

View of Almshouse, ca.1900

Artist Unknown

oil on canvas

H.24 x W.20.125 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum Anonymous Gift



There is no biography information on this page.

Who made this painting?

That is an excellent question. We don't know! What we do know is the location that it depicts, which is at the junction of Almshouse Road and Route 611 North in Warrington, Pennsylvania. This painting was a gift to the Michener Art Museum from someone who wanted to remain unknown. Perhaps the person wanted to make sure that as many museum visitors as possible would see the painting. A large audience would not be possible if the painting was kept in someone's home. When someone donates a painting or work of art to a museum, there is a process that takes place. A committee of scholars studies the painting to decide if it "fits" into the mission of the museum and is a good example of art of an artist's work. In this case, the painting was accepted into the museum collection because of its historical value. The subject of the painting shows a "real" or authentic location in Bucks County during the 1800s. It also gives us information about what daily life was like for the people who lived in central Bucks County. We can learn about transportation, agriculture and farming, social status, animals, and recreation.

What does "Artist Unknown" mean?

It can mean that no records exist of the name of the artist. Or, it can mean that the person who painted the picture was a "folk artist." A folk artist is someone who has had no formal training in art and often works with traditional subject matter or in techniques learned through trade, hobby, personal interest, or family traditions. In the past in the United States some artists were known as "itinerant," which meant that they traveled around painting pictures that were partially completed and then filled with a specific face or theme when the artist was hired by a patron. Many early portraits were completed with this technique.

What is an almshouse?

An almshouse was also known as the "poorhouse"—a place built and endowed by private charity for the residence of poor and usually aged people. In Bucks County an almshouse was built on May 4, 1809 by public servants at a cost of \$38,309.13 (this included the price of the land, building the house, furnishing it, and stocking the working farm associated with it). Sometimes people lived at the almshouse for a short period of time, others remained there throughout their adult lives. One resident, Peter Sine, died there in 1820 at the age of 110. The almshouse required "inmates" to do pauper labor such as farming, tending livestock, and performing the upkeep of the buildings, including a hospital located nearby. Well-known author James Michener mentions spending time living during his childhood at the almshouse where his aunt was the matron. In his book



Fires of Spring Michener vividly describes the bleak life of the inmates. Although the book is fictional, Michener has said that much of the detail is autobiographical.

How did the artist compose the painting?

Although the artist may not have had any formal art training, the painting is composed in such a way that we can get a “bird’s-eye view.” This means we see the scene as if we were flying above it, like a bird. How has the artist layered the activities in the painting? Are the buildings the same size as the carriage? How has the artist used “perspective”? What shapes, colors, and textures do you see? Would this painting look the same as a photograph we could take of the same scene? What would the scene look like if the artist had used a “worm’s eye view” instead?

What story was the artist trying to tell?

What do you think the artist was trying to accomplish in this painting? It tells the story of an event, time, or place, and they give us specific details. Sometimes we call paintings this type of painting a historical or narrative painting. Looking at the painting, can you tell when it was painted? What kinds of activities were the people doing? What kinds of animals did people keep as pets or as work animals? What crops were being grown? How did people travel? What games did children play? What clothes did people wear?

Learn More

Your art can tell a story. Try the activity “Telling Tales”, below.

Where did this painting come from?

The history of a painting is called its provenance. This means tracing its ownership through records, deeds, and archives. . For instance, we know that it appeared as part of the Bucks County Pennsylvania Council on the Arts survey in 1978. It was one of the first paintings given to the Museum, in 1988. We don’t know much for certain about the painting or why it was originally painted.

The painting is dated c. 1900. What clues are there that point to that time?

We can look at clues in the painting to give us an idea. One big clue is the bicyclist’s clothing. She is wearing a long skirt, and a top with puffy sleeves that was very popular in the early 1890’s. Now look at her bike; it is called a Victorian and was made in the 1890’s. There are other ways of dating paintings that use science to date the materials. These methods are also used to determine the authenticity of a painting-to tell a fake from the real thing!

Related Images

Charles Hofman was one of the Pennsylvania Almshouse Painters. His style was very elaborate. His painting, *Berks County Almshouse*, can be seen on the World Images Kiosk of California State University, at worldart.sjsu.edu. American painter Louis Mader created a painting of the same subject in 1875. It is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C, www.nga.gov.



This style of the painting is called naïve, primitive, or folk art. There are many painters who painted this way. They usually taught themselves to paint. Grandma Moses became very famous for her country scenes. Many of them are on exhibition at the Bennington Museum in Vermont, at www.benningtonmuseum.org. Horace Pippin, an African American, devised his own way of painting because of damage to his right hand. His works are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., at www.nga.gov. Edward Hicks was a Bucks County artist who painted bible and history scenes. His works are at the Michener Art Museum, www.michenerartmuseum.org, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art at www.philamuseum.org.

The community people who helped run a county or town almshouse were originally called regents. Frans Hal, a Dutch painter, portrayed the women in charge of the local almshouse in *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse*, dated 1664. In those days, people did not smile in paintings. You can see several of his works on the Frans Hals website, www.frans-hals.org.

Related Links

When was the first Almshouse built?

The first recorded Almshouse was founded by King Athelstan in York, England, in the 10th century AD. For over 1000 years, almshouses have enabled people in need to retain their independence and to live in their local community. Some of the early almshouses were like prisons, the conditions were bad, and the people had to work very hard. Dorothea Dix (1802-87), an American philanthropist, became interested in conditions in almshouses and prisons in 1841 after visiting such institutions in Massachusetts. Following that visit, she worked to change laws so that conditions in almshouses were improved. Through her activities, institutions for the poor were improved and had to follow the laws.

An old history of Bucks County gives us some information of the original Alms House .It was originally built in Warwick Township, which is the township next to Doylestown, in 1810. In the painting, the almshouse is the building on the right side of the road with the dormer windows and three doors. It was torn down in 1966 and replaced by a long-term nursing care facility.

Why is the woman on the bicycle so large? Is she very important?

It is really unusual to show a woman on a bicycle at this time. A woman bicyclist was not always accepted. In fact, it was a symbol of very modern woman who stood for women's right. What do you think? Is there a secret message in this painting supporting women's rights? If a woman rode a bike, though, it was very important to dress carefully not catch the long skirt in the chain. A style developed that featured a skirt that came with straps that were used to hold a skirt in place around the woman's ankle. This style and many others can be seen on the Women's History website at www.womenshistory.about.com.



Why are there turkeys in the painting? Wouldn't they be in the forest, and not on the land where the horses are plowing?

The painting shows wild turkeys that should be hiding in the forest. By the 1900s turkeys were scarce in most parts of the county, including the area of the painting. One reason for this was the destruction of their habitat—the forests where they lived.

Gradually, the numbers have increased throughout the US. This is partly due to the development of the white domestic turkey that we eat at Thanksgiving. It is not the same as the wild turkey, but is a good substitute, and we can buy it at the grocery store. Learn more about wild turkeys on the website of the National Wild Turkey Federation, at www.nwtf.org.

