Conscience and Context in Eastman Johnson's The Lord Is My Shepherd

Amanda Melanie Slater
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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Conscience and Context in Eastman Johnson’s *The Lord Is My Shepherd*

Amanda Melanie Slater

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

James Russel Swensen, Chair
Marian E. Wardle
Heather Belnap Jensen

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

Conscience and Context in Eastman Johnson’s *The Lord Is My Shepherd*

Amanda Melanie Slater
Department of Visual Arts, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis considers the experiences that motivated the creation of an 1863 painting by American artist Eastman Johnson entitled *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. An examination of the painting—which depicts a black man reading a Bible—reveals multiple artistic, social, political, and spiritual influences. Created in the midst of the American Civil War, the painting’s inspiration derived from Johnson’s New England childhood, training in Europe, encounters with the Transcendentalist movement, and his abolitionist views. As a result, *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is a culminating work in Johnson’s oeuvre that was prompted by years of experience and observations in an age of rampant racism and civil war.

It is also argued that *The Lord Is My Shepherd* has diaristic qualities in that Johnson explored significant social and political issues of the day such as slavery through his work. Before now, this painting has been considered a relatively minor work within Johnson’s oeuvre. This thesis seeks to change that perception and raise awareness of the contextual significance of *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

Keywords: Eastman Johnson, blacks, abolitionist, slavery, reading, Bible, American religion, Transcendentalism, American Civil War
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I wish to thank my parents, Jim and Andrea, for instilling the value of education and pursuit of knowledge in me. I am grateful to follow the footsteps of my mother and grandmother and to continue a family legacy in receiving this degree. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Mark Lierman, for his unconditional love and support during this process.
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Introduction

In 1863 the American genre painter Eastman Johnson portrayed a black man sitting in a kitchen hearth reading a Bible in his painting, *The Lord Is My Shepherd* (Figure 1). The painting is a small work—about 16 5/8 x 13 1/8 inches—painted in oil on wood. The title is somewhat enigmatic and it is unclear how it came to be ascribed to the painting, as there is no evidence that Johnson ever displayed the work. But the timing of the painting suggests that significant factors contributed to its creation.

Johnson’s choice of a black subject was noteworthy due to important political occurrences in 1863. The United States was in the middle of its Civil War. On January 1, President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed enslaved blacks in the Confederate States.1 In July, the New York City Draft Riots exposed the depths of racial tension in the Union. Ultimately, the Civil War was a crisis of such proportion that it left no one unaffected, whether black or white, northern or southern, slave or free; therefore, people who lived through this period had to learn to cope with the feelings it engendered in ways that were meaningful and helpful to them. For an artist such as Johnson, it would have been normal to address those feelings through his art. His image of a black man reading a Bible had significant artistic, political, religious, and even personal connotations at this time. As a result, it could be considered a culminating work in Johnson’s oeuvre.

Not only is it an important work in Johnson’s career, but *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is also a good example of the genre tradition in the United States. Johnson’s gravitation toward genre painting may have stemmed from his early interest in figure drawing rather than landscapes. He

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received praise for his talent in rendering accurate representations of figures from life.\textsuperscript{2} These realistic depictions were appropriate for genre painting because they drew on actual experience and live observation. As Johnson looked for subject matter to inspire him, he may have recalled what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his disquisition on “Art” in 1841: “No man can quite emancipate himself from his age and country, or produce a model in which the education, the \textit{religion}, the \textit{politics}, usages, and \textit{arts} of the times shall have no share.”\textsuperscript{3}

Genre painting was previously simply defined as “scenes of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{4} As scholar Elizabeth Johns argued, however, American genre painting was a “systematic cultural phenomenon that [developed] in certain circumstances and [met] social needs peculiar to a specific audience.”\textsuperscript{5} This kind of painting reflected social structures within American society utilizing the popular culture of that time. Examples of thematic subjects would include inequity between classes and race, and political conflict amidst American nationalism in the antebellum period. Such themes were often communicated through widely recognized iconographic symbols or posed in stage-like settings called tableaus. Thus, American genre painting was far more layered than observed “realism” or a natural-looking visual record of what an artist saw. The American artist needed a sufficient understanding of the culture for that time—the lexicon and social relationships—to create successful American genre art.

Johns’ research indicated that the relationship between the artist and the art world is vital to the study of American genre painting. She based her arguments on paintings that were

\textsuperscript{3} Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in \textit{Emerson’s Essays: First and Second Series} (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993), 185, quoted in Carbone and Hills et al, 43. The emphasis is the author’s.
\textsuperscript{5} Johns, xi.
displayed to a wide audience and thus subjected to multiple ideological forces. *The Lord Is My Shepherd* does not necessarily fit these parameters as there is no record that it was ever publicly displayed. However, it was painted during the Civil War, towards the end of genre painting’s popularity in America. Johns attributed this decline in popularity to the changing focus from public popular culture to private domestic culture.  

6 *The Lord Is My Shepherd* foreshadows this dynamic by taking a hotly debated public issue and transposing it to a domestic setting for the benefit of the artist. It is for this reason that it needs to be more closely examined.

Even though Eastman Johnson was a renowned genre painter in the United States during the nineteenth century, interest and knowledge of his oeuvre waned following his death in 1906. Apart from a monograph written by art historian John I. H. Baur in 1940, it was not until the latter part of the 20th century that Johnson’s life and work received greater attention.  

7 In 1972, Patricia Hills curated a retrospective exhibition of Johnson’s work at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City.  

8 The exhibit coincided with her doctoral dissertation work on Johnson at New York University, and helped to establish Hills as the eminent scholar on Eastman Johnson.  

9 In 1999, she and Teresa A. Carbone, curator of American art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, collaborated on a major exhibition of Eastman Johnson’s work entitled *Eastman Johnson: Painting America*.  

10 Their comprehensive scholarship inspired more research into Johnson’s life and work.

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10 The scholarly text that was published to coincide with the exhibition is Teresa A. Carbone and Patricia Hills, et al; *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Rizzoli International Publications, 1999).
The issue of race in Johnson’s paintings has been studied before. Hills’s research of the last few decades focuses primarily on the sympathetic renderings in Johnson’s depictions of black people in 1860s America, when the country was embroiled in a war over slavery.\(^\text{11}\) In addition, the evidence established by scholar John Davis in his analysis of Johnson’s 1859 painting, *Negro Life at the South*, confirms Johnson’s support of abolitionism (Figure 2).\(^\text{12}\) To date, however, no one has thoroughly examined *The Lord Is My Shepherd* to its fullest extent.

Drawing upon the research of these scholars, this thesis utilizes a biographical and social historical methodology to analyze how Johnson’s experiences contributed to the artistic, political, and spiritual aspects of *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. This thesis examines other works by Johnson to demonstrate how he used his art to express his views, especially in *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. Johnson left little written documentation expressing his beliefs but what remains contains clues about his perceptions of contemporary issues. Additionally, this study uses primary sources as well as his friendships and associations with many leading minds of his day to construct a more complete context for analyzing the painting. This thesis also argues that *The Lord Is My Shepherd* has diaristic qualities where Johnson was able to explore contemporary issues and create a painting where all of these influences intersect. In doing so, this thesis seeks to raise awareness of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* as a contextually significant study in Johnson’s oeuvre.

\(^\text{11}\) An example of Hills’s research in this area is Patricia Hills, “Cultural Racism: Resistance and Accommodation in the Civil War Art of Eastman Johnson and Thomas Nast,” *Looking High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, Patricia Johnston, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 103-123. See also Carbone and Hills et al, 121-165.

Creating The Lord Is My Shepherd

Eastman Johnson was born in 1824 in Lovell, Maine where his interest in art began in his youth. His father, Philip Carrigan Johnson, recognized Eastman’s talent and procured a lithography apprenticeship for his son in Boston in 1840. Philip owned several businesses before he became Maine’s Secretary of State in 1840 and then again from 1842-44. When Eastman was twenty years old, his family moved to Washington, D.C. where Philip was appointed as Chief Clerk of the Bureau of Construction, Equipment, and Repair for the U.S. Navy. Philip’s assignment coincided with the election of President James K. Polk, the Democratic candidate who defeated his Whig rival, Henry Clay. Polk continued the Jacksonian Democratic policies of slavery and westward expansion, which were both critical issues that affected the politics leading up to the Civil War. Philip’s progression from small-town businessman to politician in the federal capital demonstrated the self-made-man ideals that Andrew Jackson espoused.

Eastman was most certainly influenced by the political environment of his later youth and young adulthood. He did not aspire, however, to become a politician like his father. By age twenty, he wanted to be an artist. After the family relocated to Washington, D.C., Eastman set up a studio in one of the Senate committee rooms through his father’s political connections. Here notable Americans from both political parties commissioned him to paint their portraits. These included Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Dolley Madison, and Mrs. Alexander Hamilton. Such a location for a studio must have provided a variety of opportunities and

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14 Gerry Souter, American Realism (New York: Parkstone Press, 2009), 11.
16 Hills, Eastman Johnson, 6-7.
influences for the aspiring artist. In addition to the chance to hone his skills, these commissions personally exposed Johnson to the political players and affairs of his day. His daily associations with people from across the political spectrum gave him ample exposure to government practices, and the tensions between different factions. He also became a recognizable artistic name in the nation’s capital, which benefited his later career. While Eastman was not political in the same sense as his father, the close personal connection with the political luminaries of his day left its mark on his art.

In spite of the attention his artwork received, Johnson quickly realized that he needed further professional training. He left for Europe at the recommendation of the American Art-Union to study at the Royal Academy in Düsseldorf. Other American artists had trained at the Academy and had started sending genre works back home. Johnson’s political awareness was further revealed in his experience in Düsseldorf. When he arrived in 1849, the political atmosphere was uneasy. The revolutions of 1848 that racked several European countries had resulted in lingering bitterness and hostility, especially in the German Confederation. The German states failed to form a republic and many Germans had negative feelings toward the Prussian monarchy, specifically King Frederick William IV. Johnson spent a little over a year at the Royal Academy in 1850, which was, as described by scholar Barbara S. Groseclose, a “crucible of liberal discontent” and an institution of Prussian authoritarianism. The head of the Royal Academy was the Prussian-born conservative and German Romantic painter Wilhelm von

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17 The American Art-Union wanted American artists to produce more “American art” but believed, like many others, that in order to do so they needed formal training in the European academies.
Schadow. Tensions within the school stemmed from political and religious uneasiness between Catholics and Protestants and between monarchists and those that favored republicanism.  

This tension could not have escaped Johnson's notice, since he was probably exposed to much discussion in this "crucible" over a three year period. Johnson ultimately left the Academy to join the independent studio of the politically active painter, Emanuel Leutze, in January 1851.  

As an American expatriate Leutze strongly supported the revolutionaries who had failed to overthrow the monarchies and set up a republican model of government in the Rhineland. Johnson was present in Leutze’s studio when Leutze commenced work on his most well-known painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, an American theme that he chose as a thinly veiled allusion to demonstrate the appeal of the republican model to the German people (Figure 3).  

Johnson was assigned to make a print of the painting for Goupil, Vibert & Co., the French engraving company. In addition to the political discussion that he would have heard in Leutze’s studio, Johnson was also active in the *Malkasten*, a social club for artists founded by Leutze, where he would have interacted with other politically active American artists such as Worthington Whittredge and Richard Caton Woodville.  

Düsseldorf was also where Johnson first expressed disdain for the issue of slavery, which would prove significant when he painted *The Lord Is My Shepherd* years later. In a letter to his  

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20 Ibid.  
childhood friend Charlotte Child, Johnson recounted an incident of describing his native homeland to a German woman: “[I told her that] where I come from in America…all the girls do nothing but grow fat & get married & have black slaves to wait upon them, which she could scarcely believe, tho. [sic] she had heard America was a paradise.”

Johnson’s inclusion of the German woman’s skepticism at his description of American women’s lives, coupled with her expectation that America was a “paradise,” suggests that Johnson did not view slavery as a positive aspect of American culture. Slavery was not as significant an issue in Europe at this time as it was in the United States—if anything it was regarded as a living oddity or curiosity, which might have explained the German woman’s reaction. But Johnson’s letter indicates that the issue of slavery was on his mind years before he took to painting the subject back in America.

Johnson eventually left Düsseldorf to go to The Hague. He had only planned on staying there for four months but ended up staying four years. Holland probably had the greatest impact on Johnson’s artistic style. He was immediately captivated with the works of the Old Dutch masters, particularly Rembrandt, and appropriated much of their formal treatment of light and color into his own style. His affinity for Rembrandt showed in his copies of the master’s portraits. Johnson also spent time at the Mauritshuis, where the Royal Cabinet collection was held. He adopted the palette of earthy tones and took to observing life for inspiration, including Dutch peasants. He focused on figures and interior settings with mundane activities. Yet even as Johnson was inspired in developing his own personal aesthetic, he must have approached his

24 Eastman Johnson to Charlotte Child, March 25, 1851, quoted in Carbone and Hills et al, 238.
25 The actual practice of slavery in Britain, France, Russia, Prussia, and Austria had been abolished before 1841, which is why it remained a curiosity to them. See Peter C. Hogg, African Slave Trade and Its Suppression: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets, and Periodicals (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 259.
study of the Dutch works with the lens of an American artist. He incorporated the formal aspects of Dutch painting into the creation of his own American genre works, which necessitated that layered sociological aspect relevant to his American culture. While this would be particularly important in works created for larger American audiences, it also influenced the works he did not necessarily display, including *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

The formal qualities of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* may be traced back to Johnson’s time in Holland. Such motifs as solitary reading, sitting by a fire, and even the depiction of Africans were certainly influential on Johnson’s later painting *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. Rembrandt painted such themes in his works *An Old Woman Reading* (Figure 4), *An Old Man Asleep by the Fire, perhaps typifying Sloth* (Figure 5), and *Two Moors* (Figure 6). The muted earthy palettes and non-caricatured treatment of the Africans in *Two Moors* may have inspired Johnson’s later portraits of African Americans in the 1860s.

While its formal aspects may be inspired by the Dutch tradition, *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is an American genre painting and as such, it contains layered elements and relationships that would have been recognized within the popular culture of that time. Johnson’s adherence to the expectations of American genre painting is seen in the works he created after he returned to the United States in 1855 and up to *The Lord Is My Shepherd* in 1863. He chose culturally relevant subject matter, which he imbued with deeper sociopolitical relationships and meanings. To do this, he relied on artistic traditions of iconography and symbolism to convey meaning, as well as popular American motifs that he would have observed in the works of other American artists and writers.

One of the literary works that most assuredly influenced him was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This novel permeated popular culture both in America and abroad,
becoming the most popular book of the nineteenth century, second only to the Bible.\textsuperscript{26} Johnson purportedly painted his own rendition of the most famous image from \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} which has since been lost—that of Uncle Tom and Eva—the year after its initial publication in 1852, while he was living in The Hague.\textsuperscript{27} The novel’s influence on culture continued into subsequent decades where posters and staged performances spread through places like New York City, where Johnson resided in the early 1860s.

When Johnson returned to America in 1855, political tensions between the North and South were mounting, foreshadowing the eventual conflict of the Civil War. Franklin Pierce, a Northern Democrat with Southern sympathies, was President at the time. Pierce’s contrasting loyalties were indicative of the complex political environment that Johnson encountered when he returned to his family in Washington, D.C. This environment impacted Johnson’s art. In 1859, he painted what is generally considered to be his most famous work: \textit{Negro Life at the South}. The painting addresses urban slavery in his father’s neighborhood in Washington, D.C. After the death of his first wife, Philip had married a member of the George Washington family and his new wife had brought three slaves to the marriage. Protesting the addition of slaves to his family, Eastman refused to attend the wedding.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} Hills, “Painting Race,” 122. See also Jo-Ann Morgan, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin as Visual Culture} (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 140. Eleanor Jones Harvey indicates that the painting in question was displayed at The Hague Living Artists annual exhibition and was titled \textit{Uncle Tom and Evangeline} but the location is unknown. See Eleanor Jones Harvey, \textit{The Civil War and American Art} (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 183. Hugh Honour suggests that Johnson may have been commissioned to make the painting by American ambassador to the Netherlands, August Belmont, who was a “staunch abolitionist.” See Hugh Honour, \textit{From the American Revolution to the Civil War. Vol. 4 of The Image of the Black in Western Art} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 335n28.
\textsuperscript{28} Eleanor Jones Harvey. Interview with author. Personal interview. Washington, D.C., September 20, 2012.
Negro Life at the South gave Johnson admission to the National Academy of Design in 1859 and established his reputation as an artist. When it debuted, one critic from the New York Daily Tribune described it as “a sort of Uncle Tom’s Cabin of pictures.” This comment was probably motivated by the tableau setting, reminiscent of the popular stage productions that Johnson likely saw and Stowe’s novel inspired. Negro Life at the South opened the door to the kind of works that Johnson would create over the next few years and into the Civil War, namely, local subjects (whether real or imagined) and multiracial figures. As a genre work, Negro Life at the South illustrated Johnson’s understanding of popular culture. However, it also explored his personal relationship to urban slavery in his father’s Washington, D.C. neighborhood by incorporating sociopolitical symbols, which he later used in The Lord Is My Shepherd.

Negro Life at the South depicts a setting of urban slavery with two homes. The scene, as mentioned above, is likely Washington, D.C. and possibly near the Johnson home, if not the very street. In the work, a young, white, well-dressed woman enters the scene on the far right through the fence that separates the slave quarters from the master’s home. The slave quarters are an extremely humble residence, in contrast to the large, well-kept master’s home. The tableau setting follows the genre tradition in that one may expect a particular moral or message to be played out by the characters. In this case, the message of abolitionism is portrayed within a normal, everyday setting. The color palette is true to life and the figures are placed in various groupings, as though on a stage, which was common in genre painting.

When it was displayed in New York, both Northern and Southern supporters in the city read their respective viewpoints into the painting. Abolitionists noted with dismay the

30 Davis, 69. “Old Kentucky Home”, the secondary title of the painting, refers to a popular minstrel ballad by Stephen Foster that evoked a nostalgic view of the South and not the setting of the painting.
dilapidated conditions of the slaves’ dwelling place, whereas those with Southern sympathies viewed the placid and leisurely expressions of the slaves as evidence of their contentment with the situation.\textsuperscript{31} This ambiguity was probably beneficial for Johnson given New York City’s unique political situation as a northern city that heavily relied on Southern economic enterprise. Johnson’s support of abolitionism would have made him a minority in New York City, which had economic motivation to support the South.\textsuperscript{32}

In spite of the mixed reactions in its original reception a closer reading reveals there is more visual evidence in favor of Johnson’s abolitionist views in \textit{Negro Life at the South} than against it. Eleanor Jones Harvey identifies several iconographic clues in the painting that demonstrate Johnson’s awareness of the ramifications of slavery and his own political leanings. These subtleties contribute to what makes the painting a genre piece as the artist conveys his opinion through pictorial symbolism. Apart from the white woman on the far right side of the painting entering the slave quarters, Johnson included other elements that suggest dubious interaction between the two houses. Propped against the wall of the master’s home is a wooden ladder beneath an upper window. This would provide an alternate passageway between the dwellings. The various skin tones observed in the characters speak to the mixing of the races as a result of rape of black slaves by white masters. This mixing of races, known as “miscegenation” in the 19th century, was a less-acknowledged and appalling side-effect of slavery, which outraged abolitionists. According to Harvey, Johnson subtly acknowledges these kinds of relations through the symbolism of the animals on the roof. A white cat slinks through the broken upstairs window of the slave residence. A rooster high in the tree in front of the master’s

\begin{itemize}
\item Davis, 67-89.
\item Ernest A. McKay, \textit{The Civil War and New York City} (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 41-43.
\end{itemize}
house crows as a brown hen perched on top of the slave residence looks up to the selected roosting place on the roof. It would thus appear that the “lord and master” calls to one of his female slaves to join him in a tryst. Through these elements Johnson was able to convey his support of abolitionism and display his heightened sensitivity and awareness of the complex facets of slavery beyond the immoral aspects of forced labor.

The following year, 1860, Johnson created a politically motivated and indirectly religious work for his close friend, the Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher, the brother of Uncle Tom’s Cabin author Harriet Beecher Stowe. The painting, entitled The Freedom Ring, depicted a young mulatto girl named Pinky whose freedom had been purchased by Beecher’s congregation at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York (Figure 7). Beecher was a Congregationalist minister, famous orator, and fiery opponent of slavery. Johnson’s painting is a calmer image compared to Beecher’s famed personality. Instead of a noisy “auction,” Johnson depicted the quieter aftermath of the girl’s examination of an expensive ring, donated to secure her freedom. In doing so, Johnson began to explore the possible results of abolition on an individual and even personal level for the formerly enslaved. During the next few years Johnson’s politics became more overt as conflict and war changed the nature of the slavery debate and life in the United States.

On April 12, 1861, Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter, a crucial fort held by Union troops in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. This event initiated the active conflict of the American Civil War. As a Northerner, Johnson’s family supported the Union cause, and his brother Reuben enlisted in the Union Army. Johnson himself never enlisted but he did accompany the Union Army on some campaigns between 1862 and 1863. While multiple factors

33 Harvey, The Civil War and American Art, 188-89.
34 Carbone and Hill et al, 133.
contributed to the causes of the war, slavery and abolitionism remained significant issues for Johnson leading up to The Lord Is My Shepherd.

As a genre painter Johnson established an artistic practice of making multiple copies of his own works around this time. This is evident in the creation of A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves in 1862 of which three versions exist (Figure 8). The theme of A Ride for Liberty literally centers on a slave family on horseback, riding toward the Union army and the possibility of freedom in the Union territories. The Union army is apparent in at least one version based on the gleaming bayonets (Figure 9). The father of the slave family faces forward with his son in his lap but his wife looks back toward whence they came as if afraid of being pursued.

In many ways A Ride for Liberty was an autobiographical work inspired by an incident that Johnson witnessed near Bull Run in Virginia in March 1862. Johnson described the event in an inscription on the back of the painting which reads: “A veritable incident / in the civil war seen by / myself at Centerville / on this morning of / McClellan’s advance towards Manassas March 2, 1862 / Eastman Johnson.” While there are discrepancies between historical records and what Johnson wrote on the back of the painting, A Ride for Liberty demonstrates Johnson’s significant interest in the issue of slavery and its relationship to the greater conflict of the Civil War.\footnote{As Eleanor Jones Harvey indicates regarding the discrepancy in the date, McClellan was in Washington D.C. through March 7, 1862, where he had been at a hearing to explain his continued inaction before the Council of War. He did not arrive in Centreville until March 9, and no battle was fought in or near Manassas until August of that year. See Harvey, The Civil War and American Art, 200; 267-8n79.} Despite making three versions of the subject, Johnson did not display any of them. It is possible that the subject was too inflammatory for a Northern audience, but it seems more likely that the incident captured in A Ride for Liberty raised issues for Johnson that he needed to address privately rather than publicly. The included date of the incident suggests a desire to memorialize the specific event, but the existence of three versions of this work may mean that
Johnson felt a need to work through his feelings about the subject on the canvas directly and that one attempt was not enough. Johnson continued to consider notions about blacks, both free and enslaved, in his art into the following year.

In July 1863, the same year that he painted *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, Johnson traveled to Fredericksburg, Maryland to meet with members of the elite New York Seventh Regiment. His intention may have been to depict them in an ambitious Civil War project.\(^{36}\) His plans for the project were frustrated within days of his arrival when the Seventh Regiment was called back to New York City to assist in subduing the infamous Draft Riots. The riots lasted from July 13-16, 1863. In all likelihood, Johnson returned to New York City, too. There he would have observed the aftermath of the racially charged riots, which led to the brutal death and mutilation of at least eleven black men.\(^{37}\)

The issue of black enlistment in the Union army directly contributed to the draft riots. Following the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, President Lincoln had authorized the draft of black soldiers into the Union Army. The riots in New York City erupted when some whites did not want to be drafted alongside blacks.\(^{38}\) In *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, Johnson includes a Union blanket or soldier’s coat—the blue cloth with the red trim—draped over the back of the black man’s chair.\(^ {39}\) The Union army uniform was a major example of the unfair circumstances that black soldiers faced in their enlistment. Black soldiers were required to pay for their own uniforms, the cost of which was deducted from their salary and unfairly added

\(^{36}\) Carbone and Hills et al, 57-8.


\(^{38}\) Ibid.

to the salary of white troops. Johnson’s interest in American politics had already influenced his artistic style and genre subject matter, and the inclusion of the Union army cloth draped over the back of the chair in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* supports his awareness of the political implications of black enlistment, and perhaps the unfair circumstances of their uniforms. Ironically, it was the government of the North—which was fighting to free black slaves—that imposed the salary and uniform requirements on their own black soldiers.

If the inclusion of the Union uniform in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* was provoking, other details in the painting were clearly designed to resonate with a broader Northern audience. The setting of the work is certainly humble enough to be a Southern slave cabin, but the inclusion of the Union army fabric makes this unlikely. In actuality, Johnson placed the black subject in a hearth of a Northern home. The hearth comes directly from another painting by Johnson called *The New England Kitchen* (Figure 10). This designated Northern environment shows the familiarity of home for Johnson, who was raised in New England. Johnson’s choice of a domestic setting from the area of his youth points to a possibly psychological motive for creating the work. Although the scene of a black man reading would not likely have occurred in a space reminiscent of a white New Englander’s kitchen, Johnson’s decision to place the figure in this familiar setting may be a personal attempt to grapple with his own thoughts about black people, their sensibilities, and abilities. The painting brings together Johnson’s background in New England with the current political topic of blacks and their place in society. *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is a reflection of Johnson’s political views both as they came to develop and as they existed at the time of the painting’s creation.

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40 The cost of clothing in the Union army was three dollars. This was deducted from the ten-dollar salary that black soldiers earned and added to the salary of white troops who already received thirteen dollars per month. See Harold Holzer, *The Civil War in 50 Objects* (New York: Viking, 2013), 179.
Perhaps the most astonishing political aspect of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is the very action depicted: a black man reading. Slave literacy was a controversial issue and illegal in many parts of the South. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 79.9% of American blacks were illiterate in 1870. This statistic would probably have been even lower in 1863, and lower still in the South. It is unlikely that Johnson deliberately depicted a slave in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* based on the man’s dress and his New England setting. Johnson’s subject is dressed in a white shirt and golden yellow vest with dark slacks. His outfit is not typical of Southern slave attire in the 1860s, which was often of a lesser quality material than those afforded by whites. Slaves would have worn functional work clothes, likely in the natural color of the cotton material from which they were made. Furthermore, in a later painting that Johnson made in 1866, *Sunday Morning*, an elderly white man and presumed Northerner is dressed in the same apparel and in the same setting (Figure 11). The black subject of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* sits calmly in the chair – in a space that whites could also occupy, as Johnson showed later in *Sunday Morning*. Even on the rare occasion when house slaves wore the hand-me-down clothes of their masters, it seems unlikely that Johnson would paint a slave in one outfit and then paint an older white man in the same outfit years later if there was a master-slave relationship. In all likelihood, therefore, the subject of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is a free black man.

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43 Johnson made two other works in 1866, where he switched the race of a figure in two versions of a painting entitled *Fiddling His Way*. The title figure (fiddler) is a black man in one version and a white man in the other.
44 Shaw, “Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce, and Industry.”
Even as a free black man, the subject of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is a solitary and isolated black man. The lone black man had been a popular motif in American genre painting for over two decades prior to *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. One of the most important examples is William Sidney Mount’s *The Power of Music*, where a black laborer eavesdrops on the music of white men fiddling inside a barn (Figure 12). Although Mount’s painting was made in 1847, it was published in America and Europe by the French engraving company Goupil, Vibert & Co. Goupil was one of the most popular engraving companies at that time, and Johnson would have known the work of artists like Mount’s through engravings if he did not see the original paintings.

*The Power of Music* is considered one of the few positive images of a black man from the antebellum period, known to have circulated, where the black man is not caricaturized or stereotyped. Bruce Robertson suggests that Mount was one of few pre-Civil War artists who understood that blacks had “the power to comprehend fully” based on the “unbidden” nature of his subject’s listening. Robertson supports his claim with the words of an old Negro song: “Got one mind for white folks to see / ‘Nother for what I know is me / He don’t know, he don’t know my mind…” Similarly, Johnson’s subject in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* reads “unbidden” to enrich his own mind. The mental and social abilities of free blacks were hotly debated during the antebellum and Civil War years. Art historian Albert Boime indicated that during this period, “black mental capacity was intimately connected to the question of spiritual grace” and that “black people’s mental ability arose historically out of reservations about their ability to undergo

47 Ibid.
conversion.”49 This suggests that social expectations in America were closely tied to religious observance, which would necessitate comprehension of the Bible.

Even if the subject was a former slave, the ability to read was a rare and powerful tool for blacks. Literacy, which was often taught through the Bible, allowed blacks to become contributing members of society, even when they were not granted full citizenship in the North. Reading is the key to all education. The highly influential periodical at the time Harper’s Weekly indicated that education and literacy were the most important necessities for former slaves. Not long after the war it declared: “The alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved refuse to teach them to read.”50

Despite its unknown origins, the title of The Lord Is My Shepherd has survived and it does provide additional insight into the painting and its meanings. It was not necessarily the one given to the work by Johnson. It first appeared when the Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired the painting in 1979.51 The title is derived from the opening phrase of the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord Is My Shepherd, I shall not want.” This phrase invokes the belief in a Christian salvation—a topic that many whites debated in its application to black slaves. It also strongly suggests that the subject is reading a Bible.

The 23rd Psalm also famously speaks of the “valley of the shadow of death” which would certainly resonate with an educated and religious American audience embroiled in civil war. In her analysis of the painting Eleanor Jones Harvey indicates that the title referencing the 23rd Psalm was given in an attempt to deflect attention from where the book is actually open.52

man were reading Psalms, the book would have been opened closer to the middle. Upon inspection, however, the subject is reading from the front of the Bible. As the detailed symbolism in *Negro Life at the South* demonstrates, Johnson was deliberate in his paintings and would probably not haphazardly paint the Bible open to just any page. Harvey convincingly argues that the man in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is reading somewhere in the book of Exodus, which is closer to the beginning of the Bible.\(^5^3\) At the time the exodus of the Israelites found in the Pentateuch was a culturally important story related to abolitionism during the Civil War.\(^5^4\) In this case, the subject of *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is actively reading the story of freedom from oppression.

Due to the Bible’s popularity within American society during Johnson’s lifetime, certain stories and motifs were culturally incorporated to illustrate contemporary political messages. The account of Moses and the enslaved Israelites’ exodus from Egypt was a common device for explaining ideas about slavery and Southern secession. For example, Northern abolitionists compared the plight of enslaved blacks to the ancient Israelites. The oft-repeated message throughout the book of Exodus is “let my people go,” a dramatic phrase and direct reference to freedom from bondage that invokes divine assistance as it pertains to freeing slaves. One popular use of this phrase occurred within the black community in the form of Negro spirituals, but even white Northern abolitionists drew on this biblical allusion to promote their cause.\(^5^5\) Yet use of this metaphor was not limited to the North or abolitionists. Southern whites also compared their situation to Exodus, likening the North to “Egypt” and Abraham Lincoln to “Pharaoh,” neither of

\(^5^3\) Eleanor Jones Harvey. Interview with author. See also Harvey, *The Civil War and American Art*, 211.
\(^5^5\) The most popular Negro spiritual that references “let my people go” is probably “Go, down Moses.” The words reference the story of Exodus. See Rev. L. C. Lockwood, *The Song of the Contrabands: “O Let My People Go”* (New York: Horace Waters, 1861). Reverend Lockwood notes on page 5 of the sheet music that the song had been sung by Virginia slaves for nine years.
whom would allow the South to peaceably secede from the Union.\textsuperscript{56} Due to his abolitionist ties, Johnson most likely resonated with the Northern appropriation of Exodus.

\textit{A Ride for Liberty}, Johnson’s depiction of the fugitive slave family on horseback fleeing to the Union territory completed one year prior to \textit{The Lord Is My Shepherd}, also suggests that he was pondering biblical and contemporary slavery and incorporating the theme in his art.\textsuperscript{57} This “fleeing to a promised land” motif conjures up additional biblical connotations. More specifically, the grouping in \textit{A Ride for Liberty} has been compared to the subject of the Holy Family and the Flight to Egypt, even though there are four members in Johnson’s party.\textsuperscript{58} The Flight to Egypt may be interpreted as a kind of “reverse Exodus.” In the Moses-led flight in Exodus, the children of Israel fled Egypt to escape bondage. In contrast, when the Holy Family fled Bethlehem to protect Jesus, they went to Egypt. This biblical theme seems to have been an intentional device in Johnson’s rendering of an eyewitness event because of its cultural association with fleeing. Rough brush strokes add to the urgency of the moment. \textit{A Ride for Liberty} depicts figures in a hurry, moving from bondage to freedom, from danger to safety. In contrast, \textit{The Lord Is My Shepherd} is decidedly unhurried, peaceful, and calm. This quietude is not an overt biblical allusion but clearly vested in the book and the private contemplations of its events.

When Johnson’s subject in \textit{The Lord Is My Shepherd} takes the Bible in his hands to read, he exercises his mental capacity to comprehend the message that supports his circumstances as a free black man. In this way, he takes the means of freedom literally into his own hands. The \textsuperscript{56} Langston, 88, 147.

\textsuperscript{57} Since Johnson was a northern artist, this notion of “promised land” denoting the North would have been applicable, though Southerners also saw themselves as a symbol of Canaan (one popular song in the South was called “The Happy Land of Canaan”) See Langston, 166.

message of abolitionism could be found and endorsed by the Bible, an important cultural source in Johnson’s white American society. As a result, the inclusion of the Bible in The Lord Is My Shepherd not only challenges the political climate of Johnson’s America, but also connects politics and religion.

With the incorporation of the Bible in his painting, Johnson adds many layers of significance and questions for contemplation. Not only could the black man read, but his choice of reading material implies the ability to strive for a closer relationship with God, to reflect on himself and his relationship with his Creator, indeed to imply that he, like the viewer, is a human being. From Johnson’s standpoint, the black figure quietly reading his Bible invites the white viewer to reflect on the former’s dignity and humanity at this most basic level, as if to say, “What if we are more alike than different?” The painting may be an exploration of the idea that black people and white people were not as different as the times and circumstances suggested. In addition, reading the Bible would have been part of Johnson’s culture, whereas black people, who were typically illiterate, would have relied on oral tradition to learn the scriptures. In placing a black man in that context, a scene which is both ordinary and extraordinary, Johnson created a work that conveys his spiritual views and those of the culture at large.

Johnson lived in an age that held the Bible in esteem. His childhood in the Northeast coincided with a time when religious upheaval was prevalent in that region. In Maine, the predominant Congregationalist churches were slowly edged out of prominence as new rural settlers in the state brought an increase of “dissident Protestant” churches, such as the Methodists, Baptists, Universalists, and Shakers. 59 Though they may have placed emphasis on

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different aspects of doctrine, all of these denominations used the Bible as their foundational book.

In addition to the Bible, Johnson’s exposure to religious thought incorporated various Christian Protestant theologies that were fostered through his family and friends. Johnson’s father Philip, a native of New Hampshire, was likely among the new settlers who embraced the new, “dissident,” Protestant sects. Philip also served as the Grand Secretary of the Masonic Grand Lodge of Maine from 1836 to 1844.60 Founded in 1820, the Grand Lodge of Maine required that every prospective member “profess a belief in God” prior to gaining admission to the order.61 The Masons also encouraged involvement within one’s community. Given the father’s position as Grand Secretary, it can be assumed that the Johnson family was exposed to basic Christian theology and community service. Another likely influence on Johnson’s religious views was his sister, Harriet C. Johnson, who served as a model in some of her brother’s works. Harriet was married to a well-known Unitarian minister, Reverend Joseph May.62 Furthermore, Johnson also counted the famous Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher as a close friend and most likely witnessed his sermons at Plymouth Church from time to time.63 Towards the end of his life, Johnson attended an Episcopal church, a denomination that did not have strict requirements about conversion.64

62 Harriet’s husband, Joseph May, was the son of the staunch abolitionist and Unitarian minister, the Reverend Samuel Joseph May. See Carbone and Hills et al, 64-65.
63 Johnson and Beecher were still close friends in 1875 when Beecher was on trial for adultery during the Beecher-Tilton Scandal. Johnson’s close friend, Jervis McEntee, mentions Johnson’s loyalty to Beecher in his diary during this time. See The Jervis McEntee Diaries, entry of February 7, 1875, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/diaries/mcentee/entry/18750207>.
64 For more information about the lax requirements of Episcopalianism, see Anne C. Rose, Victorian America and the Civil War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.
In general, the antebellum period in the Northern United States witnessed a blurring of religious and political ideologies manifested in the fiery sermons of charismatic preachers who expounded Christian allegories with secular applications. Long before the Civil War, many white preachers employed Old Testament motifs to expound American nationalism and exceptionalism. They likened America to biblical Israel, a land whose destiny was to be blessed and guided by God.\(^{65}\) As the century drew on, other sociopolitical issues like slavery also found biblical counterparts to promote supporting and opposing viewpoints.\(^{66}\) Pro-slavery arguments were explained by the existence of the institution in biblical societies. The exhortation of the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians for “servants” or “slaves” to “obey [their] masters,” was a justifying example. It is more than likely that Eastman Johnson was exposed to such sermons, or at least was aware of the conflicting and competing religious sects in New England.

The American religious world Johnson inherited as a mature artist was still deeply Christian and Protestant, but it was changing in some important ways. Private religious practices were becoming more prevalent as a growing trend of domestic Bible reading emerged. Religious practice shifted from church settings to include the home.\(^{67}\) This certainly influenced Johnson’s choices in creating *The Lord Is My Shepherd*.

The trend from approaching religious practice as consumers in a public forum like church, to becoming seekers in private Bible study at home, reflected many key aspects of the current Transcendentalist mindset. Johnson may have incorporated this thinking many years before he made *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, when he first became acquainted with the

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\(^{67}\) For more information on this subject, see Rose,17-67.
Transcendentalists. In 1846, Johnson moved back to Boston from Washington, D.C. and deepened his friendship with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of Transcendentalism’s leading contributors.68 Longfellow commissioned Johnson to make crayon portraits of himself, other members of the Longfellow family, and his associates. Johnson’s portraits of Charles Sumner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—all leading members of the New England Transcendentalist movement and literary world—were installed in the study of “Craigie House,” the Longfellow home (Figure 13).69 In this way, Johnson used his art as an entrée to become familiar with the leading social and philosophical issues of the day.

Johnson’s exposure to Transcendentalism likely impacted his personal spiritual views as well and would have been found in his art. Transcendentalism is more known as an American literary and philosophical movement but it grew out of a community for ministers, mostly of the Unitarian faith, to meet and discuss “theology and ethics.”70 While some members maintained a strong adherence to Unitarianism, others took more liberal approaches to religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson became a strong advocate of using literature to aid traditional ministry and encouraged people to seek spiritual enlightenment apart from a pulpit.71 Johnson may have heard these ideas when he made Emerson’s portrait, as Emerson was both vocal and pithy in his conversation.72

When Johnson painted The Lord Is My Shepherd in 1863, he did not depict his subject seeking spiritual enlightenment in a church setting but instead utilized a hearth. And while the subject is likely reading the Bible, it was used as a source of both secular and religious education

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68 For a good discussion on American Transcendentalism see: Philip F. Gura, American Transcendentalism (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).
71 Ibid, 10.
in Johnson’s day, especially as an aid for literacy. The social power of literacy was certainly an example of lifting mankind, a goal that Emerson endorsed as part of a spiritual quest.

Johnson’s depiction of reading to convey spirituality in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* fit many of the tenets of Transcendentalism.

The Transcendentalist influence on Johnson’s inner life probably continued in Johnson’s correspondence with Longfellow over the next few decades and through the Civil War. Longfellow and Johnson were equivocal about their religious beliefs, yet a selection of each man’s works—Longfellow’s poetry and Johnson’s art—reflects a personal spiritual component, derived from their shared American cultural experience. Both men hailed from Maine, and were familiar with the religious upheaval that affected their home state and New England. Both turned to the Bible as a source of stories and motifs to convey personal feelings about contemporary issues.

Longfellow’s familiarity with the Bible is reflected in his religious poetry and writing, which is driven by a strong moralistic sense that relies on biblical passages. He alludes to the New Testament in writings like *The Three Kings*, *Blind Bartimaeus*, and *The Sifting of Peter*. He also incorporated direct passages from the King James Version of the Bible in *The Divine Tragedy*, which quoted prayers from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Johnson, likewise, incorporated biblical titles into some of his later paintings of the 1860s and 1870s including *Our Father Who Art in Heaven* (an 1869 painting which is now lost) and *Thy Word is*...
a Lamp Unto My Feet and a Light Unto My Path (Figure 14). But his 1863 painting The Lord Is My Shepherd is the first chronological painting to bear a biblically referenced title, even if the circumstances are unknown. While the title of The Lord Is My Shepherd seems inconsistent with the depicted subject matter, its ascribed title and that of Thy Word is a Lamp are derived from the Psalms and depict reading of the presumed Bible in a domestic setting—not a church—consistent with growing cultural trends in America and spiritual ideas about worship propagated by the Transcendentalists.79

Belief in the Bible was probably the largest cultural foundation of nineteenth-century American religious tradition. The Bible was regarded as the central source for “the knowledge of God” in American Protestantism, and was the most popular book published by American presses up to and throughout the Civil War.80 During the War, the American Bible Society distributed more than three million Bibles and New Testaments to servicemen.81 Regardless of the level of religiosity, the American public was generally “well versed in the Bible” and both Longfellow and Johnson reflect this notion in some of their works.82

Johnson possessed religious knowledge not only from his biblically literate culture but also through his own personal religious habits. He seems to have incorporated the contemporary American practice of “managing [one’s] own religious life” through private Bible study and introspection. He attended different denominations during his life, without belonging to one specific church or creed. In an 1862 letter to his close friend and fellow artist, Jervis McEntee,  

82 Chambers, 120.
Johnson stated: “For the present, however, I thank the Lord that I am back again in N. York (Possibly you thot [sic] I never thanked the lord [sic] for anything. It’s a mistake).” Such a statement strongly suggests that Johnson had absorbed his American heritage of being god-fearing, but was not overt in religious practice. He apparently gave credit to the Lord for good things in his life, prayed, and gave thanks. The combination of his cultural tradition and his personal adherence to that tradition informed the creation of The Lord Is My Shepherd.

Conclusion

It is true that these artistic, political, and spiritual elements still affected Johnson’s art in later years. Johnson painted more sympathetic portraits of blacks during the rest of the Civil War years. He also experimented with switching races in two versions of Fiddling His Way, where either a black (Figure 15) or a white musician entertains a white family (Figure 16). This suggests that notions about the relationship between blacks and whites continued to affect Johnson even in 1866. His depiction of domestic religious worship in Sunday Morning that same year, where the black figure of The Lord Is My Shepherd was replaced with an elderly white grandfather figure, supports Johnson’s continued ideas about domestic religious practice. As the popularity of genre painting in the American art world waned, Johnson returned to portraiture and occasionally included the activity of reading. But none of these themes has the critical, combined, and climactic effect found in The Lord Is My Shepherd. This painting is a significant

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83 Eastman Johnson to Jervis McEntee, June 28, 1862, Frame 506, Reel D30, Charles E. Feinberg Collection of Artists’ Letters, quoted in Carbone and Hills et al, 243. Interestingly enough, Johnson employs evangelical or liturgical terms like “rapture”, “benediction”, and “blessings”, to express his joy at returning to New York in this letter. This is further evidence of his familiarity with church practice and lexicon.
exercise, inspired by decades of living, learning, and thinking. The Lord Is My Shepherd is an important, reflective, and deliberate culmination of Johnson’s artistic growth, political views, and spiritual beliefs.

In spite of the forethought that went into its creation, The Lord Is My Shepherd did not receive significant recognition until after Mrs. Francis P. Garvan donated it to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1979. It is unknown how or when the painting came to be in her possession. Even after the Smithsonian acquired it, the painting was often stylistically compared to its twin work The Chimney Corner as a quiet image of a black man or compiled with other studies and portraits that Johnson made of black men, women, and children (Figure 17). 84 But it is more than just a portrait or rendering of a minority race from the 1860s. When understood in its proper context, The Lord Is My Shepherd takes the moral question of abolitionism and raises it to another level. Multiple cultural influences, private religious experience, and a tumultuous political scenario combined to inform this painting.

84 See for example Patricia Hills, “Painting Race: Eastman Johnson’s Pictures of Slaves, Ex-Slaves, and Freedmen,” in Carbone and Hills et al, 121-165, especially 140.
Figure 1. Eastman Johnson, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, 1863. Oil on wood. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
Figure 2. Eastman Johnson, *Negro Life at the South (Old Kentucky Home)*, 1859. Oil on canvas. New York Historical Society.

Figure 3. Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *An Old Woman Reading*, 1655. Oil on panel. Buccleuch Collection, Drumlanrig Castle, Scotland.

Figure 5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *An Old Man Asleep by a Fire, perhaps typifying Sloth*, 1629. Oil on panel. Sabauda Gallery, Turin.
Figure 6. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Two Moors*, 1661. Oil on canvas. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Figure 7. Eastman Johnson, *The Freedom Ring*, 1860. Oil on paperboard. Private collection.


Figure 11. Eastman Johnson, *Sunday Morning*, 1866. Oil on canvas. New York Historical Society.
Crayon and chalk on tan wove paper. Craigie House, Cambridge, Ma.
Figure 15. Eastman Johnson, *Fiddling His Way*, 1866.
Oil on canvas. Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Va.

Figure 16. Eastman Johnson, *Fiddling His Way*, 1866.
Oil on board. Terra Foundation for American Art.
Figure 17. Eastman Johnson, *The Chimney Corner*, 1863. Oil on cardboard. Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York.
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