Arturo Toscanini said that Marian Anderson had a voice that came along “once in a hundred years.” When one of Anderson’s teachers first heard her sing, the magnitude of her talent moved him to tears. Because she was black, however, her initial prospects as a concert singer in this country were sharply limited, and her early professional triumphs took place mostly in Europe. The magnitude of her musical gifts ultimately won her recognition in the United States as well. Despite that acclaim, in 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution banned her from performing at its Constitution Hall. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt ultimately intervened and facilitated Anderson’s Easter Sunday outdoor concert at the Lincoln Memorial—an event witnessed by 75,000 and broadcast to a radio audience of millions. The affair generated great sympathy for Anderson and became a defining moment in America’s civil rights movement.

Betsy Graves Reyneau (1888–1964)
Oil on canvas, 1955
Gift of the Harmon Foundation
NPG.67.76