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GALLERY

The Legacy of Grandma Moses

By Judith Bell

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■ *The Old Checkered House*, 1944. Oil on pressed wood, 23 15/16 x 43 1/16 in. Seiji Togo Memorial, Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, Tokyo. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

The works of America's beloved Grandma Moses, who flourished despite the drive toward Modernism, are seen in a fresh light in a new touring exhibition.

In 1940 American artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were struggling to redefine the abstract genius of Picasso for a new generation and to finally liberate American art from its European ancestry. Out to express the universal and the elemental in artistic equivalents of the interior state of the mind, they launched American art onto a fresh new canvas that was as large and unformed as the country that spawned it.

In the same decade, a very different but equally American vision burst upon the New York art scene. Anna Mary Robertson Moses' big-city public debut was modestly titled *What a Farm Wife Painted*. The small paintings of quiet moments in rural upstate New York by a self-taught artist who had just turned eighty gave Americans a strong sense of reassurance in an era marked by the uncertainties of war and propelled their maker to media superstardom.

Grandma Moses in the Twenty-first Century, a retrospective of the artist's work, is now on national tour. The exhibition challenges viewers to set aside stereotypes of this American icon, who died forty years ago at age 101, and take a fresh look at her artistic talent. (Her output was prodigious, with more than sixteen hundred works to her





■ *Apple Butter Making*, 1947. Oil on pressed wood, 19 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. Private Collection. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

credit during a twenty-year career.)

Born on a farm in Greenwich, New York, in 1860 as one of ten children,

Moses spent her teen and young adult years working as a "hired girl" on farms in southern Washington County, a terrain of open valleys and rolling hills just north of where the Hoosick River flows into the Hudson. Her life was one of hard work marked by the losses common in her time. Married at twenty-seven, she became a tenant farmer in Virginia with her husband, Thomas, and bore ten children, five of whom died in infancy. The couple returned to New York, to Eagle Bridge, in 1905 after saving up enough money to buy a small dairy farm. The setting became the subject of many paintings she would create in old age.

After her husband's death in 1927, Moses found herself with time on her hands and began to paint. She later wrote, "If I didn't start painting, I would have raised chickens. I could still do it now. I would never sit back in a rocking chair, waiting for someone to help me."

Moses first exhibited her work at country fairs alongside her award-winning preserves, and she routinely gave paintings to family and friends. A few of her pieces were on display in a local drugstore in 1938 when amateur art collector Louis Caldor happened by and bought them up, convinced of their popular appeal. He later brought them to the Galerie St. Etienne in New York, where dealer Otto Kallir would give Moses her first one-woman show in 1940.

Impressions of family gatherings, southern workers, backyards, and country roads defined Moses' artistic vision. The seasonal tasks of sugaring off, haying, spring cleaning, and fruit picking found their way into her art, as did the mundane work of washing clothes, making soap, and baking bread. Her whites were those of a New England winter; her reds and umbers the rich, saturated colors of preserved fruit. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, art scholar and organizer of the Moses retrospective Jane Kallir recalled seeing a Grandma Moses painting for the first time in 1954 in her father's gallery:

"I remember an amazing combination of emotional intensity, a visceral capturing of the landscape of different weather and seasons. You can practically smell the hay in a Grandma Moses painting. You can imagine yourself walking around in them. There's a technical brilliance, a handling of form and color that is really on a par with the great artists of all time. I was bowled over by what this little farm woman had managed to achieve on an artistic level."

Moses usually painted from memory, wanting to capture the image of "old-timey things," as she did with *The Old Checkered House* (1944), which preserves the memory of a historic inn that had burned down in 1907. She also sought to convey the serenity of nature, even in those paintings depicting the busy activities of the people, as in *Apple Butter Making* (1947).

The artist was quickly swept up in a tide of popularity that focused on her embodiment of homespun democratic ideals and American originality. In the cultlike rush of fame she became known more for her octogenarian innovation and pluck than for the nuances of her art. The press focused as much on her baking and preserving talents as her painting. "She gave people an enormous amount of hope at a time when people were absolutely terrified," says Kallir. "These were the early years of the Cold War. People were really afraid that the United States and the world might not have a future. She was someone whose work said the important things endure."

Her images were adapted to sell everything from instant coffee to cigarettes and found their way onto greeting cards and calendars. However, ignored by art historians and the art elite, her work was doomed to second-class status.

Currently on view together for the first time in twenty years, the best-known works by Grandma Moses invite a reappraisal for a new time. For contemporary art audiences--which have seen the embrace of outsider art (a term first applied in the 1970s to the self-taught, the insane, and others working beyond the traditions of Western art)--her paintings can be appreciated purely for their raw energy, immediacy, and direct, undiluted emotion.

Personal Themes

Uer sense of place provided a firm grounding for the parameters of her work. She

recorded specific spots in the local landscape: the flax mill in nearby Greenwich; the Whiteside Church, where her relatives were buried; Hoosick Valley, Hoosick River, and Hoosick Falls. These physical landmarks she combined with details from her personal history--games played in childhood, for example, or the fabric of a favorite dress. All were memorialized in her paintings.

Moses was more indifferent to the exactitudes of chronology and objective dating. Months and years mattered not so much in her remembering as the emotional calendar registered by her own sensations as a child, adolescent, mother, and grandmother.

In bringing her environment to life, however, Moses relied on collected imagery, as in her *Moving Day on the Farm* (1951). Magazine illustrations served as sources of inspiration for her work. By the time she died, she had amassed hundreds of cutout images depicting such stock items as barns, farm animals, and people. Even Hoosick Falls, the subject of a dozen pictures, was documented among the artist's papers, in local photographs, and in a lithograph of an aerial view of the town.

Before beginning a painting, Moses would select clippings that were appropriate to her subject and move them around on a white background until she could settle on a pleasing arrangement. Using pencil and carbon paper, she would then transpose these motifs onto the board and complete them in paint. It was here that the real and the imagined met in a vision that was uniquely her own.

Moses' approach to storytelling is cinematic, with several arenas of action taking place simultaneously on the same canvas. In *The Thunderstorm* (1948), a black horse bolts in terror in the middle distance; in the foreground, farmers scramble to get a load of hay under cover in the barn while a girl runs toward them. Workers at either edge of the canvas pause in their raking to observe the wind-lashed trees and approaching dark clouds. *Sugaring Off* (1943) is representative of the landscapes that cemented Moses' reputation in the mid-1940s. The theme is one she returned to repeatedly. Her use of color to evoke natural phenomena is evident in the background of white paint flocked over blue to convey the texture and multiple tonalities of deep snow. Abstracted figures rendered in crisp and brilliant blocks of red, blue, and yellow stand in sharp contrast to the cool, impressionistic interplay of color in the landscape elements of the composition.

Rarer in Moses' pictures are interior scenes, which when she did paint them usually depicted the work of women on the farm. Primarily a landscape painter, she was apparently drawn to nature more than domesticity. "I tried that interior but did not like it, so I erased it," she once wrote. "That doesn't seem to be in my line. I like to paint something that leads me on and on into the unknown, something that I want to see away and beyond." Interior scenes such as those in *The Quilting Bee* (1950) and *Old Times* (1957) reveal how, without the landscape to provide spatial clues and elements of realism, her innate sense of pattern and the abstract move to the forefront. The geometric grid of shapes seen respectively in the quilt and the flooring play off the bright clothing on the figures who move about the horizontal span of space.

Although most of her paintings are outdoor scenes, they nonetheless convey the warmth of the human spirit as people work and play together in nature. There is a sense of peace, she seems to be telling us, that derives from family and community relationships and the simple fulfillment of one's daily activities. This basic outlook on life is consistently reflected in her art, right up to her final work, *Rainbow* (1961), painted in the more expressive style of her later years when she was 101.

Unplagued by the history of art or by notions of Modernism, the vision of the woman whose work debuted in New York in 1940 alongside that of the giants of Abstract Expressionism remains for audiences today as refreshingly unselfconscious and relevant



■ *Hoosick Valley (From the Window)*, 1946. Oil on pressed wood, 19 1/2 x 22 in. Private collection. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

as it was sixty-one years ago. "Memory is history recorded in our brain," the artist wrote. Moses' gift lay in her ineffable ability to make her memories our memories in works that embrace the direct connection between past and present, and the connection between experience and values that continues to provide an anchor in an ever-changing world.■

Grandma Moses in the Twenty-first Century previewed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., and continues its tour at the San Diego Museum of Art, California, June 30--Aug. 26; the Orlando Museum of Art, Florida, Sept. 15--Nov. 11; the Huntsville Museum of Art, Alabama, Dec. 1--Jan. 27, 2002; the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Feb. 23--April 20; the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, May 11--July 28; and the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, Aug. 17--Dec. 1.

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