

238 Putnam Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
October 16, 2001

Megan E. Holloway
Junior Specialist
American Paintings and Sculpture
Christie's
20 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, NY 10020

Dear Ms. Holloway:

RE: Eastman Johnson, Woman in an Interior, Knitting, oil on board, 12 13/16 x 15 inches (my measurements of original canvas edge; the stretcher is 13 x 15 1/8 inches. Signed lower right: "E. Johnson / 1865."

I examined the painting at Christie's on October 5, 2001. In my opinion the work is by the genre painter Jonathan Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), and I will include it in my catalogue raisonné.

In my subsequent research I came across an 1865 reference to the painting, and hence I would like to rename it Interior of a Farmhouse in Maine. It apparently was on view at the showrooms of Samuel P. Avery, when it was described in The Round Table (October 14, 1865):

"Mr. Avery has at his rooms a late picture by Mr. Eastman Johnson, which shows the artist steadily advancing, as must be the case with so unwearied a student. The subject is the interior of a farm-house in Maine--which state, by the way, the artists are gradually finding out, and whose scenery we shall probably soon see painted until it is made as familiar as that of the White Mountains--and Mr. Johnson has given us a picture of it, in all its quaint simplicity, as careful and accurate as any that Frère ever painted of a French peasant's cottage. The wall over the large fire-place is covered with newspaper, in default of wall-paper proper, and before the hearth is a home-made rug, which in pattern and color would not lose by being put beside Indian work. We think this circumstance worth noticing. So strikingly good are the color and design of this rug, that we at first took it for a faded bit of Smyrna or Persian carpet, which we supposed had stopped at this humble home on its way to the rag-bag; but it is really a bit of home-made work, put together out of scraps and clippings of woollen cloth; and either from the same house, or from another near by, the artist brought a cushion, a curious affair--a fluffy, brioche-shaped, comfortable old thing, but having the same charm of color. Odd, isn't it? For these simple people, that made the rug and it, have probably never heard the first word about design, or color, or art of any kind, and never heard of any Titian, or Veronese, or Indian but the great divine One

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who is just now painting our woods and fields with such glorious color as makes Venice paltry. An old lady sits at the window sewing, and we look out upon the field where the reapers are drawing their work to a close in the long golden afternoon. It is an idyl of rustic peace, with which the artist has felt such true sympathy that we must reckon him, as we have indeed this long time, poet as well as painter: a true American singer, with not a note of Europe in his song."

Johnson may have consigned some of his paintings to Avery in the mid 1860s. Frère is Edouard Frère, a well-known French genre painter of the 1860s. Smyrna is in West Turkey.

The picture, as we observed, holds up very well when seen at a distance. The space is convincing both in terms of the perspective and the light and dark qualities. The flat area above the fireplace seemed ambiguous, but the 1865 description makes it clear that the artist was representing a wall with newspapers affixed to it. (There also seems to be a framed picture propped on top of the mantle.) Johnson executed parts of the picture with great attention to detail, for example, the three-tiered box on the sewing table and the scissors and sewing basket. The view through the window is quite handsome with farmers working in the bright sunlight. The curtain and the tassles are deftly executed.

Another painting by Johnson, There's No Place Like Home, collection of the Nantucket Historical Association, has the same setting; the rugs, mantle, sewing table, window, shade and view are nearly identical to Interior of a Farmhouse in Maine. The difference is that a man smoking a pipe sits in a wooden chair before the fireplace, and there is no woman sewing. That picture is reproduced in my essay, "Eastman Johnson on Nantucket," in Michael A. Jehle, ed., Picturing Nantucket: An Art History of the Island with Paintings from the Collection of the Nantucket Historical Association (Nantucket, MA: Nantucket Historical Association, 2000), p. 45. I suggested to the NHA at the time I was doing research for that essay that the date for their picture might be circa 1880, since I thought that perhaps the view through the window was of Nantucket. I will revise that date to 1865, and will let the curator, Niles Parker, at the NHA know of your picture.

I would like to know the name of the new owner for my records.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills
art historian
co-author of Eastman Johnson:

Painting America

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Niles Parker
Nantucket Historical Association
2 Whalers Lane
Nantucket, MA 02554

Dear Niles:

I would like to revise the date for your picture by Eastman Johnson called There's No Place Like Home.

There is pretty clear evidence that the date should be c. 1865. See the enclosed copy of a letter I wrote for Christie's. Their Eastman Johnson, with the same setting as yours and dated 1865, will be going up for sale in November.

Hence, it is not a Nantucket scene, as I wrote in my essay, "Eastman Johnson on Nantucket," but, rather, Maine. The discovery of this new evidence will help me to date other works as well.

Enclosed also is a photocopy of the photograph they gave me.

Sincerely,

Patricia Hills
Professor

email: pathills@bu.edu