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March 24, 2008

Dan Burns  
American Paintings, Drawings & Sculpture  
Christie's  
20 Rockefeller Plaza  
New York, NY 10020

Dear Mr. Burns:

Re: Eastman Johnson, *At Close of Day*, late 1870s. Oil on paper board, 17-5/8 x 26-5/8 inches (sight measurements). Initialed L.R. "E. J." There is an oil sketch of figures picking cranberries in a field on the verso.

I viewed this painting at 11 Park Drive South, Rye, New York on December 6, 2007. In my opinion the work is by the American genre painter Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), and I plan to include the work in my catalogue raisonné of the artist's work.

This is typical of the many studies Johnson did of the cranberry pickers on the island of Nantucket, where he summered during the 1870s. The front side shows a woman in the foreground leaning against cranberry barrels. Typical of Johnson's sketch style is his emphasis on the way the light from the setting sun hits the edge of the figure and the barrels. In fact, he uses only a few bold strokes, especially noted in her head scarf, to represent that bright light. In the distance at the left, we can discern figures standing in the field. (In terms of composition, this group balances the woman in the foreground.) The background hills are painted like the background hills in other paintings Johnson made of the cranberry pickers. We noted that Johnson represented the stalks of dried grass in the foreground by eliminating paint with the handle end of his brush,.

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The painting on the verso shows about fifty sketchy figures, either standing or bending over their task of picking the berries in the bogs. Again, Johnson uses loose and quick brush strokes, applying pure paint in different colors to delineate the edges of the figures, their bonnets, and their bags.

We also looked at both sides of the painting using an ultra-violet light. It was noted that parts of the painting, especially on the verso, had had touching up with varnish at some time in the past, but this did not seem to be recent work. The painting looks in good condition, but an expert conservator might give it a light cleaning.

The painting (both sides) was listed and reproduced in Everett U. Crosby, Eastman Johnson at Nantucket: His Paintings and Sketches of Nantucket, People and Scenes (Nantucket, MA: Privately printed, 1944), No. 12A and 12B.

According to my records M. Knoedler and Company of New York, sold it to Dr. G. A. Lowenstein of Scarsdale, New York. At one point the painting was also at Wildenstein's.

Some of Johnson's best paintings are from the 1870s when he stayed on Nantucket, where he kept a studio and often stayed into November. To him Nantucket represented a place where people worked together as a community. Indeed, his optimism and his celebration of the joys of rural labor endeared him to his own generation and to many of us today. See Patricia Hills, Eastman Johnson (New York; Clarkson N. Potter, 1972), 92.

Do not hesitate to get in touch with me, if you have questions.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills, PhD  
Co-Author: Eastman Johnson:  
Painting America (1999)

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