

American History Lesson #3: The Chimney Corner

American History Lesson #3 Overview: The Chimney Corner

Main Ideas: Stereotypes, Slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, Empathy, Point of View, Cultural Diversity

Grade Level: Fourth Grade

Learning Objectives: Teachers will lead students through a visual analysis to explain the message behind Eastman Johnson's painting, *The Chimney Corner*, painted in 1863. Influenced by the Emancipation Proclamation and antislavery abolitionists, students will understand how this artist challenged the 19th century stereotypes of African Americans in art.

Duration: 30 minutes

Set Up:

- Display Object Image in a darkened room.
- Print out Teacher Facilitation Questions for use during object discussion
- Optional essays are included to supplement the teacher's understanding of the artwork and are not part of the student activity.

Attachments

- **Overview**
- **Object Image Enlargement**
- **Teacher Facilitation Questions**
- **Background Information**

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Background Information

About the Artist:

A gifted draftsman, the major artistic Spokesman for post-Civil War rural America, and a figure of wide acquaintance and influence in New York art circles, Eastman Johnson enjoyed a long, productive, and distinguished career. His talent emerged early in portrait studies done in Lovell, Maine, his birthplace, and progressed rapidly through training in Dusseldorf and Paris. When he returned to this country in 1855, he was as advanced technically as any other artist of his generation, and his work continued to grow in breadth and power through the next three decades.

The Chimney Corner builds on lessons Johnson had learned well by 1863. His grasp of form and contour was assured, his figures possess an inner authority, dominating well-defined, Dutch-like spaces, and his brush moves with a broad energy that heightens contrasts of light, color, and texture. In the case of *The Chimney Corner*, the brushwork almost alone carries the muted physical impact of flesh tones, coarse clothing, and uneven interior surfaces. One senses a lingering touch of Dusseldorf in the somber palette, but more of Thomas Couture, Johnson's French master, in the painterly manipulation of form and deftly mixed highlights.

Johnson's picture of a lone black man seated in a rustic interior probably harks back to scenes he had witnessed in Washington, D.C., shortly after his return from abroad. His first statement in this genre was the well-known *Life in the South* of 1859 (New-York Historical Society), later given the more popular title of *Old Kentucky Home*. (1) The obvious narrative character of that picture became reduced and concentrated in the years following into a number of scenes of black life that indicate the seriousness with which the artist approached his subjects. "No one of our painters has more truly caught and perfectly delineated the American rustic and negro," Henry Tuckerman claimed of Johnson in 1867.(2) Hindsight may give us a slightly different perspective, but one can safely say that Johnson, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Eakins were among the few whose work rose above the stereotypical images of black life that preceded and were produced alongside their own.

The Utica picture is almost identical to a painting in the National Museum of American Art entitled *The Lord is My Shepherd*.(3) According to Tuckerman, *The Chimney Corner* had found its way into the collection of John Taylor Johnston by 1867;(4) the provenance of *The Lord is My Shepherd* is unclear, as is the date the painting first assumed that title. Yet the opening line of the Twenty-third Psalm is probably a more accurate representation of what Johnson ultimately meant the painting to convey—that the sober black man, the essence of humble piety, guaranteed the faith of the nation. It was a belief with direct parallels to earlier images of peasant life, especially those produced in rural Barbizon, in which tradition, hardship, and poverty were regarded as the true test of piety.

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Surrounding the lone black man reading his lesson are all the signs of these so-called virtues. The forlorn and neglected setting is drawn from *New England Kitchen* (R. Philip Hanes, Jr., Winston-Salem, North Carolina), an interior by Johnson that must have slightly preceded *The Chimney Corner*.⁽⁵⁾ The strong, gnarled hands of the subject attest to a life of toil, his dress and circumstances to enduring poverty. Yet his dignity remains, a factor of his stalwart form and the presence of divine grace—no small comfort during the turbulent years of the Civil War. Only by nourishing such individuals, Johnson seems to be saying, would America truly become a free and independent nation.

Notes

1. The painting was originally exhibited as *Negro Life at the South*. For this title and much of the preceding biographical information, I have drawn upon Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson*, exhibition catalog (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972). I am also grateful to Dr. Hills for personally suggesting several improvements to this entry.
2. Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* (New York: 1867; repr., New York: James F. Carr, Publisher, 1967), p. 467.
3. Oil on canvas, 16 5/8 X 13 1/8, signed lower left: E. Johnson. Gift of Mrs. Francis P. Garvan, 1962. An apparent study for *The Chimney Corner* is listed in John I.H. Baur, *Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906*, exhibition catalog (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1940), p. 90.
4. Tuckerman, p. 624.
5. Another painting by Johnson, *Sunday Morning* of c. 1866 (New-York Historical Society), incorporates the same setting.

About the Artwork:

Johnson painted this work the same year President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared that "all persons held as slaves . . . shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." Because African-American illiteracy was widespread, Johnson's image of a dignified, black man receiving enlightenment from the book that rests on his lap was, in its time, a provocative image. In addition to emancipation and the right to vote, the outcome of the Civil War gave African-Americans access to public education for the first time. The light that shines down on him from an unknown source suggests that his pursuit of the wisdom contained in the book is divinely sanctioned. Another version of this painting in the collection of the Smithsonian

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American Art Museum has a slightly different title, and suggests that the book on the figure's lap is a Christian Bible.

The message embedded in this work imparts to it a level of seriousness not typically found in American genre paintings, which typically depict less politically-charged scenes of everyday life. Another painting that Johnson exhibited in Utica in 1866, titled *The Innocent Cause of the War* (now lost or unidentified) suggests that Johnson explored ideas about emancipation in other paintings as well.

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Aside from its slightly smaller size and deeper cove, the frame on Johnson's painting is similar in design to the one on the John O'Brien Inman painting, *Uncle Dick*, 1863 (72.44) in the Museum's collection. Both paintings have the same leaf (or flower) forms in the corners. The two frames were more than likely not made by the same frame maker but, nevertheless, demonstrate how fashionable frame designs were used by different craftsmen.¹ While the innermost liner lacks the rounded corners found in the Inman frame, both frames feature multiple liners with contrasting smooth and textured finishes. Also, like the Inman frame, the outer raised edge is decorated with an overlapping motif, but in this case the geometric design elements are somewhat larger and consistently run in a clockwise fashion around all four sides. The outermost edge features a trefoil motif rather than the scrollwork that is in the same location on the Inman frame.

There is no way of knowing when Johnson's name and the picture's title were painted below the bottom sight edge of the frame. Such lettering, applied directly on the gilded surface, is not commonplace, but can be found on other 19th century American frames.² Two screw holes along the top, outer edge of the upper horizontal rail suggests that at some point the frame had a lighting fixture affixed to it.

Notes

1. Sheldon and Caroline Keck noted in a conservation report they prepared on this painting ("Report to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute," May 1971) that there was a pencil inscription on the back of the frame that read: "frame ordered Jany 75." This inscription was not found when the frame was examined in August of 2002.

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2. [Need to explain in this note whether or not the Smithsonian's frame is of a similar design.]

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For a new, thoughtful reading of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's version of this painting, titled "The Lord is My Shepherd," see Eleanor Harvey's 2012 exhibition catalog, "The Civil War & American Art," (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012).

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Teacher Facilitation Questions:

Eastman Johnson (American, 1824-1906), *Chimney Corner*, 1863

Note to teacher: It is helpful for students to have some background knowledge about the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation before facilitating a discussion of this artwork.

During discussion, students may comment on sensitive attitudes, social conditions or even current political news (reparations). The following facilitation questions offer one approach to introducing this topic. Deal with all comments tactfully, and include them as valid responses while keeping the focus on the painting.

Questions:

1. Eastman Johnson painted this picture, titled *The Chimney Corner*, in 1863.
2. What war was happening in the United States of America during this time? (The Civil War).
3. What was one of the reasons for the war between the Northern States and the Southern States?
4. During this time, many African American people living in the Southern states were still slaves.
5. What does being a slave mean? (You are someone else's property and have no control over your own life.)
6. Do you think the man in this painting might be a slave? (Some might say yes, some might say no)
7. Slavery once existed here in New York but was abolished in 1827.
8. However, even after it ended in the North, African Americans could still not vote or hold certain jobs, and many lived in segregated communities.
9. Let's try to identify all the things you can recognize in the picture. (a black man reading by a fireplace in a dark room, a cupboard, a cane, a blue coat, a pipe on a ledge behind his shoulder, a red piece of cloth)
10. Where do you see the most light or the white color in the painting? (shoulders, shirt, book)
11. Where is this light coming from? (Above; an opening or a high window maybe)
12. This is where the artist wants us to focus. He wants us to notice what the man is doing.
13. What book might he be reading? (Bible - often the only book a household owned.)
14. What might this tell us about him? (religion and faith is important to him)
15. Today, do most people in the U.S. know how to read?

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16. When this was painted, many people could not read, including slaves. It was against the law to teach a slave how to read, if slaves were caught reading they would be in trouble.
17. This might also explain why he is hiding inside and not reading outside where the light is better.
18. Education is so important to this man he is willing to take a chance of getting into trouble.
19. Look at his hands and describe them. What do his hands say about him? (big and rough - he has done hard work)
20. Describe his clothes, what is he wearing?
21. Do his clothes look old or new? (old, worn, shoes scuffed)
22. What do you think the blue coat behind him might symbolize? (Possibly a Union soldier)
23. Were there African American soldiers during the Civil War? (Yes, fighting for the Union Army)
24. What might the cane leaning against the wall say about the man? (Older, or hurt)
25. Do you think this man has had an easy life? [No]
26. Is he neatly or sloppily dressed? (neatly, his vest is buttoned all the way and not missing any buttons, there are no holes in his clothes)
27. He might be poor, but he cares about his appearance, he is making himself look the best he can look.
28. The artist chose to portray this man as dignified and intelligent.
29. At this time, were all African Americans slaves? [No, for example Frederick Douglass]
30. How would you describe the mood or the feeling of this little scene? (quiet, serious, lonely)
31. Look at the man's face. How would you describe the mood of the man?
32. In the 1800s, most images of African Americans were presented as stereotypes.
33. What is a stereotype? (Give an example if needed, i.e. All redheads have bad tempers)
34. Stereotyped images of black people in the 1800's presented them as inferior to other people and often as foolish cartoon-like figures doing dumb things.
35. There are many examples of other 19th century artists portraying African Americans in a negative way. This was their point of view. Do you think these artists were in favor of abolishing slavery? [No]
36. The newspapers and magazines in some ways were the 19th century equivalent to today's social media, ridiculing certain groups of people.
37. Do you think Mr. Johnson's quiet man is a stereotype? (no) He is not a cartoon, but presented as a human being who is literate, and dignified.
38. Do you think Mr. Johnson wanted us to like this man?
39. This painting is important because Eastman Johnson was recording for the people of his time an image of an African American very different from the stereotypes usually seen.
40. What do you think was Eastman Johnson's point of view about slavery?