



Lilly Martin Spencer

Born: 1822, Exeter, England, United Kingdom

Died: 1902, New York, New York, United States of America

The Home of the Red, White and Blue

c. 1867-1868

Oil on canvas

Image: 24 x 35in. (61 x 88.9cm) Frame: 35 1/4 x 41in. (89.5 x 104.1cm)

Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Art

Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2007.1

Signed:

Lower Left corner: L. M. Spencer

Interpretation:

Lilly Martin Spencer's *Home of the Red, White, and Blue* is an allegory of the state of the American nation in the aftermath of the Civil War, couched in a benign scene of family recreation in a generic sylvan setting. The composition focuses on the central group of three female figures--a self-portrait of Spencer herself, flanked by two of her daughters--who enjoy the comic antics of a monkey begging for his owner, an organ-grinder. Between these figures stands a plump boy precariously raising a goblet of milk, toward which the musician seems to reach as if to transfer it to his barefoot daughter, who glances shyly downward as she folds her arms, her tambourine mute against her apron. On the far right a sturdy nursemaid smiles at the delight of the crowing baby on her arm as a pitcher of milk dangles from her left hand. Seated and relegated to the periphery are three more family members: a grandmotherly woman in the center background; her male counterpart, on the left, who glances sideways toward the main action, and on the far left a shadowed man marked by his crutches and blue uniform as a wounded veteran of the Union Army. This figure is said to be modeled on the painter's husband, although Benjamin Spencer did not serve in the war.

Dominating the foreground of Spencer's composition, a battered American flag, its blue field of stars torn from the red-and-white stripes, symbolizes the nation's physical and psychic devastation in the wake of the Civil War. The nearby sewing box suggests the repair and reconciliation underway in the capable hands of the white-clad central woman, a thimble visible on her right hand as it rests on her younger daughter's shoulder. The flag's colors echo insistently in the contrasting dresses of the female trio, in the striped bunting in the lap of the grandmotherly woman, and in the tricolor shoulder ribbons worn by both the young girl in blue and the baby. America's restoration, Spencer asserts, is the work of its mothers and daughters now that American manhood, personified by the shadowed veteran marginalized at the left, is defeated or exhausted. The generously shared milk is a further emblem of the boundless natural feminine capacity for nurturing, a central element in the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood. In Spencer's image it suggests the healing of the national divide not only between North and South but between conflicting social classes and ethnic groups, linking the middle class represented by Spencer and her daughters to the working class and to immigrants. The artist's contemporaries would have recognized the swarthy features of the organ-grinder as stereotypically Italian, and the red-haired servant-woman probably was intended to represent the many Irish female domestic servants then working in American homes.

Home of the Red, White, and Blue is the last of several paintings in which Spencer used domestic settings and situations to comment on the monumental tragedy of the Civil War. As a woman artist in mid-nineteenth-century America, Spencer was effectively restricted to "womanly" themes of family and home. In her many domestic paintings, however, she consciously transcended such limitations, subtly and humorously challenging gender roles and subverting domestic politics. *Home of the Red, White, and Blue* suggests that in the aftermath of a war that had emasculated the nation, its future necessarily lay in the hands of its women.

From Terra Foundation for American Art Web Site, entry by W. Greenhouse:

(<http://www.terraamericanart.org/collections/code/emuseum.asp> [search Lily Martin Spencer])

Lilly Martin Spencer

Born: 1822, Exeter, England, United Kingdom

Died: 1902, New York, New York, United States of America

Gender: Female

Biography:

In a career that spanned the decades around the American Civil War (1860-65), Lilly Martin Spencer created images of American middle-class domesticity inflected with ironic social comment. Spencer was born Angelique Marie Martin in Exeter, England, to forward-thinking French intellectuals who supported abolitionism and the education of women. When she was eight, in 1830, the family immigrated to the United States and settled in rural Marietta, Ohio. Spencer early displayed artistic talent, and her father took her to Cincinnati to study with portrait painter John Insko Williams (1813-73). Her paintings attracted local acclaim and the attention of wealthy Cincinnati collector Nicholas Longworth, who proposed to finance her education in Europe. Ambitious American artists of the time often aspired to study abroad, but Spencer chose to remain in the United States, working under such artists as James Henry Beard (1812-93), an established painter of animals and of genre scenes (scenes of everyday life), and amateur portrait painter William Althorpe Adams (1797-1878). Spencer's regional popularity grew and by 1842 she was accepting portrait commissions and exhibiting in local stores. Two years later, she married Benjamin Rush Spencer, an English immigrant tailor. The couple eventually had thirteen children, of whom seven lived to adulthood. Unable to maintain steady employment, Benjamin assisted his wife by managing the household, a highly unusual domestic arrangement for the period.

Encouraged by her success in Cincinnati, in 1848 Spencer moved to New York City to take advantage of its thriving art market. She enrolled in evening drawing classes at the National Academy of Design, one of the nation's premier art schools, and in 1850 she was named an honorary member of the Academy, the highest recognition the institution then permitted women. To augment her income, she hand-colored lithographs while exhibiting her work at the Academy and in Washington, D.C., Boston, and Philadelphia. She began to sell her work through the Cosmopolitan Art Association, a New York-based organization that promoted the development of American painting. Spencer maintained an active presence in the New York art world while residing in nearby Newark, New Jersey, before settling in Highland, New York, on the Hudson River.

Spencer made a considerable name for herself in Europe and America through her humorous images of domestic life, many of which were published as reproductive prints. In 1876, she exhibited at the Centennial Exposition, in Philadelphia. Although her detailed style and pointed moral themes soon were outdated, Spencer continued to paint until her death at the age of eighty.

Thereafter, thanks both to her gender and to her topical subject matter, she was largely forgotten until 1978, when a retrospective exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum), in Washington, D.C., marked a revival of interest in her work. Today, respected as one of the leading genre painters of her time, Spencer is valued for her ability to capture the shifting gender roles and family politics of nineteenth-century American society.

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