

36 Harrison Street
Brookline, MA 02146
October 16, 1987

Ms. Beverly Grace Dunne
American Paintings
Christie, Manson and Woods International Inc.
502 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10022

[Not done in
Kentucky; probably
Murray Bay.]

Dear Beverly:

Regarding the painting inscribed verso "Kentucky Mountain Corn," oil on board, measuring 8-5/8 x 10-7/8 inches which I examined at your warehouse on October 5, 1987 (a photocopy of the photograph is attached).

It seems certain that this painting is the work called Wigwams, which was No. 7 in the estate sale of Johnson's paintings held at the American Art Galleries in 1907. Also attached is the page from the catalogue which describes the painting. The catalogue states that the work is signed at the lower right, "E. J., Murray Bay, July, 1869." Today, we cannot see the "Murray Bay;" and instead of "E.J." we have "E. Johnson." Perhaps there was some tinkering of the signature. But in any event, in my opinion the painting is Eastman Johnson's Wigwams.

In terms of the style of the painting, it has many of the characteristics of Johnson's paintings. The overall brown palette and the sketchy impasto to enliven the foreground area where sits the Indian at work mending a snowshoe. The motifs are also characteristic: the Indian with his averted face (you may recall that a year ago we looked at Man in a Cornfield--another averted face); the Indian woman barely visible standing in the background wigwam; and the other male figure in the right background watching over a kettle on a fire.

Since seeing you, I have done further research into the question as to why the painting is inscribed "Kentucky Mountain Corn" on the verso. John I. H. Baur recorded the painting in the listing of all of Johnson's known works which he published with the exhibition catalogue An American Genre Painter: Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906, Brooklyn Museum, 1940. The entry reads as follows:

29. KENTUCKY MOUNTAIN CORN
Oil on academy board, 8 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.
Lower right: E. Johnson July 1869
Back: Kentucky Mountain Corn
Owner: Norman Hirschl Gallery

The painting seems to have passed from Norman Hirschl Gallery to Dr. Chester J. Robertson and then to "Pelham Manor" by 1949. It was reproduced in The Art Digest, Vol. 20 (January 1, 1946), in connection with a review of a Johnson show held at Knoedler's. It was also exhibited at Frazier Galleries in 1937 (No. 13); Levy Galleries in 1944 (No. 10); and the Philadelphia Art Alliance, from October 9 - November 12, 1944 (No. 10). [Exhibition history is from the Frick

Art Reference Library].

Johnson did at least two other paintings of Indian life in Murray Bay, Canada, in 1869, which were also in the estate sale: Dressing the Doll and The Old Squaw. It seems that in the late 1860s Johnson summered in Maine and Canada; other paintings of Indian life ascribed to the late 1850s (when Johnson was in Duluth) may actually be from this Canadian phase of his career.

I can only speculate as to why the painting is inscribed "Kentucky Mountain Corn." It obviously has nothing to do with corn. According to The Columbia Encyclopedia, 3rd, 1963 ed., there is a city called Murray, the county seat of Calloway County, located in southwest Kentucky near the Tennessee line. The Murray Bay where Johnson summered is northeast of Quebec, on the north shore of the St. Lawrence at the mouth of the Murray, or Malbaie, River. The encyclopedia adds that, "It is a well-known resort, in a dairy-farming country." Somewhere along the line someone must have assumed that the Murray in question was in Kentucky.

I will include this painting in my forthcoming catalogue raisonné. Please ask the new owner to let me know of its whereabouts.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills

P.S. I will be calling the picture: Wigwams (also exhibited as Kentucky Mountain Corn)