

A PIONEER ARTIST ON LAKE SUPERIOR

ON JANUARY 18, 1940, the Brooklyn Museum placed on display the first comprehensive collection ever assembled of the works of Eastman Johnson. Newspapers and periodicals throughout the nation commented on the exhibit in their art columns, and at least one critic expressed surprised delight over a series of Indian sketches made on Lake Superior.¹ Six of the seven pictures in this group were loaned to the Brooklyn Museum for the Johnson exhibit by the St. Louis County Historical Society of Duluth, which has in its collections thirty-two paintings and sketches of Lake Superior scenes and figures by this distinguished American portrait and genre painter.

The story of Johnson's visits to the Head of Lake Superior in 1856 and 1857, when he painted his western pictures, and of the return of most of these pictures to the region of their origin forms an important chapter in the history of Minnesota art. When he made his first excursion to the West, Johnson was a young man of thirty-two who had already experienced a measure of success as a portrait artist and who had enjoyed the advantages of six years of study abroad. In Augusta, Maine, and in Washington and Boston, he had filled orders for numerous portraits in pencil, crayon, and pastel. Among his subjects were such celebrities as Mrs. James Madison, Daniel Webster, and members of the Longfellow family.²

¹ For reviews of the Johnson exhibit, see, for example, the *New York Times* of January 21, *Newsweek* for January 22, and the *New Yorker* for February 3, 1940.

² Most of the biographical material in the present article is drawn from John I. H. Baur, *An American Genre Painter, Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906* (Brooklyn, 1940). This is the most extensive and scholarly life of the artist available. Included in the volume are a catalogue of

In 1849 Johnson went to Europe to study, going first to Düsseldorf, where he enrolled in the Royal Academy and worked in the studio of Emanuel Leutze while the latter was engaged in painting his gigantic "Washington Crossing the Delaware." Later Johnson visited London and spent some years at The Hague. There he became absorbed in a study of the Dutch masters, especially Rembrandt. The American made numerous copies of Rembrandt's work, with such marked success that his friends dubbed him the "American Rembrandt." That Johnson's original canvases of this period "show very strongly the imprint of his studies" of Rembrandt is the opinion of Mr. John I. H. Baur,³ whose excellent biography of the artist appears with the Brooklyn Museum's catalogue of its recent exhibit.

Fresh from his contact with the Dutch school, Johnson returned to America in the fall of 1855. Sometime in the following summer he went to Superior, Wisconsin, to visit his sister Sarah, who had married William H. Newton, a pioneer settler at the Head of the Lakes. As an associate of a group of Minnesotans that included Daniel A. Robertson, Rensselaer R. Nelson, and Edmund Rice, Newton staked a claim on the site of Superior, and in 1854 he became one of the "Proprietors of Superior," as those who owned shares in the townsite company were called. At Superior, across the bay at Duluth, and along the Minnesota shore of the lake, Johnson saw a raw new land. The Indian title to the North Shore lands had been cleared as recently as 1854, when the Lake Superior Chippewa ceded the region at La Pointe, Wisconsin. Superior was surveyed and platted in the same year, and two years later these operations were repeated at Duluth. At Oneota, now a part of Duluth, there was a sawmill; small settlements ex-

the works displayed at the Brooklyn Museum and a "General Catalogue" listing "as many of the paintings and drawings by Eastman Johnson as could be located" in a limited time — a total of 472.

³ *Eastman Johnson*, 14.

isted also at Portland and Fond du Lac in the same vicinity. Farther up the shore, at Buchanan, near the mouth of the Knife River, at Beaver Bay, and at Grand Portage, there were a few white settlers. Even at Superior, mail was received not oftener than once a week. Lumber, salt fish, and furs were being exported in small quantities; the vast iron resources that were to be poured into the East from the ports at the mouth of the St. Louis River had not yet been discovered.⁴ Along the whole North Shore, native Chippewa were still living in large numbers.

There is evidence that it was something more than a desire to see his sister that attracted Johnson to Superior. Land speculation had reached a high point in 1856, and he undoubtedly hoped to profit from investments in the booming town. Certain it is that the artist saw the possibilities of the Chippewa in their native haunts as subjects for his brush. One biographer believes that he "may have been influenced by the novels of Cooper."⁵ But it is scarcely necessary to turn to literature to find a motive for Johnson's western venture. A number of American artists—George Catlin, John M. Stanley, J. O. Lewis, Seth Eastman, Henry Lewis, and others—had blazed the trail to the Northwest; and it is likely that Johnson knew Henry Lewis in Düsseldorf, where both were members of the American art colony in 1851.

Johnson must have remained in the West until as late as January, 1857, for a sketch of "Our camp on Kettle River"

⁴Lillian K. Stewart, *A Pioneer of Old Superior*, 112 (Boston, 1930); *A Souvenir of Superior*, 129, 131 (Superior, n. d.); John R. Carey, "History of Duluth, and of St. Louis County, to the Year 1870," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9: 243-278; Frank Hayes to the *Duluth Free Press*, May 2, 1935. A copy of Hayes's letter was made available by the St. Louis County Historical Society; it is published in the *Free Press* for May 10, 1935. See also John A. Bardon, "Eastman Johnson, Pioneer-Artist," a manuscript sketch in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is one of a series by Mr. Bardon on pioneer life in the Lake Superior country.

⁵Baur, *Eastman Johnson*, 15.

bears that date.⁶ Here, too, is proof that on his first western trip he saw some of the Minnesota country to the south of Superior. He seems to have entered whole-heartedly into the social life that revolved about the Newton home, the "largest house in town" and a "favorite gathering place." He was "as frolicksome as anybody" present at a Christmas party of 1856. A story that has long been told among members of the Newton family indicates that on one occasion Johnson left a souvenir of an evening's festivities on the walls, which were covered with a gaily flowered paper. On the following day, "Mrs. Newton found portrait sketches of many of the guests adorning the roses on the wall paper."⁷

Johnson established "himself in the woods in a primitive camp studio of his own construction, which was 'everything an artist could desire.'" Mr. John A. Bardon, who was born in Superior in 1863 and spent much of his life there, recalls using this cabin as headquarters for his boyhood hunting trips. He records that it was located on the Pokegama River, a stream that widens into a bay and empties into the St. Louis River west of Superior. The cabin was built of cedar logs, "had a Southern Style, broad fire-place and a wing chair, crane and bake oven," according to Mr. Bardon's description. It was identified for him as Johnson's cabin by Stephen Bonga, who served as the artist's guide and interpreter when he traveled in the North Shore country. Bonga was a member of a family of mixed Indian and Negro blood, prominent in the fur trade of Minnesota and the Northwest. With Johnson he made "trips among

⁶ This picture is number 398 in Mr. Baur's catalogue of Johnson's work. See his *Eastman Johnson*, 79. When the catalogue was prepared, the sketch belonged to the late Albert Rosenthal; it has since been acquired by Mr. Albert Duveen of New York, who has presented the Minnesota Historical Society with a photographic reproduction. See Duveen to the writer, March 12, May 25, 1940.

⁷ Baur, *Eastman Johnson*, 15; Hayes, in *Duluth Free Press*, May 10, 1935. Mr. Hayes's mother was a sister of William H. Newton.

the Apostle Islands and down the north shore of Lake Superior as far as Isle Royale." Three views of Grand Portage show that Johnson included that early center of the Northwest fur trade in his travels. Among his pictures also is a view of the interior of a cabin, doubtless his studio, for it bears the descriptive comment, "E. J. Superior on Pokegama Bay St Louis river 1856." Seated in Lincolnian fashion before a quaint log fireplace on a rough bench is a bearded and moccasined figure—probably a self portrait. Mr. Bardon recalls seeing Johnson's portrait of Bonga, a picture that has not been located. The mixed-blood guide spoke affectionately of Johnson as a "most likable man to work for," and recalled that he became an expert at handling a birch-bark canoe.⁸

Most of Johnson's known frontier pictures probably are the products of his second visit to Lake Superior, made in the summer of 1857; several of them are dated between August 24 and October 22 of that year. At least some of his time must have been occupied by other interests, however, for he was infected with the fever for land speculation that was sweeping through the new settlement at the Head of the Lakes and the West in general. His brother-in-law's interest in the Superior townsite company doubtless influenced Johnson to invest his capital in local land, and his father placed five hundred dollars at his disposal for the same purpose. With the panic of 1857, the value of town lots dwindled to little or nothing. When Johnson returned to the East in the late autumn he was almost penniless. He managed to repair his fortunes somewhat, however, by painting portraits in Cincinnati, where he stopped before going

⁸ Bardon, "Eastman Johnson"; William Walton, "Eastman Johnson, Painter," in *Scribner's Magazine*, 40: 268 (September, 1906). Mr. Baur, in his *Eastman Johnson*, 4, presents evidence that Walton had "at his disposal much material in the form of journals and letters, which have since disappeared." An interesting comparison may be made between Johnson's cabin interior and his later "Boyhood of Lincoln," reproduced by Baur as plate VIII.

to Washington. There in 1859 he painted the "Old Kentucky Home," which brought him membership in the National Academy of Design in New York and assured his future reputation. In time he probably received returns from his investments at Superior, for Mr. Bardon records that in the early 1880's Johnson was there "closing up some land transactions."⁹

If Johnson's sojourn at Superior was a failure financially, artistically it was a success. Few of his western pictures, it is true, found purchasers, for the bulk of the collection was still in the artist's possession when he died in 1906. For the historian, this rich pictorial record of Lake Superior scenes and natives of the 1850's is of untold value. Through a fortunate circumstance, after the artist's death it came to the attention of one who had both an appreciation of its value and the means with which to ensure its permanent preservation. This was Richard T. Crane, a wealthy Chicago manufacturer. Wishing to dispose of the collection, Johnson's widow showed it to Crane. Late in 1908, when the pictures were on display at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, he again saw them. It was at that time that he wrote to the manager of the Duluth office of the Crane Company, suggesting that if Duluth "would like to own these pictures and has any suitable place for them, I should be glad to purchase them and make the city a present of them." "I regard it as of great importance that the city of Duluth should have these pictures," wrote Crane, who directed his correspondent to "take this matter up with the proper city official."¹⁰

The offer must have been called to the attention of the Duluth city council promptly, for on January 18, 1909, it passed a resolution thanking Crane for the gift of the John-

⁹ Baur, *Eastman Johnson*, 16, 17; *Souvenir of Superior*, 132; Walton, in *Scribner's Magazine*, 40: 268; Bardon, "Eastman Johnson."

¹⁰ A copy of Crane's letter, which is dated November 9, 1908, was furnished by Mr. Otto E. Wieland, president of the St. Louis County Historical Society.

son collection. The pictures were to be housed temporarily in the Masonic Temple, where they were placed on display. There they remained for two decades, until February, 1929, when they were turned over to the St. Louis County Historical Society.¹¹ Today they are the outstanding attraction in this organization's museum in the courthouse in Duluth.

Of the thirty-two pictures in the Duluth collection, twelve are oil paintings, one is a colored pastel, and nineteen are charcoal sketches with the high lights in white. The pastel and seventeen of the charcoal sketches are Indian portraits—heads or full figures. Many of them show the tendency, so common among nineteenth-century artists who pictured the American Indian, to romanticize the "noble savage." Johnson's studies of the figures and faces of the native women particularly illustrate this tendency. Some of his sketches, however, portray true Indian faces, with all their rugged and often unpleasant qualities.¹² Six Indian portraits are included among the oil paintings. Some of Johnson's models doubtless were half-breeds rather than full-bloods. This probably was true, for example, of the subject for the double-head study reproduced herewith.¹³

The remaining charcoal sketches are the picture of the interior of Johnson's log cabin studio, already described, and a sweeping view of the harbor at Superior in 1857. It shows the town as seen across the bay from the Duluth

¹¹ Wieland to the writer, November 16, 1938.

¹² On at least one occasion Johnson encountered the superstitious fear, common among the red men, that the making of a likeness would be followed by the death of the subject. An Indian maiden whose portrait he had painted went off with the picture in the hope of destroying it, but Johnson succeeded in recovering it before she could harm it. See Walton, in *Scribner's Magazine*, 40: 268. One of the Indian portraits is reproduced with this article, p. 272.

¹³ For a list of the pictures in the Duluth collection, giving subjects, dimensions, and mediums, see Baur, *Eastman Johnson*, 60, 79-81. Photographic copies of all these pictures are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Many of the oil paintings in the group show the influence of Johnson's studies at The Hague.

shore on Minnesota Point, with the dock that led to George R. Stuntz's warehouse in the foreground. To the extreme right is pictured the "Lady Elgin," a steamboat that met with a tragic end in 1860. Mr. Bardon identifies the other boats in this sketch as the "palatial passenger boat 'Manhattan' and the Astor Fur Company's supply boat 'Union.'" Oil paintings other than portraits in the collection include three Indian groups, a picture of a Chippewa wigwam, and two views of Grand Portage. For the historian, these early pictures of the first permanent white settlement in Minnesota are the most significant in the collection. One shows the village as it appeared in the 1850's looking toward the east from a point near the lake shore, with Mount Josephine in the background; the other depicts an Indian encampment toward the northwest at the foot of Mount Rose. That Johnson should have painted a third view, looking south over the lake, was to be expected. As a result of Mr. Baur's researches, such a picture has come to light, and Johnson's panorama of the Grand Portage scene is complete. This picture, which is reproduced herewith, probably was with the original collection when Johnson died, for it was included in a sale of his works in 1907.¹⁴

Other Lake Superior pictures located by Mr. Baur are two oil paintings entitled "Oweenee of the Chippewas" and "Rock-a-bye, Baby, on the Tree Top." He found also two portraits painted at Superior in 1856—one of the artist's sister, Mrs. Newton, the other of Mrs. Sarah Fairchild Conover.¹⁵ The pencil sketch of the Kettle River camp has been noted. Mention should be made also of a lithograph, in the possession of the St. Louis County Historical

¹⁴ Mr. Baur found the picture, number 18 in his list, in the possession of the Misses F. Pearl and Elizabeth Browning; it is now owned by Mr. Norman Hirschl of New York. See *Eastman Johnson*, 38; Baur to the writer, April 26, 1940. The Minnesota Historical Society obtained a photograph of this picture through the courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

¹⁵ See Baur's list of Johnson's works, numbers 25, 26, 174, and 234, in *Eastman Johnson*, 52, 61, 67.

Society, showing the "Chronicle Office" at Superior. This is said to be based on a picture by Johnson, but the fact that it is dated 1855 casts doubt on the assumption. Mr. Bardon asserts that Johnson also depicted the first hotel in Superior and the lighthouse on Minnesota Point, and that these pictures, with the view of Superior, were later lithographed.¹⁶

In the years that followed his visits to Lake Superior, Johnson became known as one of the most prolific and industrious, as well as distinguished, of American painters. His genre pieces were added to the collections of most of the country's important art galleries, and there was a constant demand for portraits from his brush. In the last two decades of his life, commissions came so rapidly that he devoted all his time to portrait painting. It is said that he received as much as ten thousand dollars for a family group, and half that amount for a full-length likeness.¹⁷ But with the development of a less conventional taste in art, Johnson's reputation suffered and museums began to relegate his canvases to basement storerooms. From such a fate many of his pictures were rescued last winter through the efforts of the Brooklyn Museum. Since they were placed before the public at Duluth more than thirty years ago, however, interest in Johnson's Lake Superior studies never has lagged, for their regional and historical importance endow them with a quality of permanence that some of his work lacks. Mr. Baur and the Brooklyn Museum should be given credit for bringing them to the attention of a wider audience.

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¹⁶ Bardon, "Eastman Johnson."

¹⁷ Baur, *Eastman Johnson*, 25.



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