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Plate 1

(For color plate, see front cover)

Eastman Johnson, *Lunchtime*, 1865. Oil on composition board,
21 x 18 1/2 inches. Colby College Museum of Art.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ellerton M. Jetté. 1962.007.

Photograph: Colby College Museum of Art.

Eastman Johnson's *Lunchtime*

By DAVID L. SIMON

EASTMAN JOHNSON'S *Lunchtime*¹ (Plate 1, left) in the Colby College Museum of Art is a seemingly quintessential American painting in the way that it represents American values of honesty, simplicity, and directness.² These values are expressed both through subject and form, that is, in terms of the humility that is represented in the painting and in the manner with which it is represented. In the center of the composition are two boys³ facing each other. The older one leans against a chair on which a metal bowl rests; he holds an implement with his right hand, apparently taking food from the bowl. That he is in mid-meal is emphasized by his puffy, food-filled cheeks. His companion, a much younger child, appears to have been crawling; he is on his knees and supports himself by holding onto a leg of the chair while looking up at the older child. A domestic, if worn, setting is accentuated by the rubbed paint and chipped wood of the open door at the left of the composition, by the cracked walls and crumbled plaster revealing lath on the stairway at the right, and by a room with an exposed bed that is visible through an open doorway behind the figures. The simple scene, with only two figures filling the center of the canvas, is appropriately represented by simple and muted color relationships, largely based on a subdued range of hues. Limited tonalities and the

I would like to thank the staff of the Colby College Museum of Art, in particular Gregory Williams, assistant director, and Patricia R. King, registrar, for their willingness to allow me to examine *Lunchtime* in detail and under ideal circumstances. I am also grateful to Sonia C. Simon, emeritus professor of art at Colby College, for reading various drafts of this article. My colleagues at Colby, especially Professor Michael Marlais, Professor Véronique Plesch, and Professor Laura Saltz have been willing to allow this non-Americanist to talk about Johnson and about American art with relative impunity, and I owe a particular debt of gratitude to a generation of Colby students who have shared with me the excitement of viewing original works of art firsthand; it is from my discussions with students in the Museum that the germ of this article first sprouted. I would be remiss indeed if I did not acknowledge the help of Adam Grassi '03, who for a long year was my research assistant and helped me sort my way through Johnson bibliography, and of Courtney Rothbard, who assisted me at the end stages of this project.

1. The painting, acquisition number 1962.007, is oil on composition board and measures 21 x 18 5/8 inches. It is inscribed "E. Johnson '65" in the lower right corner and was donated to the Colby College Museum of Art by Mr. and Mrs. Ellerton M. Jetté in 1962.

2. Edward Lucie-Smith (*American Realism* [New York: Abrams, 1994] 24) refers to Johnson's paintings of the period when the Colby work was painted as "quintessentially American not only because of their subject matter but because they encapsulate the idea that there is an American truth in art." The American quality of the painting is clearly emphasized at the Colby Museum where the painting is presented in context of other American works, hung next to Winslow Homer's *The Trapper*.

3. The skirted costume of the younger child is not an identification of sex, since in the 1860s and relying on a long tradition, pre-toddler boys and girls dressed alike. Although the short hair of the younger child is probably an indication that he is a boy, in fact sometimes girls wore short hair as well. See Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992) especially 103.

reduced saturation of colors all reflect the unaffected subject. The figures themselves are painted in an almost blurry, *sfumato* manner, which adds a sense of immediacy to the work.

Eastman Johnson was one of mid-nineteenth century America's premier genre painters, those artists who concentrated on scenes of everyday life. Much as this painting is a natural, matter-of-fact presentation of an anecdotal scene and as such accentuates those American values mentioned above, the painting is, in fact, a product of an artist who studied abroad for a protracted period. Born in Lovell, Maine, in 1824, Johnson moved with his parents to nearby Fryeburg and then Augusta.⁴ Around 1840 he worked for a lithographer in Boston and received a number of commissions as a portrait draftsman, a practice that he continued in Washington, D.C. and later in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Clearly recognizing that he would need increased training if he were to develop as an artist, in 1849 Johnson chose to travel to Düsseldorf, where he stayed until 1851, studying anatomical drawing at the Royal Academy. He moved to The Hague during the summer of that year and in 1855 moved to Paris, entering the studio of Thomas Couture, probably the leading academic painter of the day. A few months after arriving in Paris, he was called back to America, a result of the death of his mother, ending a more than six-year stay in Europe.⁵ Johnson's desire to master his trade and study art in Europe was of course not a unique instance. Among America's finest early artists, both John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West had not only gone to Europe to study but had remained in England. In fact, Johnson traveled to Düsseldorf with the artist George Henry Hall, and in Düsseldorf, as well as in The Hague and in Paris, he found other Americans with aspirations similar to his own.⁶

It is clear from an examination of the Colby Museum painting that Johnson learned the lessons of current practice from the artists with whom he studied and those of the Old Masters from works he would have seen in the European cities in which he lived and to which he traveled. The two boys in the Colby painting establish a triangular or pyramidal composition, as classical an arrangement and as firmly rooted as one could find in any Renaissance work, in any painting by Raphael or Leonardo da Vinci, for example. The diagonal incline of the older boy's legs forms one side of the triangle, while the skirt of the younger one is conveniently placed to form its other side and to

4. Biographical information on Johnson is drawn from 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 and Progress of Art in America* (New York: Putnam, 1867; reprinted New York: Carr, 1966) 466-71; Wilfrid Meynell, *Some Modern Artists and Their Work* (London: Cassel, 1883) 153-59; William Walton, "Eastman Johnson, Painter," *Scribner's Magazine* 40 no. 3 (1906): 263-74; John I. H. Baur, *An American Genre Painter: Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906* (Brooklyn: Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1940); Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson* (New York: Potter, 1972); Patricia Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson: The Sources and Development of His Style and Themes* (New York: Garland, 1977); Teresa A. Carbone and Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1999).

5. Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson*, 5-20, 121-22; Teresa A. Carbone, "From Crayon to Brush: The Education of Eastman Johnson, 1840-1858," in Carbone and Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* 11-32.

6. Carbone, "From Crayon to Brush" 16-32.

suggest as well the triangle's base. The triangle is prevented from becoming a static element by being interlocked with other and varied geometrical shapes. The rectangle of the door and the rhomboid of the stairway's banister balance each other and, with the rectangle of the rug that slides into the composition, energize the central grouping. The careful construction forms, in its own way, as poetic a composition as any still life by Chardin. The reduced colors and intensities accentuate the more varied contrasts of light, which become the principle structural means of establishing unity and contrast within the painting. Light entering through the door illuminates the two figures, accentuating their plasticity and creating dramatic patterns. The strong light from the left is balanced by a softer light coming from the right, from above the stairs, which serves, while balancing the visual weight of the open door on the opposite side of the painting, as a compositional device to direct attention back to the central group. The composition and the use of light together emphasize the central figures and add gravity to the everyday scene; indeed, the light creates atmosphere and a sense of moment, heightening the anecdotal aspects of the work even as it clues the viewer to the appropriateness of reading the scene as emotionally expressive. In short, Johnson demonstrates a masterly ability to create compelling compositions and to model forms using *chiaroscuro*, thus employing the traditional methods of the Old Masters whose works he would have studied in Europe.

Johnson was following in a long tradition of genre painting that undoubtedly derives from Flemish and Dutch painters, beginning with those of the Golden Age of the seventeenth century and continuing into the work of Johnson's contemporaries. The anecdotal nature of the scene, the warm coloration and reduced hues, and the concentration on a domestic interior are elements shared with many Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century, the kind of works that Johnson would have admired during his stay in Europe, particularly during his four years in Holland,⁷ but that also would have been available to him in America through works acquired by American collectors and probably even more importantly through prints that were distributed here.⁸ It is not only the character of the interior that reminds us of Dutch painting; in fact some of the specific elements Johnson chose to depict appear commonly in Dutch works, for example, the vista into another room,⁹ the open door, and the stairway. These elements can be seen in works by Pieter de Hooch, Pieter van Slingelandt, Gerard Dou, and Adriaen van Gaesbeeck, among others,¹⁰

7. Henry James, in a review of 1875 art exhibitions, noted that a painting by Johnson "has a Dutch humility of subject, but also an almost Dutch certainty of touch." See James, "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited," *The Galaxy* 20 (1875): 93; Carbone "From Crayon to Brush" 19-30. Baur (*An American Genre Painter* 14) recounts that in The Hague Johnson was nicknamed "the American Rembrandt."

8. H. Nichols B. Clark, "A Taste for the Netherlands: The Impact of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Genre Painting on American Art 1800-1860," *The American Art Journal* 14.2 (1982): 23-38.

9. Hills (*Eastman Johnson* 83) has suggested that other of Johnson's paintings that include views of rooms in the distance recall Dutch interior paintings.

10. See for example, Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) figures 88, 93, 115, 157; Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983) figure 102. Children are commonly represented in Dutch genre painting, as evidenced by Durantini's study.

and, as Teresa Carbone has pointed out, the tradition continued in Holland into the nineteenth century, for example in work by Hubertus van Hove, who was a member of the same group of artists in The Hague as was Johnson.¹¹ Of course there was an American tradition of genre painting with which Johnson would also have been familiar.¹² Some of the elements of our painting, for example, children's toys, the stairway, and the bedroom in the background, appear in earlier American paintings, such as *The Itinerant Artist* (circa 1813-25) by Charles Bird King.¹³

The lure of Dutch painting was not only a result of the formal solutions it provided to American artists; undoubtedly Dutch paintings, both in the subjects represented and in the manner in which they were depicted, were thought appropriate for emulation because of the republican virtues they patently espoused.¹⁴ In acknowledging Johnson's highly skilled manipulation of traditional painterly and design elements, one recognizes that the seemingly simple approach to painting, at first glance reflecting the purity and directness of American values, is in fact highly contrived, the result of the skilled manipulation of artistic forms.¹⁵

But, however charming the painting seems at first glance, there is more than anecdote being presented here. Johnson's method of exactitude in the representation of details, an exactitude that largely conveys the naturalism of the scene, encourages us to notice many seemingly subsidiary details. At the bottom right of the painting are a series of corncobs, some leaning against each other and some arranged to form an architectural structure, a precursor to Lincoln logs with which later generations of American children would play. Another cob rests on an empty spool, the pair taking the form of a cannon, which, due to its placement in front of the piled-up cobs, suggests that together they might form a toy fort. Given the humble surroundings, it is not surprising to find that these children's toys would have been made from household detritus. On the other side of the composition, that is at lower left, flower petals are scattered on the floor, as if they had casually blown in through the open doorway. The corncobs primarily fall so as to create a predominantly horizontal and vertical pattern, reinforcing the enframement and, as such, emphasizing the architectonic structure of the composition. Only a few of the cobs are arranged on diagonal and these point into the composition, at the children, and at the chair that comes between them. Although the primary composition is formed by the two figures, the chair placed between

11. Carbone, "From Crayon to Brush" 26-29.

12. Hermann Warner Williams, Jr., *Mirror to the American Past, A Survey of American Genre Painting: 1750-1950* (Greenwich, Ct.: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson*, especially 207.

13. Williams, *Mirror to the American Past* 51. King was resident in Washington after 1815, and Johnson would certainly have been aware of his works. Johnson and King were cited together in an 1856 article on the Washington art scene in the *Crayon*. See Carbone, "From Crayon to Brush" 13, 32, 37.

14. Clark, "A Taste for the Netherlands" 23-38.

15. I am reminded of Claude Lévi-Strauss's account: "The painter is always mid-way between design and anecdote, and his genius consists in uniting internal and external knowledge." Cited in Christopher Benfey, *Degas in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997) 164. On the constructed aspects of genre compositions, see Hills, *Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 6. Henry James said of Johnson, "Of all our artists, he has most coquetry of manipulation." In "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited" 93.

them fills the central space, uniting the major compositional group even as it separates its main elements, the two figures. This play on unity and separation is key to a fuller reading of the painting.

The painting is dated at bottom right, next to Johnson's signature, to 1865, a not insignificant date in America, the year that marked the end of its long Civil War. I believe the Colby painting is a virtual allegory of that event or, perhaps better stated, of its consequences. The children's corncob and spool toys are instruments of war, albeit humble ones, while the flower petals on the other side of the composition suggest peace, a fitting and meaningful juxtaposition. The two boys, connected by their locked gazes, are separated by the chair, the vertical spindles of its back functioning as a wall that divides them. While one child eats, the child who is literally on his knees seems to go hungry. In questioning why one child is eating and the other not, the viewer of *Lunchtime* is led to ask where the parents of these children are. Is their father one of those missing in the war? The reference to the absent parent, or parents, is ironic in a painting in which sustenance is represented at the center of the composition and reminds us of the public discussions about the need to care for Civil War soldiers' orphans, of whom there were many.¹⁶

The juxtaposition of the two children here, particularly given the way Johnson has manipulated compositional and lighting effects, is certainly far from accidental. Even as the Mason and Dixon Line of a chair establishes a sharp division between the two figures, it pulls them together and allows them to see each other, a touching metaphor for a divided country. Further, the chair functions as a memorial for the losses incurred during the war, for those who are missing. Unoccupied chairs often served as memorials, as gravemarkers, in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In fact, a popular, sentimental Civil War song was "The Vacant Chair," written by George Frederick Root in 1861,¹⁸ who also wrote a number of other popular patriotic war songs, including "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!" The vacant chair of the song refers to a soldier who would never return to his family. It is hard to imagine, given the song's popularity, and Root's as well,¹⁹ that Johnson or his patrons would not have made the connection between the empty chair of our painting and the

16. James Marten, *The Children's Civil War* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) 14, 216.

17. Empty chairs are common on funeral monuments, and not only in the nineteenth century. A recent one in Jaca, Spain, commemorates a victim of Basque terrorism, and empty benches comprise the Pentagon memorial for victims of 11 September 2001. For an 1860-65 example of an empty-chair gravemarker in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, an example of what Ellen Marie Snyder refers to as the "'empty furniture' syndrome," see figure 1.7 in "Innocents in a Worldly World: Victorian Children's Gravemarkers," *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*, ed. Richard E. Meyer (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989). For other examples, see Edmund V. Gillon, Jr., *Victorian Cemetery Art* (New York: Dover, 1972) figs. 248-57.

18. The words to "The Vacant Chair; or We Shall Meet but We Shall Miss Him" were written by H. S. Washburn. See Paul Glass and Louis C. Singer, *Singing Soldiers: The Spirit of the Sixties* (1964, New York: Da Capo, 1975) 286-87; Richard Crawford, *The Civil War Songbook: Complete Original Sheet Music for 37 Songs* (New York: Dover, 1977) 117-20. The chorus of the song reads "We shall meet, but we shall miss him, There will be one vacant chair; We shall linger to caress him When we breathe our evening prayer."

19. "Root, George Frederick," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. 2001, vol. 16, p. 183.

missing family member.²⁰ "The Vacant Chair" was published for Thanksgiving, which is referred to in the song and emphasized by the sheet music's illustration of a family gathered round a table with, in the foreground, an empty chair, remarkably similar to the chair in our painting.²¹ In *Lunchtime* the poignancy of the meal, on that unoccupied chair, is more subtle, but no less real, than in the song.

A similar metaphoric function for a chair operates in another painting that also specifically refers to the war, William Morris Hunt's *Our Sick Soldier* (or *Playing Field Hospital*) of 1863, which was widely available in a lithograph printed in the same year by Oakley & Thompson of Boston²² and which was a contribution to a Boston Sanitary Commission Fair held to support field hospitals and provide other humanitarian services to the troops, a forerunner of the Red Cross.²³ In *Our Sick Soldier* (or *Playing Field Hospital*) (Plate 2, right) two children have set up a toy field hospital and feed a doll, their sick soldier. Johnson would undoubtedly have been aware of Hunt's work, of two years earlier than *Lunchtime*, not only because of its wide distribution as a lithograph, but also because Hunt was a member of a similar artistic circle to Johnson's and one of the group of artists who had made journeys to Europe parallel to Johnson's, first studying in Düsseldorf and later in Couture's studio in Paris.²⁴

As poignant a metaphor as the chair is the triangle that Johnson uses in *Lunchtime* to stabilize the composition, an ironic comment on balance and unity, aspirations of a country torn apart by a civil war. Meaningful as well is the light that unifies the figures at the same time that it illuminates them as individual, thus isolated, elements of the composition. Indeed, Kenneth Ames sees light in Johnson's work as so significant that he claims for it a symbolic role, "to represent the challenge of America."²⁵

There is compelling evidence of Johnson's interest in the Civil War and in representing it;²⁶ he was present at the front at Bull Run and Antietam in 1862 and Gettysburg the following year, and a number of his paintings repre-

20. W. Lloyd Warner describes a Memorial Day ceremony that included a memorial to Civil War veterans and that contained "the Vacant Chair ceremony," which included the singing of "The Vacant Chair." *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959) 255-65.

21. Crawford, *The Civil War Songbook* 117.

22. Herman Warner Williams, Jr. (*The Civil War: The Artists' Record* [Boston: Beacon, 1961] 231) chose as a caption for his illustration of *Playing Field Hospital* a dialogue from Louisa May Alcott's "Nelly's Hospital" in *Our Young Folks, an Illustrated Magazine for Boys and Girls* (April 1865) in which children play at being war nurses and which suggests to what extent it was understood that children mimicked adult roles. See also Sally Webster, *William Morris Hunt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 64.

23. Williams *The Civil War: The Artists' Record*, 19, 231; William Quentin Maxwell, *Lincoln's Fifth Wheel: The Political History of the United States Sanitary Commission* (New York: Longmans, 1956).

24. Webster (*William Morris Hunt*, 20) points out both were part of the same artists' circle. Tuckerman (*Book of the Artists* 447) in his 1867 account lists Johnson and Hunt together as two of the four most eminent genre painters of the day.

25. Kenneth Ames, "Eastman Johnson: The Failure of a Successful Artist," *Art Journal* 39 (1969): 180.

26. Baur, *An American Genre Painter* 18-19; Hills, *Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 79-84; Patricia Hills, "Painting Race: Eastman Johnson's Pictures of Slaves, Ex-Slaves and Freedmen," in Carbone and Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* 121-65; Patricia Hills, "Images of Rural America in the Work of Eastman Johnson, Winslow Homer, and Their Contemporaries: A Survey and Critique," *The Rural Vision: France and America in the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. Hollister Sturges (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1987) 73.



Plate 2

William Morris Hunt, *Our Sick Soldier*, 1863. Lithograph on paper.
Published by Oakley and Tompson, Boston, Boston Athenaeum,
11 $\frac{4}{5}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Gift of Charles E. Mason, Jr., 1977. 7770A.
Photograph: Boston Athenaeum.

sent specifically Civil War themes, such as, among a number of other works, *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* (Plate 3, right) and *The Letter Home* (Plate 4, p. 406). Johnson's *Writing to Father* (Plate 5, p. 407) of 1863, painted in the middle of the war years, is undisguised in its reference to the absent parent and, as with our painting, to the Civil War.²⁷

Hermann Williams underplayed Johnson's involvement with war themes, but that is I believe mostly because he did not understand the complexity of some of the paintings or of Johnson's task.²⁸ A more nuanced interpretation is that of Lucretia Hoover Giese, who notes the difficulty of representing the war, because of its magnitude and its type, and cites a contemporary critic, James Jackson Jarves, who recognized "painting the war to be difficult, if not impossible."²⁹ That Johnson might have chosen to deal with an event as major as the Civil War in allegorical terms is not unusual, either for Johnson or for other nineteenth-century genre painters, who, while concentrating on the anecdotal, often conveyed a meaning beyond the literal one being presented. Genre paintings were often moralistic, even if meaning was embedded in such a manner that it is not obvious at first reading.³⁰ My own sense of the situation is that Johnson was attempting to find a way to deal with the Civil War in a manner that the American public and particularly his patrons could understand and would support. Although the use of disguised symbolism is certainly not unusual in American nineteenth-century painting, such an approach could have been reinforced by Johnson's stay in Couture's studio in Paris, and it resonates as well with the traditional approach to painting in Holland, where Johnson studied for four years. And, in Johnson's other work, the use of seemingly ordinary details to suggest symbolic import can often be seen, for example, in *Bo-Peep* (Plate 6, p. 408) of 1872 in the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, where the sanctity of the family is emphasized by the bible, the prie-dieu and the silhouette of the cross, outlined by the shutters in the background.³¹ As with the Colby painting, two figures form a triangle in the center of the composition, accentuated by a dramatic, if gentle, light coming from the side.³² Indeed, as in the Carter Museum painting, aspects of the Colby scene impart an ecclesiastical tone to the work, indicated by the child's kneeling position and his gold clothes that read as liturgical vestments, while the

27. The painting, today in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is illustrated in Marten, *The Children's Civil War* 80.

28. Williams, *Mirror to the American Past* 144-46. The evidence Williams cites, of the number of battles that Johnson witnessed firsthand and the number of Civil War scenes that Johnson painted, would suggest that Johnson was profoundly affected by the war. In an account of twelve years earlier, Williams uses Johnson as a seemingly exemplary Civil War artist. See Williams, *The Civil War: The Artists' Record* 18.

29. Lucretia Hoover Giese, "'Harvesting' the Civil War: Art in Wartime New York," *Redefining American History Painting*, ed. Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 64-81 (especially 79-80).

30. Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991); Williams, *Mirror to the American Past*, especially 16-19; Edward J. Nygren, "American Genre: Its Changing Form and Content," 6-26 and Peter C. Marzio, "The Not-So-Simple Observation of Daily Life in America," 178-91, both in *Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution and Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1981).

31. Didactic material accompanying the exhibition of *Bo-Peep* at the Amon Carter Museum.

32. Hills, *Eastman Johnson* 76-79.



Plate 3

Eastman Johnson, *A Ride for Liberty – The Fugitive Slaves*, 1862.
Oil on composition board, 22 x 26 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Brooklyn Museum of Art.
Gift of Miss Gwendolyn O. L. Conkling. 40.59B.
Photograph: Brooklyn Museum of Art.



Plate 4

Eastman Johnson, *The Letter Home*, 1867. Charcoal and graphite on paper, 24 x 30 inches. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The Julia B. Bigelow Fund by John Bigelow. 74.17.

Photograph: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

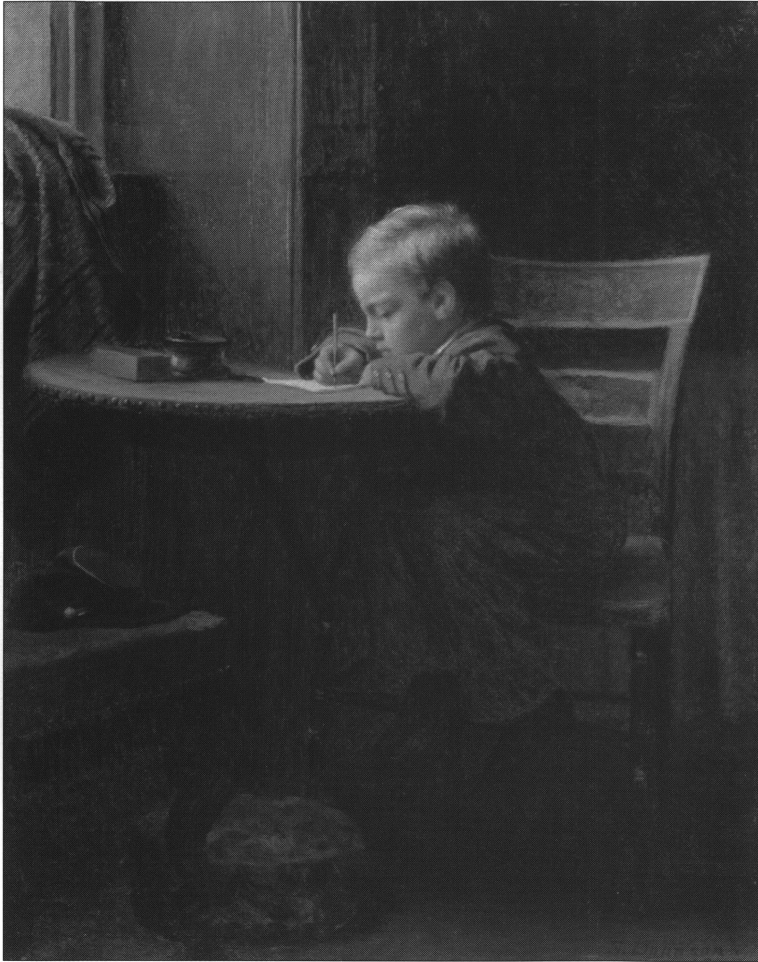


Plate 5

Eastman Johnson, *Writing to Father*, 1863. Oil on composition board, 12 x 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Maxim Karolik. 64.435.

Photograph: © 2003 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Plate 6

Eastman Johnson, *Bo-Peep*, 1872. Oil on composition board
mounted on panel, 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches,
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. 1980.21.
Photograph: Amon Carter Museum.

chair functions as a virtual altar on which an offering of food is placed. It has been widely noted that in the nineteenth century childhood was viewed as near sacred.³³ The exclusive representation of children here underscores the importance of children in nineteenth-century America, where they were viewed as synonymous with America, the youthful country.³⁴ Stephen A. Douglas, the Senator from Illinois and the 1860 Democratic presidential candidate, specifically likened the country to a boy,³⁵ and during the Civil War children were identified with the warring factions, all members of the same family, even if one in discord.³⁶ The family, in turn, was envisioned as the core of society and northerners, in particular, imagined the Union as a family, familial discord being equivalent to the conflicts within society at large.³⁷ George Forgie has claimed that for at least one Civil War writer, Douglas Trevor, the "war was an echo and capitulation of a child's fantasy of fratricide."³⁸

Recognizing the iconographic meaning of *Lunchtime*, its anecdotal details become even more significant.³⁹ The corncobs, which were in fact common children's toys, appear in other paintings by Johnson, for example in *Corn-Shelling* (Plate 7, p. 410) of 1864, in which a grandfather shucks corn, while a child amuses himself with the discarded cobs. The Colby painting picks up a theme of family relationship presented in the earlier painting and develops it into a more coherent, or at least more obvious, allegory. Johnson painted a number of other works in which corn husking is the central activity, some of these paintings suggesting a community of people gathered together for the common good, as in *Husking Bee, Island of Nantucket* of 1876, in the Art Institute of Chicago, or *Corn Husking* of 1860, in the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse.⁴⁰ Scenes of corn husking undoubtedly were meant to impart a particular American quality to the work, both because the crop was a plentiful one in this country and also because it was a native one.⁴¹ Corn's symbolic significance in nineteenth-century America was well recognized and accounts for its appearance in a rather dramatic example on America's Capitol in Washington. In 1809 the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe decorated the

33. Calvert, *Children in the House* 152; Lee M. Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910* (Yonkers, New York: Hudson River Museum, 1986) 24-26; Ames, "Eastman Johnson: The Failure of a Successful Artist" 181.

34. Hills, *Eastman Johnson* 71-72.

35. George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: Norton, 1979) 213.

36. Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 132.

37. Mitchell (*The Vacant Chair*, plates opposite 82) makes this point by showing illustrations from *Harper's* of 1861.

38. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided* 241.

39. Carbone ("The Genius of the Hour" 59) quotes an 1864 *Round Table* writer who says of Johnson's works: "that simple and domestic look that ... makes us feel grateful to the artist for so affectionately rendering subjects that are so closely connected with the heart of today. ... [T]hey mean more than they pretend ..."

40. Hills (*Eastman Johnson* 117) credits Johnson with "adding to the repertory of American painting such scenes as corn husking." Johnson was not the only artist to be interested in the subject of corn husking, which was a popular one in the mid-nineteenth century. For references to corn husking in both art and literature, see Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989) 34-36.

41. For example, in Thomas Waterman Wood's *The American Farmer* of 1874, in the New York Historical Association, Cooperstown, corn is an identifying attribute of the farmer.



Plate 7

Eastman Johnson, *Corn-Shelling*, 1864. Oil on academy board,
15 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, Toledo Museum of Art,
Gift of Florence Scott Libbey. 1924.35.
Photograph: Toledo Museum of Art.

Senate stair vestibule of the Capitol with foliate capitals on which corn was substituted for the traditional acanthus leaves of their ancient classical models.⁴² Johnson would undoubtedly have been aware of these corn capitals, since he was resident in Washington in 1846, engaged largely in portrait painting, his sitters visiting him in the Capitol, where he was allowed to set up a studio in one of the Senate committee rooms.⁴³

Other details indicate that the anecdotal aspects of *Lunchtime* are far from accidental. The simple, humble surroundings no doubt suggest admirable American attributes, and are accentuated by the fact that so many of the elements, such as the thick, plank-seated chair, are clearly the product of hand labor. The rug under the younger child is a hooked rug, also a product of manual labor, of home activity, a typical element of rural home decoration. The open door and the flower petals and corncobs further emphasize rurality, accentuated as well by the bare feet⁴⁴ and costume of the older child, whose loose shirt and baggy pants are typical rustic attire.⁴⁵ Although the fashion of the time, at least in some quarters, would have favored what we have come to think of as Victorian styles, with furniture both elaborate and machine made, such elegant interiors would have suggested an urban setting, while our painting stresses the rural and the rustic. Johnson was certainly aware of contemporary style, evidenced by the number of his paintings where fashionable city interiors are exhibited, often these interiors taking on a virtual life of their own within the composition, for example in *The Brown Family* of 1869⁴⁶ (Plate 8, p. 412) or *Christmas Time (The Blodgett Family)* (Plate 9, p. 413) of 1864. Suzaan Boettger has shown that a contemporary critic of the latter painting understood the setting as reflective of the Victorian "cult of domesticity."⁴⁷ I would argue that that cult is as much at the root of Johnson's thinking in *Lunchtime* as it is in *Christmas Time*, even if, or perhaps precisely because, the interior represented is so modest, and as such so homely.⁴⁸ Boettger understands the domestic bliss of the Blodgett family portrait as compensating for the uncertainties of a war-torn country.⁴⁹ Similar intentions are expressed in our painting, of only a year later, even if there is to some

42. Talbot Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York: Oxford UP, 1955) 269-70. Although the Capitol was largely destroyed by the British in 1814, the Senate stair vestibule survived the fire.

43. Carbone, "From Crayon to Brush" 12; Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 24; John Davis, "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South* and Urban Slavery in Washington, D. C.," *Art Bulletin* 80 (1998): 67-92.

44. In terms of the boy with bare feet, one is reminded of Whittier's 1856 poem "The Barefoot Boy," which in fact stimulated a painting by Johnson. See Burns, *Pastoral Inventions* 229-30 and Sarah Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children: Sentiment and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Art," *The American Art Journal* 20.1 (1988): 24-50.

45. Burns (*Pastoral Inventions* 103) uses a painting by Eastman Johnson to describe a typical agrarian costume.

46. John Davis, "Children in the Parlor: Eastman Johnson's *Brown Family* and the Post-Civil War Luxury Interior," *American Art* 10.2 (1996): 50-77.

47. Suzaan Boettger, "Eastman Johnson's Blodgett Family and Domestic Values During the Civil War Era," *American Art* 6.4 (1992): 51-67.

48. Jane Weiss, "Home-Loving Sentiments: Domestic Contexts for Eastman Johnson's Paintings," in Carbone and Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* 166-83.

49. Boettger, "Eastman Johnson's Blodgett Family" 65. See also Patricia Hills, *The Painters' America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910* (New York: Praeger, 1974) 34, 74.



Plate 8

Eastman Johnson, *The Brown Family*, 1869. Oil on canvas,
38 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III. 1879.7.67.

Photograph: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.



Plate 9

Eastman Johnson, *Christmas Time (The Blodgett Family)*, 1864.
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Whitney Blodgett. 1983.486.

Photograph: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

extent a reversal of the Blodgett group, that is, in *Lunchtime* the discord between the siblings is presented at a time when the war had ended, when unification of the country was a pressing theme.

In this context it might be instructive to reconsider the furnishings of our scene. The chair, central to the composition, is a Sheraton Windsor, an old one, generations out of fashion by the 1860s, as was the low-post bed visible in the open room. Both the types of objects represented and their vintage recall America's past, a time when the country's values, based on simple agrarian principles, reflected a society united in a common and salutary enterprise.⁵⁰ It is precisely this nostalgic view of the past that led to the colonial revival, which began around the end of the Civil War and intensified a decade later, that is at the time of the centenary of the country's founding.⁵¹ The colonial revival offers us a framework for understanding the setting of *Lunchtime* and is in accord with Russell Sturgis's 1867 review of a Johnson painting, *The Pension Claim Agent*, of that same year, as "at once a memorial of the war and of New England domestic life."⁵² Understanding this nostalgic view of America's rustic and agrarian past leads us to think about what is not represented here: the rampant industrialization and urbanization of the country are evident precisely because any reference to them is missing from the scene.⁵³ Celia Betsky has seen the colonial revival as establishing "a masculine presence at a time when the absence of men from the domestic scene had increasingly become the frequently regretted norm."⁵⁴ And, John Davis describes a pattern in late nineteenth-century painting where "group portraits are often imagined as theaters to feature the male child in a display of assertive activity."⁵⁵ In this context Davis cites Charles Loring Elliot's *Portrait of Mrs. Elizabeth Hart Colt and Her Son Caldwell*,⁵⁶ a painting of the same year as Johnson's, although executed in a very different manner, in which a toy cannon is placed at the feet of the child.⁵⁷

But, what of the title *Lunchtime*? Is it an attempt to obscure and thus heighten the effect of the disguised symbolism of the painting, a practice typical of some genre painters? In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that the

50. Burns (*Pastoral Inventions* 99-109) explains that "in agrarian theory the American farmer was the ideal American citizen, the ultimate and fundamental republican." Elizabeth Johns (*American Genre Painting* 14) describes the nineteenth-century view of the farmer as "the very repository of virtue." See also Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 86-92.

51. Cardone ("The Genius of the Hour" 66-67) has interpreted other of Johnson's paintings of the mid-1860s in light of the Colonial Revival, as providing "a highly accessible language for Americans bent on reinventing their lives with domestic values and stability." See also Hills, *Eastman Johnson* 40. Kenneth Ames has described "historical movements, most of which seem to cluster in three sets: (1) responses to modernization, (2) expressions of nationalism, and (3) strategies to cope with America's social and cultural diversity." The revivalist aspects of *Lunchtime* might well be seen as expressing concerns for all three categories. See Ames "introduction," *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Norton, 1985) 10. See also Celia Betsky, "Inside the Past: The Interior and the Colonial Revival in American Art and Literature, 1860-1914," in the same volume, 241-77.

52. Cited in Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 83-84.

53. Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children" 25; Burns, *Pastoral Inventions* 237-45, 297-313; Ames, "Eastman Johnson: The Failure of a Successful Artist," 178. Hills (*Eastman Johnson*, 92) has stated that "Johnson did not so much react against urban realities as he ignored their very existence." This would of course not have been true of his patrons, as is discussed below. See also Hills, *The Painters' America* 74, 80.

54. Betsky, "Inside the Past" 248.

55. John Davis, "Children in the Parlor" 73.

56. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

57. Karin Calvert (*Children in the House* 111-12) has noted that 17 percent of the 325 portraits of boys that she has examined, all painted 1830-1870, are accompanied by military toys, including cannons.

title was Johnson's own. The title appears on a paper label on the back of the panel, a label from the Vose Galleries in Boston, which sold the work to Mr. and Mrs. Ellerton M. Jetté, who donated the work to the Colby Museum of Art.⁵⁸ There is no evidence for the title going back farther than that acquisition, and I have been unable to locate a work by that title in Johnson's exhibition history.⁵⁹ However, there is a work by Johnson, auctioned at the Artists' Fund Society at the very end of 1865, the year our painting is dated, whose title, *Not Enough for Two*,⁶⁰ would make it a likely match for the Colby painting. The title is clearly suggestive of the kind of allegory that the painting represents in that there was general concern about food, about sustenance, at the end of the war.

Not uninterestingly, *Corn-Shelling*, the painting in Johnson's oeuvre that is most like *Lunchtime*, a painting in which a child is building a corncob fort and which was painted in 1864, just a year before our painting and the same year as *Christmas Time (The Blodgett Family)*, was owned by Blodgett.⁶¹ Blodgett was active in the Union League Club, a New York organization formed to further the Union and abolitionist cause, and in the Committee on Fine Art of New York City's Metropolitan Fair, which benefited the United States Sanitary Commission.⁶² Johnson was also a member of that committee and was to join the Union League Club in 1867.⁶³ Another member of Blodgett's social and political circle, also a member of both the Union League Club and the Committee on Fine Art, was Abraham M. Cozzens, who, according to an account published in 1867 by Henry T. Tuckerman,⁶⁴ himself a member of the Union League Club,⁶⁵ was owner of *Not Enough for Two*. Cozzens would have been well equipped to understand and be receptive to the political and social message of our painting, particularly as it concerned the fate of the nation.⁶⁶ It is intriguing indeed to think that *Lunchtime* might have originally been exhibited as *Not Enough for Two*.

The metaphor of brothers divided with insufficient resources to sustain them both would have been a poignant one for a country torn apart by a fratricidal civil war and would have resonated of other divisions that were of pre-eminent concern to Americans of the time. After all, America's losses were multiple, its divisions manifold. Among the oppositions that characterized

58. Paper labels on the back of the masonite panel to which the paper board has been glued read: Vose Galleries / 559 Boylston St. / Boston 16 Massachusetts / #20121 / 21 X 19 and Babcock Galleries / 19 East 49th Street / New York / No. Maynard.

59. The most complete exhibition history was compiled by Julie M. Douglass, "Lifetime Exhibition History," Carbone and Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* 259-66.

60. Douglass, "Lifetime Exhibition History" 260. The painting was number 49 in the auction of December 29, 1865.

61. Carbone "The Genius of the Hour" 62; Douglass, "Lifetime Exhibition History" 260.

62. Boettger, "Eastman Johnson's Blodgett Family," 60, 67; Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 68; Carbone, "The Genius of the Hour" 59, 64; Patricia Hills, "Painting Race" 140-143; 153-157.

63. Hills, *The Genre Paintings of Eastman Johnson* 77.

64. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* 470.

65. Hills, "Painting Race" 157.

66. Hills (*The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson*, 6, 15) claims that a catalyst for the popularity of genre painting was "its potential to illustrate patriotic virtues" and that "parallel to the appeal for a national art was the appeal for a morally ideal art." That art should be of social and moral benefit was of course not an American invention, but it was adopted here and well understood during the nineteenth century. See Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966) 213-30.

postbellum America, perhaps central among them, was the rural/urban divide and the concomitant agrarian/industrial schism, issues of import in American social and philosophical discussions of the time.⁶⁷ *Lunchtime* was painted at a time when Johnson was himself divided, that is dividing his time between New York City, where he maintained an elegant studio,⁶⁸ and rural Fryeburg, Maine, where he had lived as a child and to which he returned to paint local scenes, including *Corn Husking*.⁶⁹ And, the audience for paintings of rural subjects such as Johnson's was of course an urban one,⁷⁰ as evidenced by Blodgett's purchase of *Corn-Shelling* and Cozzens's purchase of *Not Enough for Two*. Johnson's attempts to deal with the multiple realities of postbellum America is perhaps a result of what Ames sees as Johnson's "ambition to create an American art which would be a true expression of his time and an integral part of American culture."⁷¹

Johnson's aims were lofty ones, and Ames has suggested that it was Johnson's inability to satisfy his ambition that led him to the subsequent and virtual abandonment of genre painting, dedicating himself nearly exclusively to portraiture. *Lunchtime* might help us appreciate the difficulty Johnson faced and the complex manner with which he attended to his task. While the nostalgic aspects of rural settings and the representation of children must be acknowledged, we should recognize the demeanor of the children here is not nearly so innocent as in traditional depictions of barefoot youths. Here, boys display the same comportment as their elders, that is, Johnson is unlike those Americans who, in the words of John Davis, "in the difficult years following the war ... looked for reassurance to the innocence of children, untainted by the fratricide practiced by their elders."⁷² Johnson's children mirror their elders more than they are distinguished from them. In many ways Johnson reflects Henry James's understanding that the Civil War had "introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult."⁷³

67. Burns, *Pastoral Inventions*, especially 237-45. The social divisions between rural and urban were not, of course, an exclusively American problem, and, as a result of an earlier industrialization, appear in England before they do in America. English Romantic literature is rife with comparisons between the two lifestyles, and there is a tradition in English painting to glorify the simple country home. Typical is George Smith's *A Sewing Lesson by the Fireside* of 1867, a scene with stairs and open room in the background and children in the foreground, although here with their mother, which recalls the worn, but honest, character of the interior Johnson depicted in *Lunchtime*. See Mary Cowling, *Victorian Figurative Painting: Domestic Life and the Contemporary Social Scene* (London: Papadakis, 2000) fig. 12 and p. 27.

68. Eugene Benson, "Eastman Johnson," *The Galaxy* 6.1 (1868): 112; Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 70-71.

69. Baur, *An American Genre Painter* 20; Carbone, "The Genius of the Hour" 50. Betsy ("Inside the Past" 273-74) cites letters from Johnson to his friend Jervis McEntee in 1879 and 1881 in which he "described his sojourns on Nantucket and the scenes he painted there as a relief from the urban art world, as an escape from the present into the past."

70. Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children" 25; Burns, *Pastoral Inventions* 308; Patricia Hills, "Images of Rural America" 63.

71. Ames, "Eastman Johnson: The Failure of a Successful Artist" 175.

72. Davis, "Children in the Parlor" 52; on the popular view of the innocence of children, see Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger, "Children, Childhood, and Change in America, 1820-1920," *A Century of Childhood* (Rochester, New York: Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, 1984) 1-32. Hills (*The Painters' America* 65) says "The majority of paintings exhibited at the time of the Civil War were sentimental renditions of life at home."

73. Henry James, *Hawthorne*, London, 1879, 144, as quoted in Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children" 25.

In many ways this more equivocal reading of the painting is in keeping with the development of Johnson's career. Carbone has pointed out that "as a figure painter in the postwar period, Johnson was more directly challenged than his landscape-painting colleagues to retune his subject matter to the altered tenor of the times."⁷⁴ But even for some of Johnson's work before the war, it has been difficult for scholars to agree on their meaning in a general sense and in terms of specific details, most specifically *Negro Life at the South* (or *Old Kentucky Home*), which has been variously viewed and interpreted in terms of its attitude toward blacks and towards slavery.⁷⁵ As *Negro Life at the South* demonstrates how Johnson transposed clichés about the way blacks and whites were traditionally represented,⁷⁶ so too *Lunchtime* shows how he reversed the mid-nineteenth century penchant for the sentimental and saccharine presentation of children. This is not to say that Johnson's aims were necessarily different than that of many of his peers, and we can certainly understand that the image of the country children "implied, or referred to, a strategy for social control, based on venerated traditions and beliefs, which might help redeem civilization."⁷⁷ Even as Johnson reversed the expectation of his patrons, he continued to express concerns with morality and nationality that dominated American painting before, during and after the war;⁷⁸ as early as 1865 he pushed the bounds of American genre painting on the path towards the acceptance of realism, something he was to continue developing into the 1870s,⁷⁹ that is before he was ultimately to abandon the painting of genre subjects. That at least some viewers understood Eastman Johnson's aims is confirmed by the critic Henry T. Tuckerman, who in the 1860s was Johnson's neighbor⁸⁰ and who in 1866, the year following the painting of *Lunchtime*, wrote of Johnson: "No one of our painters has more truly caught and perfectly delineated the American rustic ... or put upon a canvas bits of household or childish life, or given such bright and real glimpses of primitive human nature."⁸¹ If Johnson's *Lunchtime* is a quintessential American painting, it is so not only because of the simplicity of its subject and the seeming directness with which it is recorded, but also because it makes manifest the complicated, indeed contradictory, nature of America just at the end of the Civil War in the way it captures the concerns of a divided country, expressed in the poignant tension between naturalism and contrivance, unity and division.

74. Carbone, "The Genius of the Hour" 66.

75. Davis, "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South*" 67-92; Hills "Painting Race" 126-36.

76. Davis, "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South*" 81. For a discussion of contradictions in other works by Johnson, see Hills, "Painting Race" 120-65.

77. Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children" 48.

78. In Hills's words ("Images of Rural America" 73): "Art patrons would not have found pleasure in pictures of strife and conflict." Miller (*Patrons and Patriotism* 157) describes how "the smoothly idealized paintings of American children engaged in the virtuous activities of prayer, industry, or study also demonstrated how art could convey morality and nationality at once."

79. Hills, "Images of rural America" 78; Carbone "The Genius of the Hour" 84.

80. Hills, *Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson* 70.

81. Henry T. Tuckerman, "Our American Artists—No. VI. Eastman Johnson," *Hours at Home*, 4 (1866) 174.