

Maurice R. and Maxine B. Forman Fund, 2004.14  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

## Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Images of the lives of Americans were very popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Whose stories are told in these pictures? What picture of America emerges from these works?



DeWitt Clinton Boutelle (1820 – 1884)

*The Indian Hunter*, 1846

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 84.47

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



George Catlin (1796 – 1872)

*Shooting Flamingoes*, 1857

Oil on canvas

R. T. Miller Fund, 1941, transferred to Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 1949, 41.25

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Mortimer Smith (1840 – 1896)

*Home Late*, 1866

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 75.139

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the  
University of Rochester



Unknown, American

*American Harvesting*, after a painting by Jasper Cropsey,  
after 1851

Oil on canvas

Anonymous gift, 77.196

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the  
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## Exploring the Context/Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Compare the portrayal of the woman in *Peeling Onions* with pictures of women in domestic roles today. What are they doing? What objects are used to tell their stories?

## Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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