



GREENWICH *Decorative Arts* SOCIETY

November 2018

Dear Members,

We greet another Thanksgiving with much gratefulness. I especially thank you all for your support as we have dealt with the expansion plans of the Bruce Museum which have involved changes for us. I appreciate your flexibility during the transition and your loyalty to our society.

I want to share some paintings which may be familiar to you but always invite revisiting - I hope they warm your heart and bring you the Thanksgiving spirit.



I know you have all seen this iconic Norman Rockwell Painting.

Do you remember it is entitled *Freedom from Want* and it was painted in 1943 during World War II?

As art critic Lennie Bennett writes, "Rockwell always sweated the details. The

white tablecloth has creases in it indicating it was ironed, folded and stored until a special occasion like this one. Painting white on white is always a technical challenge, but Rockwell did it, putting a white casserole on the white cloth. The table isn't overflowing with food; besides the turkey and covered casserole, there are small dishes with celery and cranberry sauce."

Three generations circle the food. From the lower right corner, in the finest Renaissance tradition of painting, a man looks out at you directly—the classic challenge to the viewer posed by the painter and his painting. His gaze asks you to join in with the wonder at the bounty set before them, but is that all it asks?

After years of overseas wars sacrificing human lives and draining monetary reserves, that man's kindly look reminds us that Thanksgiving gratitude is not necessarily for abundant food on a bountiful table

The thankfulness is for having each other and the enduring capacity of people to free one another from all kinds of want—physical, emotional and spiritual.



Rockwell used his neighbors for models and his own living room as a setting. *Freedom from Want* is considered one of Rockwell's finest paintings, and the bonding tradition it shows involves his hope for the post-war world. To art critic

homeliness, and abundance without extravagance in a Puritan tone, as confirmed by the modest beverage choice of water.

There is more than surface nostalgia in this painting which is about the joy of sharing what we have with those we love.



In 1894 Henry Ossawa Tanner painted *The Thankful Poor*, an oil-on-canvas portrait of an elderly black man sitting down to supper with a young boy, perhaps a grandfather and his grandson. Their heads are bowed in prayer. The table is plain and simple, and Tanner has endowed the humble pair with an aura of quiet dignity. He wrote "My effort has been...to give the human touch 'which makes the whole world kin' and which ever remains the same."



HENRY OSSAWA TANNER
BORN JUNE 21, 1859
DIED MAY 25, 1937

The warm and expressive light Turner creates helps enhance the spiritual

feeling of the painting and the qualities of devotion and thankfulness. His later paintings were exclusively devoted to spiritual themes. He wrote: "I paint the things I see and believe."



It may be hard to imagine today, but Doris Lee's painting *Thanksgiving*, a beloved depiction of holiday domesticity, provoked a firestorm of controversy when it was first shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1935.

As curator Robbie Sexton notes, at the 46th Annual Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture, Doris Lee, one of the most successful female artists of the Depression era, was awarded that show's highest honor, the prestigious Logan Prize. The only problem: Mrs. Josephine Hancock Logan, the patron for whom the award is named, detested Lee's work, calling it "atrocious" and "awful."

Thanksgiving became the locus of fierce debate about the state of contemporary art when many of the city's art patrons lambasted the show for its modern bent. More people came to see the show than would have otherwise in part because critics called it "obscene and indecent."



Logan criticized the painting's broad, exaggerated style. Its setting is deliberately folksy - a kitchen complete with plain furniture, clamoring active children and busy housewives who are putting all their efforts into preparing dinner. Children especially enjoy the details like the little girl playing with the cat and the two babies in the highchair. Despite the chaos, the lighting and warm colors convey positive emotions. We instantly get the feeling of comfort, warmth, concerted work and purpose.



DORIS EMRICK LEE
BORN FEBRUARY 1, 1905
DIED JUNE 16 1983

To a generation exhausted with the trials of economic hard times, the return to a simpler past became more desirable. Lee's work received public and critical acclaim for its earthy qualities and sense of humor. One critic described her paintings as "fresh, with the charm of innocence." *Thanksgiving* celebrates the joys of family ties. The bustling kitchen is filled with life and love as a group of women prepares the annual feast.

Lee's sophisticated fusion of folk and modernist painting in *Thanksgiving* has been recognized as one of the most popular nostalgic views of this American



As Curator Leslie Umberger notes, *Turkeys* is a classic Grandma Moses (Anna Mary Robertson Moses) painting depicting the annual Thanksgiving ritual of catching the holiday bird. Moses captures the cold November sky and an early snow, contrasted by the bright colors worn by both the poultry and the people. Moses gives an unusual amount of detail to the turkeys themselves, paying tribute to the noble bird that Ben Franklin called “a true original of North America.”



Moses, a lifelong farm woman, understood the nature of growing crops and raising livestock, yet still pitied the poor turkey for being so widely regarded as delicious. Thanksgiving only became an official American holiday when Moses was a child, yet its role as a family-centric and gratitude-based holiday gave it a special place in her oeuvre.

Moses began painting when she was 76, looking back to the rural ways of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her art became wildly popular after 1939, when the Museum of Modern Art acclaimed her as a “modern primitive.”



The *New York Times* said of her: "The simple realism, nostalgic atmosphere and luminous color with which Grandma Moses portrayed simple farm life and rural countryside won her a wide following. She was able to capture the excitement of winter's first snow and Thanksgiving preparations ... In person, Grandma Moses charmed wherever she went. A tiny, lively woman with mischievous gray eyes and a quick wit, she could be sharp-tongued with a sycophant and stern with an errant grandchild."

She operated a farm with her husband for decades, making potato chips and churning butter to supplement family savings. She had ten children, five of whom survived infancy. She turned to painting when severe arthritis made embroidery painful. Although familiar with the hardships and sorrows of hard farm life, she chose to illustrate happy memories.



ANNA MARY ROBERTSON MOSES
BORN SEPTEMBER 7, 1860
DIED DECEMBER 13, 1961

Grandma Moses died at age 101 in Hoosick Falls, New York. President John F. Kennedy memorialized her: "The death of Grandma Moses removed a beloved figure from American life. The directness and vividness of her paintings restored a primitive freshness to our perception of the American scene. Both her work and her life helped our nation renew its pioneer heritage and recall its roots in the countryside and on the frontier. All Americans mourn her loss."



Although I did not plan to include a Hopper in this reflection on paintings, the news this week that *Chop Suey* had sold for \$91,875,000, a record for the artist and the category of American Art, had me pondering this iconic painting.

Thanksgiving it is not! Art historian Judith A. Barter explains that this is characteristic of Edward Hopper's style: 'There is never anything to eat on Hopper's tables. Famously uninterested in food, Hopper and his wife often made dinner from canned ingredients. What he found important were the spaces where eating and drinking took place.'

Would you say there is an attempt at communication and a shared experience

For an excellent discussion of this painting and a video, go to this Christie's [site](#). As author Avis Berman writes "Eight decades after his most evocative canvases were painted, those silent spaces and uneasy encounters still touch us where we are most vulnerable. Edward Hopper, matchless at capturing the play of light, continues to cast a very long shadow."

If you are not bidding millions on paintings, among many pleasures of the season are the museums small and large in our proximity. Sometimes when viewing many paintings starts to overwhelm, I enjoy focusing on a small portion of the painting. These miniatures can be very rewarding.

Here is an image from the painting of the Frick's *Virgin and Child with St. Barbara and Jan Vos*, Petrus Christus, 1450.

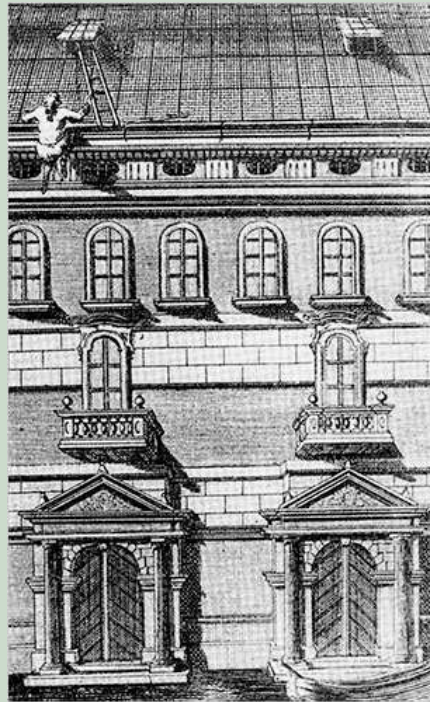


The kneeling man in the white robe is Jan Vos, Prior of the Charterhouse Monastery and a member of the Carthusians, "the athletes of God," known for austerity, dedication, and lives of private devotions.

As art critic Karen Wilkins notes, it is believed that Jan Vos commissioned this painting. In his life of simplicity and solitude he would have gazed at this painting as into a rarified world. The Carthusians kept their works of art in their cells as objects of devotion, meditation and gratitude.

I find a parallel between this 1450 vignette and Rockwell's, Tanner's, Lee's and Moses' appreciation of the blessings of life despite hardships. The monk's gesture - to fall to your knees - is respectful yet underlined by joy. For a music accompaniment you could listen to Bach's Air on a G-String (which Procol Harum borrowed for their international hit) ~ an expression of reverence, praise and thanksgiving.

(You cannot see the full painting and others from an excellent intimate show at the Frick in the tiny gallery near the entrance hall : "The Charterhouse of Bruges: Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, and Jan Vos" remains on view through January 13, 2019. Treat yourself to a holiday art encounter!)



An engraving of Casanova's escape from prison in 1756, an adventure that became famous in his own lifetime.

We started our fall season with a wonderful lecture on the era of Casanova. His memoir, *L'Histoire de ma Vie*, is an 1800 page picturesque romp threaded with enjoyment of food, whether he was nibbling oysters from his mistress's mouth, supping on sausage on cross country journeys or reciting odes about pasta at the Macaroni Society - yes, he wrote a sonnet about macaroni and cheese, one of his favorite dishes.

He said he inherited his mother's craving for crabs and langoustines while in the womb. He preserved his Venetian taste for steaming bowls of polenta and said that the lure of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding once stopped him from drowning himself in the Thames.

Casanova also ate gnocchi in solitary confinement in a windowless cell in the depths of La Plombia, the highest security prison in Europe located in the dungeons of the Venetian Doge. (Unlike the Carthusians, he did not relish spending time in a cell.)

I can just imagine he would have delighted in a Thanksgiving Dinner!

I hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving, perhaps even sitting on a Chippendale chair, on the 300th anniversary of Thomas Chippendale, whose superior designs were presented in our November lecture and whose genius we will continue to celebrate.



I look forward to seeing you Monday, December 3, at the First Congregational Church, Old Greenwich for Facets of Art Deco: Connecting Jewelry as Design in the 1920's and 1930's by Sarah Coffin.

Don't forget to wear some art deco jewelry! And if you don't have any, just wear some fun jewelry - it is the holidays and we are going to be festive.

I am grateful this Thanksgiving for your shared company in the appreciation of the decorative arts and the education and exploration we enjoy together.



Happy Thanksgiving!
Karen Handal, President
Greenwich Decorative Arts Society



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