



The Art of Grandma Moses

The Bennington Museum is looking forward to your class visit! You may wish to make connections in your classroom to the things your students experience at the museum. Below are just a few ideas for pre- and post-visit activities that you could do with your class. If you have a great activity idea, and would like to share it with us, please contact Deana Mallory at dmallory@benningtonmuseum.org, or call (802) 447-1571.

Pre-visit activities

Explore the Seasons

From studying the paintings of Grandma Moses, students will discover how she depicted the seasons. Get the class thinking about the seasons by doing some seasonal artwork with them. Have students make drawings of things they do during each season. Encourage them to think about how their drawings might be different (and how they might be similar!) if they had grown up a long time ago.

Reading

Explore the book *The Year With Grandma Moses* by W. Nikola-Lisa with your students. Have them look at the paintings in the book and gain familiarity with Grandma's works. What do they see in the paintings? Where do they see detail? What did Grandma keep simple? What kinds of colors did she use? How do the paintings make you feel?

Add It Up!

Grandma Moses lived to be 101 years old! Have students calculate what year it will be when they are 101 years old. What do they think the world will be like then? Will there be new inventions? How will people travel? What kinds of jobs will people have?

Post-visit activities

Moses-style Paintings

At the museum, the class created their own Moses-style artwork using felt boards. At school, the students can create similar works of art, starting by coloring or painting seasonal backgrounds onto paper or posterboard, then adding buildings, people, and scenery. Remind them of Grandma's use of bold, solid colors, and of the lack of detail typical in her figures.

75 Main Street
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fax 802. 442. 8305
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Learn More

There are several books written about Grandma Moses. Have students use the library and/or the Internet to see what else they can learn.

Other Great Artists

Grandma Moses was friends with Norman Rockwell. Have students do research about Norman Rockwell and his art. Investigate other American artists. Have students write short biographies of individual artists, then make a class book. Loan your book out to other classrooms in your school.

Moods

Grandma Moses' paintings tend to convey a happy mood, reflecting her happy memories of childhood. Discuss with your students what it is about the paintings that created that mood. What could an artist do to create a gloomy mood, using the same scene? Have students try creating mood pictures – recreating the same scene in more than one mood. Try this with writing too. Have students describe something (a door, for example) from the perspective of someone who just won the lottery... without mentioning the good news at all. Now have them write about the same scene from the perspective of someone who just got terrible news... again without mentioning the news.



About Grandma Moses

Birth

Anna Mary Robertson was born on September 7, 1860, in the town of Easton near Greenwich, NY, one of ten children in a farm family.

Early Life

She left home at the age of 12 to earn her living as a hired girl. On November 9, 1887, she married Thomas Salmon Moses and moved to Staunton, Virginia. There she carried on all the regular chores of a farm wife, and helped with her husband's milk route and made hand sliced potato chips for sale. Ten children were born between 1888 and 1903. Five of the children died in infancy. The Moses family returned to the Hoosick Valley of upstate New York in 1905 to settle on another dairy farm in Eagle Bridge. This would be their home for the rest of their lives.

Painting

Anna Mary Moses began painting in the early 1900s, but it was not until 1938, when she was 78, that she began making painting her career. A widow with her farm life no longer demanding so much of her time, she began painting because her arthritis made it difficult to continue making the yarn pictures she liked. Her first picture was done with house paint on a piece of canvas left over from making a threshing machine cover.

Grandma Moses once stated that her subjects came from childhood memories and from stories she had been told or had read. These were worked by her imagination into lively scenes that were less accurate representations of the past than they were evocations of the spirit of the past as she wished to portray it. She would not represent the sorrowful or arduous aspects of farm life, although she had experienced many of these personally. She also preferred to leave such modern elements as cars, trucks, telephone poles, and tractors out of her paintings, although she was certainly familiar with them. In terms of mid 20th century society Grandma's childhood would certainly seem tranquil, yet in reference to what had preceded it, it was quite progressive. By the 1870s, industrialization and urbanization had already profoundly changed the face of the country, and the Currier and Ives prints which Grandma enjoyed so much, and also used for subject matter, were in part tributes to a vanishing way of life. Even the farming community was affected by developments in science and technology, and Grandma's father, husband and sons all followed new developments with great interest. Grandma's image of the past was therefore highly personal and selective.

The first paintings were exhibited at a local fair and were ignored. Hoping to earn a little money, Moses put them up for sale at the W.D. Thomas Pharmacy in Hoosick Falls, where the two small ones brought \$3 each and the two large ones \$5 each. It was there that her paintings were discovered by a vacationing art collector.

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In the fall of 1940, Moses had her first one-person show entitled "What a Farmwife Painted" in New York City at the Galerie St. Etienne. The report of this show in the New York Herald Tribune referred to the new artist as "Grandma Moses." The new name became instantly popular and may have contributed almost as much to Moses' success as her primitive artistry did.

Grandma Moses painted more than 1,500 pictures in the last twenty-three years of her life. She often had several paintings in progress in different stages of completion, and to avoid waste, used the same colors of paint in those paintings. She painted in her bedroom or on the porch of her farmhouse, never in a studio. Always economical, she used old coffee cans to keep paint in and soaked her often worn-down brushes in cold cream jars. She rarely painted on canvas but used masonite board on which she would put three coats of flat paint in order to save the more expensive artist's paint. Grandma Moses did not often paint from nature, because she thought sitting outdoors with an easel was "very impracticable." She preferred to work indoors with "it all up here in my head." Although she never received formal art training, she created paintings with a perfection of their own, despite their technical shortcomings.

The popularity of Grandma Moses paintings has resulted in high prices being paid for some of them, but the most Grandma Moses received for one picture was \$1,000. This was for a painting of President Eisenhower's Gettysburg home, which she did from photographs. Grandma Moses' career as a painter was unique. She never had a painting lesson but kept learning and improving on her own, and she had many exhibitions both in the United States and abroad. At the age of ninety, she had exhibitions in the United States, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and France. Her appeal was universal, and 100,000 people visited her exhibit in Moscow in 1964. Many people believe her appeal is in part nostalgia for a simple, peaceful, happy childhood that some have been fortunate to have and many wish they'd had.

The Last Years

Grandma Moses continued painting until a few months before she died at the age of 101, on December 13, 1961 in the Hoosick Falls Health Center. Her death was noted in the news media throughout America and Europe. She is buried in Hoosick Falls.

The Schoolhouse

The Grandma Moses "Schoolhouse Museum" was the realization of a dream of her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Forrest (Mary) Moses, who, with her husband, had been in possession of the artist's personal effects since her death. The schoolhouse, originally located in Eagle Bridge, New York, dates back to the 1830s. It was attended by Grandma Moses in 1874 and later by four of her children, nine grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.

After successfully operating the Schoolhouse Museum for seven years, Mr. and Mrs. Forrest Moses arranged for its acquisition by the Bennington Museum. The schoolhouse was removed to Bennington, where Grandma Moses had lived for eight years from 1927 to 1935. In 2005, the Grandma Moses Schoolhouse was renovated to become the Bennington Museum's primary hands-on gallery for families and children.

I look back on my life like a good day's work, it was done and I feel satisfied with it. I was happy and contented, I knew nothing better and made the best out of what life offered. And life is what we make it, always has been and always will be. - Grandma Moses



Grandma Moses' Biography

- 1860 Born (Anna Mary Robertson) September 7th in Greenwich, New York
- 1872-87 Works as hired girl on neighborhood farms in upstate New York
- 1887 Marries Thomas Salmon Moses, a farmer, on November 9th
- 1887 Moves to Staunton, Virginia
- 1887-1905 Ten children are born; five die in infancy
- 1905 Returns to New York State and purchases farm in Eagle Bridge
- ca. 1920 Paints occasional pictures for friends and relatives
- 1927 Thomas Salmon Moses dies on January 15th
- 1930 Moves to Bennington, Vermont. After the death of her daughter, Anna Moses, in 1932, she cares for two grandchildren
- 1930 Embroiders worsted wool pictures
- 1935 Returns to Eagle Bridge, NY
- 1935 Begins to paint in earnest and exhibits paintings along with preserves at county fairs
- 1938 Discovered by a vacationing art collector who sees her work displayed in a drugstore in Hoosick Falls, NY
- 1939 Three of her paintings are included in an exhibit of "Contemporary Unknown Painters" in the Members' Room of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City
- 1940 First solo exhibition entitled "What a Farm Wife Painted," at the Galerie St. Etienne, New York City

- 1940 Attends exhibition of her work at Thanksgiving Festival held in Gimbel's Department Store, New York City
- 1941 Wins New York State prize for *The Old Oaken Bucket*
- 1946 Christmas cards reproducing her paintings are published
- 1946 Publication of *Grandma Moses: American Primitive* by Otto Kallir, with an introduction by Louis Bromfield and autobiographical notes by Grandma Moses
- 1949 Youngest son, Hugh, dies in February
- 1949 President Harry S. Truman presents Grandma Moses with the Women's National Press Club Award for Outstanding Accomplishment in Art
- 1949 Receives an Honorary Doctorate from Russell Sage College, Troy, New York
- 1950 Documentary color film made about the artist's work
- 1951 Her autobiography, *My Life's History*, is published
- 1953 She is guest speaker at the New York Herald Tribune Forum in New York City
- 1955 Edward R. Murrow interviews Grandma Moses for a telecast in his "See It Now" series
- 1958 Her daughter, Winona Fisher, dies
- 1960 Paints illustrations of the poem *A Visit by St. Nick*, by Clement C. Moore
- 1960-61 Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller proclaims the artist's birthday "Grandma Moses Day" in the state of New York
- 1961 Grandma Moses dies on December 13th, at the age of 101 years, 3 months, and 6 days