



[SLIDE 4]

Doris Lee, American (1905–1983)

Thanksgiving, c. 1935

Oil on canvas

Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Prize Fund, 1935.313

Doris Lee grew up on the banks of the Mississippi River in the rural town of 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 appeared in her paintings long after she moved away from the Midwest.

In 1935 Lee won the Logan Prize, offered by The Art Institute of Chicago, for her painting *Thanksgiving*. In it she offered a quaint model of domesticity that appealed to those who were tired of the complication of modern life in the thirties. To an age exhausted with the trials of the Depression (1929–1938), a return to a simpler, gentler 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, including the back room. Every person's character emerges through the way in which she completes her task. 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 as 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 cast-iron stove gleams around the edges from sunlight entering the opposite window. A delicate brown line creates a hint of shadow that defines the collar of the woman holding the rolling pin. 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. The polished effect created by Lee's intelligent use of color and arrangement of figures is evidence of her impressive technical skill and use of **perspective**, honed by study in Italy and France.

The artist's national popularity grew through her exposure in the mass media. *Life* magazine commissioned many paintings from her. She first depicted sights she encountered on travels through Mexico and Cuba, and later she depicted her impressions of the musical *Oklahoma*. She also designed ads for the 1948 film *The Pirate* that were seen by millions of movie-goers 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.

CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS

[1] This painting is rich in detail. Play "30-Second Look" with your students. Show them the image for 30 seconds and then ask questions about what they remember observing. This activity sharpens students' skills of observation, analysis, and interpretation. Students learn how an artist can tell a story with pictures instead of words.

Some questions include:

How many people are in the painting? Describe them.

What are they doing?

Where are they? Describe the room.

Does this painting show a scene from today or from long ago? How can you tell?

Are there any animals in the painting?

[2] 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.

[3] 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 work? Have students discuss the roles that family members play on holidays or in daily life.

[4] 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.