Thanksgiving
1935
by Doris Lee
Doris Lee grew up on the banks of the Mississippi River in rural Aledo, Illinois. As a youngster on her grandfather’s farm she developed a great appreciation for the spirit of the American family, a theme that continued to appear in her paintings long after she moved away from the Midwest.

In 1935, The Art Institute of Chicago awarded Lee the Logan Prize Fund for her painting *Thanksgiving*, which then entered the 20th-century collection. Her painting offered a quaint model of domesticity that appealed to those who were tired of the complication of modern life in the 1930s. To a generation exhausted with the trials of the Depression (1929–38), the return to a simpler past became more desirable as the search for a new national identity continued. Her 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. It is clear that to Lee the meaning of the holiday lies in the ritual of its preparation. Women, children, and animals fill the entire composition, even the back room. Every character’s personality emerges through body language; even the dog’s demeanor is apparent as he dozes under the warm stove to escape the commotion. In this cozy space a steaming turkey emerges from the oven, the table is set, dough is rolled out, and babies fidget in the corner.

The painting, although simple in subject, is filled with tiny details. The edges of the cast-iron stove gleam from sunlight entering the opposite window; a delicate brown line creates a shadow defining the collar of the woman rolling out dough; the floral patterns on the women’s dresses are, like the rest of the painting, composed of small dots and splotches of paint. Realistic touches like the small still-life painting near the door, the designs on the wallpaper, and the cat’s subtle marmalade stripes make it clear that the painting was inspired by the artist’s observations of events of everyday life. Each figure is carefully positioned to create a sense of balance and unity in the painting. Lee’s intelligent use of color and arrangement of figures creates a polished effect, evidence of her impressive technical skill and use of perspective, honed by study in Italy and France.

The artist’s national popularity grew with her exposure in the mass media. *Life* magazine commissioned many paintings from her. For the magazine, she first depicted sights she encountered on travels through Mexico and Cuba, and later her impressions of the musical *Oklahoma*. She also designed ads for the 1948 film *The Pirate* which were seen by millions of moviegoers all over the country.

Lee’s expert technique gave her work the power of believability. Her talent for painting “the comic frenzy of people in action,” as *Fortune* magazine put it, earned her the respect of a nation yearning for the charm and security of the traditional hearth and home.
Glossary

**perspective**: Devised by artists in 15th-century Italy, this technique is used to create the illusion of three-dimensional objects and space on two-dimensional (flat) surfaces, so that things appear as they do in reality.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

**LANGUAGE ARTS**

- This painting is rich in detail. Play this game with your students: show them the image for 30 seconds and then ask questions about what they remember observing. Questions can include:

1. How many people are in the painting? Discuss.
2. What are they doing? Discuss.
3. Where are they? Describe the room.
4. Does this painting show a scene from today or from long ago? How can you tell?
5. Are there any animals in the painting? Discuss.

This activity sharpens students’ skills of observation, analysis, and interpretation. Students learn how an artist can tell a story with pictures instead of words.

- Have your students participate in a dramatic presentation using physical expressions to communicate. Have students choose a character from the painting and pose as the person and then act out his/her next movements as if the painting would come alive. Have the rest of the class guess the character.

- Play the “I Spy” game with your students. Begin with the phrase “I spy...” and then describe something seen in the painting but do not name it. For example: “I spy something that is worn. It is made out of glass and plastic. It has two circles in it and is worn on the head (glasses).” Divide the class in half and have one side come up with descriptions for the other side to guess. Give points for successful guesses.

**MATH**

- Create and extend geometric patterns using pictorial images to cover an area such as the red and white tiles on the floor. Have the students redesign the floor using another geometric shape and different colors.

- Have the students find 90-degree angles (table, cupboard, squares, doorways). What other angles can be found?

- Artists often use different techniques to create three-dimensional images on a flat surface. Two of those techniques are overlapping images and things made smaller as they move back in the space. Have students find examples of each.

**SOCIAL STUDIES**

- Thanksgiving is a holiday that can bring families together. Discuss with students their family traditions at Thanksgiving or during other times of the year, noting the differences in beliefs and styles of celebration. Have students write about and illustrate a favorite family tradition. As an alternative to this activity, have students interview grandparents to learn how their celebrations of Thanksgiving (or another holiday) have changed over the years.

- Discuss the different contributions that family members make to the effective running of a home. What job does each individual have in Doris Lee’s painting? Have students discuss roles that family members play on holidays or in daily life.

- Thanksgiving is a time of giving thanks for the people and things in our lives. Have students reflect on the people, particularly family, for whom they are grateful. (As with this painting, extended family plays an important role in many people’s lives.) Have students write letters of thanks to different family members, describing and expressing gratitude for their various contributions.
Related Works of Art

Thanksgiving is just one of many works of art that celebrates family. Here are additional works in the Art Institute’s permanent collection that relate to family and some key themes to discuss with students:

1. The many definitions of family
   - Edgar Degas (French). Uncle and Niece, 1875/78
   - Olowe of Ise (Nigerian, Yoruba). Veranda Post Representing an enthroned King and His Senior Wife, c. 1914
   - Jacob Lawrence (American). The Wedding, 1948

2. Different customs and lifestyles
   - Cradle, Northern Plains, Crow. Lent by the Foundation for the Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture.
   - Jan Steen (Dutch). The Family Concert, 1666
   - Grant Wood (American). American Gothic, 1930

3. Needs such as shelter, clothing, and food
   - Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Amenemhet and His Wife Hemet (Egyptian), c. 1800 B.C.E.
   - Frans Snyders (Flemish). Still Life with Game, 1614
   - Parts of an Armor Garniture, Italy, 1570–80

4. Places where families live
   - Horace Pippin (American). Cabin in the Cotton, 1933/37
   - Thorne Miniature Rooms
   - Sesson Shukei (Japanese). Landscape of the Four Seasons, 16th century

5. Time period of the work of art and its possible relation to family life
   - This theme can be applied to all works of art

Related Resources

for Teachers


Related Resources

for Students


Doris Lee. Thanksgiving, 1935

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The information in this packet was adapted from Self, Family, and Community, a teacher packet available through the Crown Family Educator Resource Center (formerly the Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center).

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