Lilly Martin Spencer and Robert Scott Duncanson: Following Nineteenth-Century American Ideals

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When reflecting upon artwork, one tends to absorb a piece’s novelty and innovation. The word “art” itself tends to connote feelings of creativity. However, “art for art’s sake” is a fairly modern concept. As museum specialist G. Ellis Burcaw states, “An example of modern abstract art that does not depict anything real is more truly art for art’s sake than is, for example, a portrait by [Thomas] Gainsborough, which is not only a work of art but also a kind of historical document showing how a certain real person looked and dressed.” Historically, artwork was created with a more utilitarian purpose; it was created for nobility, royalty, and the Church. Modern artwork is experimental, expressive and contains a unique message; however, all art, modern or not, is a part of humankind’s cultural history.

Dissecting art in American history reveals the cultural, social, economic, and sometimes the religious ambitions of the nation. Without historical structure, art exists in a vacuum; its purpose and human qualities are lost. During the nineteenth century, American art was influenced by many prevalent factors, such as Manifest Destiny, Social Darwinism, cyclical economic crises, Romanticism, etiquette pamphlets, the Civil War, and the Industrial Revolution. Nineteenth-century American art was also on the verge of a creative revolution. American artists continued to create artwork based on societal demands until it was exposed to the new creative outlet instigated in Europe; it was not until the late nineteenth-century French Impressionists broke the boundaries of “realistic technique” that creativity took new form in America. Prior to these new techniques, American nineteenth-century art was primarily utilitarian; it was widely utilized to reinforce nineteenth-century ideals.

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2 Ibid., 79.
Nineteenth-century American ideals were dictated by the middle-class value system. The formation of the “middle class” was created with the expectation of resolving conflicts between individuals and communities; it was to become a means of bonding the community.\(^3\) In nineteenth-century America, the middle class became the predominant market for artwork. As Joshua C. Taylor, the director for the National Museum of American Art in the Smithsonian Institution, writes, “By the end of the 1840s, art patronage was firmly in the hands of the middle classes, who were both eager to purchase culture in the form of art and quick to assert their preference for scenes with which they could identify.”\(^4\) The middle class demanded imagery that would reflect their values and status, and artists were expected to provide these images. In order to gain commissions, nineteenth-century artists, such as Lilly Martin Spencer and Robert Scott Duncanson, were pressed to follow protocol.

In nineteenth-century America, the opportunities for women and African Americans were tremendously limited. In terms of flouting gender and racial boundaries, Lilly Martin Spencer and Robert Scott Duncanson were clearly groundbreaking nonconformists. As a woman, Spencer defied the norm by choosing a profession typically only practiced as a feminine hobby. As Taylor states, “…artistic endeavors by women of the period were esteemed as genteel accomplishments only.”\(^5\) As an African American, Duncanson challenged racial prejudices and disproved Social Darwinistic attitudes with his career choice. Although Lilly Martin Spencer and Robert Scott Duncanson were progressive American artists, they did not create artwork that demonstrated their radical

\(^5\) Ibid., 19.
positions; they did not create art for art’s sake. They pushed society’s standards by
pursuing an artistic career as a woman or as an African American; however, despite these
transitional roles, they continued to create primarily utilitarian based artwork. Their art
did not overtly challenge societal expectations.

Lilly Martin Spencer was born in Exeter, England in November of 1822 as
Angelique Marie Martin. Her parents were both French and moved to England in order to
teach. Spencer’s mother, Angelique Perrine LePetit, was raised in a convent. Giles Marie
Martin, her father, studied to become a priest but later changed his mind and taught at
Exeter Academy. In 1830, the Martins immigrated to New York City. Giles, along with
three English friends, opened a school.6 Spencer’s parents sent her to the Academy of
Design in New York City before she was ten years old; however, as Ann Byrd Schumer’s
art history dissertation states, “These first lessons were few in number…due to general
family illness during the cholera epidemic of 1831-32; the Martins left New York and
moved to the vicinity of Marietta, Ohio.”7 As the New York Times reports, “[The
cholera] epidemic left 3,515 dead out of a population of 250,000” in New York City and
“people of means were escaping to the country.”8 Although the Martins originally wanted
to venture farther west, they decided to settle in Marietta, Ohio. In 1833, Giles Martin
taught for the Department of French within the Institute of Education, which was to
become Marietta College. He purchased about one hundred and fifty-five acres of land
from the widow of Return Jonathan Meigs Jr., the former Governor of Ohio. The

6 Ann Byrd Schumer, “Lilly Martin Spencer: American Painter of the Nineteenth Century” (Diss., Ohio
State University, 1959).
7 Schumer, 6.
124&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink.
property, Tupperford Farm, was located approximately five miles outside of Marietta in Washington County.  

Spencer did not go to school, but was tutored at home by her highly educated parents. The Martins were liberal and progressive for nineteenth-century America. Compared to other households, their home library was unusually diverse. It included works by Shakespeare, Pope, Moliere, Rousseau, Voltaire, Gibbon, and Locke. The Martins were followers of Charles Fourier, a French philosopher and socialist. Initially, they had hoped to create a utopian colony of families in Marietta; however, it was not until later in life when they moved near Braceville, Ohio, that this dream materialized. They would eventually join the Trumbull Phalanx, which was a community based upon Charles Fourier’s theory of community shared property. As followers of Fourierism, or phalansterianism, the Martins firmly believed in a system of merit, the ability to advance in society based on skills and not gender or economic class. The Martins were also advocates of the temperance, abolition, and women’s suffrage movements.

Spencer’s mother, Angelique, was ardently devoted to furthering women’s placement in American society. Angelique Martin fervently corresponded with suffragists and politicians in an attempt to help women’s political progress. In an 1852 letter to Gerrit Smith, a prominent politician and social reformer, Angelique wrote about how America’s patriarchal society needed to incorporate women as equals:

…the ever overlooked cause of the poor downtrodden degraded and oppressed Mother of Mankind all over the Earth, even so in the United States, which stamps a darkest blot on Man’s moral character in reverting

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9 Schumer.
10 Taylor, 10.
12 Taylor.
His natural destiny, which was to be her admirer lover and devoted friend, into being her selfish despot and tyrant, consequently her bitterest foe!\textsuperscript{13}

Both Giles and Angelique were involved in the improvement of women’s political rights in America. Schumer writes, “[The Martins] received over fifty letters discussing the movement from Horace Greeley, Lucretia Mott, Mrs. [Amelia Jenks] Bloomer, Mrs. [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton, and others.”\textsuperscript{14} Spencer was exposed to the liberated practices of both her parents, including their dedicated work for women’s rights.

Within the liberated atmosphere of the Martin family, Spencer was encouraged to pursue her artistic career. Along with the Martins’ Fourieristic ideals, France provided the opportunity for women to attend higher-level educational institutions. Taylor writes, “The Martins’ origins in the late-eighteenth century France, in an era when fifteen women were admitted to the French Academy, may account for their freedom from prejudices against an art career for their daughter and their constant encouragement which often involved substantial sacrifices.”\textsuperscript{15} The Martins consistently made sacrifices in order to nurture Spencer’s talents; however, it was worthwhile in order to help their daughter within the gender-biased culture of nineteenth-century America. These sacrifices were often financial. Despite financial hardships, the Martins still managed to support their daughter’s aspirations.

With her father in November of 1841, Spencer moved to Cincinnati in hopes of seeking patronage under Nicholas Longworth, a horticulturist, entrepreneur, lawyer, abolitionist, investor in real estate, and major patron of the arts in nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{13} Angelique Martin, “Letter to Garret Smith,” 2222 January 1852, Discusses the changes that society needs to make and how she would like to help, Angelique LePetit Martin Letters, Marietta College Library, Marietta, OH.
\textsuperscript{14} Schumer, 29.
\textsuperscript{15} Taylor, 12.
Ohio. Spencer’s father stayed with her in Cincinnati until 1842 to ensure that she found accommodations. Longworth, however, wanted Spencer to have more training before she came to Cincinnati. Spencer refused this advice. She again turned down another offer from Longworth to study abroad. Art historians debate her reasons for refusing.

Since Spencer was born abroad, maybe the impulse to study overseas was not as alluring. Perhaps Spencer felt she would be able to gauge her American audience by studying at home. As Taylor writes, “A subject much debated at this time was whether a young artist was best advised to seek the discipline and training afforded by study in Europe or to retain an unjaded eye and uncorrupted loyalty to his native culture by remaining at home.” Unfortunately, this might not have been the best approach; Spencer became insolvent. Most likely due to Lilly’s hardships, Giles Martin returned to Cincinnati late in the spring of 1842. Giles gave private French lessons in Cincinnati in order to help with Lilly’s expenses. He also made a deal with John, or Insico, Williams, an itinerant artist in central Indiana, to tutor Spencer in return for French lessons. It was Giles’s French tutoring that enabled Spencer to receive art instruction.

After helping Spencer establish herself in Cincinnati, the Martins allowed her to pursue a career on her own terms; they let her lead her own life. They did not believe their daughter was destined to play a stereotyped, gender-based role in society. With their support, Spencer was to break down gender barriers instilled in society. As Elizabeth L. O’Leary, an associate curator of American arts at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, writes, “In an era when female efforts in the arts were typically viewed as leisure

16 Schumer, 22.
17 Ibid., 20.
18 Taylor, 17.
19 Schumer, 23.
diversions, only a handful of women managed to turn their endeavors into vocations.”

Spencer was one of these women.

While in Cincinnati, Lilly Martin married Benjamin Rush Spencer on August 26, 1844. Benjamin R. Spencer was born in England in 1808. His family relocated to Northern Ireland where his father, Lord Spencer, was sent to suppress an uprising. He and his six brothers migrated to Virginia. When unsuccessful in business, Benjamin moved to Cincinnati where he worked as a tailor and imported cloth. Benjamin was not very successful with his business and abandoned his career in order to dedicate himself to helping his wife with her “professional and domestic tasks.” Benjamin would prepare Spencer’s canvases and frames; it is possible that he painted backgrounds. Although Benjamin would eventually list his occupation in New York directories as “artist” from 1850 to 1857, the extent of his artistic career is unknown. Regardless, their marriage was indeed unconventional for the time. As Taylor notes, “With its reversal of the conventional role of breadwinner, the Spencer’s marriage departed from the norm.” Throughout their marriage, Lilly and Benjamin had thirteen children, of whom seven lived into adulthood. As indicated in letters and their large family, the Spencers had a happy relationship despite their unconventional marriage.

Despite her liberal upbringing, avant-garde career, and atypical marriage with Benjamin, Spencer’s artwork failed to challenge nineteenth-century American culture. Spencer’s famed genre paintings were based on American middle-class ideals. As University of Nebraska-Lincoln art history professor Wendy Jean Katz writes, “Spencer’s

20 O’Leary, 80.
21 Schumer, 30.
22 Taylor, 21.
23 Ibid., 34.
24 Ibid., 21.
genre paintings draw what is ‘American’ from a stock of ideas about class and race and the proper response to them that originated in [commercial areas].”25 Spencer did not always allow society to dictate her tastes and interests. During the beginning of her career in Cincinnati, Spencer concentrated on Shakespearean subjects and a few Biblical themes; however, her subject matter changed due to consumer demand. Despite this change in Spencer’s work, as Taylor mentions, “Nowhere in her correspondence does she lament the pressures that diverted her from the allegorical and literary scenes that filled her sketchbooks.”26 Spencer wrote, “To get along I was obliged to paint at hazard what I thought would be likely to please or what I happened to fancy very much, and if it happened to hit [their] fancy I would get an offer for it.”27 The subject matter on Spencer’s canvases changed in order to meet the public’s expectations.

Spencer’s success greatly increased from 1846 and onward while she worked in Cincinnati. Cincinnati’s interest in the arts grew tremendously after the founding of the Western Art Union in 1846. The Western Art Union was “an enterprise modeled after the American Art-Union in New York City.”28 With a fixed sum of about five dollars, a subscriber would receive an engraving based on an original American artist’s painting and the opportunity to win an original piece of art in an annual art lottery. The works that were to be purchased for the lottery were chosen by a committee and displayed before the lottery drawings.29 The Western Art Union had its own building with an exhibition hall and spaces for artists to utilize as studios; it was financially and promotionally beneficial for artists in Ohio.

25 Katz, 27.
26 Taylor, 33.
27 Ibid., 48.
28 Ibid., 25.
29 Ibid., 25.
In spite of these advantages, the Western Art Union promoted certain ideals based on marketable appeal. As Taylor notes, “Organized by merchants rather than artists, the art union scheme had an obvious commercial orientation.”\textsuperscript{30} By 1848, Lilly Martin Spencer was recognized as a professional artist in the catalogue of the Western Art Union and had also exhibited with them. With the influence of art unions, genre paintings grew in popularity. Prior to the nineteenth century, flowers and fruit were mainly studied by botanical artists and treated merely as scientific studies. Genre and still life themes were a reflection of the middleclass interests in everyday activities. Spencer could not ignore the public’s taste; she financially depended upon it. Taylor explains, “The increasing demand for genre scenes could not be ignored by an artist dependent on public sales for a livelihood.”\textsuperscript{31} With Spencer’s involvement in the Western Art Union, her artwork grew in popularity, but that was largely because she adhered to society’s demands.

In 1848, Spencer moved with her family to New York City. Despite the work she exhibited with the National Academy of Design and the American Art-Union during 1849, Spencer did not immediately gain popularity in New York City. In 1849, Spencer’s funds first began to suffer from reproductions. Alfred Jones, an engraver, was paid twelve hundred dollars in order to produce an engraving of one of Spencer’s works, \textit{One of Life’s Happy Hours}.\textsuperscript{32} This is the first recording of a reproduction of Spencer’s work. Spencer would never be paid for the reproductions of her work and “many of her works were reproduced as popular chromos.”\textsuperscript{33} Although the Copyright Act in the United States

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 25-26.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 31.  
\textsuperscript{32} Schumer, 37.  
\textsuperscript{33} Edna Maria Clark, \textit{Ohio Art and Artists} (Virginia: Richmond Garrett and Massie, 1932).
was not established until 1909, men duplicated Spencer’s work. New York City provided
a competitive atmosphere, but even more so for Spencer because of her sex.

While in New York City, Spencer painted and tended to her family during the
daytime and took drawing classes at the National Academy of Design in the evening.
Although many sources claim that Spencer was “self-taught,” it is evident that she did
have training; however, the extent of this training is unclear. Regardless, it is obvious that
Spencer’s work was widely affected by the European images newly available to her. Her
work began to focus more on “hard contours, clear local color, and painstakingly
described surface textures,” realistic technique that was popular in both Europe and
America at the time.\footnote{Taylor, 29.} Also, Dutch and Flemish genre paintings from the seventeenth-
century were available for Spencer in “exhibitions, book illustrations, and loose prints.”\footnote{O’Leary, 68.}
A large percentage of images showed the domestic chores of women, such as spinning,
childcare, and kitchen labor.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} Domestic genre images with their “didactic focus on
family and references to Protestant and republican values” from Europe were exceedingly
popular within nineteenth-century America.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} With the competition far more strenuous in
New York City for patronage than in Cincinnati, Spencer found it impossible to ignore
the popular imagery, regardless of whether it portrayed women as inferior.

In spite of the Martin’s Fourierist ideology and involvement in the women’s
suffrage movement, Spencer most likely had been exposed to the influx of etiquette
pamphlets that had become popular during the nineteenth century. The ideal of separate
spheres for women and men flourished from the 1830s and onward. For example, A.J.
Graves published *Women in America; Being an Examination into the Moral and Intellectual Condition of American Female Society* in 1841. The goal of this etiquette pamphlet was:

> to prove that woman’s domestic duties have paramount claim over everything else upon her attention—that home is her appropriate sphere of action; and that whenever she neglects these duties or goes out of this sphere of action,… she is deserting the station which God and nature have assigned her… Home, if we may so speak, is the cradle of the human race; and it is here the human character is fashioned either for good or for evil. It is the “nursery of the future man and of the undying spirit”; and woman is the nurse and the educator.\(^{38}\)

Women were expected to follow the preordained role as “God’s appointed agent of Morality.”\(^{39}\) Women were to maintain their moral authority through piety and domesticity. By following the female destiny within the moral confines of the home, the entire nation would improve. The ideal nineteenth-century woman would be christened the “republican mother.”\(^{40}\) The ideal of separate spheres was reinforced in essays, church sermons, poems, novels, pamphlets, and manuals.\(^{41}\) Man was to conquer the public sphere, while woman, being the morally superior being, would control the private realm, the home. Separate spheres for men and women were only buttressed by the dawning of the Industrial Revolution. As O’Leary writes, “As wage labor became the primary means of economic support, the paths of adult men’s and women’s work diverged.”\(^{42}\) Although this was the “American ideal,” it was truly only a concept employed by the families that could afford such a lifestyle. This idealized role of a submissive, domestic housewife was based on a middle-class concept.

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38 Ibid., 75.  
39 Ibid., 75.  
40 Ibid., 75.  
41 Ibid., 75.  
42 Ibid., 75.
One of the identifying factors of the middle class was the ability to afford hired help. Ironically enough, lower class women were to take on the household tasks that reflected morality within the household. The role of the middle-class woman switched from a performer into a supervisor. Catharine Beecher, an influential writer on etiquette in the nineteenth century, would clarify the newly found, supervisor-like position for the middle-class woman. In *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, Beecher wrote, “It is because such work has generally been done by vulgar people, and in a vulgar way, that we have such associations; and when ladies manage such things as ladies should, then such associations will be removed.” Housework lost its respectability and a new stigma toward domestic labor was formed. Spencer’s genre work paralleled the morals and values upheld within middle-class America.

Although she struggled economically throughout her life, Spencer not only painted middle-class ideals, she lived them. Most middle-income families employed at least one servant. By the mid-nineteenth century, 15% to 30% of urban homes contained a live-in servant; this percentage included Spencer, who maintained a servant throughout most of her life. By maintaining middle-class ideals, Spencer went against Fourierism and, therefore, her parents’ ideals. Fourierists condemned domestic service as a violation of inherent human rights. Spencer would write to her mother, Angelique, and complain about a servant’s incompetence. Despite the Martins’ belief system, Spencer wrote to her mother, “I have often heard you dear Mother speak of the pitiful situation of poor servants but I tell you I don’t pity them.” Spencer never referred to her servants by

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43 Ibid., 78.
44 Ibid., 76.
45 Ibid., 96.
name; they were merely “girls.” Inadvertently, society’s middle-class ideals outweighed the activism Spencer once knew as a girl.

An example of Spencer’s stance on women’s work and working women can be viewed within *Fruit of Temptation* (see Fig. 1, page 18). Although the original painting no longer exists, a Goupil lithograph published in 1857 preserves the image. Spencer clearly utilizes her artistic abilities to vent her frustrations over her hired help’s ineptitude. Since the servant was to maintain order, she was responsible for the children and the pets. The servant’s inability to restrain them demonstrates her ineffectiveness. Middle-class women believed that wayward servants left unsupervised “could turn a household upside down.” Although the servant’s vain and disorderly behavior led the room to disarray, it is ultimately the surprised mother, the supervisor, who is in charge. Despite the servant’s wrongdoing, perhaps Lilly is condemning herself for not being able to balance financial demands and the tedious schedule within the home.

While studying *Fruit of Temptation*, the viewer is drawn into the chaos from the little boy’s gaze; the viewer is now alongside him and helping him commit the crime; grubby little sticky fingers are ravaging the tempting fruit upon the table. The tablecloth is off center and being wrinkled. A cat is lapping milk from a glass pitcher. A small dog appears to be attempting to steal an item from a chair while treading on a mishandled cloth. The maid’s cleaning instruments are tossed upon the floor by the chair while she fusses over her dress. The mirror even appears to be off center and leaning forward. The frenzied genre scene demonstrates the irony within the painting’s title. While engaging in

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46 Ibid., 82.
47 Ibid., 69.
tempting frivolous, gluttonous, and vain activities, the characters within the painting are not productive and, therefore, they do not produce “fruit.”

With the room in complete disarray, the order prescribed by Catharine Beecher and other etiquette advocators has been discarded. The domestic servant, the children, and the pets commit the crimes portrayed within the image. The children devouring the abundant array of food are breaking the traditional social bonds that accompany proper dining skills. As Katz describes, “Eating within prescribed conventions [became] highly valued because it [demonstrated] one’s willingness to meet others’ expectations of behavior.”48 The lack of self-control also emphasizes much larger social issues. By wasting instead of sharing food, a sin was committed, mainly based upon two reasons: personal greed and the economy. As O’Leary writes, “In an economy repeatedly buffeted by crises and panics, some middle-class families found themselves in a tenuous position.”49 Spencer knew from personal experience the trials and tribulations within the wavering economy; her assets depended upon the economy’s success. On top of meeting financial demands, Spencer endured additional stress from supervising her servant. The chaotic representation of the room reveals Spencer’s disapproval of her “girl,” and perhaps herself for successfully supervising.

With the large influx of Irish immigrants from the 1840s and throughout the nineteenth century, the “Irish Bridget,” or the Irish maid, performed a large percentage of domestic service in America. By mid-century, the majority of servants were either immigrants or African Americans. Ethnic and religious differences helped to instill a negative, filthy veneer on domestic labor. As O’Leary writes, “[Servants’] ethnic and

48 Katz, 32.
49 O’Leary, 76.
racial differences were widely interpreted as signs of inferiority or regarded as threats."  

Magazine articles and illustrations continuously portrayed derogatory images of maidservants, especially Irish servants. Caricatures represented Irish Bridgets as apelike with broad jaws and very small, upturned noses.  

It is quite possible that Spencer’s *Fruit of Temptation* was based on an actual occurrence. Spencer utilized the people and objects around her as models. The overseer of the servant standing in the doorway resembles the artist a great deal. If the overseer is Spencer, then the servant may also be based on Spencer’s actual servant at the time. Many of her domestic genre paintings contain actual likenesses of her hired help. Although it is not recorded whether or not the servant portrayed in *Fruit of Temptation* is based on a real person, it is safe to presume that it is.  

Since the reproduction of *Fruit of Temptation* image was created in 1857, the painting was most likely executed around the same time, within 1856 or 1857. Spencer indicated in the 1860 census that she had one live-in domestic, Mary Carpenter, who was an Irish woman. It is possible that the image of a servant in *Fruit of Temptation* is of Mary Carpenter. Is it possible that Spencer created a commentary on the inferiority of the Irish within nineteenth-century American culture? Although Spencer herself was an immigrant, she had been fully assimilated into American culture. Compared to Spencer’s idealized feminine faces in past genre works, the small nose on her servant in *Fruit of Temptation* is noticeable. *Fruit of Temptation* indicates Spencer’s adherence to ideal nineteenth-century feminine etiquette and quite possibly to middle-class American

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50 Ibid., 108.  
51 Ibid., 98.  
52 Ibid.  
53 Ibid., 100.
Figure 1, *Fruit of Temptation*
attitudes toward immigrant workers. Although Spencer never mentioned the ethnicity of her “girls” within her correspondence, it is very likely that this servant was Irish. After all, the servant in *Fruit of Temptation* “presents a profile revealing a suspiciously small nose,” like the other available stereotypical imagery of Irish people during the nineteenth century.  

During the decade from 1848 to 1858, Spencer reached the height of her popularity in New York City. She exhibited all around the country and won numerous awards. She painted for business organizations, exhibits, and private commissions. Her works were sold at higher prices than those by Bingham, Audubon, Eastman Johnson, and William S. Mount, and they were equal in value to [works by] Asher Durand. By 1851, Spencer was involved in many art organizations, including the American Art-Union, the National Academy of Design, and the Brooklyn Art Association. Spencer’s success was widely based upon her popular portrayal of women.

In an 1857 painting entitled *This Little Pig Went to the Market* (Fig. 2, page 21), Spencer continued to reinforce nineteenth-century feminine ideals. As Taylor notes, “Having largely left behind the more serious dramatic and literary themes of her early years, she put motherhood to the service of her painting career….” Spencer produced many genre scenes demonstrating the benevolent role of motherhood. Again, the mother within the painting resembles the artist. The mother counts and tickles her baby’s toes in a game of “This Little Piggy,” which is a nursery rhyme. The Madonna-like appearance of the mother in *This Little Pig Went to the Market* fits the mold of nineteenth-century

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54 Ibid., 98.
55 Schumer, 39.
56 Ibid.
57 Taylor, 48.
perspectives on idealistic female roles in society. Her “down turned eyes suggest the modest qualities prescribed in the prevailing [nineteenth-century] doctrines of womanhood.”

The baby looks outward toward the viewer with golden ringlets framing the face in a halo-like manner. When comparing Spencer’s painting to Giotto’s *Madonna Enthroned* (Fig. 3, page 22), which was painted around 1310, it is evident that Spencer’s virtuous mother replicated the images of early Italian Renaissance representations of the Virgin Mary. Like Giotto’s Mary, Spencer upheld her mother as royalty.

Not only does Spencer’s representation of her heavenly mother fit the approved moral description in etiquette pamphlets, the setting does as well. The mother’s feet are placed upon a footstool, as if to indicate that the mother and child are on holy ground. The circular golden trimming located on the upper canopy resembles a halo. Also, the canopy shape of the baby’s crib is reminiscent of the triangular shaped, gothic and Byzantine inspired throne of Giotto’s Mary. The golden, yellow hues in Spencer’s work resemble the golden, Byzantine-inspired background in Giotto’s work.

While Spencer’s maternal depiction resembled Renaissance representations of the Madonna, it also endorsed the nineteenth-century American ideal of motherhood. As *Moore’s Western Lady’s Book* reminded nineteenth-century readers, a setting for mothers and their children should be “a picture for the heart.”

The setting is for the republican motherhood, the ideal American mother; therefore, the nursery is the “empire of the mother.” The ideal American mother maintains the nursery and nurtures future American generations. The golden eagle, an American symbol, perched upon the infant’s

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58 O’Leary, 72.
59 Katz, 38.
60 Ibid., 38.
Figure 2, *This Little Pig Went to the Market*
Figure 3, *Madonna Enthroned*
crib reflects the future generations of America. Within this setting, the mother is the sovereign, but only in the home, in the sphere of morality. Spencer’s fortuitous situation of being both a mother and a producer for the public’s taste enabled her to combine those roles successfully. Never did Spencer venture to paint a female character outside of her correct sphere.

In 1858, Spencer moved from New York City to Newark, New Jersey with her family. The family resided there for nineteen years. In 1880, Spencer and her family moved near Poughkeepsie in up-state New York. Her contacts in New York lessened while she was residing in New Jersey. Spencer’s reasons for moving are unknown; it was most likely a family decision. Benjamin Rush Spencer died in 1890. For the next ten years, Spencer painted very little. In 1900, Spencer managed to reestablish her career in New York City. Her studio and home were then located in Manhattan. Spencer died at the age of eighty while painting at her easel on May 22, 1902. She left three unfinished works.

Lilly Martin Spencer abided by the customary, nineteenth-century feminine conventions but also deviated personally from the norm. Although Spencer’s upbringing and untraditional marriage provided a support for her radical career decision, she created conventional images, which reinforced gender-biased attitudes. With the help of popular seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish works, the Western Art Union, etiquette pamphlets, the industrialization of society, and the American middle-class taste, Spencer adhered to the inferior gender notion by portraying women performing domestic labor or as mothers within the female sphere, the home. Although her income depended upon

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61 Schumer.
62 Ibid.
these conventions, Spencer came to believe in some of these ideals, which is evident in her sentiment toward domestic labor and motherhood.

Lilly Martin Spencer was not the only nineteenth-century artist that went against the grain. Robert Scott Duncanson endured a similar predicament within the nineteenth century. While Spencer submitted to portraying specific female gender roles, Robert Scott Duncanson submitted to derogatory racial guidelines. Duncanson was born in 1821 to a free woman of African descent and to a Scots-Canadian in New York. Details about Duncanson’s youth are obscure; what his education consisted of is unknown. Some sources indicate Duncanson ventured to Canada with his father in order to receive an education. With the Civil War brewing in the atmosphere, Canada provided a less discriminatory environment, and therefore, a preferable education for a racially mixed student. Some sources refer to Duncanson as being a self-taught artist, claiming that he “taught himself about art by studying and copying engravings of famous European paintings.” Other sources claim he received training as a housepainter in Michigan. Apart from this contradictory information, it can be assumed Duncanson began to paint during adolescence, since he exhibited his work soon after his arrival in the United States to live with his mother around Mount Healthy, north of Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1842.

Cincinnati forced Duncanson into the forefront of the chaotic anti-slavery versus pro-slavery movements. With Cincinnati’s location bordering on the South, many African Americans escaped into its borders. Before 1800, many slaves escaped into the Northwest

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66 McElroy, 6.
Territory. Parts of the Northwest Territory ignored returning the fugitive slaves, but the influx of African Americans in Ohio created the fear that helped pass the Black Laws in 1804, which prohibited African Americans from settling in Ohio without proof of freedom.\textsuperscript{67} Not only was proof required, but African Americans also had to register with the county clerk and pay five hundred dollars “as a guarantee of good behavior.”\textsuperscript{68} However, the repressive measures did not prevent Duncanson’s artistic endeavors.

Despite the confusion regarding slavery in Cincinnati, Duncanson knew that Cincinnati was a flourishing commercial center in the West. With economic development, Cincinnati was able to grow culturally as well. Patrons were able to collect European and American artwork. Guy McElroy, scholar of African-American art, writes, “Among many [patrons] who might be named were Judge Burnet, Robert Bishop, Freeman Cary, William Wiswell, Nicholas and Joseph Longworth.”\textsuperscript{69} Also, with the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, many wealthy patrons were involved in Abolitionism. Abolitionists published reports on African Americans and their artwork. Stereotypical images of African Americans dominated the first half of the nineteenth century, but these images were challenged after the establishment of Anti-Slavery Society.

Prior to the abolitionists’ involvement in commissioning African Americans for artwork and literature, most aspiring African-American artists were disregarded. Samella Lewis, an African-American artist and historian, writes, “Throughout the nineteenth century, African-American artists were excluded from the academies, associations, and teaching institutions that were accessible to white artists in the United States. Thus

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 6.
African American artists were rarely able to attract and sustain dependable patronage."\textsuperscript{70}

Before the Anti-Slavery Society’s involvement, nineteenth-century American painting portrayed African Americans as “clowns, simpletons, and creatures expressing all manner of inhuman qualities.”\textsuperscript{71} Americans of European descent used derogatory imagery to reinforce the necessity of slavery within America. As art historian Frances K. Pohl reiterates, “Some European Americans attempted to justify the enslavement and exploitation of Africans and Africans Americans through visual and written representations of them as either childlike and in need of care, or savage and in need of disciplining….\textsuperscript{72} African-American men were depicted as stereotypical silent servants disappearing on the sidelines of a canvas, or as childlike “darkies” entertaining their white owners.\textsuperscript{73} African Americans were often depicted with toothy grins and oversized lips. Although these images were sometimes used ignorantly for good-natured humor, they endorsed the debasement of African Americans.

Duncanson became involved with the Abolitionist movement through commissions. He painted many anti-slavery leaders, such as James G. Birney, Reverend Robert H. Bishop, Lewis Cass, Richard S. Rust, and Nicholas Longworth. Abolitionists utilized Duncanson’s artistic ability in order to point out the prospective talents of African Americans. As art historian Sharon Patton writes, “A reason for the close association between black artists and abolitionists was the latter’s belief that images were very effective tools to proselytize their cause."\textsuperscript{74} By mid-century, disparaging images

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\textsuperscript{70} Samella Lewis, \textit{African American Art and Artists} (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1990), 19.
\textsuperscript{71} Lewis, 23.
\textsuperscript{72} Pohl, 198.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{74} Patton, 75.
were being heavily re-evaluated; however, they were replaced by yet another stereotype. As Patton writes, “The black person was humanized and not intimidating. Portrayal as victim was very common. The goal was to appeal to the viewer’s emotions.”

Abolitionists wanted to “humanize” African Americans by making them appear non-threatening. Again, African Americans were subjected to certain portrayals that espoused middle-class, Christian morality. Many abolitionists adhered to the ideals of American culture and wanted their artwork to correspond with these values. As Lewis writes, “The only means to artistic acceptance required a commitment to European middle-class values and the rejection of everything African.” By working with abolitionists, Duncanson had to adhere to white, middle-class society’s culture.

Duncanson endured the hardships of racial discrimination. Being a “mulatto,” Duncanson was neither white nor black. He faced discrimination from both races. The word “mulatto” itself held a negative connotation; it derives from the word “mule.” Art historian Cedric Dover wrote in his book entitled *American Negro Art*, “…it was [mixed African American’s] involvement with developing a cultured society which fostered the rapid social development of American blacks.” Being of mixed racial descent, Duncanson fell into a cultural subgroup, a group Dover calls the “black bourgeoisie,” or the African-American middle class. The term was ironically dubbed since African Americans were not socially accepted into the ideal, white American middle class. African Americans considered the black bourgeoisie, or “Uncle Toms,” sellouts. Social Darwinism dubbed mixed African Americans as more civilized than African Americans.

75 Ibid., 75.
76 Lewis, 23.
77 McElroy, 5.
78 Ibid., 5.
of pure descent. Duncanson would spend his life on the cusp of both white and African American culture. Like many African American artists of the nineteenth century, Duncanson became an individual without a culture.

Duncanson’s isolated identity is identifiable through his landscapes. With no connection to society, Duncanson immersed himself in nature. In culturally thriving Cincinnati, Duncanson was able to study the works in the Hudson River School style. According to McElroy, “Mid-century Cincinnati was certainly a center for painters of this [landscape, Hudson River School] persuasion, which began about 1825 when a group of artists under the influence of Thomas Cole started looking at the American landscape in terms of romantic ideals.”80 These works were often permeated by allegorical themes, romantic sentiments, and spiritual ideals. Through the Western Art Union, Hudson River School artists, such as Thomas Cole and George Caleb Bingham, had work distributed and made available in exhibitions. With exposure to the Hudson River School, Duncanson primarily became a landscape artist; however, the ideals of Manifest Destiny were not inclusive of his race. During the nineteenth century, American painting accompanied the newfound fortitude of the “true” American ideal. The Democratic Review coined the term “Manifest Destiny” in 1845. This ideal, according to art historian Wayne Craven, “advocated the white person’s right and duty to make use of the land as God’s intention, even if it meant the displacement of indigenous peoples.”81 African Americans were not part of the “American” ideal; they were considered inferior and, therefore, incapable of making sufficient use of land.

80 McElroy, 7.
Despite Duncanson’s principal focus on landscapes, he continued to create portraiture for his abolitionist patrons. Duncanson’s affiliation with the Abolitionist movement followed him to Detroit, a place where he frequently sought work. It is possible Duncanson continued portraiture for financial purposes only, and not because of interest. Duncanson thrived in landscape art while his portraiture seemed retrogressive in comparison. Duncanson’s awkward depiction of the human form can be witnessed by comparing his painting *Nicholas Longworth* (Fig. 4, page 30), to his outstanding landscape work, *The Land of The Lotus Eaters* (Fig. 5, page 31).

Upon examining the portrait of Longworth, it is apparent Duncanson painted Longworth’s body in sections. Longworth’s narrow shoulders only emphasize the inaccurately large size and position of his head. His neck and head are cocked forward. Duncanson most likely painted the neck and head after painting the body. If it were not for Longworth’s hand lightly grazing the podium, his upper torso would keel over. Duncanson painted Longworth’s body and arms as another section. Given the position of Longworth’s knees, it is obvious that his legs are far too short for his body. Also, his feet are far too small to support his weight. To counteract the flawed portrayal of Longworth’s appearance, Duncanson loaded the portrait with iconography. With Catawba grapes indicating Longworth’s prosperous vineyard, envelopes addressed to “N. Longworth, Esq., Cin. O.” to indicate Longworth’s influence, a pinned note to Longworth’s sleeve to reveal a personal habit, and the scenery of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the background, Duncanson enables the viewer to identify Nicholas Longworth despite the inaccurate physical depiction of him.  

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Figure 4, Nicholas Longworth
It is evident through Duncanson’s disproportional portraiture that he had an “almost exclusive interest in landscape.” The Land of The Lotus Eaters demonstrates Duncanson’s true artistic ability. Duncanson utilized a technique called aerial, or atmospheric, perspective, which enables the viewer to feel the depth of the landscape. Duncanson also followed the popular, romantic technique of illuminating the sky. Duncanson’s reflective water and thick vegetation reveal his meticulous eye for detail. Not only does Duncanson’s technical execution in landscape painting surpass his ability in portraiture, but also his iconography prevails within his landscape. In the years preceding the Civil War, many Americans believed it was an improbability for African

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83 McElroy, 7.
Americans and white people to live harmoniously together. Many people, including some abolitionists, advocated the migration of African Americans to Africa, the Caribbean, or to Central America.\(^{84}\) It is possible that *The Land of The Lotus Eaters* reflects Duncanson’s attitude on emigration for African Americans. The allegorical theme of the lotus-eaters derives from Homer’s *The Odyssey*; the lotus-eaters represented an “uncivilized” lifestyle. Duncanson’s painting was based upon Lord Alfred Tennyson’s poem, “The Lotos-Eaters.” As Tennyson wrote, “Our island home/ Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam.”\(^{85}\) It is possible Duncanson believed that emigration was the key for acceptance and serenity for African Americans.

Perhaps Duncanson’s ill proportioned portraits were done on purpose in order to appease an American ideal regarding the glorification of the body. As Lewis writes, “This consistent weakness [with portraiture] on Duncanson’s part is probably due simply to a lack of proficiency, but it may be related to Puritan attitudes prevalent in America at the time, which discouraged glorification of the human form.”\(^{86}\) Or perhaps Duncanson did not receive sufficient training in order to depict the human form properly. Studying the nude form in an academic setting was an unlikelihood for Duncanson. Regardless, Duncanson’s disconnection from society is noticeable with his inability to perfect portraiture.

Duncanson also failed to gracefully execute African-American figures as well. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. James Francis Conover, editor of *The Detroit Tribune*, asked Duncanson to illustrate a passage from the novel.

\(^{84}\) Mary Beth Norton, 412.


\(^{86}\) Lewis, 27.
The painting *Uncle Tom and Little Eva* (Fig. 5, page 33) is “possibly the only known work by Duncanson in which [an African American] plays a basic role in the composition.”\(^8^7\) This is the only work in which Duncanson advocated the advancement of African Americans in America.\(^8^8\) Despite the opportunity to portray the advancement of African Americans, Duncanson failed to demonstrate his artistic ability.

**Figure 4, Uncle Tom and Little Eva**

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\(^8^7\) McElroy, 11.
\(^8^8\) Lewis, 27.
Duncanson’s figures are again stiff, disproportionate, and appear to have been painted in fragments. Little Eva’s body resembles the figure of a woman. Her feet and legs would not be able to support her. She is represented as an illuminated, angelic figure, and foreshadows her death by pointing upward. Her illuminated skin matches the sky and indicates that she will end up in the heavens. Uncle Tom is not connected to the heavenly atmosphere. Instead, he is dark and connected to the unruly vegetation behind him, which indicates his “savage” instincts. His hat is off to Little Eva, specifying her higher status in society. Instead of holding the hand of an equal, Uncle Tom is cupping Little Eva’s hand with both arms in reverence. In an 1853 excerpt entitled “An Uncle Tomitude,” criticism of Duncanson’s inability to gracefully portray figures is elucidated in The Detroit Free Press. The author wrote, “Uncle Tom, according to the artist, is a very stupid looking creature, and Eva instead of being a fragile, fading flower is a rosy-complexioned, healthy seeming child, not a bit ethereal.”

Even with the portrayal of African Americans, Duncanson failed to create a commendable image. With Uncle Tom, the adult, learning from Little Eva, the child, Duncanson conformed to the notion that African Americans were pitiable.

The Civil War wreaked havoc in Cincinnati. In 1862, the city feared potential ruin from a Confederate attack. Duncanson moved northward and painted in Minnesota, Vermont, and Canada. He ventured to study in Europe in 1863. McElroy writes, “There is a possibility that Duncanson’s [second] trip to Europe as well as the preceding trip to Canada reflected his desire to become an expatriate.”

In The Cincinnati Gazette, Moncure D. Conway, who met Duncanson in England, described Duncanson’s reasons

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89 McElroy, 11-12.
90 Ibid., 13.
for moving as a desire to find a place “where his color did not prevent his association with other artists and his entrance into good society.” His unlisted signature in the Cincinnati Directories from 1864 to 1866 provides evidence of his absence. Duncanson’s exact route during this European trip is unknown. About a year after the Civil War, Duncanson returned to the United States. In 1867, Duncanson’s name reappears in the Cincinnati Directory. Duncanson proceeded to exhibit works in both Cincinnati and Detroit.

Sadly, at the highpoint of Duncanson’s artistic career he “succumbed to a severe mental illness.” It is possible that long-term exposure to lead paint poisoned Duncanson and ruined his mind. While arranging artwork for an exhibition in 1872, he suffered from a breakdown. For three months, Duncanson was cared for in the Michigan State Retreat facility and on December 21, 1872 he died. Duncanson’s obituary in The Detroit Tribune stated, “He had acquired the idea that in all his artistic efforts he was aided by the spirit of the great masters.” Correspondence between himself and his friends provide evidence of Duncanson’s depressed stages and irrational mindset. A friend noted Duncanson’s “unstable temperament.” During such mood swings, Duncanson would cry and then laugh uncontrollably. Despite his success, Duncanson had constant feelings of inadequacy and seclusion. His self-doubt and depressive moods might also explain his sporadic fleeing. He might have been seeking an emotional refuge through his romantic landscapes; creating an imaginary, ideal land where he could be accepted. As Patton

91 Ibid., 14.
92 Ibid., 15.
93 Ibid., 15.
94 Ibid., 15.
95 Ibid., 15.
96 Ibid., 15.
writes, “The very escapism embodied in landscape painting inevitably leveled a critique at the abusive social order that produced the need for such escape. Viewing Duncanson’s landscapes as escapist images can reveal a political subtext within his paintings.”

Robert Scott Duncanson’s mental illness only reinforced his terminal fear of inadequacy.

Just as Lilly Martin Spencer’s artwork was subjected to American nineteenth-century ideals, so too was Duncanson’s artwork. Abolitionists, though progressive for their time, encouraged Duncanson to only reflect their notions of what progress meant, and not to define his own internal person, neither his white nor black character. His discouragement can be witnessed in a letter written to his son, Rueben, who accused his father of “passing for white.” Duncanson responded, “My heart has always been with the down-trodden race…It does not follow that because I am colored that I am bound to kiss every colored or white man I meet…What have the colored people done for me? Or what are they going to do for me? Please answer? I care not for color.” Although Duncanson was a radical figure for the nineteenth century, he failed to provide any work of art that truly represented the African-American race; he failed to care for color.

Nineteenth-century American culture provided a set of guidelines for the roles of women and African Americans. Although Lilly Martin Spencer and Robert Scott Duncanson broke the ongoing protocol with their career choices, they inevitably failed to create artwork that challenged convention. They continued to follow the status quo by creating images that reinforced nineteenth-century ideals. While the Industrial Revolution helped define the middle class and, therefore, middle-class values, images were utilized

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97 Patton, 85.
99 Ibid., 245.
to highlight these principles. As middle-class society designated titles and roles, etiquette pamphlets and behavior manuals delegated women’s sphere in society. Despite Lilly Martin Spencer’s unconventional upbringing and marriage, she helped enforce preconceived, biased notions on the role of women in society. Spencer continuously portrayed women in the sphere of womanhood, the home. Within the middle-class market, abolitionists were eager to reveal the “human” side of African Americans through their artistic abilities. Although Robert Scott Duncanson received his education in Canada and was supported by the Anti-Slavery Society, he never truly created works that advocated the advancement of African Americans. Regardless of how progressive the abolitionists’ notions were for the time, they insisted that African-American artists should produce works that reinforced the white, middle-class value system.

Following the prescribed, popular sentiments during the nineteenth century enabled both Spencer and Duncanson to earn a living; however, did they truly believe in these ideals? Though Spencer and Duncanson preferred different themes in the beginning of their careers, they gradually adopted imagery that conformed to the nineteenth-century canon. Perhaps the act of being successful as opposed to challenging society for the right of being successful was the progressive step needed in nineteenth-century America.

Ultimately, both Spencer and Duncanson show that artwork does not necessarily dictate reality. Despite the complicit, idealistic roles painted, both artists prove that it is indeed possible to contradict society and achieve notoriety. Both artists demonstrated through their actions that it was possible to break away from the societal norm. Rather than advocating change through their artwork, Spencer and Duncanson provided living
examples of what minorities could accomplish. Maybe the most radical aspect of their lives was their popularity.
List of Images

Figure 1
Lilly Martin Spencer
*Fruit of Temptation*
1857
Goupil Lithograph
Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio
Reproduced in http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_quarterly/v056/56.2masten.pdf

2
Lilly Martin Spencer
*This Little Pig Went to The Market*
1857
Oil on Canvas
Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio
Reproduced in www.hnet.uci.edu

3
Giotto
*Madonna Enthroned*
c. 1310
Tempera on Wood
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy
Reproduced in artyzm.com

4
Robert Scott Duncanson
*Nicholas Longworth*
1858
Oil on Canvas
Reproduced in www.negroartist.com

5
Robert Scott Duncanson
*The Land of The Lotus Eaters*
c. 1861
Oil on Canvas
Reproduced in www.negroartist.com

6
Robert Scott Duncanson
*Uncle Tom and Little Eva*
1853
Oil on Canvas
The Detroit Institute of the Art, Detroit, Michigan
Reproduced in www.iath.virginia.edu
Bibliography


