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

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...
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.

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

Glossary

gender 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. Under-
girding 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 a 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.

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.

After the Civil War, rapid urbanization and industrialization in the United
States hastened societal change. Jobs as stenographers, telephone switch-
board 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Oberlin College becomes the first coeducational college in the U.S.</td>
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<td>1844</td>
<td>Amelia Bloomer launches the dress reform movement</td>
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<td>1848</td>
<td>First women's rights convention in the U.S. is held in Seneca Falls, NY</td>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Mount Holyoke College becomes the first coeducational college in the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony form the American Equal Rights Association</td>
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<td>1870</td>
<td>Woman Suffrage Amendment is introduced in the U.S. Congress</td>
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<td>1874</td>
<td>Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is founded</td>
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<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Ida B. Wells launches her nationwide anti-lynching campaign</td>
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<td>1891</td>
<td>Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party becomes the first national political party to adopt a woman suffrage plank</td>
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<td>1892</td>
<td>Alice Paul and Lucy Burns organize the Congressional Union (later known as the National Woman's Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>19th Amendment allowing women the right to vote is adopted</td>
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<td>1920</td>
<td>National Woman's Party proposes the Equal Rights Amendment to eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender. It has never been adopted</td>
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The Woman's Sphere
Godey's Lady's Book, March 1850
University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections

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

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
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.

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

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?

Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 – 1902)
*Peeling Onions*, ca. 1852
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Kathleen McEnery Cunningham (1885 – 1971)
*Woman in an Ermine Collar*, 1909
Oil on canvas
Gift of Joan Cunningham Williams, Peter Cunningham, and Michael McEnery 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
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 University of Rochester

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
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?

We are grateful for the generous support of this project from the Anne and Vincent DeClue family and our School Program sponsors: Dominion, Bank of America, the Mary W. Clark Trust and two anonymous donors. Additional support is provided by Thomson Reuters, the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F Judson Jr., Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation, Hammer Packaging, the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.
Lilly Martin Spencer (1822 - 1902)
*Peeling Onions*, ca. 1852

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