



**Pepper-Pot: A Scene in the Philadelphia Market**  
1811, by John Lewis Krimmel

**Pepper-Pot: A Scene in the Philadelphia Market**

1811

Oil on canvas

19 ½ x 15 ½ inches  
(49.5 x 39.4 cm)

**John Lewis Krimmel**

(American, born  
Germany, 1786–1821)

125th Anniversary Acquisition.  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward B.  
Leisenring, Jr., 2001-196-1



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## About the Artwork

At the center of this small market scene, a young woman dishes up soup from the large pot beside her. Her focus is on her latest customer, a tall man wearing the clothes of someone from the countryside. He points downward, perhaps placing his order by gesturing to the selection of bowls and spoons beside her. The vendor has sold portions to three customers already: an older woman, a kneeling woman feeding a young boy, and a pale older man dressed in the uniform of the Pennsylvania State Regiment from the American Revolution. Two girls complete the circle of figures, one holding a basket of flowers bought from another market stall. The other stands close to her friend, one hand on her shoulder, as they both gaze at the former soldier. An energetic dog looks up at the girls, perhaps hoping for food or a game.

Brick structures like this one once stood along the center of High Street in Philadelphia, where numerous street vendors could sell their wares. People nicknamed it "Market Street," and its name was officially changed in 1858. Wide ledges and rows of hooks between each column could be adapted to sell and display various goods. The city demolished the stalls in 1859 to make way for train lines, and built new indoor marketplaces, including Reading Terminal Market.

Outdoor markets were one of the rare places in Philadelphia during the early 1800s where people of all ages, professions, social classes, and races would interact. For an artist, they provided a lens to study these exchanges. There are some elements of harmony between them, like in the shared

gesture of raising a spoon or tilting their heads. But there are also signs of discomfort: the two girls, dressed in the fancy clothes of wealthy city families, look at the old soldier, perhaps with pity or condescension. Their bright footwear stands out in contrast with the bare feet of the street vendor.



This view shows what the High Street Market looked like from outside. At its height, these sheds extended from the Delaware River to 8th Street and beyond.

*Market St. below 6th, 1859*, collected by Joseph Y. Jeanes (Library of Congress, Washington, DC: LC-DIG-ppmsca-41949)



## Let's Look

- What is going on in this picture?
- What can you tell about the setting?
- If you could step inside this place, what sounds or smells would you experience?
- How would you describe the people in this scene? What clues can you find to each of their identities? What makes them similar or different?
- How are the people interacting? What kinds of conversations can you imagine them having with each other?

## Let's Look Again

- Do the figures seem like real people or exaggerated characters?
- Why might the artist have chosen to paint this scene? What does it reveal about life in Philadelphia in 1811? What questions does it raise?

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## About the Artist

When John Lewis Krimmel painted *Pepper-Pot: A Scene in the Philadelphia Market*, he had only been living in the United States for one year. Born in Germany in 1786, he emigrated to Philadelphia in 1810 to help his family, who were facing financial difficulties. He found himself in a city that was the center for the arts in the still new nation and provided many opportunities for a young man who had studied painting.

While he submitted several paintings to his first exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1811, *Pepper-Pot* was the one that attracted public attention. It was unusual at the time for a professional American artist to choose scenes of everyday life for paintings. Krimmel, influenced by Dutch and British traditions, was the first significant painter of these **genre scenes** in the United States. Though the painting shows struggles with perspective and proportion, Charles Willson Peale, a leader of the arts in Philadelphia, expressed his admiration by calling the work, "pointed, spirited, and contemporary."

Krimmel achieved recognition in his lifetime and was elected president of the Association of American Artists. Tragically, he died in 1821 at the young age of thirty-four in a swimming accident. Despite his short career, he inspired the next generation of artists who made genre painting popular in the United States.

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## Philadelphia's Free Black Community

Krimmel's observation of street life in his adopted city appealed to his contemporary museum audiences. He provided an immigrant's perspective on society in a country just beginning to establish its national identity. One aspect of life in the United States that was very different from Germany was the presence of the large Free Black community in Philadelphia.

The Free Black population of Philadelphia, the nearest free city to the slave states in the South, grew from 240 people in 1780 to nearly 9,000 in 1810 when Krimmel arrived in the city. These numbers demonstrate an increase from 2 percent of the total population to 10 percent. This shift was the result of newly passed emancipation laws in some states and the arrival of freedom seekers from others. The rapid change was shocking to many white Philadelphians who feared the growing power of this developing community. They passed laws and developed systems that limited the economic opportunities of Black Philadelphians.

Many of the jobs that were open to Black people depended on white attitudes about what was appropriate. For entrepreneurial Black women with no professional training, cooking and selling food was an alternative to domestic labor. Black female street vendors were an important part of Philadelphia's economy by 1811 and achieved economic self-sufficiency despite discrimination.

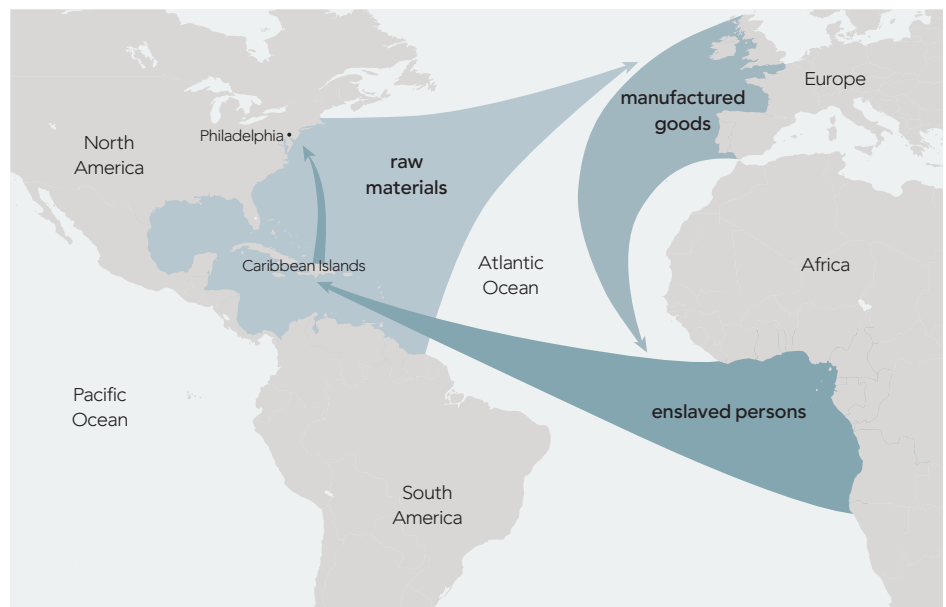
*Pepper-Pot* was one of the first paintings to depict a person of color at work in Philadelphia. Later in his career, Krimmel frequently included Black characters in his paintings, often in roles as musicians or entertainers. He was one of the first artists to distort African American facial features in ways that have now become familiar stereotypes, giving them very dark skin, exaggerated wide lips, and shabby clothing. His intent may have been to create humorous scenes, but the result was that he reinforced racial prejudices. The pepper-pot seller, his first representation of a Black person, is largely free of these stereotypes. Her feet are bare, in contrast to the white people in the scene, but she is wearing clothing without tears or patches. The extreme height of the country visitor forces her to look up at him as she serves the soup, but this emphasizes his awkwardness as much as her lower position.

## Pepper-Pot Soup

The soup for sale in this painting is an important contribution to Philadelphia's cultural history, originally made by enslaved Africans and carried on by the community of Free Black women. While the exact origin is unknown, pepper-pot was most likely based on callaloo, a West African recipe made from greens. Over many generations, as people were forcibly transported to Philadelphia from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade, they incorporated food traditions of each culture into the spicy soup. There was no specific recipe, only guidelines for combining meat, vegetables, and other available ingredients. Everyone could make it their own. The influence of Caribbean mondongo stew may account for the choice of tripe, the stomach lining of a cow, as the traditional pepper-pot protein. It was a cheap and hearty meal that was popular as street food and economical to sell. The remains of one day's batch could be used as the basis for the next.

Pepper-pot came to the United States through Philadelphia but was known nationally. It was included in the first cookbook produced in the United States in 1792 as "A West-India Pepper Pot."

Despite this history, the soup's popularity led to a myth that it had been invented by German chef Christopher Ludwick to warm George Washington's freezing troops at Valley Forge. By including a soldier in a Revolutionary uniform, Krimmel may be referencing this story. Eventually, the stew found a place on the menus of elegant restaurants wanting to serve a Philadelphia classic. A canned version was sold by Campbell's from 1899 to 2010.



Pepper-pot soup followed the path of the transatlantic slave trade from West Africa to the Caribbean to the Atlantic coast of North America.

This painting is highlighted in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's **new Early American Art galleries**. Opened in spring 2021, the new and reinstalled galleries tell the story of how Philadelphia became the young nation's cultural capital, and how Black, Indigenous, and Latinx artists contributed to the development of American art.

### Support

The installation of the new Early American Art galleries has been made possible with lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation, and by The Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, The Richard C. von Hess Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy Demands Wisdom, an anonymous donor, The Davenport Family Foundation, Edward and Gwen Asplundh, Dr. and Mrs. Robert E. Booth, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. James L. Alexandre, The Americana Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. S. Matthews V. Hamilton, Jr., The McLean Contributionship, Lyn M. and George M. Ross, Dr. Salvatore M. Valenti, the Wunsch Family, Donald and Gay Kimelman, Boo and Morris Stroud, Mr. and Mrs. Ronald C. Anderson, Matz Family Charitable Fund, Marsha and Richard Rothman, and other generous donors.

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