

238 Putnam Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
February 28, 2003

Dear [REDACTED]

Re: Eastman Johnson, The Lesson, oil on board, 21 1/4 x 18 1/2 inches. Inscribed Lower Right: "E. Johnson/1874"

I examined this painting on December 19, 2002, at my home in Cambridge. It is my opinion that the painting was painted by the nineteenth-century American genre and portrait painter Eastman Johnson (1824-1906).

The painting is similar in size, subject and composition to a painting, also called The Lesson, which belonged to the Newhouse Galleries of New York back in the 1970s when I first began my Johnson research. That painting is signed in the lower left "E. Johnson 1874."

The differences are minor: the right hand of the younger girl is placed somewhat differently on the large book. As you noticed, the book is opened to "N O P" in your painting, whereas in the Newhouse painting, it is opened to "A B C." Also in the Newhouse painting there is a stylized floral design to the wallpaper, whereas there is none in your version. I am not certain which was painted first.

The painting has the characteristics that I associate with Johnson's work. There are graphite lines along the toddler's lips and nose and the girl's profile. The eyes are well done, with one in shadow. The anatomy of both children is convincing, and the highlights are very fine. There is somewhat brighter impasto for the highlights of the girl's dress.

As a genre painter, Johnson did domestic scenes throughout his career. And after his daughter, Ethel, was born in in May 1870, children increasingly figure in his paintings. One assumes that he used her as a model. He was praised in 1864 by James Jackson Jarves, The Art-Idea, for pictures of home life:

We say "home," because there is no other word which includes so entirely, to the Anglo-Saxon ear, all those feelings, sentiments, and ideas which have their origin and growth under the family roof and in social training. Its motives are healthful, aims excellent, spirit patriotic. . . . Eastman Johnson and Thom worthily represent this Branch. (See James Jackson Jarves, The Art-Idea, ed. by Benjamin Rowland, Jr. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 183. 29

Children learning lessons from older children and adults was a favorite Johnson theme.

The painting is charming, but could use a light cleaning. I will include the painting in my Catalogue Raisonné of Eastman Johnson's work.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Hills
Author, Eastman Johnson, 1972

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