

## **Jennie Augusta Brownscombe (1850–1936)**

Jennie Augusta Brownscombe's childhood sounds like a story illustrated in one of her detailed narrative paintings. She was born in a log cabin in the Pennsylvania countryside to a farming family. Brownscombe could trace her ancestors on her mother's side of the family back to a colonist who had arrived on the Mayflower and a great-grandfather who had been a soldier during the Revolutionary War. Brownscombe was proud of this heritage, and it may have influenced her later interest in painting scenes from America's early history.

Brownscombe showed artistic talent even as a young child, and her mother encouraged her to write poetry and to draw. She practiced her drawing talent by sketching classmates and flowers. Her father died when she was just eighteen, but Brownscombe was able to support herself and save money to attend art classes by teaching school for three years. Eventually she had saved enough to travel to New York City to pursue formal artistic training. She became a founding member of the Art Students League, the progressive new arts organization, in 1875 and later taught there. In the early 1880s, she traveled to Paris to continue her studies and made regular trips to Rome thereafter.

Brownscombe's sentimental oil paintings celebrating rural family life and portraying events from American history were popular in the United States and England. Viewers loved her highly naturalistic style, which included picturesque details that helped them recognize the stories and emotions portrayed. Her paintings often illustrated books and magazines and were regularly reproduced as affordable prints, Christmas cards, and calendars. Such wide reproduction of her art ensured that it was familiar in homes across the United States.

Throughout her lifetime, Brownscombe was able to support herself through her art and teaching. She never married, and she continued working until the end of her long life, completing her final large oil painting at age eighty-one after recovering from a stroke.

### **Selected Bibliography**

- Heller, Nancy G. *Women Artists: Works from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. and Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2000.
- Rubinstein, Charlotte Streifer. *American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982.