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October 15, 1995

FAX 212/606-7039
Ms. Susan Imbriani
American Painting, Drawings
and Sculpture Department
Sotheby's
1334 York Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10021

Dear Ms. Imbriani:

Re: Eastman Johnson, An Earnest Pupil, oil on board, 26 1/8 x
22 1/8 inches. Signed lower right: "E. Johnson 1881"

I examined this painting on October 9, 1995, at Sotheby's. I
had seen the painting at a New York dealer's gallery on March 1,
1983.

I think it is a first-rate Johnson genre painting of 1881.
Beginning that year Johnson began to paint fewer and fewer genre
paintings, instead turning to portraiture in which he also
excelled. As John I. H. Baur stated in his essay on Johnson,
with this particular picture in mind: "By the beginning of the
'80's, Johnson was already turning his back on genre in favor of
his more remunerative portrait commissions, and from about the
middle of the decade to the end of his life the latter absorbed
him completely. It was not, judging from the evidence of his
art, a case of going stale, for the few genre pictures that he
did do at this time show a continued development along the lines
he had laid down for himself at Nantucket." (John I. H. Baur,
An American Genre Painter: Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906.
Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, 1940, p. 23.) As you know, An
Earnest Pupil was included in that exhibition of Johnson's work
in 1940, along with A Glass with the Squire, collection Brown
University.

In his late genre paintings he often chose themes that suggested
such traditional values as the benefits of communal work, the
passing of knowledge from an older to a younger generation, and
the camaraderie of the older generation. In An Earnest Pupil
the young boy is learning to play the flute from an older man,
whose ragged old coat and cap suggest, perhaps, a veteran of the
Civil War, even though his coat and cap are brown, rather than
the usual blue. The theme of youth learning at the knee of
previous generations dropped out of American painting, to be
revived by African-American artists in the late nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. (One thinks of Henry O. Tanner and Jacob
Lawrence.)

An Earnest Pupil is painted in Johnson's typical style of these

years. The two figures are foregrounded against a brown background wall along which objects can only be dimly seen. Johnson was a master of painting such luminous shadowed backgrounds. The colors of brown, tourquois-blue and touches of red are typical of Johnson's palette, as are the blue-white highlights, for example, on the older man's boots and along the edge of the chair arms. The brush strokes, broad on the clothing and deftly executed on the faces, are also typical.

I will be including the painting in my catalogue raisonné of Johnson's work. Will you please request of the new owners that they let me know of the disposition of the painting.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills
art historian