Lilly Martin Spencer, (American, 1822-1902)
*Raspberries on a Leaf*, 1858
Oil on panel

Lilly Martin Spencer’s sensitively rendered still life focuses on red raspberries cupped by a green cabbage leaf. In the background, a cucumber curls up from the shadows. From the white-veined cabbage leaf with slightly browned edges to the freshly picked raspberries and the nubby skin of the cucumber, textures are convincingly rendered. The variation in light and dark tones contributes to the verisimilitude of the painting. For example, Spencer’s talents are seen in the highlights on the top of the leaf to the back lighting on its underside and then to the dark shadow it casts on a stone ledge.

Born in 1822 near Marietta, Ohio, by the time she was 18 Spencer committed herself to a career as a painter. At a time when women were not given societal support to sustain a career in the field, she established herself as a genre painter, obtaining recognition for her paintings of family and domestic life. She was also known for her still life paintings. Indeed, some of her genre paintings contain meticulously painted still life elements. Many of her paintings were printed as hand-colored lithographs.

From rural Ohio she moved to Cincinnati to study art with James Henry Beard. In Cincinnati, she met and married her husband, a cloth merchant and tailor. The competitive art world of New York soon attracted her. *Raspberries on a Leaf* was painted at the end of a ten-year period in New York where the European art she saw in galleries made an impression on her. At the Düsseldorf Gallery she was saw realism espoused by German painters. While in New York, she was admitted to the National Academy of Design.

At the end of ten years, she moved her family to Newark, New Jersey to find less expensive living. She was the breadwinner for her family of 13 children, 7 of which lived into adulthood. Her husband early supported his wife’s talents, leaving his career to take on the responsibilities of child care and housework. Eventually, he served as her agent.

Domestic and family subjects were in vogue, and her choice of them reflects her need to earn money. These subjects were also easily available to her. She and her husband frequently were models for her paintings. Still life subjects were also at hand. Small still life paintings such as *Raspberries on a Leaf* were particularly saleable.

The subjects she chose reflect the prevailing view at that time that home is the province of women and by extension, a woman’s place is to support a man’s world. At the time, this view was actively supported by middle class women whether or not the facts of their lives allowed them to practically uphold this point of view. Such was the case with Spencer, who by embracing these subjects nevertheless earned a living and sustained the career of her choice throughout her lifetime. She created a large body of accomplished work and cemented a place for herself in the history of American art.

Nancy Miller Batty
WHO WAS WHO IN AMERICAN ART

Compiled from the Original
Thirty-four Volumes of
AMERICAN ART ANNUAL:
WHO'S WHO IN ART
Biographies of American Artists
Active from 1898–1947

EDITED BY
PETER HASTINGS FALK

SOUND VIEW PRESS
1985


SPEIGHT, Marion (Miss) [P] Louisville, KY. Member: Louisville A.L. [01]

SPEIGHT, Francis, Mrs. See Blakeslee, Sarah.


SPENCER, Andrew H. [P] Columbus, OH. Member: Columbus Ppc [25]


SPENCER, Edna Isebeth [S, PT] Waban, MA/Miami, FL b. 12 N 1883, St. John, New Brunswick. Studied: BMFA Sch.; ASL; B. Pratt, R. Aitken. Member: Miami A. Lg. Exhibited: Concord AI (prize); Miami A. Lg., 1940 (prize); Paris Salon, 1926 (prize); PAFA. Work: numerous portrait busts [47]


SPENCER, Frank B. [P] Rochester, NY [08]

SPENCER, Guy Raymond [Car] Omaha, NE b. 1 S 1878, Jasper County, MO. Member: Staff, Omaha World-Herald (since 1899), Lincoln Commemorer (1902-10) [21]


SPENCER, Irvin B. [P] Columbus, OH. Member: Columbus PpC [25]


SPENCER, Joseph [P] Detroit, MI. Exhibited: Ann., PAPA, 1939; San Fran. A. Assn., 1939 [40]

SPENCER, Julia Selden [Mrs. B.P.] [P] Miami, FL (Deep River, CT, until 1925) b. Connecticut. Studied: AIC, with B. Pratt; E. With, Walter and Bredin; Breckenridge, in East Gloucester. Member: North Shore AA; Miami Beach Al [27]


American Women Artists

Fig. 3-31. Margaret Foley. FOUNTAIN (c. 1874-76), marble

Today it is in the new Horticulture Center, West Fairmount Park, Philadelphia.

In 1877 Foley, ill and exhausted, left for her annual vacation in the Tyrol with her British author-friends, the Howitts. She died in Merano, to the sorrow of her colleagues in Rome.

Blanche Nevin (1841-1925) was a Philadelphia sculptor, well known in her day, but now shrouded in obscurity. Her only work that can be located is one of two statues representing Pennsylvania in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol.

In Philadelphia she studied sculpture with Joseph Alexis Bailly and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Then, oddly, she went to Venice rather than Rome. Nevin achieved some recognition for Maud Muller, a sculpture based on Whitier's poem, and executed portraits and ideal busts.

In 1876 she sent two life-sized plaster statues to the Woman's Pavilion of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition—a recumbent Cinderella, described unkindly as "sitting with an air of discouragement among the ashes, in pose as if the dying gladiator had shrunk back into infancy and femininity,"118 and an Eve. A contemporary engraving shows these two large works as the central focal points of the women's art display.

Nevin was a competent technician. She won a commission to carve a figure of John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg (1887), which was unveiled in 1889 in Statuary Hall.

Florence Freeman (1825-1876), a Bostonian who went to Italy in 1861 under the protective wing of Charlotte Cushman, specialized in bas-reliefs for mantelpieces. The most famous of these was Children and Yule Logs with Fireside Spirits. Other members of the flock referred to her as "Hilda," after one of the protagonists of Hawthorne's Marble Faun.

Sarah Fisher Ames (née Clampitt) (1817-1901), the first woman sculptor to settle in Rome in the mid-nineteenth century, was born in Lewes, Delaware, studied in Boston and Rome, and married the painter Joseph Alexander Ames.

She was prominent in antislavery circles and served as a nurse during the Civil War. She did portrait busts, of which the best known is Abraham Lincoln (purchased 1868 by the U.S. Capitol).

The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition

The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 climaxed the early phases of the art of the Republic. A number of women artists were represented in the main exhibition in Memorial Hall. Among the sculptures were six works by Edmonia Lewis, in-
cluding her award-winning Cleopatra; Vinnie Ream's Spirit of the Carnival, Miriam, and The West; Anne Whitney's Roma, her bronze bust Le Modèle, and her statuette of Charles Sumner; Florence Freeman's mantelpiece Children with Yule Log; and Margaret Foley's Jeremiah and Cleopatra. Foley's fountain, which had depleted her reserves of money and energy, was set in the center of Horticulture Hall, sending out sprays of water amid the plants and the Arabic horseshoe arches surrounding it.

Among the painters and graphic artists were Emily Sartain and Imogene Robinson, both of whom won medals, as well as Fidelia Bridges, Eliza Green, Susan C. Waters, Virginia Cranberry, Annie C. Shaw, Cornelia Fassett, and Elizabeth Gardner. Not all of the women's art, however, was shown in the main exhibition hall; some of it was displayed in a separate building—the Woman's Pavilion. The setting up of this pavilion was a startling last-minute development.19

At first there had been no consideration given to a separate exhibition of the work of women artists. But the organizers of the Exposition had been unable to raise the necessary operating funds as the event approached. They sought the help of Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin and distinguished social leader and organizational wizard. Gillespie threw back a challenge of her own. She would agree to rally the women of the country in a national fundraising effort in return for a special area in the main hall devoted entirely to the contributions of women in all fields. The members of the Centennial Board of Finance (all males) agreed, and Gillespie and her newly formed Women's Centennial Executive Committee organized an elaborate national network of women who worked very hard and raised a large sum of money in a short period of time.

Shortly before the exposition date, however, Gillespie was informed that no space was available for the women's exposition because the booths of

---

Fig. 3-32. Lithograph of THE WOMEN'S PAVILION, PHILADELPHIA CENTENNIAL EXPOSITION (1876)
foreign nations had used up almost every square foot in the hall. If women wanted a show they would have to raise more money and build a separate building. Alternating between depression and rage, Gillespie conferred with her committee and decided to accept the conditions of a separate building. Unable to find a woman experienced in rate building, she turned to Woman's Committee of the Exposition, which was elected in a prominent position on the fair grounds.

In the art section were two life-sized plaster sculptures by Philadelphia's Blanche Nevin, Cinderella and Eve: a marble bust by Florence Freeman; and Margaret Foley's bas-reliefs of Charles Sumner and Joshua. Among two-dimensional works were drawings by Eliza Greatorex; a painting of a young girl sewing, by Emily Sartain (as well as some of her steel engravings); sketches for Harper's Weekly by a young artist named Jennie Brownscombe (discussed in chapter 4); and wood engravings by Alice Donlevy. Also, there were special student exhibitions from the newly created art schools for women: the Women's Art School of Cooper Union, the Lowell School of Design at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Pittsburgh School of Design, and the Cincinnati School of Design.

The already well-known artist Lilly Martin Spencer showed Truth Unveiling Falsehood (her most important allegorical work), We Both Must Fade, and several of her "cabinet-sized" paintings. Truth Unveiling Falsehood was awarded a medal and, along with two portraits of members of New York's Connolly family, was installed in the subsequent Permanent International Exhibition, remaining there until 1880. Large photographs of Truth Unveiling Falsehood were sold during the period it was on display at the Exposition.

There was a great deal of controversy about the appropriateness of the separate building. Some women artists showed in both the Main Hall and the Woman's Pavilion. Lilly Spencer's correspondence reveals that she would have preferred to be in the Main Hall despite the fact that the Women's Committee offered to pay the shipping costs for her work. Radical feminists attacked the exhibition for being too conservative. Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not support the Pavilion, saying, "The Pavilion was no true exhibit of woman's art. . . . Upon its walls should have hung . . . framed copies of all the laws bearing unjustly upon women—those which rob her of her name, her earnings, her property, her children, her person . . . ." For Stanton, true women's art consisted of such things as shoes, watches, and other objects made by women working for slave wages in factories owned by men. The author William Dean Howells declared himself "puzzled" by the exhibition.

Leaflets and provocative incidents, such as the unexpected, unscheduled presentation of a Declaration of Rights for Women at the huge Independence Day gathering that year, added extra fireworks to this important Fourth of July. The raging controversies that surrounded the Woman's Pavilion demonstrated vividly the ambivalent position of women in the United States in 1876.

The Woman's Pavilion stood as a symbolic bridge between the Golden Age and the Gilded Age. It was a model for the Woman's Building that would be designed, by a woman architect, for the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. In the next fifty years, women would seize the vote and enter all fields of art in still greater numbers.
WOMEN ARTISTS

Recognition and Reappraisal
From the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century

Karen Petersen & J.J. Wilson

NEW YORK. NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS. 1976.
universal justice, "a justice that includes the woman sculptor." 48

AMERICAN ARTISTS AT HOME

The effort of American women artists to gain admittance to art schools and particularly to life-drawing classes paralleled many aspects of women's struggle for equal opportunity in the nineteenth century, in honor of which we picture here two leaders of the early women's movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. (Figs. V, 49,50) In an age when anatomy was learned in medical school and women were barred from medicine, they found it difficult to master the basic elements of human figure drawing—and then were criticized for their innate inability to model the glorious male thigh!44 Those artists who could not go to Europe for study had to resort to drawing and modeling from plaster casts of Greek and Roman statuary, and even this was difficult. In 1848, for instance, the nude statuary gallery of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was only open to women between ten and eleven on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and in 1856 it was deemed necessary to attach "a close fitting, but inconspicuous fig leaf to the Apollo Belvedere, Laocoon, Fighting Gladiator, and other figures as are similarly in need of it."45 Nonetheless, women were entering art schools in increasing numbers and pressure was building to provide them with something other than a cow to model. (Fig. V, 51) Obtaining access to schools and models would give only partial victory. There remained the struggle for more women instructors, which continues to the present day. And there were those conflicts Harriet Hosmer described in her ode to the unity between a full commitment to art and family demands: We as with Lilly Martin Spencer, the hand that rocked the cradle for the brush," it was frequently with great personal cost.

Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902)

Who is Lilly Martin Spencer? We are often asked on our lecture tours, and the answer is given grandly by a contemporary of hers. Let Men . . . know that with the skill of her hands and the power of her head, she sustains a family . . . are sustained them a thousandfold, better than she could have done with the needle or the washtub, and gives out to the world besides, the rich treasures which become the rays of sunshine in many a heart and home. Heaven bless thee, Lilly Martin Spencer.49

More prosaically, she was probably the best known American genre painter of the mid-nineteenth century. She was born in Ohio to a family of immigrants. Her father taught French in a nearby college and educated his children at home. Both he and Lilly Martin's mother were involved in cooperative reform societies, the abolition movement, and women's suffrage, and so they of course encouraged their daughter's desire to be an artist. Her father agreed to take her to Cincinnati, where she met and studied with various itinerant portrait artists. She refused an offer to travel to Europe for formal training and remained essentially a self-taught artist. She was often to lament her choice—particularly when she began to compete seriously with more sophisticated artists of the East Coast.

While still in Cincinnati, she married Benjamin Rush Spencer. A friend wrote to Lilly Martin Spencer...
at the time of her marriage: "glad to hear you determine to stick to painting... I was fearful matrimony would put an end to painting—I hope not." In fact, painting was the only visible means of support for the Spencers. Benjamin made several unsuccessful sorties into the labor market but was repeatedly drawn back to assist with the numerous children (she bore thirteen, seven lived).

The Spencers found it necessary to move to New York, where Lilly's work could bring a higher price. The competition, however, was intense, and Lilly had to study and work much harder to support her family than she had in Ohio. She was also making the difficult discovery that in order to earn money for her work, she had to meet the public's demand for sentimental scenes, of which The Young Husband: First Marketing is an excellent example. (Fig. V, 52) What is more, according to the prudent ad-

Fig. V, 49 ANNA KLUMPKE. Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Fig. V, 50 ADELAIDE JOHNSON. Susan B. Anthony.

These heroic busts of our "Founding Mothers" show the women artists' desire to commemorate those historical figures most meaningful to them. The prime example of such interaction between art and politics is found in the life of Sylvia Pankhurst, a devoted worker for women's suffrage in England, and later for other revolutionary movements. In 1909 she painted a series of twenty-foot-high panels to serve as backdrop for the Women's Social and Political Union General Meeting. The pursuit of her art, however, had often to be put aside for other kinds of political action, in what she felt was a necessary sacrifice.

Fig. V, 51 THOMAS EAKINS. Ladies Modeling Class at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (photograph). c. 1883. Forbidden access to nude human models, they are doing their best to learn the mysteries of anatomy from this unlikely model...
vice of a friend, she had to be willing to make numerous copies of each work—something Lilly Martin Spencer was loathe to do. Her friend wrote:

The question then arises why you have not sold many more pictures—It is only because instead of two pictures of your peculiar "genre," you have not had twenty. The plain truth is that pictures remarkable for Maternal, infantine and feminine, expressions, in which little else is seen but flesh, white drapery, and fruits, constitute your triumphs; according to popular estimations . . . Correggio is only known to posterity by subjects of your "genre."

Lilly heeded this advice and for the remainder of her life devoted herself to domestic scenes. Many of these were, in turn, purchased by
lithography firms, and numerous reproductions were made for American and occasionally for European households.

She did manage to imbue some of her portraits, allegorically, with her philosophical concerns, as we see in *We Both Must Fade*. (Fig. V, 53) Ostensibly a life-size rendering of one of the daughters of a wealthy New York family, the exquisitely detailed ice-blue gown, the rose, the young subject, were all appropriate emblems for her exploration of the *vanitas* theme. As Joshua Taylor points out in the introduction to *The Joys of Sentiment*, "Mrs. Spencer accepted the view that ruminations on mortality were no less real for being brought to mind in an inescapably modish and domestic environment." 52

Lilly Martin Spencer did achieve a certain degree of fame in her own lifetime but never the financial success she urgently needed. Her continuous hard work just barely kept her large family afloat. The decades of the '80s and '90s were to see the decline in domestic genre painting, and by 1889 she was receiving no more than ten dollars for her paintings and was often forced to use her work as barter in lieu of cash to pay her household expenses. She nevertheless continued to paint until her death at the age of seventy-nine, having spent the morning of her last day on earth at her easel. (Fig. V, 54)

**THE IMPRESSIONISTS**

*After All, Give Me France—Mary Cassatt (1845–1926)*

"I hated conventional art," said Mary Stevenson Cassatt, but then she came of a different social class than Lilly Martin Spencer, she never married, and she went to Paris to study. She had very little choice, she felt, as the limitation of the art schools in America she was sure would condemn her to mediocrity. Her study at the Pennsylvania Academy confirmed her conviction that only abroad would she thrive, and indeed when she got to Paris and saw the work of Edouard Manet, of Gustave Courbet, of Degas, "I began to live." 53

It was Degas who first was interested in her work and who preferred the invitation, which she accepted with alacrity, to join the group we now know as the Impressionists, though they called themselves Independents. They also became personal friends, though as Degas was an extremely difficult man and as Cassatt had rather firm opinions also, they were often estranged. 54

Her Main Line Philadelphia family, though they later "came around," did not at first know quite what to make of all this. Her brother, Aleck, wrote home patronizingly that, "She is in high spirits as her picture has been accepted for the annual exhibition (1872) in Paris ... Mary's art name is 'Mary Stevenson' under which name I suppose she expects to become famous, poor child." 55 Perhaps that is where the phrase smart-Aleck began!

A few years before she had written quite seriously, despite her laughing tone, about a friend of hers, "She is only an amateur and you must know we professionals despise amateurs." 56 How do women artists begin to see themselves as professionals? Usually when they need a profession, which Mary Cassatt did not really, though as her mother said: "Mary is at work again, intent on fame and money she says. . . . After all a
Lily Martin Spencer

American Still Life Painting, Wm. H. Gerdts and Russell Burke
Praeger, N.D.
1822-1902 - Leading woman artist in the 3rd quarter of the 19th century
Flowers and fruit.
  We Both Shall Fade, Natl. C.F.A.
  Vanitas
  Portrait of Deceased - Newark Museum

Dining Room Pictures

Pictures published by Prang as chromo-lithographs.

Louis Prang & Co. - Illustrated Catalogue of Art Publications:
for Spring 1876 (Boston 1876)

L.M.S. - The Museum, New Series, XV, Nos. 2 & 3 (Spring - Summer, 1963), 14;
and XVII, Nos. 1 and 2 (Winter-Spring, 1965), 10. (Quarterly, Newark Museum)
American Women Artists

Jane Simes, herself a living miniature, rivals her aunt in the same style."34

Mary Jane lived for a while with her widowed mother and her aunt Sarah in Baltimore. She was also, according to author Elizabeth Ellet, Anna Claypoole Peale's only student. Her miniatures are similar to Anna Peale's, but are slightly more primitive and harsher in color. She exhibited in Philadelphia and Baltimore between 1825 and 1835, but ceased painting after marrying Dr. John Yeates, with whom she had four children.

Mary Jane Peale (1827–1902), daughter of Rubens Peale, studied with her uncle Rembrandt and Thomas Sully. Her father's eyesight was poor, and unlike the other Peales, he was not a painter. When his museum business failed, he retired to a farm in Pennsylvania, and Mary Jane, who had been building a career as a portrait painter in New York, returned to care for her aging parents.

In an amusing reversal of Peale tradition, she taught her father to paint. He became an elderly "primitive," but joining him in still-life painting, Mary Jane produced her most sophisticated works—misty flower studies, with a distinctive personal quality that has been compared to Odilon Redon.35

Other "Painting Peales"
Maria Peale (1787–1866), Rosalba Carriera Peale (1799–1874), an early lithographer, Emma Clara Peale (1814–?), and Harriet Cany Peale (c. 1800–1869) wife of Rembrandt Peale, also became artists—all products of the liberated and encouraging Peale family.

Genre Painting

Let not my justice, gallantry and wit,
A Lilly Martin Spencer here omit.
The humor of the lower life she shows
Wherein but few superior she knows.36

John Frankenstein, American Art: Its Awful Attitude: A Satire (1864)

Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902), the outstanding female genre painter of the Golden Age, was a prodigy from Marietta, Ohio, whose scenes of everyday family life and sentimental subjects were widely reproduced in engravings and lithographs. At the height of her popularity, her paintings sold for as much as those of George Caleb Bingham, a leading male genre painter. In addition to an enormous output of paintings, she bore thirteen children (seven of whom survived) and supported all of them, as well as her husband, at her easel.

The atmosphere surrounding her childhood and early youth included the same element of vigorous encouragement from a liberated father that feminist historians have uncovered in the histories of many leading women artists of early times.37 Gilles and Angélique Martin were French intellectuals who went from Brittany to Exeter, England, where Lilly was born. In 1830 they immigrated to the United States with the idea of forming a utopian colony of families. They were idealists and reformers, active in support of the three main causes of the century: abolitionism, women's rights, and the temperance movement. Gilles Martin strongly supported and encouraged his daughter's talent—going so far as to leave his family in Marietta, at one point, to accompany her to bustling Cincinnati, remaining there with her so that she could study art.

As a child, however, Lilly Martin was educated at home. The Martins had an extensive library from which she acquired knowledge of Shakespeare and the classics, which in later years provided imaginative material for her paintings. She is described as "a strong fervent energetic child, with jet black hair,
large black flashing eyes, bold forehead, wild as the
deer on the hills and as full of joy and gladness as
the grey squirrel that bounded limb to limb in the
great walnut by the brookside not far from her
father's door.”

Her talent revealed itself at an early age. At seven­
teen she covered the plaster walls of her family
home, Tupperford Farm, with charcoal murals that
included full-sized portraits of the family, “a view
from a public piazza out upon a water scene bor­
dered by hill and dale.” Also, there were figures
“shaded and finished in the most exquisite manner
... some talking politics and some making love.”

This description in the local newspaper also men­
tioned several domestic scenes—a boy teasing a
cat, a child taking his first steps, a woman baking
bread with her hands in the dough. It is pleasant to
speculate on the character of a family that permitted
its walls to be covered with charcoal murals. These
works soon became a tourist attraction for the sur­
rounding area.

In 1841 Lilly Martin held her first public exhibit of
paintings in the local Episcopal church, charging a
twenty-five-cent admission fee to raise funds for her
education. This exhibition attracted so much atten­
tion from critics that the wealthy Cincinnati patron
of the arts, Nicholas Longworth (who sponsored
some of America’s most famous artists of that
period), offered to finance her training in Boston
and Europe, but she refused his offer. Many have
conjectured about the reason she turned down such
an important opportunity. Longworth reportedly
stipulated that she would have to study for seven
years with European masters before exhibiting her
work. Many American artists of the time were try­
ing to build a native tradition and objected to
“foreign” training.

After lessons fro:... local painters, Lilly Martin
studied briefly with James Beard and John Insco
Williams in Cincinnati, mastered the bare rudim­
ents of oil painting, and soon surpassed her
teachers, whose work was somewhat stiff and pro­
vincial. She wrote home to her mother, “I work at
my painting from morning ‘til night,” adding that
Cincinnati was “literally full of portrait painters
who are set up with their sign . . . and all that, but I
shall beat them all, I hope one day.”

In 1844 she married Benjamin Rush Spencer, a
sweet-natured man with whom she shared forty-six
years in an unusual marriage. Benjamin Spencer,
recognizing soon after their marriage that his wife
would be the breadwinner of the family, took over
many of the domestic duties of hearth and home,
and assisted her in the business side of her work.

For a few struggling years she exhibited wherever
she could—the Cincinnati Society for the Promo­
tion of Useful Knowledge, the Young Men’s Mer­
cantile Library, and even at art supply stores. In
1847 she wrote her mother that her prospects
looked much brighter. A sudden increase in her
income came from painting sales through the West­
ern Art-Union in Cincinnati. For five dollars this
organization gave subscribers an engraving of a
painting by an American artist and a chance to win
an original oil in a lottery drawing.

The New York and Cincinnati Art-Unions, al­
though obviously commercial and sometimes vul­
garizing in their effects, generated a large number of
sales and reached a wide audience for American
artists. The works were displayed in advance of the
lottery and were widely publicized. The Art-Unions
flourished until they were declared to be illegal
gambling promotions in 1852.

In 1848 the Spencers moved to New York City to
“very comfortable lodgings over a cofin [sic] store
in a very eligible situation on broadway.”

Lilly Spencer wanted to seek fame in the main center of
galleries, art schools, and patrons. Yet soon, she
found herself competing with polished, European­
trained peers. She wrote to her mother that New
Yorkers were severe critics. She suddenly felt in­
ferior and would have to study very hard to catch
up: “I do not actually get half as well paid for my
works, than I did west, and however have to do ten
times better work.""42

In spite of a growing family and the grinding labor of painting all day to support her husband and many children, she took night classes at the National Academy of Design to improve her drawing and knowledge of perspective.

At first Spencer aspired to allegorical and Shakespearean subjects, but convenience and public demand soon led her to make use of her family as the models for domestic, sentimental scenes, such as The War Spirit at Home, Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg. Her drawing and technique improved under the double spur of lessons and close study of works in the New York galleries.

In 1854 the Cosmopolitan Art Association began to promote her work. Praising her painting Shake Hands? (1854), the Association declared that it was like "the incomparable pictures by the Flemish artists."43 This reference to "the Flemish artists" is significant—the Art Association had bought the entire Düsselhof Gallery of German works and informed the public that the American painters would have the "privilege of competing with the Düsseldorff pictures, for popular favor."44

The engravings and lithographs sent to subscribers by art unions and the Cosmopolitan Art Association spread Lilly Spencer's fame and made her name a household word. Since she received no payment, however, she mused wryly that "fame is as hollow and brilliant as a soap bubble, it is all colors outside, and nothing worth kicking inside."45 Such sad phrases are in marked contrast to the earlier, gushing letters to "Dear Ma"—in which she speaks of her great aspirations. Although she was exhibiting at the prestigious National Academy, she and her husband were nevertheless frantically pursuing every avenue for commercial sales to provide for their many children.

In such paintings as Fi! Foe! Fum! (c. 1858), Picnic, Fourth of July (c. 1864), and Shake Hands? Lilly Martin Spencer achieves the level of excellence of our best American genre painters. With frank good humor and close observation, she portrays both the warmth and the din of family life. There is a refinement of paint quality and design, and a subtlety of color and form in the still lifes that can be likened to that of Dutch artists of the seventeenth century.

One cannot help comparing some of Spencer's domestic scenes with those of the French painter Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin. Shake Hands? has a Chardin-like subject—a housemaid with floured hands, standing amidst a beautifully rendered kitchen scene of metal pots, fruits, and meats. Unlike Chardin, however, Spencer has her smiling housemaid reaching out toward the viewer, addressing the audience with ingenuous friendliness. The painting captures the flavor of Jacksonian democracy, deliberately breaking down class distinctions and reducing artistic "distance."

Spencer's Picnic, Fourth of July—a complex composition of many figures organized in a mean-

![Fig. 3-7. Lilly Martin Spencer, THE WAR SPIRIT AT HOME. CELEBRATING THE VICTORY AT VICKSBURG (1866), oil on canvas, 30" x 32½"](image)
The Golden Age, 1800–1876

Fig. 3-8. Lilly Martin Spencer. FI! FO! FUM! (1858), oil on canvas, 35 7/8” x 28 5/8”

dering S-curve against a beautiful painted setting of river and park-like meadow—preserves the rural charm of the United States at mid-century. The central figure is her lifelong model, her husband Benjamin Rush Spencer. Shown in the portly form of middle years, he has just tumbled on the ground from a swing, while friends, children, animals, and servants are grouped in various attitudes of work and play. Spencer's work was uneven in quality, however, and certain paintings are flawed by the weak draftsmanship that concerned her so much.

As the years passed, Lilly Martin Spencer's efforts became a grinding labor with lessening rewards. Photography had increasingly usurped portrait commissions, and the native scene was no longer popular with the art-buying public. Collectors were looking toward Paris and other European centers for art.

Late in her life many of her works were auctioned for as little as ten dollars, and at the end she bartered works for bread to keep alive. A poignant photograph shows her, white-haired, bent over her easel with a work in progress the day before she died at the age of eighty.

**Herminia Borchard Dassel (?–1857)** was born in Germany and achieved success in America with paintings of literary subjects, genre scenes, and portraits. Her father was a wealthy banker in Königsberg, Prussia, and as a child Herminia Borchard was surrounded by servants, teachers, horse-drawn carriages, and all the trappings of European upper-class society. When her father was bankrupted in the crash of 1839 and left with only a small farm, she was forced to help her older brothers and sisters with the chores.

At this time Herminia decided to become a professional painter:

She would attend to her household duties in the morning and then, with portfolio in hand, wander off over the dusty or muddy road to the city, and again returned to attend to the flowers and cabbages, and the making of cheese and butter.

Her early education undoubtedly included drawing lessons, and she quickly secured a commission to paint a full-sized portrait of a local clergyman. "This she painted in the church with her model on the altar," while the country folk gawked with amazement.

An exhibition of painter Carl Sohn's work inspired her to go to Düsseldorf to study with him for four years, supporting herself with the sale of paintings of peasant life. Düsseldorf was at that time the center of the school of anecdotal and historical painting, which also attracted American artists like Emanuel Leutze, painter of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851).
Artistic Women and Women Artists

JOSEPHINE WITHERS

We all know that women are naturally artistic and creative, don't we? But we also know that there have not really been any great women artists. We know, too, that a male artist is a pretty effeminate being, or as June Wayne phrased it, a "sterotypical female."

Bankrupt and discredited sentiments? Not really. These notions are remarkably durable, and persist today despite changes in their mode of expression. They have a long history, but became particularly well-articulated during the course of the 19th century, as the feminized Victorian image of the artist took a hold on popular culture, and the traditional feminine role-definitions came into head-on conflict with the first wave of Feminism.

If young girls were not, in fact, "naturally" artistic, training could do the job. For every young girl who took her drawing lessons in stride, can we not imagine a sister who silently gnashed her teeth at the prospect? While boys were neither encouraged to be artistic nor to be artists, the converse was not true: young women were encouraged to be artistic, but they were not, of course, encouraged to become artists.

What, then, was considered a proper artistic training for a young girl? A woman writing in 1892 recalled that two generations before, an artistic "finishing" consisted of an elaborate sampler "in crewel work, and appended to this bit of embroidery a yellow canary bird eating impossible cherries from a tree scarcely taller than itself." The women of the following generation "employed leisure moments in painfully duplicating with fine lead pencils the innumerable leaves of trees seen in engravings."1

Through the second quarter of the 19th century, when specialized art schools came into being in this country, the teaching of drawing and painting tended to be lumped with embroidery, lace-work, dancing, and music — sure indication that they were intended as female accomplishments rather than male training. "A Mother" (her pen name), wrote in 1829 that "for boys, some knowledge of drawing is useful in many professions and situations besides that of an artist, as soldiers, sailors, and manufacturers. To girls, this charming art is an accomplishment highly desirable, as being a quiet, a domestic, and an elegant amusement."2

We can judge from the tone used by these writers that working "impossible dragons and roses on canvas"3 was an incidental by-product. The real purpose was "to supply her hours of leisure with innocent occupations; occupations which may prevent the languor and the snares of idleness... and contribute to preserve the mind in [a] state of placid cheerfulness."4 Our "Mother" has essentially the same praise: "The pencil and the palette offer a recreation that may be enjoyed at almost any time, and that, without infringing on the comforts of the other members of the domestic circle."5 Arguing from the other side, the Unitarian minister and Feminist, Thomas Higginson, pointed out to the Massachusetts legislature that "the first lesson usually impressed upon a girl is, that the object of her instruction is to make her more pleasing and ornamental; but of her brother's, to make him more wise and useful."6 These accomplishments were intended to be distracting, not engrossing; a diversion, not a preoccupation, not unlike the gimp bracelets and leather bookmarks that children are asked to manufacture in endless variety to keep them quiet on a rainy day at camp.

Grudging allowance was made for a woman who wanted to put her talent to work for her: if she was forced to support herself, if she had only modest ambitions, and if she remained unknown, she could still hold on to her virtue. An editorial in The Crayon (February 1861) claimed it an advantage that "the female painter or engraver may follow her profession in the shadow of retirement, overlooked, never publicly advertised, and never summoned to appear before the curious and heartless world." Fortunately for women, art "is not restricted to the summits of excellence, but by gentle gradations descends into the minute and familiar details of ordinary life." The suggested list of occupations included miniature painting, botanical plates, illustration, and industrial design. In the 1890s such professional modesty was still reported with approval: "Girls and women are heard of who, content to be poor and unknown, are happy and serene in carrying out plans for stained glass or mural ornamentation in the studios of Mr. LaFarge, Mr. Tiffany, Mr. Crowninshield, and other artists who can guide the brain of those who yet furnish many a delicate thought."7

Whether a woman remained an "accomplished" amateur or a professional handmaiden, her relationship to the creative production of art was supposed to remain the same and that is — remote. Beginning around the time the Women's Art School of New York merged with Cooper Union in 1859, and continuing through the century, increasing numbers of
women did attend art schools. But in 1868, the Feminist newspaper *Revolution* (April 23, 1868) reported that of 160 women enrolled at Cooper Union that year, only 20 planned professional careers; the other 140 “are women not dependent upon industrial occupation for a livelihood.” If they didn’t go to art school, these “lady amateurs” provided the support of many male artists who gave lessons on the side so they could create “high art.” Look in the studios of many of these artists—Allston, Matisse, even Gorky—and you will find that their students were predominantly or exclusively women. In 1949, Elaine de Kooning gave a talk entitled “Women Fill the Art Schools; Men Do the Painting.”

Twenty-five years have brought little change in this relationship.

Having browsed in the thickets of the stereotype—the ideal of the “naturally artistic woman,” we had best emerge in order to discover the connection between the “ideal” and the reality. Theoretically, a woman artist could either accept or reject the stereotype as an ideal. Practically, of course, life is never that simple. And regardless of her own feeling in the matter, stereotypes do have a life of their own. June Wayne has recreated the quintessential stereotype of the woman artist, clearly intended as an imaginative construct embalmed for posterity. She writes both prose and poetry for the best magazines, speaks upon industrial occupation and enters every musical instrument. She is familiar with a half-dozen languages and plays on a number of musical instruments. She excels in the womanly art of fine and artistic needle work. All her surroundings are literary and artistic.


Stereotypes, as I say, have a life of their own. The French painter of animals, Rosa Bonheur, who surely went further than most in creating a life and a body of work outside the stereotype, was still dogged by it: “Rosa Bonheur may not be the very last artist of the age. The artist, who insists that her children shall be clean and well dressed even if they lack the spontaneity, freedom and artistry of real child life.”

Bonheur’s critic—a woman, in her case—clearly didn’t like what she saw, and latched on to the metaphor closest at hand. Using the language of the stereotype to belittle and dismiss women artists and their work was, in fact, the predominant critical mode.

How an individual artist dealt with the stereotype is a complex matter which changed in the course of the 19th century. The one constant was that she did not—could not—remain oblivious to it. Sophia Hawthorne, who is not even generally known as an artist, was formed by it; Lily Martin Spencer, a genre painter of the mid-century, turned it around and used it to her advantage. The neo-classical sculptor, Henriette Hosmer, consciously rejected it in both her life and her art. Mary Cassatt, our best-known artist of the 19th century, transcended it in some degree, but was also ambivalent in her attitude toward the stereotype.

Sophia Peabody Hawthorne’s (1809—1877) artistic ambitions and accomplishments lay somewhere between the amateur and the professional (Fig. 1). Most of her paintings are copies after originals or engravings which sold well in the art-poort Boston of the 1830s and ‘40s. Sophia came of a modestly genteel and well-educated branch of the Salem Peabody family. She and her sister Mary are principally known to us as the wives of famous men: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann. Her eldest sister, Elizabeth, is known in her own right as an educator, associated with Alcott’s Temple School, and as an energetic social reformer.

In the early years of Sophia’s marriage to Hawthorne (she married in 1842, at the age of 31), her painting supplemented his meager income. Thereafter, her interest in art had a profound, if indirect, effect on their lives. It was principally to satisfy Sophia’s desire to finally see the originals she had been copying all those years, that Hawthorne took a consulship in Liverpool, which subsequently allowed them to live and travel in Europe, where Hawthorne wrote *The Marble Faun*. The principal character of Hilda, a painter and copyist, was partially modeled on Sophia, and many of the aesthetic judgments, particularly of paintings, can be traced to Sophia’s knowledgeable appreciation.

Sophia’s chief impediment to taking herself seriously, and possibly doing her own original work, was that she was a woman, and well-socialized to that role. In addition, she had one of those mysterious afflictions, reminiscent of her friend Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and so common to 19th-century women. “For four days,” she wrote in her journal, “I suffered inexpressible agonies—so that even I wondered how I could have ever called all my former suffering pain. . . . For a few
hours I very nearly lost the governance of my intellect and felt that if such sensations lasted in full power much longer, I should surely go mad."

The journals which Sophia kept give us an extraordinary insight into the conflicting directions which her dedication, enthusiasm, disability, and lack of confidence took her. "Oh how little anyone knows the intensity of my love for [art]—Had I the least perception of a continued or an hour's sensation of perfect health—I suppose I should think—'If I were well—how I would paint and draw.' But even when I say this, it conveys no meaning to my mind." (July 23, 1831). "Yesterday I began copying Mr. Allston's picture [Fig. 2]. It was intense enjoyment—almost intoxicating—It was an emotion altogether too intense for my physicals." (January 10, 1832). 

Washington Allston lent his own pictures to Sophia, and also corrected her work from time to time.

Of her work, she had this to say: "I cannot bear to take the time [to rest]. I know... that if I unwind, it will be no easy matter to wind me up—so that I make a desperate effort and lose myself again in my occupation. I wonder if there are many people who live on this, as it were by drawing up buckets of life with hard labour—from the well of the mind—the cord will break I suppose on one of these almost supernatural exertions—but I believe it best to wear out." (February 15, 1832).

Besides her fairly regular painting schedule, Sophia read extensively in religious and philosophical tracts, and read the classics in Greek, Hebrew, and German. This is the account she gives of herself in a letter to a friend: "You kindly ask, dear Mr. Russell, for particular accounts of my occupations—I have been reading John's archaeology—and Milman's History of the Jews—the memoirs of Josephine—Paul's letters to his Kinsfolk—Griscom's Europe—a singular medley and I have pursued the Hebrew and German a little—and paint a great deal. I have even begun to create out of my own head." She associated with Boston's intellectual elite, and later in the decade, she participated in Margaret Fuller's famous "conversations," which were held in the Peabody home. Until the time she married, and between bouts of the headache, Sophia led the life of the scholar-artist.

Hawthorne scholars tend to condescendingly dismiss Sophia Hawthorne as an overly pious and emotional woman who had few original thoughts. She is condemned, in effect, for being what she and those around her thought to be most admirable in a woman. She was appropriately submissive to authority, whether it was her God or the painters whom she copied. The price she paid for this "correct" posture was fairly high, for she continually expressed a lack of confidence in her abilities.

Her timidity often expressed itself directly in her art. She was in technical control as long as she was copying from a model, but it was a painting, engraving, or sculpture. But as soon as she turned to nature, her expertise failed her, and she reverted to a charming but awkward primitivism. Sometimes she was stalled altogether. One day when she went to a favorite pine grove, she began sketching one of the trees close up; "but I was too much taken up with the music and the shadows and the clouds to use my pencil." (September 16, 1830).

Her humility is nowhere more poignantly expressed than in her report of an evening's conversation with the Unitarian minister William Channing, her sister Elizabeth and others. They spent a good deal of the evening talking about the relative status of women in various countries. "After quite a pause in the conversation, Dr. Channing said, 'Miss Sophia,' upon which I roused me and looked at him; but his face was buried in his hands, and so I waited for what should follow. He went on to say he had been reading about some females who would be painters—and that it was said they were generally wanting in strength, or as Fuseli said, 'There was no fist in it.' I tried to respond to his very kind notice of little me—but I found that no thought could find expression, and so I sunk away into my shell again" (February 15, 1832). If Channing was hoping for a debate on the merits of the stereotype, he was disappointed; by remaining silent, Sophia effectively gave her assent to it. A wildly incongruous coda to this report appears in the next journal entry, describing her routine activities: "I painted more than three hours this morning after reading Plato's part of Socrates' defense [in Greek]" (February 17, 1832). In her own words, but altogether unconsciously, she demonstrated the considerable mental agility required to dissemble her more serious purpose in order to accommodate the stereotype.

Lily Martin Spencer (1822–1902) also made an accommodation in her own way, but with very different results. She had her first one-artist show at the age of 17, and never stopped painting until her death at the age of 80. She regarded her art as a business enterprise, and for many of those years was the primary support of her large family. She was a self-determining woman, yet was no Feminist. With her husband taking care of the children and assisting her in the studio, their family arrangements were unusual for the time, yet her paintings present a sentimental and unquestioning view of conventional child-centered family life (Fig. 3).

Lily's biography reads like a Horatio Alger story. She was essentially self-taught, yet when she moved from home in Marietta, Ohio to establish herself in Cincinnati at the age of 19, she could write her mother that "The city is literally full of portrait painters who are set up with their signs, advertise-
I

Fig. 3. Lily Martin Spencer. *Fil! Fo! Fum!,* 1858. Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Betz

ments and all that, but I shall beat them all, I hope, one day” (January 21, 1842. See Fig. 4, painted at this time). She aspired to “become a Michel Angelo, if I possibly can, and I mean to try to make my painting have a tendency towards moral improvement” (July 11, 1847). She had a clear sense of what was required of her to succeed, and that was—work. She sagely observed, “I think the great secret of people failing often from succeeding is their being too impatient and wishing to succeed too soon” (undated [1850]). When her mother came across a negative exhibition review, Lily reassured her by saying: “I depend entirely upon my own truthful and persevering efforts to improve. And my own natural powers whatever they may be. On this raft of quiet comfortable determined self-reliance, I float composedly amidst all these vain attempts from jealous shafts to keep me down. Feeling conscious of my own merit, and knowing exactly the extent of my powers, these attacks can never put me down” (April 20, 1854).

When Lily Martin married Benjamin Spencer in 1844, a friend and supporter was relieved and “glad to hear you determine to stick to painting. . . . I was fearful matrimony would put an end to it.” By the time the Spencers moved to New York City in 1848 to further Lily’s career, Ben Spencer had given up his work in the cloth trade so he could help with the family, the house, and the studio.

Lily became the principal breadwinner in the family because she wanted to paint, and because it was no doubt mutually agreed upon that her career held more promise than did Ben’s. But once in this position, Lily had a great deal of financial pressure on her to produce as much, and as quickly as possible. Painting above all was a business. She made continual references, both anxious and optimistic, to selling, painting subjects that would sell, and finding enough time in a day to do it all. “I am extremely busy,” she wrote, “both in mind and body trying to improve in my painting, that I scarcely find time to even think of anything else” (June 5, 1850).

Two years later she vividly evoked the crisis atmosphere in the house. “A portrait came which I had to set at in the greatest haste. [The next day] I had to go at the portrait, for my sitter came. The girl was washing, and Ben had to hold little Charley on one knee, and Angelo on the other. . . . We had to watch [the sick child] on turns that night and the next and then the next again. . . . And I had to keep constantly at my portrait, for besides their being very impatient to get it, I had reason to hope that I would get several more portraits from the same quarter” (March 6, 1852).

Particularly during the years that her children were youngsters, there was no time for that creative indolence, contemplation, and reverie which we often think a necessary part of the artistic process. Contemplation needs, first of all, solitude, and that is something Spencer neither had nor apparently wished for. The business of art was thoroughly embedded in the business of raising a family. “We spend our

Fig. 4. Lily Martin Spencer. *Self-portrait,* c. 1841. Columbus, Ohio. Ohio Historical Society.

SUMMER 1976
evenings so pleasantly, myself at my pictures or sewing, and Ben reading aloud" (January 13, 1848).

There were moments when Lily regretted not having the time to extend herself. "I wish I had studied landscape more when I was at home. . . . I am extremely backward in it, principally from not being able to afford the time to make studies from nature." And characteristically, her regret was that "they sell quicker than any other kind of painting" (August 11, 1852). If there was little time to experiment and develop her painting, there was no time at all outside family and business for socializing with other artists or for other sorts of activities. On one occasion, her mother evidently wanted Lily to attend a Feminist convention with her. She made it clear to her mother that "I cannot leave my babies nor my business to attend those meetings. . . . You know, dear mother, that that is your point of exertion and attention and study, like my painting is mine, and you know, dear mother, as you have told me many a time that if we wish to become great in anything [we must] condense our powers to one point" (undated [c. 1850]).

It was her babies and her business which made Spencer's devotion to art acceptable by the standards of the day. Even though her dedication to art antedated any necessity to earn a living, this became the cover, the respectable justification for so doing. There is no hint in her letters of art being an end in itself. Unlike Sophia Hawthorne, she never admits to painting for the pure pleasure of it. Lily's career was first and always at the service of the family. In this way, she could have a career and an unconventional family arrangement for herself, yet not seriously challenge thereby the code of feminine propriety.

Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908) chose a radically different route. When asked by a younger woman artist, "What is the first thing I have to learn in my art?" Hosmer replied, "Learn to be laughed at, and learn it as quickly as you can. Other matters you can learn at your leisure." Hosmer was far more aware of the complications of being an ambitious woman than was Spencer, and she was willing to flout social convention whenever this threatened her chosen profession as a sculptor. She knew that she would need a good training in anatomy, and so she contrived to attend medical school. When this slander appeared in the Art Journal and The Queen, Hosmer sued for libel and also defended herself in an article describing the basic technical procedures. "We women artists have no objection to its being known that we employ assistants; we merely object to its being supposed that it is a system peculiar to ourselves." She went on to observe that "I am quite persuaded that that, had Thorwaldsen and Vogelberg been women. . . . we should long since have heard the great merit of their works attributed to the skill of their workmen." 21

It is no coincidence that the slanderous rumors surfaced at the very moment that Hosmer was getting enthusiastic notices for her heroic statue of the ancient Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia, completed in 1859 and exhibited in 1862 (Fig. 5). Hosmer chose this queen for her "womanly modesty, her manly courage, and her intellectual tastes," 22 and depicted her in chains as the prize captive in Aurelian's triumphal procession. During the early 1860s, the statue was regally and profitably displayed in London, and later in New York and Boston. Whether or not it was consciously intended, this "most superbly royal of queens" stands as one woman's response to the bland and submissive beauty—"that passionless perfection," as Elizabeth Barrett Browning styled it—of Hiram Powers' extraordinarily popular Greek Slave, done 16 years earlier.

In the early 1890s, Hosmer completed her last major work, a large statue of another great queen, Isabella, commis-
tioned by the city of San Francisco. By the 1870s, however, her work was no longer in such demand, and her career, like that of Lily Martin Spencer, was eclipsed by changes in aesthetic taste. The American Civil War, and political upheavals in Italy and France, shattered that sense of self-confidence and optimism which helped create the taste for Spencer's scenes of domestic bliss and Hosmer's idealized historical figures.

As fate would have it, Hosmer's most celebrated work is something of a cult object, neither an original piece, nor commonly associated with her name. She was an intimate of the Brownings, and did a life cast of their clasped hands at Elizabeth's request (Fig. 6), which later acquired the etiquette, "Parted in death, we say; Yet 'hand in hand they went their/Eternal way.'"

The decline in Hosmer's reputation was only partly brought about by the demise of the neo-classical aesthetic. Although convoluted, the patronizing language of this critic is by now familiar:

"Women, by nature, are prompted in the treatment of sculpture to motives of fancy and sentiment, rather than to compete with men in realistic portraiture or absolute creative imagination. But this distinction, like every generalization, has its exceptions. The works of Harriet Hosmer are all of a robust, masculine character, even in details, as if wrought out by a hard head—work and diligent study of models by a mind that had forced itself, as will a manly energy, to achieve a mechanical mastery of a profession for which it has no supreme aesthetic predilection."

Obfuscating and slanderous criticism aside, Hosmer's life and art are refreshingly clear and consistent. Not so with Mary Cassatt (1843-1926). Late in life, ill and almost blind, she burned the letters which Edgar Degas had written her over the many years of their friendship. Since then, the history of a relationship known only through indirection and a handful of one-line remarks reported by third parties, has been kept alive and nourished by creative speculation. She effectively put a lid of privacy on one half of a dialogue which by itself would go far in revealing the meshing of her life and her art, an understanding which we essentially lack.

Obfuscating and slanderous criticism aside, Hosmer's life and art are refreshingly clear and consistent. Not so with Mary Cassatt (1843-1926). Late in life, ill and almost blind, she burned the letters which Edgar Degas had written her over the many years of their friendship. Since then, the history of a relationship known only through indirection and a handful of one-line remarks reported by third parties, has been kept alive and nourished by creative speculation. She effectively put a lid of privacy on one half of a dialogue which by itself would go far in revealing the meshing of her life and her art, an understanding which we essentially lack.

Cassatt's opinions and attitudes are complicated at the very least. What she says in her paintings is more direct and forthright, although this has been obscured by a great deal of indifferent criticism. Like the other Independants, she painted what was available to her; as with Spencer, that was the indoor life of women. It did not include the life of the boulevards, the cafés, or the whorehouses. When one art historian begged to be delivered from her "tea, clothes and nursery; nursery, clothes and tea," he expressed the unthinking premise of most critics that these subjects are inherently less interesting than dance halls and brothels. This unexamined bias has created a sort of critical myopia which tends to lump all Cassatt's subjects together without reference to the varied and subtle perspectives with which she viewed them.

These could range from the tender to the imperious. It is, perhaps, understandable that Mrs. Riddle didn't care for Cassatt's portrait of her (Fig. 8). There was some complaint about the nose, but what seems to have gone unremarked is the prim but forceful manner in which this grande dame presides over her exquisite tea service (which belonged to Cassatt) and by implication, the women whom she hosts. To make her point, Cassatt played off the crisp blacks of her
dress against the pale colors of the face, whose most striking accent, the eyes, picks up the brilliant cerulean blue of the tea service. The studied artifice of the Cassatt portrait is one demonstration of the stereotype of the naturally creative woman is a poor explanation for artistic excellence, wherever it may be found. In their own words, and with varying degrees of insight, Hawthorne, Spencer, Hosmer, and Cassatt have exposed the myth as the hindrance it is, rather than the blandishment it was thought to be by true believers. While this myth of women's peculiar artistic abilities may bring comfort to some, it is no longer of any constructive use to the artist—or critic—still entangled in its web.

1 This article is dedicated with affection to Margret Craver, artist and silver-smith. For the first part of this study, I am indebted to Hilda Smith for her "Feminism and the Methodology of Women's History," which can be found in the anthology edited by Berenice Carroll, Liberating Women's History: Critical and Theoretical Essays in the History of Women, Evanston (Illinois), 1976.


3 Susan Carter, "Women in the Field of Art Work," The North American Review, September, 1892, p. 381. Susan Carter was principal of Cooper Union Art School at the time.

4 A Mother, Thoughts on Domestic Education, Boston, 1829, pp. 24-25.


6 Charles Butler, The American Lady, Philadelphia, 1836, p. 60. This was published as a companion to The American Gentleman; their format suggests they were intended as presentation gifts to young people for their moral instruction.

7 A Mother, op. cit., p. 69.

8 Thomas W. Higginson, Woman and her Wishes, New York, 1853, p. 8. This essay is reprinted in various collections of his works.


10 I thank Jim Jordan for the Gorky information.


15 May 7, 1831. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from a series of holograph journals in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

16 I thank Mary Garrard for pointing out the stylistic similarities of Hawthorne’s painting to early paintings by Alston.

17 Letter from Salem, December 8, 1832, to Mr. William Russell, in the collection of Houghton Library, Harvard University.


19 This and all subsequent quotations are from letters available in the Spencer papers. Archives of American Art. Unless otherwise noted, they are all from Spencer to her parents. In a few instances, I have made minor changes in spelling and punctuation. The Spencer papers include a large correspondence from Spencer to her parents, clippings of the period, and also an extensive collection of letters to and from Angelique Martin concerning her feminist activities.

20 Letter from W. A. Adams to Spencer, February 5, 1845, in the Spencer papers, Archives of American Art.


23 The "White Marmorean Flock," so named by Henry James, included Louisa Lander, Emma Stebbins, Margaret Foley, Florence Freeman, Anne Whitney, Edmonia Lewis, and Vinnie Ream. Charlotte Cushman provided cohesion for the group, although not all the women had as close ties as did Hosmer. See Gerdts, op. cit.

24 There are many contemporaneous accounts of the Roman studios, but see especially Hawthorne's description of Kenyon's studio in The Marble Faun, New York, 1902, 1, p. 100 ff.


26 Lydia Maria Childs, a lifelong friend, credited this to Hosmer in an article appearing in the Transcript (undated clipping, c. 1862, in the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College).

27 The original plaster cast is in the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College; there are, of course, numerous bronze casts of the hands.

28 J. Jackson Jarves, "Progress of American Sculpture in Europe," Art Journal, n.s. 33, 1871, p. 7. For further observations on Jarves' criticism, see Mary Garrard, "Of Men, Women and Art": Some Historical Reflections," in this issue, p. 324.

29 Nancy Hale, Mary Cassatt, New York, 1975, p. 141. Adelyn Breeskin confirmed this in conversation, adding that this probably took place between 1923 and 1926.


Josephine Withers is an Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Maryland.
Lilly Martin was born in Exeter, England, in 1822. Her parents, Gilles and Angelique Martin, immigrated to the United States (Marietta, Ohio) in 1830 with the hope of forming a utopian colony of families. They were idealists and reformers, supporting abolitionism, women's rights, and the temperance movement. As a child, Lilly was educated at home. Her artistic talent revealed itself at an early age and was strongly supported by her family.

In 1841, Lilly held her first exhibit of paintings in a local church, charging a small admission fee to raise funds for her education. As a result of this exhibition, a wealthy Cincinnati patron of the arts offered to finance her training but, for reasons unknown, she refused the offer.

After lessons from local painters, she studied briefly in Cincinnati with James Beard and John Insco Williams. In 1844 she married Benjamin Rush Spencer. Benjamin recognized early on that his wife would be the breadwinner in the family. He took over many of the domestic duties at home and helped to manage the business side of her work.

In 1848 the Spencers moved their growing family to New York City. (Lilly Spencer bore 13 children; seven survived.) Lilly soon found herself competing with the more polished, European trained artists. She began to take night classes at the National
Academy of Design to improve her drawing and knowledge of perspective.

In 1854, the Cosmopolitan Art Association began to promote her work. Her fame spread and her name became a household word. Well-known for her domestic sentimental scenes, she became one of the best known American genre painters of the mid-nineteenth century. However, although she was exhibiting at the prestigious National Academy, her work was not selling well enough. As the years passed it became very difficult to provide for her large family. Photography began to replace portrait commissions, and the domestic scene was no longer popular with the art-buying public. Collectors were looking toward Europe for art. Late in her life many of her paintings were auctioned for as little as ten dollars, and at the end she was forced to trade paintings for food. She died in 1902 at the age of eighty.

Lilly Spencer preferred to work on a large scale. However, her small "cabinet-sized" paintings, such as Raspberries on a Leaf, were probably easier for her to sell to support her family. Her small paintings, along with her larger and more well-known works, were displayed at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876.