

238 Putnam Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
December 17, 2003

Ronald Bourgeault LLC
Northeast Auctions
93 Pleasant Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801

Dear Mr. Bourgeault:

RE: Eastman Johnson, Embers, oil on board, 16 5/8 x 14 1/2 inches. Signed lower right: "E. Johnson/1879". I examined the painting at my home in Cambridge on December 16, 2003.

In my opinion the work is by the genre and portrait painter Jonathan Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), and I will include it in my forthcoming catalogue raisonné.

The painting is similar in the pose of the figure and the setting to Embers, not dated, oil on canvas, 13 7/8 x 12 5/8 inches, signed LR "E. Johnson", a painting included in the exhibition, Eastman Johnson, that I curated for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972 (reproduced on p. 111 of the catalogue). At that time this undated Embers was owned by a private collector. The model for the figure is Captain Charles Myrick, one of the retired whaling captains who lived on Nantucket, where Johnson spent his summers during the 1870s. Myrick bends forward, leaning his face on a Malacca cane as he stares into the embers of the fire in the hearth.

The undated version was included in the Estate Sale of Johnson's work held at the American Art Galleries on February 26 and 27, 1907. I quote from the auction catalogue:

No. 21 / EMBERS

An old man is seated in a green-painted chair close by his fireplace, resting his chin upon a stick which he holds in both hands, and gazing pensively at the embers which glow on the hearth. He wears a rusty beaver hat and a wrinkled suit of black, and the figure is in strong relief against the plaster wall of the little room. Upon the low fireplace shelf stands a Delft jar and two small candlesticks. Many beautiful poems inspired by this picture were received by the artist.

Signed at the lower right, E. Johnson.

Height, 13 inches; width, 12 inches

The dated version you have at Northeast Auctions is somewhat more elaborate, including more of the setting. It is missing the pair of brass andirons found in the undated version, but includes many more details, such as a portion of a Queen Anne lowboy, a portion of a Chippendale

mirror, the pipe stand, the telescope, the pipe placed on an edge that protrudes from the back wall, the hammer hanging on the wall, and the delineation of the wall boards. The chair in the other version is a very simple chair with one middle horizontal brace. The version you have is a “bird cage” Windsor chair.

Stylistically the picture has the characteristics that mark it as a painting done by Johnson’s hand. The details are very finely done—Myrick’s hands, the objects on the mantel shelf, the cane, the hardware of the lowboy, the lanterns hanging on the wall, the pipe stand, etc. The cast shadows on the floor anchor the chair, and there are blue tints in the highlights, such as on the shoes of Myrick and the slipper feet of the lowboy. His face is in shadow, which is typical of many of Johnson’s works. The paint is applied unevenly, because Johnson used the undertones (or ground) to represent the middle tones—another characteristic of Johnson’s style.

Captain Myrick was a favorite subject for Johnson and he appears in other pictures set in Nantucket, such as The Reprimand, 1880 and Nantucket Sea Captain, 1873. These pictures also include the same rustic fireplace with many similar objects on the mantles. The Nantucket Historical Association owns a bust-length portrait, Charles Myrick, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 ½ inches. He holds the same pose as in the dated Embers, but there is no setting. There is also a drawing of the same pose at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and another drawing in a private collection in New York.

I wrote in the Whitney’s 1972 catalogue on the undated picture: “Johnson’s last genre work exhibited at the National Academy of Design was Embers in 1899. In this painting the bent old man (again Captain Myrick) seated by the dying coals of the fire is himself an ember of a bygone era. The subject is especially appropriate for a concluding work, and one is tempted to fashion an analogy between the figure and Johnson, who himself was seventy-five years old in 1899.”

The painting seems to be in excellent condition. We examined the painting with an ultra-violet light and did not see any obvious conservation work. The color harmonies are particularly nice in the dated painting. Not only does the painting seem to me to be clearly by Johnson, but it is also a particularly excellent work. I would hope that the painting could find its way into a museum.

When sold, please ask the new owner to let me know where the painting will be.

Sincerely,

Patricia Hills
Professor of Art History
Boston University

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