Heberden Historical Series

Working with folk arts may produce benefits to rheumatic patients: the case of Grandma Moses

V. F. Azevedo

Anna Mary Moses, the most popular painter in the United States, took up painting when she was in her 70s when painful arthritis forced her to give up her short journey dedicated to embroidery and needlework craft. Her art is considered primitive art, or Naïve art, and portrays mostly rural and bucolic American landscapes. Before the Renaissance period there was no distinction between folk and classical art and this terminology derives from the absence of a better formal and technical classification of such arts. During its first century, the United States did not have institutions to provide formation in arts. It was necessary to cross the Atlantic and go to Europe in order to receive a proper artistic education. That is why so many American artists were associated with folk art in the 19th century [1]. Unlike other folk artists of her time like John Kane, Horace Pippin and Morris Hirshfield, Grandma Moses became famous through radio, television and press, probably due to her elderly figure, her tenderness, high morals and strong personality. Her paintings on wood display a very simple texture; however, the content is complex. She first painted a white background and then the sky, the mountains, the land and finally the people. The colours she used always caught the viewer’s attention for their extraordinary brilliance.

She spent her childhood dealing with the simple things associated with the farm lifestyle. By the time of her birth, many of the modern inventions such as television, refrigerators and airplanes did not even exist. Living her life on remote farms, Moses was physically and intellectually away from the cultural vanguard of her time [1]. Moses was in her 70s when her illness began, the painful arthritis that harmed her hands mostly and made her needlework impossible. At her sister Celestia’s urging, she started dabbling in painting. She had always been interested in painting and her first documented work was dated 1918 [1].

Says Grandma: ‘I used to wrap my hands up in scarves and lay them on a chair beside the bed at night. I couldn’t sleep on account of the aching, just like a toothache. Then, one night I got desperate, so I got up and hunted the doctor book, the ‘Family Adviser, Philosophy of Diseases’. The best recipe was: 3 cups of sweet milk every day, and from 3 to 5 drops of turpentine in it. I took it for about three months, and all of a sudden there were no pains any more, but the hardness of the joints stayed’ [2].

Her paintings were discovered by Louis J. Caldor, a Manhattan collector and engineer, when they were exposed in a store window in the village of Hoosick Falls near her house. Three of her paintings were included in a 1939 exhibit of folk contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art [3]. There was no major repercussion of this exhibit, but in 1940, Caldor arranged an exhibit of 35 works of Moses at the Galerie St. Etienne in New York City owned by the art dealer Otto Kallir, and called the exhibit ‘What a Farmwife Painting’. The opening was on 9 October 1940 [3].

At the age of 100 she illustrated an edition of the book ‘Night Before Christmas’ by Clement Moore, which was published only after her death at the incredible 101 yrs of age on 13 December 1961. During her last year of life, Moses painted 25 pictures proving to be active even at such an old age, Grandma Moses produced over 1600 works. The work of Grandma Moses presented very few changes during her life and her last paintings do not show any essential differences as compared with the first ones [4].

Some specially developed programmes for aged rheumatic patients were inspired by Grandma Moses’ example. It is widely believed that such programmes, besides helping improve the self-esteem of the elderly people, also foster the communication skills providing a beneficial therapeutic effect. However, it is important that the team conducting such therapies take special care because the focus should not be around a useful or specific item based on an artistic production market rules; instead the goal should be oriented to the production process itself. To work with folk art in an environment that does not demand a complete mastering of artistic techniques may produce a beneficial effect in rheumatic and depressed elderly people [4, 5].

Disclosure statement: The author has declared no conflicts of interest.

References
2 Presents for grandma, Time, 28 December 1953.