

Lilly Martin Spencer: Genre, Aesthetics, and Gender in the Work of a Mid-Nineteenth Century American Woman Artist

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Nineteenth-century American genre paintings have long been appreciated as documents of the varied aspects of daily life in a developing young nation. Viewed less romantically, they also point to complex cultural changes produced by the increasing industrialization and urbanization of American society. The gradual reshaping of gender roles for women, an important aspect of that transformation, can be traced in these paintings of "ordinary experience" through shifting emphases in the portrayal of female character and social experience.

Cultural changes produced a gradual transition from affirmation of women's active participation in household production and community life to an emphasis on the feminine experience of mothering and domestic management isolated within the home. Advice manuals and magazine fiction, written for the middle class, projected propriety for white women through an ideal of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness known as the "cult of true womanhood." These gender-stereotyped feminine virtues failed to account for the energy or imagination of many women, nor did they take class and racial differences into account. Nevertheless, ideological constructions of women's "natural" domestic and spiritual identity influenced the portrayal of feminine character in both literature and painting. Notions of gender propriety were inscribed into artistic practice in American nineteenth-century genre painting through the ideological patterns that shaped both the larger development of American culture and the specific preference of American audiences for the depiction of daily life in the visual arts.

The transition from active to sentimental domesticity can be seen with particularly vivid contrast in some paintings by Lilly Martin Spencer (1822-1902), the only female American genre painter in the middle decades of the nineteenth century whose work was widely popular. Spencer's domestic genre paintings dating from the 1850s are unusual in their focus on lively and humorous incidents of daily household experience, most often represented from a woman's point of view. Her domestic imagery was enthusiastically received by subscribers to two of the major organizations for art distribution during the late 1840s and 1850s, the American Art-Union and its later counterpart, the Cosmopolitan Art Association. This enthusiasm was encouraged by reviews that acclaimed the artist's female identity as a circumstance which provided her with direct, intuitive insight into feminine experience in the domestic environment.¹

Spencer's subjects, however, were not determined only by her felicitous experience of domestic activities. She worked out an unusual marital arrangement in which her husband acted as her agent, assisted her in the studio, and helped her rear their children, while she bore the major responsibility for the family's economic survival.² Her

thematic choices often were made in part because of financial necessity, as she attempted to discover subjects that would please contemporary buyers.

Spencer's early paintings of domestic genre scenes emphasize women's active identities and resist idealized stereotypes of female character; her later works continue to give women's collective experience unusual importance, while addressing Victorian sensibilities about childhood and family life. *Peeling Onions* (1852, Figure 1) and *Shake Hands?* (1854, Figure 2) are typical examples of her humorous early subjects, while *"This Little Pig Went to Market"* (1857, Figure 3) and *"Fi!Fo!Fum!"* (1858, Figure 4) suggest her eventual turn to more sentimental images of family play and affection between parents and children.³ Many of these paintings articulate at least two levels of gendered experience. While they ostensibly present woman at home in her proper sphere, they also represent women as playful, audacious and witty, qualities distinctly outside the conventions of the "cult of true womanhood."

Spencer was in her thirties and at the height of her professional career during the decade when she produced most of these images. She began working as a professional artist in 1841, when at age nineteen she moved to Cincinnati, a center of intellectual, theological, and artistic activity in the 1840s. In 1848, she moved her career and family to New York City to improve her access to commissions, shows, and further training. Her work gained immediate respect in New York, and she was nominated an honorary member of the National Academy of Design in 1850. Attentive to public taste because of her urgent need to sell her paintings, she soon began to explore the humor of daily household experience as a novel adaptation of the genre imagery which interested many American patrons.

Spencer's paintings from this decade reveal the same generalized emotional values and aesthetic qualities that characterize the work of her male contemporaries; genre painters responded to the preference of American collectors for humorous, optimistic depictions of typically American themes.⁴ Her domestic imagery is primarily distinctive in its focus on urban household subjects and female experience, in comparison to paintings by male artists which often portrayed the public amusements or labors of rural life or frontier communities, and gave major importance to the actions of male characters or male and female couples.⁵ Spencer also excelled at the use of naturalistic rendering to intensify the persuasive realism of genre subjects. Despite some problems with drawing and proportion in the figures, her domestic scenes, with their elaborate kitchen still-lives, varied household furnishings, and carefully detailed costumes, demonstrate skillful application of the artistic techniques most admired

by mid-century patrons and critics.⁶

Writers for *The Crayon* and the American Art-Union praised paintings which depicted contemporary American experience but also encouraged the development of formally complex and carefully finished pictures. They endorsed a combination of nativist sentiment and European technique derived from seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings and contemporary works by artists trained at the Düsseldorf Academy in Germany.⁷ Netherlandish paintings portrayed daily life in morally instructive or humorous subjects, while works of the Düsseldorf school were characterized by careful and accurate drawing, natural grouping of figures, and the use of chiaroscuro to define and dramatize forms.⁸ Spencer's facility with these technical skills and her development of themes similar to Netherlandish models was noted by the editors of *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* in September, 1957. One of their reviewers praised *Shake Hands?* effusively, commenting:

Perhaps no picture in this country is better fitted for popular appreciation. It reminds us constantly of the incomparable pictures by the Flemish artists. No person is doing more than Mrs. Spencer to popularize art, and for that the people owe her a debt of gratitude, which they do not fail to acknowledge, if acknowledgement is signified by appreciation.⁹

Spencer's works manifest the synthesis of daily life and aesthetic sophistication demanded of genre painting by contemporary critics and collectors. However, her interest in the limited terrain of household labor and feminine domesticity and her identity as a woman separate her paintings from those of her contemporaries.

Some critics have suggested that Spencer's focus on women's activities in the kitchen and children's play in the nursery was a natural result of her experience as a mother.¹⁰ The demands of thirteen pregnancies and rearing eight surviving children, as well as some responsibility for household routines, must have played a significant role in Spencer's daily work. But her imaginative development of domestic themes was also linked to her constant struggle for economic survival as a professional artist. When Spencer complained in a letter to a friend that she couldn't sell enough works to support her growing family, her correspondent replied that just as Wilkie had painted so many "Blind Fiddlers" and "Penny Weddings," she would have to continue painting domestic themes because they were most popular with her public.¹¹

Beyond economic necessity, the restrictive standards of behavior for women defined by the "cult of true womanhood" limited even an ambitious female artist. At mid-century, notions of female respectability demanded behavior that made it impossible for a woman to explore the spaces of public culture from which male artists took their themes. Gathering places in which men shared information and entertainment, such as the post office, businesses, saloons, or clubs, were alien territory for middle-class women. Respectable women rarely went out alone, and unsupervised interaction with any male other than a relative might be cause for public scandal. Although Spencer went to evening drawing classes at the National Academy of Design during her first years in New York and clearly insisted on some independence, she could never interact with male artists as a peer. Spencer's

experience as an artist was shaped in varied ways by social and economic forces beyond the facts of her female identity and artistic talent. To say that her choice of subjects was felicitously determined by her sex is to leave out half the picture: she may have had a "natural" affinity for humorous and sentimental household themes, but her range of vision as a genre painter was inevitably constrained by the ideologies of gender and class that limited her to the domestic sphere.

In view of the limitation imposed on her talent by gender, it is ironic that Spencer's popularity in the late 1850s was due in part to critical idealizations of her identity as both woman and artist. *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* praised Spencer's dual identity in a biographical article on her achievements in September 1857, and put several of her paintings at or close to the top of their catalog lists in the following years.¹² The Association encouraged women to become members and to solicit membership clubs; its journalistic rhetoric reflected contemporary middle-class idealizations of women as more sensitive to beauty and aesthetic value than men.¹³ Although the ideology of domesticity negated professional careers for women, Spencer was lauded by *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* for combining serious artistic work with family responsibilities because her imagery was seen as inseparable from her domestic and maternal experience. Her ability to validate the daily humor and tribulations of women's domestic world for female viewers made her an ideal example for the *Art Journal's* admiration and propaganda of the *Art Journal*.

Spencer's popularity was therefore partially constructed through a reading of her images that suited prevailing gender stereotypes, but the characteristically active personalities displayed by her female subjects may also have been a factor in the appreciation of her works, though not one that was publicly articulated. The depiction of women in Spencer's domestic genre paintings is not at all the normative one for art of the 1850s, as comparison of her works to paintings by some of her male contemporaries demonstrates.

Spencer's two most important surviving domestic subjects from the mid-1850s, *Shake Hands?* (Figure 2) and *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses* (1856, Figure 5), as well as the earlier *Peeling Onions* (Figure 1), show women as primary subjects whose sense of self underlies the significance of the humorous incidents. In many nineteenth-century American genre paintings by male artists, women are portrayed only as incidental figures in the predominantly masculine realms of political life or frontier society; they are given slightly more significant roles in household scenes or as the objects of romantic affection or frustration. Overall, however, female figures are shown in dependent or responsive relations to the male subjects of these works, whether tending numerous children or aged parents, listening to traveling musicians or artists, flirting with agricultural workers, or pausing in the midst of domestic tasks to attend to some momentary drama.¹⁴

Whether representations of agricultural and frontier themes or middle-class social experience, in most paintings by men portray women in ways which remain consonant with prevailing notions of gender propriety. Earlier images of women emphasize their active domestic labor as well as dependence, while later images tend to develop

the ideals articulated in the pages of contemporary novels, magazine fiction, and advice manuals, which valorized woman's domestic roles of mother and household manager. Visual art replicated the rhetoric of the "cult of true womanhood," which assigned women ultimate responsibility for the physical and spiritual welfare of their families while idealizing their sweet dependency, piety and submissiveness.¹⁵

By the 1850s, women in the abolitionist, feminist, and temperance movements were expressing frustration with this ideal in their writing and public speeches, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Declaration of Women's Rights" at Seneca Falls, Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sojourner Truth's abolitionist "An't I a Woman?" diatribe, and Mary C. Vaughn's advocacy of the destruction of contemporary feminine stereotypes at a temperance rally. Vaughn commented:

This is nearly the masculine idea of womanhood, and poor womanhood strives to personify it. But not all women. This is an age of iconoclasm; and daring hands are raised to sweep from its pedestal, and dash to fragments, this false image of woman. We care not how soon, if the true woman but takes its place.¹⁶

These women and many others sought to reform or subvert the idealized stereotype of the "cult of true womanhood." Although Lilly Martin Spencer painted women who appear to be cheerfully acting out their domestic roles, many of her paintings could also be read as resisting, rather than supporting, narrow idealizations of feminine duty. They can be read by a modern viewer as a demonstration of Spencer's ability to use the language of contemporary art to reshape conventional meanings attributed to woman's domestic labor.

The most unusual of these works is *Shake Hands?* (1854, Figure 2). The painting established the artist's reputation for comic household scenes and was published in both engraved and lithographed reproductions.¹⁷ Although formal etiquette would hardly apply to kitchen activities, Spencer marked out a challenge to conventional feminine behavior by her female subject's humorous offer. The following description from an 1849 book of manners is typical of mid-nineteenth century articulations of proper demeanor for women, to which the gesture and attitude of Spencer's model can be compared:

But what is especially insupportable in this (female) sex is, an inquiet, bold and imperious air, for it is unnatural... let her not forget, that she may be a man in the superiority of her mind and decision of character, but that externally she ought to be a woman! She ought to present herself as being made to please, to love, and to seek a support; a being inferior to man, but near to angels. An affectionate, complying, and almost timid aspect, a tender solicitude... should be shown in her whole person.¹⁸

Spencer's figure hardly illustrates the ideals described here; on the contrary, she offers her sticky hand to every viewer in bold, egalitarian friendliness. The painting constitutes an amusing visual jest—but it also proposes a cheerfully subversive alternative to the restrained propriety assigned to women by contemporary middle-class gender

ideologies.

Painted two years later, in 1856, *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses* (Figure 5) depicts a similar humorous challenge in somewhat less direct form. *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* described this work in November 1856 as portraying "a coquettish girl, apparently engaged in peeling apples." The writer continued:

She is teased by some person, whom the picture does not show, who is trying to kiss her. She quietly seizes a spoon from the bowl of molasses on the table beside her, and is poisoning it to give the 'provoking fellow' a daub.¹⁹

The romantic situation suggested by the title (the work was originally exhibited as "Kiss me if you dare..."), is elaborated in this appraisal, allowing romance to take the edge off the mettlesome quality of the female subject. Her teasing demeanor, like that of the woman in *Shake Hands?*, is self-assured not dependent; her strong arms and solid hands imply she is capable of vigorous labor, not just timid and tender solicitude. Both paintings suggest that while working from the stimulus of her own domestic experience in the 1850s, Spencer chose some themes that specifically demonstrated women's energy, humor, and self-possession in its literal as well as figurative meaning.

The subtle difference in class status that can be observed in these two paintings represents the beginning of a change in Spencer's imagery. Under the constraints of economic necessity and her desire to accommodate the changing tastes of patrons during the late 1850s, Spencer began to create paintings that separate comfortable middle-class family themes from the livelier activities of servants. In the 1854 *Shake Hands?* the identity of the subject as servant or middle-class housewife is not clearly established, although her gesture toward the viewer suggests an egalitarian openness that negates pretentious social distinctions. Spencer herself could not always afford a domestic helper, and she may also have learned resistance to class hierarchies from her parents, who admired Robert Fourier's utopian values.²⁰ However, the figure's facial characteristics resemble those of a woman carefully portrayed by Spencer in a drawing dated ca. 1854 and titled *Our Servant* (Figure 6); this woman could well have been the model for *Shake Hands?*²¹ In the September 1857 issue of *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, a reviewer also described the woman as a maid:

At the table stands the maid—we don't have many *such* maids now-a-days!—with her hands just from the pan in which she is manufacturing stuffing...²²

Servant status might be mistaken by an observer who saw the woman as atypical for that identity "now-a-days." The woman's dress, in fact, is ambiguous, since she wears her work apron over a much finer one and her skirt is tucked up to protect it from damage which a servant might be expected to tolerate. Spencer's humor in this work can be interpreted as resisting the hierarchical formulations of both class and gender propriety. In *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, however, Spencer began to emphasize the young woman's middle-class status by giving her a more elegant and tidy appearance, and revealing an orderly parlor behind her.

Three other paintings demonstrate this shift in Spencer's choice of subjects and modes of presentation

that catered to a more elegant conception of the domestic world and to an increasingly sentimental vision of family relations. Her earlier humorous style is still evident in works such as *Fruit of Temptation* (1857, now known only from a lithograph copy, Figure 7), which plays children's mischief against maternal dismay. The theme of naughty childhood escapades was a popular genre topic in nineteenth-century America, but Spencer made it her own in the comic contrast she developed between the self-absorbed primping of the adolescent girl, the delight of her siblings in their feast, and the mother's horrified discovery of their activities.²³

The humorous narrative suspense of "*Fi!Fo!Fum!*" (Figure 4), painted a year later in 1858, turns from the comedy of household catastrophe to a celebration of family unity. This image of a storytelling father, with his children next to him and his wife leaning amusedly around his chair, draws on the newly sentimental attention to childraising and family values that paralleled the ideals of the "cult of true womanhood." In "*This Little Pig Goes to Market*" (1858, Figure 4) and other paintings of mothers and children from the end of the 1850s decade, Spencer also depicted middle-class women in more elegant clothes and elaborately decorated settings. These works seem to have been intended to please potential middle-class patrons by constructing images with which they would more easily identify.

The shift from good-humored camaraderie to elegance and more distanced amusement characterizes most

of Spencer's domestic themes from the late 1850s, but she continued to portray her female subjects as prime movers in the household drama. Her domestic genre paintings represent an intervention in the tradition of imagery that ordinarily depicted women as unassertive respondents to male action and emotion. She altered this tradition by portraying woman as subject of her own experience, witty, spirited, or absorbed in an implied interaction with the viewer or in attention to family, work, or children's mischief. Spencer said she could not actively participate in the women's rights movement because she needed to focus exclusively on painting to survive as artist and family breadwinner, but she created images that can be read as visual corollaries to the arguments made by advocates of more expansive social and domestic roles for women.²⁴

Lilly Martin Spencer's "felicitous" experience as both woman and artist in fact allowed her to use the aesthetic formulae popularized by contemporary critics and male artists while subverting dominant visual codes of proper feminine demeanor. Her paintings of domestic genre scenes map out a complex set of intersecting meanings: the struggle of a particular woman to maintain an artistic career; the humor, pleasure, and difficulty she perceived in women's maternal and domestic responsibilities; and the tension between women's daily experience and prevailing white middle-class ideologies of gender in mid-nineteenth century American society and art.

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1 *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* Sept. 1857: 165. See also Joshua Taylor, Introduction, *Lilly Martin Spencer 1822-1902: The Joys of Sentiment* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1973) 8.

2 Lilly married Benjamin Rush Spencer in 1844 and the first of their thirteen children was born in 1845. It soon became clear to both of them that her talent offered the likeliest support for their family since Benjamin had few useful professional skills. Besides helping her with the mundane aspects of a professional career, he took over as nurse and nanny to their children when she had commissions to complete and they were too poor for a servant's assistance.

3 A number of Spencer's paintings, known through anecdotal evidence, have been lost, including her first domestic genre painting, titled *The Jolly Washerwoman*, (NY: American Art-Union sales catalogue 1852). Bolton-Smith and Truettner 148 and n.79.

4 Taylor 31. See also Brucia Witthoft, "American Artists in Düsseldorf: 1840-1865" (Framingham, MA: Danforth Museum, 1982) 10.

5 Linda S. Ferber analyzes these interests in "Themes in American Genre Painting: 1840-80," *Apollo* April 1982: 250-259.

6 For discussion of the changes in American taste and preference for genre painting by the 1840s, see Ferber 250. Also Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism. The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States 1790-1860* (Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 1966) 170-171.

7 These would have been known in collections of American patrons or through travelling art exhibitions and art publications. See H. Nichols B. Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds; American Master in the Dutch Tradition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1988) 45.

8 Witthoft 9-10.

9 *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* Sept. 1857: 165.

10 Recent comments echo the nineteenth-century analysis of authors such as Mrs. Elizabeth Ellet. See Bolton-Smith and Truettner 48: "Because of a fortuitous coincidence in her own circumstances and the public's taste...;" or Taylor 8: "The hand that rocked the cradle held the brush. Contemporary [nineteenth-century] criticism rarely failed to point up the association..."

11 Bolton-Smith and Truettner 30, n.70.

12 The *CAJ's* touting of Spencer as a woman artist seems to have been prompted partly by their desire to build a pool of female subscribers to the *Cosmopolitan Art Association*; in any case the organization was very supportive of her work. See *The Cosmopolitan Art Association Catalog for 1858, 1859 and 1860. Shake Hands?* was #6 in 1858, "*Fi!Fo!Fum!*" was #1 in 1859, and "*This Little Pig Went to Market*" was #1 in 1860. In 1858, other Spencer paintings were nos. 9, 22, 28 and 98 out of 345 total. In 1859, her works were nos. 5, 9, 25, and 38 out of approximately 400. In 1860, they were nos. 10, 132, 213 and 337 out of 422 total.

13 "The 'Women of America' and the 'Cosmopolitan,'" *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* Dec. 1857: 44-45.

14 Numerous examples could be given from the late 1840s and 1850s: for instance, Richard Caton Woodville, *War News from Mexico, 1848*; Francis W. Edmonds, *Taking the Census, 1854* or *The Thirsty Drover, 1856*; Jerome Thompson, *Apple Gathering, 1856*; or Eastman Johnson, *Life at the South, 1859*.

15 Despite the ostensible importance of women's domestic roles, they were permitted almost no independent legal or social existence either before or after marriage. Married women could not sign a contract, witness a deed, or make a will without male permission, could not vote, hold any public office, enter most professions, or obtain legal

- relief from domestic abuse. See Russell Nye, *Society and Culture in America 1830-1860* (New York: Harper, 1974) 51 or Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* XVIII.2 Pt 1 (1966): 155. Since 1970, numerous scholarly articles have discussed particular examples of how women negotiated these restrictive conditions to become writers or activists in labor-organizing and social-change movements.
- 16 Mary C. Vaughn, "Address," January 28, 1852; excerpted in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane De Hart-Mathews (New York: Oxford U P, 1987) 215-216.
- 17 *Shake Hands?* was engraved for the Cosmopolitan Art Association by Rogers and Phillibrown, New York, for distribution to subscribers in 1858. A lithograph was made by Lafosse for William Schaus, New York, probably in 1854. Bolton-Smith and Truettner 167.
- 18 Mme. Celnart, *The Gentleman and Lady's Book of Politeness and Propriety of Deportment* (Philadelphia: Grigg, Elliot and Co., 1849) 86.
- 19 *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* Nov. 1856: 50. Also cited in Bolton-Smith and Truettner 148-149.
- 20 Elsie F. Frievoegel, "Lilly Martin Spencer," *Archives of American Art Journal* 12.4 (1972): 9. Spencer's parents moved to Marietta, Ohio to join one of Robert Fourier's utopian communities which emphasized egalitarian values and agrarian harmony. Although the community was never established, both her parents continued to follow many of Fourier's principles. Angelique Martin, Lilly's mother, was also actively involved in the women's rights movement.
- 21 Bolton-Smith and Truettner 159.
- 22 *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* Sept. 1857: 165 (emphasis in original).
- 23 Jadviga M. da Costa Nunes, "The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art," *Journal of American Studies* 21.2 (1987): 241-242.
- 24 Lilly Martin Spencer, "To her mother," of Elsie F. Frievoegel, "Lilly Martin Spencer," *Archives of American Art Journal* 12.4 (1972): 9.



Figure 1. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Peeling Onions*, ca. 1852; collection of Mr. and Mrs. William Postar, Boston. (Reproduced in *Lilly Martin Spencer. The Joys of Sentiment* [1973]).



Figure 3. Lilly Martin Spencer, *"This Little Pig Went to Market"*, 1857; Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio.



Figure 4. Lilly Martin Spencer, *"Fi!Fo!Fum!"*, 1858; collection of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Betz, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (Reproduced in *Lilly Martin Spencer. The Joys of Sentiment* [1973]).



Figure 6. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Our Servant*, ca. 1854; Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.



Figure 2. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Shake Hands?*, 1854; Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.



Figure 5. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses*, 1856; The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York.



Figure 7. Lilly Martin Spencer, *Fruit of Temptation*, 1857; (original not located); lithograph by Lafosse published by Goupil, 1857; Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio.