

238 Putnam Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
November 25, 1992

Peter Rudolph



Dear Mr. Rudolph:

Re: Barefoot Black Boy, oil on academy board, 12 3/16 x 9 3/8.
Inscribed lower left: "E. Johnson / 1863".

The subject is a barefoot black boy, about eight or ten years old, who leans against a side of a house and a latched door. His clothes and cap are dark colored; he holds a heavy blanket or overcoat over his left arm which is tucked behind his body. His right arm is crossed across his breast in front. His legs are crossed at the ankles. His expression is one of guarded openness.

I examined this painting at Childs Gallery, Boston, on October 9, 1992. In my opinion this is an authentic Eastman Johnson painting.

I have researched my files, which included going through the records of well-known exhibitions, and I could find no record of such a painting. However, it has all the characteristics of paintings done by Johnson at this time. The face is beautifully painted with a small brush; some of the color on the face is applied with a stippling-like technique. The background--house siding and a latched door--is painted with his usual technique. The shadows softly fall at the left. Clearly evident is a pencil (graphite) line along the left of the shoulder, which indicates that the figure was probably transferred from a drawing. This was Johnson's characteristic way of working. There is also a touch of light blue on the latch to indicate the highlight--another characteristic of Johnson's.

Using an ultra violet light, I examined the surface. It looks very good, with just a touch here and there of in-painting.

Johnson became famous when he exhibited his Negro Life at the South at the National Academy of Design in 1859. The painting now hangs in the New-York Historical Society. During the 1860s he painted many pictures of slaves, ex-slaves and freedmen; just a few of them are The Ride for Freedom, 1863, in the Brooklyn Museum; Fiddling His Way, 1866, in the Chrysler Museum; Negro Boy, 1860, at the National Academy of Design; The Chimney Corner, 1863, in the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica. Of all American artists, he was probably the most sympathetic to African-Americans. Most of such paintings are done with great feeling.

TO: Peter Rudolph

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There is no other picture, that I know of, that is quite like your painting. It is exquisite, with a wonderful expression. I hope to write about it and other Johnson paintings of African-Americans in the near future.

I will include the painting in my catalogue raisonné of Johnson's work.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills
art historian