



BERKS COUNTY FARMSCAPE

John Rasmussen (1828–1895)

Berks County, Pennsylvania; c. 1879–1886

Oil on zinc-plated tin; 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

Gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2005.8.15

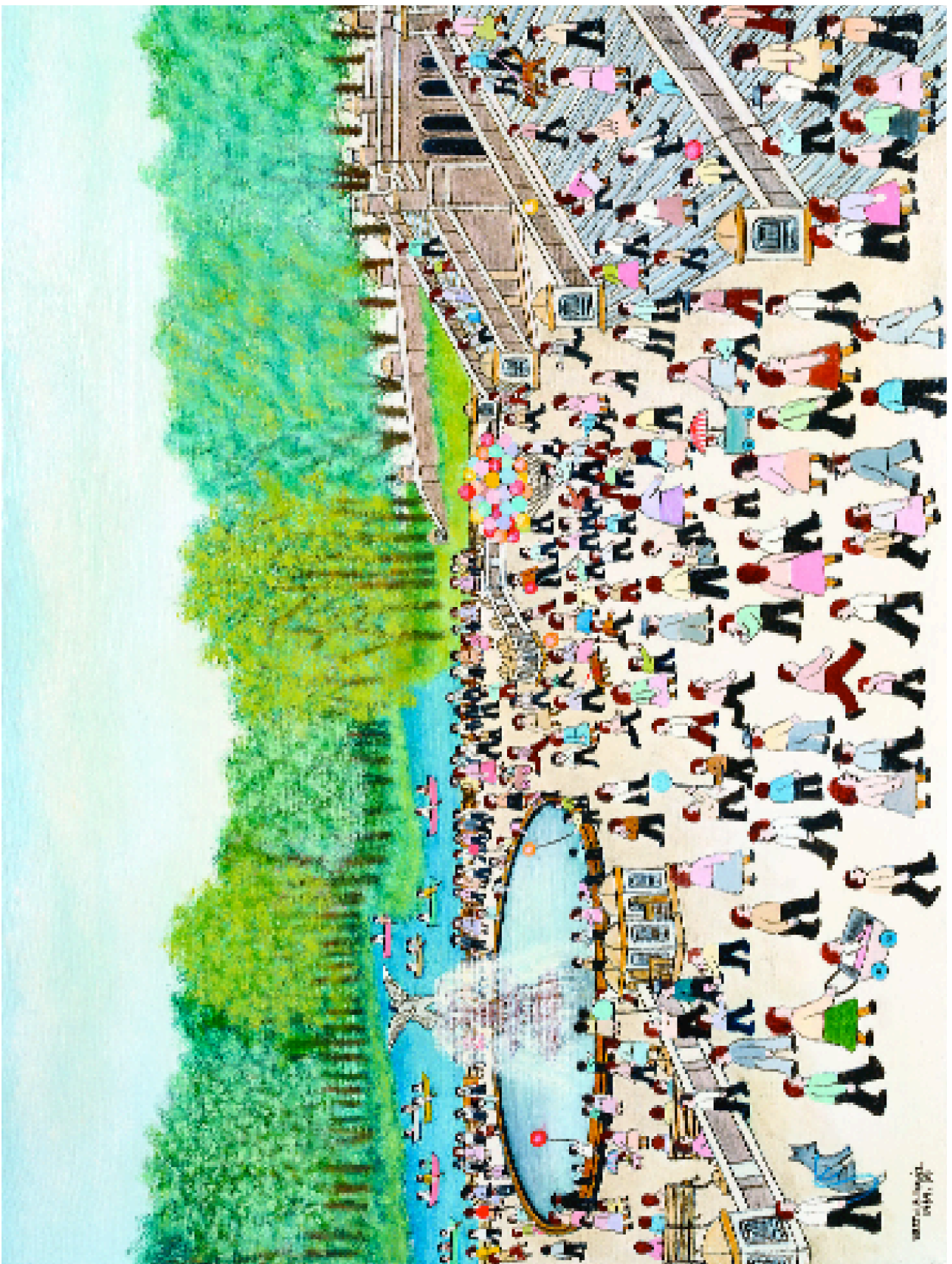
BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

This pristine view of a prosperous Pennsylvania farmstead presents an idyllic scene of verdant fields receding into the distance in a patchwork of color. A locomotive chugs across the foreground, promising continued progress. The sense of stability communicated through this crisp rendering is far removed from the difficult circumstances of the artist who painted it.

John Rasmussen arrived in New York from Germany in 1865, and was listed as a painter and “fresco painter” in the Reading, Pennsylvania, business directories from 1867 through 1879. By June 1879, widowed and suffering from chronic drinking problems, he was committed to the Berks County almshouse. Here he met fellow inmate and painter Charles Hofmann, whose portraits of the almshouse and its environs inspired Rasmussen to create landscapes that were similar in composition. On the thin sheets of metal available through the institution’s wagon and machine shops, Rasmussen painted a wide range of subject matter, such as views of the almshouse as well as this farmscape.

RELATED LESSONS

- “Painting the Town: Picturing My Community” (2–3)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)



BETHESDA FOUNTAIN

Vestie Davis (1903–1978)

New York; 1964

Oil on canvas; 18 × 24"

Gift of Gloria Bley Miller, 2002.28.2

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

Vestie Davis captured the New York community both at work and at play. His compositions of Wall Street, Times Square, and Coney Island charmingly illustrate life in the city. Working with oil on canvas and quickly establishing a flat, colorful style, the artist documented the busy, congested landscape of twentieth-century urban America.

This painting of Central Park's popular Bethesda Fountain, though made more than forty years ago, looks like it could have been painted today because Davis gives in to generic fashion statements and adopts a sameness with his figures, creating a sense of timelessness. The lack of a multicultural crowd, on the other hand, would be a glaring omission to most twenty-first-century viewers.

RELATED LESSONS

- "Painting the Town: Picturing My Community" (2–3)
- "Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry" (2–3)

PAINTING THE TOWN: PICTURING MY COMMUNITY

2-3

GRADE LEVEL: 2-3

**NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS: THE ARTS, ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ARTS, AND SOCIAL STUDIES**

ESTIMATED TIME: ONE 60-MINUTE PERIOD

OBJECTIVES

- Students will observe two works of folk art depicting rural and urban communities and will compare and contrast their observations.
- Students will consider the concept of community in the creation of paintings of their own community.

MATERIALS

- Images of *Berks County Farmscape* and *Bethesda Fountain*
- Construction paper or oak tag, watercolor or tempera paints, paintbrushes in assorted sizes

LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

Introduction

- Introduce or review the concept of community. As a group, determine some of the characteristics of the community in which the students live. Emphasize the idea that community consists of both people and places.
- Either chart the students' ideas about their community or be prepared to recall and reinforce these ideas later, when the students begin work on their paintings.
- If community is a new concept to your students, *On the Town: A Community Adventure* by Judith Caseley provides a simple introduction.

Discussion

View reproductions of *Berks County Farmscape* and *Bethesda Fountain* and discuss the students' observations.

- What do you see in each of these pictures?
- What can you tell about the places depicted?
- Compare and contrast the two paintings and the communities featured in the paintings.
- What would these places sound like?
- Which place would you rather visit? Why?
- What would it be like to live in these communities?

Activity

- Relate the conversation around the paintings to the students' earlier discussion of their community.
- Each student should identify a particular place that will be illustrated in his or her own painting and think about the people that will inhabit this place.

- Who are the people and what are they doing?
- Have the students create paintings of their own community with paints.

PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- As an extension of this lesson, students may work in groups to create “murals” or larger paintings, combining elements of their individual paintings with new ideas into fuller pictures of their community.
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- The “Going to School” lesson designed for pre-K–grade 1, which explores the concept of a school community, may be adapted for use with older students and taught in conjunction with this lesson.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- Students expressed understanding of the idea that a community is a group of people bonded together, often by a place.
- Students used their observation skills to recognize similarities and differences between the two paintings and between the places depicted in the works.
- Students identified particular places that exist within their own community and created paintings based on the idea of these places.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Recommended Books for Students

Caseley, Judith. *On the Town: A Community Adventure*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2002. The story of a young boy and his mom out exploring their neighborhood, notebook in hand, for a class project on community.

Collier, Bryan. *Uptown*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000.

A personal tour of Harlem, given by a boy from this New York neighborhood. Collage illustrations capture its many shades.

Sis, Peter. *Madlenka*. New York: Frances Foster Books, 2000.

The story of a New York girl with a loose tooth traveling through her diverse, multicultural community to share her good news.

Recommended Article for Teachers

Bley Miller, Gloria. “Vestie Davis, Brooklyn Painter: In His Own Words; Interviews from 1961–1965.” *Folk Art* 28, no. 2 (summer 2003): 40–51.

Recommended Book for Teachers

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*.

New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Catalog of this once private collection of American folk art, comprising hundreds of pieces of furniture, signs, ceramics, textiles, weathervanes, walking sticks, and other objects. *Berks County Farmscape* is illustrated and discussed on pages 95 and 417.

Recommended Websites

The Official Website for Central Park:

Bethesda Terrace and Angel of the Waters Fountain info pages

www.centralparknyc.org/virtualpark/southend/bethesdaterrace

www.centralparknyc.org/virtualpark/southend/bethesdaangel

Features photographs of Bethesda Terrace and the Angel of the Waters Fountain depicted in Vestie Davis's painting.