

10: Lilly Martin Spencer *Peeling Onions* (ca. 1852)

Elizabeth L. O'Leary

When Lilly Martin Spencer painted *Peeling Onions* in the early 1850s, she had just begun a distinctive series of domestic genre scenes. At the time, the thirty-year-old artist was negotiating the demands of the New York art market and the challenges of making her way in a profession traditionally dominated by men. Initially finding little patronage for her preferred allegorical and literary subjects, Spencer turned to themes of American home life: toddlers at play, loving parents dandling babies, and cooks preparing the staples of the family meal. Over the next decade—the most successful of Spencer's long career—these sentimental and sometimes humorous images resonated with an audience that prized views of domesticity and the carefully rendered details of a familiar physical world.¹

The cook depicted in *Peeling Onions* wipes away tears with the back of her hand.² She wears a gray pleated bodice; three dressmaker's pins pierce the fabric at the shoulder, hinting at the continuous and varied nature of household labor. Arranged in the foreground is an elaborate still life of utensils, fruit, and an unplucked chicken. The painting's even light, linear contours, and highly finished surface reveal Spencer's absorption of the Düsseldorf style that prevailed in contemporary American genre. At the same time, the image's sharply focused naturalism and trompe l'oeil effects—in particular the spoon that juts forward into the viewer's space—attest to the artist's study of seventeenth-century Dutch art.³

It was, however, Spencer's first-hand knowledge of household labor that informed the painting's narrative content—as did her singular understanding of women's work and working women. The artist presents the cook in a demeanor of both vulnerability and power. Tears come from the stinging vapors of the cut onion, yet the woman's soft weeping acts as a reminder—or perhaps a parody—of the sort of tender sensibilities ascribed to females in this period. The sleeves of the cook's dress have been rolled to reveal muscular forearms. She grips the onion and knife firmly and carefully; her strong, sure hands suggest a force that can wring life from a chicken. Despite a momentary weakness, the woman maintains a determined, competent control of her task.

Spencer's own working career echoed this ambiguous blending of vulnerability and power. She made her way into the center of the New York art world at a time when a woman's role in society was becoming increasingly restricted. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the concept of a distinct "woman's sphere" was put forward in a deluge of popular literature. It fostered a specific set of gender roles by equating woman with home and private life and man with work and the public arena.⁴ The artist, however, led a life that was far from conventional.

Daughter of liberal French émigrés and educators, Angélique Marie Martin—known as Lilly—grew up in rural Ohio. Her parents—who helped establish a commune following the theories of Charles Fourier—devoted themselves to an agrarian life, sharing and rotating labor. They also advocated social reform including abolition, temperance, and women's suffrage—the last being a favorite cause of the artist's mother.⁵ Young Lilly, exhibiting a precocious talent for drawing, taught herself to paint. With the blessings of progressive parents and small grants from philanthropist Nicholas Longworth, she left home at age nineteen to pursue professional training in Cincinnati.⁶

Lilly Martin Spencer,
1822–1902
Peeling Onions (detail), ca. 1852
Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in.
Gift of the Women's Council
in celebration of the 75th
anniversary of the Memorial
Art Gallery, 88.6





In 1844, Lilly Martin married tailor Benjamin Spencer. Within a few years, her husband, plagued by lay-offs and illness, became his wife's business manager and studio assistant. When Spencer's painting became the principal source of income for her growing family (in time she would give birth to thirteen children, seven of whom would survive infancy), the family relocated to New York City. There, the artist embarked on a period of intense work, producing paintings by day while attending courses at the National Academy of Design at night.⁷ Art unions and associations helped generate a clientele for Spencer by marketing her genre paintings and prints to the general public—the primary vehicle for her burgeoning notoriety at mid-century.⁸ By 1859, writer Elizabeth Ellet could claim that "Mrs. Spencer's high position among American artists is universally recognized in the profession."⁹ Spencer sent her parents the wry rejoinder: "Fame is as hollow and brilliant as a soap bubble, it is all colors outside, and nothing worth kicking at inside."¹⁰



The artist approached her career with grim determination in the face of an inflated cost of living and stiff competition. The taste for scenes of everyday life was firmly established among painters and collectors in the United States. Well-known practitioners such as William Sidney Mount and George Caleb Bingham laid the groundwork for the surge of interest in genre painting in previous decades. In the 1850s, Spencer managed to garner attention with her compelling kitchen scenes: a laughing washerwoman, a cook greeting the viewer with a doughy hand, a young wife preparing her first stew, and a kitchen maid weeping over onions. However, the artist was not unique in her production of domestic scenes of women, children, and maidservants. On occasion, her antebellum male counterparts—including Eastman Johnson, Tompkins Matteson, Jerome Thompson, and even National Academy of Design president, Francis Edmonds—also approached similar themes with success.¹¹

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Struggling mightily to balance roles of wife, mother, homemaker, and artist, Spencer encountered ongoing difficulty in finding time to create and market her paintings. Economic need compelled her to produce canvases for sale as quickly as possible; parental duties and societal attitudes toward women restricted her to the household. Turning to scenes at hand, she used her husband, children, herself, and her servants as models.¹²

The skillful cook pictured in *Peeling Onions* is a portrait of Spencer's own live-in maid, one of a series of workers who performed various duties in the Spencer home—cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child care—regularly freeing the artist from these chores so that she could work at her paintings. Spencer, in turn, painted her servant at these tasks.¹³ It is not clear how many different women filled the position over time, but Spencer's paintings and drawings give evidence of at least two who worked for the family in the early 1850s. Surviving letters suggest that the artist's relationship with her employees during her early years in New York appears to have been companionable. Over time—and as maids were hired and fired with frustrating frequency due to the Spencers' dwindling household budget—the artist's congenial kitchen scenes came to an end.

(Facing page)
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In the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, Spencer maintained an active production of paintings—although the public's decreasing taste for genre seems to have prompted a shift in her concentration to still life and portraiture. Slipping slowly into obscurity, she continued to depend on the income from sales right up until her death at age seventy-nine in 1902. A century later, American art historians have come to recognize Lilly Martin Spencer as one of the premier genre artists of her generation.

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