



GRANDMA MOSES

AMERICAN MODERN

By Jessica Skwire Routhier

"Catching the Turkey," 1955. Oil on pressed wood, 12 by 16 inches;

MOSES.

SHELBURNE, VT. — Context may not be everything when it comes to approaching and understanding the art of Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses, but it matters a lot. The latest contribution to the somewhat crowded field of Moses retrospectives is a studied attempt to articulate more completely the context in which her work was made and perceived in the 1940s and 1950s. Both the exhibition and the catalog take the bold step of presenting Moses’s work alongside that of her Modernist contemporaries, arguing persuasively that she was less the “naïve” autodidact she is often thought to be and more fully a participant in the construction of American Modernism.

“Grandma Moses: American Modern” is on view at Shelburne Museum through October 30 and will travel to the Bennington Museum in 2017.

By now the story of Moses’s “discovery” and rise to fame is familiar. She lived most of her life on a farm in rural Green Point, N.Y., near the Vermont border, and began painting in earnest in her seventies, after the death of her husband. In 1939, her paintings, on view in the “women’s exchange” area of a local



“The Old Checkered House, 1853,” 1944. Oil on pressed wood, 20¾ by 28 inches; Bennington Museum.



drugstore, caught the attention of a New York-based folk art collector. In an astonishingly brief period of time she was exhibiting at the Museum of Modern Art, licensing images with Hallmark, appearing frequently on nationally televised broadcasts and becoming a household name — enough so that Spencer Tracy, in the 1945 film *Adam's Rib*, could tease Katharine Hepburn that her new hat made her look “kinda like Grandma Moses.”

“To go from unknown to being name-dropped by Hollywood within the space of just a few short years,” says exhibition co-curator and Bennington Museum curator Jamie Franklin, “is pretty indicative of how much of a phenomenon she was and how quickly that happened.”

And yet it was not immediate. Franklin’s description of Moses as initially “unknown” is literal; the 1939 MoMA exhibition, in which Moses exhibited three paintings, was titled “Contemporary Unknown American Painters.” The title of her follow-up solo show at Galerie St Etienne, “What a Farm Wife Painted,” also elided her name in a way that today seems confounding, given how famous that name would soon become. A reviewer from the *New York Herald Tribune*, writing about the latter exhibition, was the first to call her “Grandma” Moses, and soon it had not only stuck, but was on its way to

“Covered Bridge with Carriage or Black Buggy,” 1946. Oil on Masonite, 29 by 22 3/8 inches; Shelburne Museum. —Bruce Schwarz photo

becoming one of the most recognized names in America.

Thomas Denenberg, director of Shelburne Museum and exhibition co-curator, sees that rapid rise and commodification of the “Grandma” name as part of a process by which her contributions to American art become devalued over time. “‘Grandma’ was initially a nickname that was belittling to her,” he notes, acknowledging that she herself was complicit in perpetuating its use, as it became clear that it was how the public chose to see her. Franklin agrees, noting that “her popularity made her authenticity questionable to the mainstream art world” and adding that “she and her art have struggled to retain a respectability among the very world...



“The Quilting Bee,” 1950. Oil on pressed wood, 20 by 24 inches. Private Collection, courtesy of Galerie St Etienne, New York.

[\(Continue Reading on Page 30\)](#)

[**Read Full Article**](#)

Browse More



**Antiques Council Debuts
New Show On Nantucket**



**Beechwood's 'French Connection'
Brings Out Hordes Of Buyers**



**Deco Japan Shaping Art, Culture
Makes Final Stop At Hillwood**