

Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906

Feather Duster Boy, late 1860s-1870s

Oil on canvas, 22 x 16 (55.9 x 40.6 cm)

Not signed

[credit line]

When Eastman Johnson painted The Feather Duster Boy, he was turning to a theme in American painting that had considerable appeal to patrons in the mid-nineteenth century--the theme of the young entrepreneur eagerly hawking his wares or his skills. These young street people, and they included peddlers, chimney sweeps, itinerant fiddlers and street musicians, evolved out of the "fancy pictures" done by English and Continental painters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such pictures were "types"--usually children presented as half-length or full-length figures without anecdotal incident, although intended to have sentimental appeal.¹ But Johnson's American versions, and this is certainly the case with The Feather Duster Boy, differ from their European counterparts in their emphasis upon trade and work as opposed to picturesque poverty.

Johnson's understanding of European genres of painting, such as the "fancy picture," and his ability to transform them into images appealing to American patrons guaranteed his success. Growing up in Augusta, Maine, he mastered the technical skills to render portrait sketches of his hard-working neighbors in crayons and pastels. He lived for a brief spell in Washington D. C. where his father had taken an assignment with the government, and it was there that young Johnson received his first serious commissions--to execute crayon portraits of notables such as Dolley Madison. In 1846 he moved to Boston where for three years he drew such literary and political personalities as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Sumner. Determined to move beyond drawing to painting in oils, he decided that he needed European training. Thus in the fall of 1849 he embarked with his friend, the genre painter George Henry Hall, for Europe. He stayed on the continent for six years: two years in Düsseldorf studying primarily with the German-American artist Emanuel Leutze; four years in The Hague, where he developed a portrait business; and finally in Paris where he briefly studied with Thomas Couture before family responsibilities called him home to America.

In Europe Johnson developed the fancy picture, such as The Savoyard Boy, 1853 (The Brooklyn Museum), depicting a comely youth, one arm akimbo, who leans against a wall. Henry Tuckerman, who in 1867 wrote the major mid-nineteenth-century art history survey, singled out Johnson's painting as the

artist's first ambitious effort: "The figure is expressive and admirably designed; the face full of character, and the color rich, mellow, and finely harmonized; it is such a boy as Murillo would have painted with a relish. There is a finish in this picture, a truth of expression, a naïveté, and a maturity of execution . . . which indicate a mastery of the best principles of art. . ."ⁱⁱⁱ

However flattering the comparison to Murillo might be, in the late 1850s, with the country split by sectional strife, the definition of what might be "American" loomed as crucial to writers on art. Typical was the admonishment coming from the Cosmopolitan Art Journal: "As language keeps alive the fire of nationality, so should painting embalm the genius of a country by preserving memory of familiar scenes, or by transmitting to posterity reminiscences of actions, deeds, or manners."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Johnson heeded the call and looked for subjects. He set out to study the Chippewa in the Superior, Wisconsin, area. Back in Washington D. C. he also turned his attention to African Americans, and painted Negro Life at the South, 1859 (New-York Historical Society), for the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design. That painting secured his reputation and throughout the 1860s Johnson could easily claim to be America's first genre painter.

The Feather Duster Boy has neither a signature nor a date, nor is there any mention of it in the exhibition catalogues of the 1860s and early 1870s.^{iv} However, there is no question of Johnson's authorship. Johnson draws a solid figure with a convincing contrapposto, and he well understands the massing of lights and darks. The shadows on the ground and background wall firmly situate the figure in space. Moreover, while presenting a fully volumetric head, Johnson also delicately renders the features of the boy's face with pencil or graphite lines outlining the full lips and the right edge of the nose.^v The quick, painterly strokes that indicate the knuckles and fingers and the feathered strokes for the feather dusters impart a quality of spontaneity to the image. Typical also of Johnson's work are his use of the brown underpainting to represent the middle tones in the composition and his deployment of delicate highlights to animate the surface of the painting, such as the blue lights on the boy's shoes.

While the full history of The Feather Duster Boy is lost to us, we might surmise that the painting

had considerable contemporary appeal. Unlike The Savoyard Boy, an image of a beautiful, languid figure loitering against a wall and watching an action off stage who projects youthful, sexual energy, the boy in Feather Duster Boy, projects seriousness of purpose and business know-how. While some of the dusters are wrapped up, others are unfurled, and our protagonist seems about to demonstrate the one in his left hand. And whereas the The Savoyard Boy, as a painting, is a finished object of preciousness, one meant for delectation, The Feather Duster Boy is sketchy--a painting in process, one that invites the viewer to participate in its action, to enter into a negotiation with both the subject and the work of art itself.

iEastman Johnson

According to Reginald G. Haggard, A Dictionary of Art Terms (New York, Hawthorne Books Inc., 1962), p. 131, "Fancy pictures" was "A term invented by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1788) to describe Gainsborough's pictures of 'little ordinary beggar-children;' they were painted toward the close of his life, and he created in them a rustic pictorial Arcadia."

ii Henry T. Tuckerman, Book of the Artists: American Artist Life Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists: Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise & Progress of Art in America 1867 (New York: James F. Carr, 1967), p. 467. There are at least three versions of the Savoyard boy.

iii "American Painters: Their Errors as Regards Nationality," Cosmopolitan Art Journal 1, No. 4 (June, 1857), p. 116. It needs to be pointed out that the journal was issued by the International Art Union, which had an interest in promoting and selling American pictures.

iv No such painting is listed in James Yarnell and William H. Gerds, Index to American Art Exhibition Catalogues (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 19xx)

v In my study of Johnson's work, I find that such paintings were often second versions of a composition. Johnson often would use a tracing technique to transfer a previous image to the canvas; the sure graphite lines indicate guidelines for these subsequent versions. The second versions are rarely exact copies, and considerable alterations occur.

Bibliography:

Baur, John I. H. Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906: An American Genre Painter. Brooklyn: Institute of Arts and Science, 1940. (Reprinted Arno Press, 1969.)

Hills, Patricia. The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson: The Sources and Development of His Style and Themes. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977.