

Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902)

“I work at my painting from morning ’til night. [Cincinnati is] literally full of portrait painters... but I shall beat them all, I hope one day.” –LILLY MARTIN SPENCER

At the age of seventeen, Lilly Martin Spencer covered the inside walls of her Marietta, Ohio, home with charcoal murals: full-sized portraits of her family, a landscape, a woman baking bread, a child taking his first steps, and more. The local newspaper reported on the display, and the house became something of a tourist attraction. Spencer’s supportive parents encouraged her interest in art and such displays of talent. A few years later, the young artist left her home to study with several professional painters in nearby Cincinnati. Spencer set up a studio there, showed and sold her works, and soon painted better than her teachers.

After she married in 1844, Spencer continued to work as an artist while her husband prepared canvases and frames for her paintings and handled business matters. He also helped run the household. The money Spencer made selling her artwork supported their ever-growing family. Spencer gave birth to thirteen children, though only seven lived to adulthood. In 1848, the family moved to New York City to be closer to the heart of the American art world. Over the years, they relocated to New Jersey and later to the Hudson River Valley outside New York City.

During Spencer’s lifetime, there was a growing market for art to decorate homes. For many decades, her sentimental images of happy families, angelic children, and good-natured housewives were in great demand. Prints made from Spencer’s oil paintings of family life sold widely. Her still-life and portrait paintings also were popular with patrons. Sadly, toward the end of Spencer’s life, the public’s tastes had changed and her style was no longer appreciated. The artist lived out her final years in relative poverty, but continued to paint until her death.

Selected Bibliography

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