



Perhaps someone visiting Arizona State University's Art Museum for the first time might overlook Eastman Johnson's "The Cranberry Pickers in Nantucket," c. 1875-1880 (Figure 1). It is a monochromatic oil sketch which appears hastily done. Several indistinct figures are depicted working under the warm early afternoon sun of a Nantucket autumn day. Three foreground figures dominate this scene while to their right are ghost-like outlines of other once contemplated pickers. Several more labor in the background of this wide, unspectacular cranberry bog. The story it tells is not immediately captivating, neither is its color scheme of rather drab earth tones. Because no aspect of this sketch has been completed in detail, it barely hints of the carefully finished final version, "The Cranberry Harvest," Timken Gallery, San Diego, 1880 (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Eastman Johnson, *The Cranberry Pickers in Nantucket*, ca. 1875–1880, oil, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Oliver B. James.

Because Johnson was an especially eclectic artist, the sketch's unfinished state provides interested students with a document which says a great deal about the American art scene of the 1870s and 1880s in terms of working methods, artistic development, subject matter and the cross currents between European and American art.

Eastman Johnson (1824-1906) enjoyed an exceptionally long and financially rewarding career. By the time he painted the sketch for *The Cranberry Pickers in Nantucket* he was one of America's best known genre painters. At his death he was regarded more as a great portraitist. After completing his many Nantucket scenes in the early 1880s he devoted the final two and a half decades of his career to portraying affluent Americans. Only in recent years has he regained his position as a great painter of American life.

Born in Lovell, Maine, Johnson was a self-taught youth who quickly created a reputation with his drawings of such famous politicians and literary figures as John Quincy Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson. By 1849 he had decided he needed formal training, and like other ambitious American contemporaries including Emmanuel Leutze and George Caleb Bingham, he

sailed for Dusseldorf, Germany where he enrolled in its academy.¹ The academy was renown for its sentimental historical and genre paintings and it taught Johnson meticulous drawing skills and compositional techniques. The Academy placed little emphasis upon oil painting. Frustrated because he could not use a brush Johnson spent much of 1851 in the studio of Leutze. He left Germany for The Hague, complaining "there is nothing to see but the present artists," who he felt were "deficient in some of the chief requisites, as in color. . ."²

In Holland he began a four year love affair with Dutch art, earning himself the title "the American Rembrandt." There his brushwork, under the influence of Hals especially, loosened considerably and he completed his first genre paintings. While his portraits gained for him the position as Court Painter, it was his genre scenes which gained him his reputation.³

In 1855, desiring more formal instruction, he joined several former Dusseldorf companions in Paris at the atelier of the famous painter-instructor Thomas Couture. The French master was very popular with Americans because he stressed method. This new environment excited Johnson so much that he later stated he would have remained in Paris forever had not his mother died just two months after his arrival there, forcing him to return to the United States.⁴ Such a brief tenure would seem to exclude the possibility of Johnson being heavily influenced in France. Yet his contemporaries and today's art scholars have acknowledged the heavy debt of Couture. The American artist Carroll Beckwith stated shortly after Johnson's death, "His method of work was one known to our predecessors and esteemed by us, though differing from that which I had myself been taught. . . Thomas Couture was perhaps the best exponent of this method in France during the period preceding my study there. Eastman Johnson practiced this formula of painting with extreme dexterity. . ."⁵ Patricia Hills, today's leading Johnson scholar, and Albert Boime are two who have confirmed the impact of Couture.⁶ The "Cranberry Pickers" sketch would not exist today without the influence of the French master.

The ASU painting is one of some dozen oil sketches or drawings from the 1870s on this theme. Johnson consistently used sketches for his genre scenes, completing over thirty for his maple sugaring subjects of the 1860s. This reflects the impact of Couture, who emphasized more than any other instructor of his day "the practice of making painted sketches."⁷ The loose fluid manner in which the maple sugaring sketches are painted reflects Johnson's knowledge of Rembrandt



Figure 2. Eastman Johnson, *The Cranberry Harvest*, Nantucket Island, 1880, oil on canvas.

and Couture. Despite the many varied studies for both themes, no finished version is known of the sugaring off scenes and just one – the Timken painting – of the cranberry pickers. The cranberry bog scenes can be divided into two groups. The Oliver B. James Collection sketch is clearly a study for the Timken painting. As in the finished work we find the central standing female in the foreground and scattered background pickers within the same unobtrusive landscape. Other sketches differ in composition and in theme, representing the final gathering of this harvest at day's end. Hills suggests Yale University Art Gallery's "Cranberry Pickers," c. 1875-80 (Figure 3) may be the final unfinished version of this scene, because of its degree of completion and dimensions similar to the Timken work, 27" × 54 $\frac{1}{8}$ " and 27" × 55" respectively.⁸

It is difficult to determine when the Matthews Center painting was completed in relation to the other sketches of cranberry pickers. The landscape and the standing foreground woman remain consistent in three of the four related sketches. It clearly illustrates Johnson searching for several solutions. He is determining the final scale of the central standing figure in relation to her companions and the landscape while deciding the compositional problem of how the kneeling workers will surround her. The foreground figures in their stiff poses are closer to the Timken work than the Detroit Institute of Art's "In the Field," c. 1875-80 (Figure 4) and resemble the ideal peasants of Millet or Breton.⁹ In this sense the sketch may have been a breakthrough for Johnson. Its size, 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ " × 43 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", is closest to the final version. In the end, however, it offered him few final



Figure 3. Eastman Johnson, *Cranberry Pickers*, ca. 1875–1880, the Detroit Institute of Art. Founders Society Purchase, Dexter M. Ferry Fund.

answers. In the Timken painting the secondary foreground figures were altered, their numbers increased. This is suggested in the ghostlike outlines in the ASU sketch. Such outlines were usually traced by Johnson in charcoal from drawings of individual figures.¹⁰ The landscape was finally extended horizontally, resulting in a more panoramic view. At the same time the scale of the workers was decreased in relation to their setting. The sketch is painted in an all over brown tonality applied thinly and evenly, allowing the canvas to show through in places. This technique, possibly learned from Couture, creates a sense of spontaneity and natural lighting not present in the final painting.¹¹

The sketch catches Johnson in the act of creating and contemplating, rejecting certain possible solutions while continuing to experiment. This was part of current academic practice leading to a finished painting suitable for public exhibition. It is important to keep in mind that despite current taste which prefers spontaneous examples of an artist's work, Johnson, like most of his contemporaries, never expected Arizona State's sketch to be exhibited publicly. Not only Homer but such artists as the Barbizon painters, various Hague School artists, Boudin and the Impressionists were seriously addressing the issue of precisely what constituted a finished work versus a sketch. As an older artist Johnson in the end was dominated by the desire for the slick, carefully-composed work. He is an example of the American artist working during a transitional period that offered alternative working methods to consider.

Johnson's genre scenes of the 1870s are often compared with Winslow Homer's visions of country life.

Similarities in pigments, brushwork and subject matter are obvious. Homer, too, portrayed berry picking episodes. These similarities are not coincidental since they both maintained studios in the same New York University building during the 1860s and early 1870s. Johnson's carefully painted exhibition works reflect his Dusseldorf training.

The spontaneous quality of the Arizona State sketch combined with its sense of natural lighting seems to suggest that it was completed outdoors. Indeed, Johnson did often work outside.¹² The painter regularly asked to be driven about the island with his wife in search of subject matter. All would remain silent until the artist found an appropriate place to work. Then the carriage would be halted. The driver and Mrs Johnson remained behind the artist as he began to work. At the end of such a session the coachman frequently observed what he thought an odd quirk. If no figures were yet in the sketch, one at least was invariably added by the artist before his departure. While figures could have been included for scale, it demonstrates how Johnson regarded Nantucket – as a source of genre scenes, never as pure landscape material.

To what extent did working directly from nature affect Johnson's work? While scholars agree works like "Berry Picking," Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, c. 1875-80 (pencil and watercolor on paper, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ "), were likely done on the spot, oil sketches and the final work were reserved for the studio, even for seemingly spontaneous work like that at Matthews Center.¹³ This puts the artist in line with academic practice of the time. Johnson, in any case, would not have needed to wander out of his studio for the cranberry scenes, because the bog lay directly beneath the cliff upon which his studio was built.¹⁴

If the "Cranberry Pickers" illustrates how an eclectic artist can react to various technical working options, what does this work tell us in terms of subject matter? From the 1840s artists such as William Sidney Mount and George Caleb Bingham had popularized genre painting. By the time Johnson returned to America in 1855 this branch of art had assumed a nationalistic flavor and widespread acceptance. The aftermath of the Civil War brought about an even greater vogue for sentimental everyday scenes. The sense of depression after civil strife, the rapid growth of cities and the resulting loss of long standing American ways of life combined to create a demand for nostalgic views of uniquely American subject matter. Johnson understood better than most artists what would meet current appeal, feeling "there



Figure 4. Eastman Johnson, *In the Fields*, ca. 1875–1880, the Detroit Institute of Art. Founders Society Purchase, Dexter M. Ferry Fund.

was so much beauty all around him in America that he had no time to paint anything else."¹⁵

Johnson first discovered Nantucket in 1870, when like most artists based in New York he was looking for a "quiet and incurious locality" in which to have a summer studio.¹⁶ He was soon enchanted and spent summers there during the remainder of his life. By the late 1870s Nantucket and Johnson were thought of synonymously because of the widespread popularity of engravings made after the artist's anecdotal scenes. Even today some of the local populace, including a few of the cranberry pickers, can be identified by name, Lizzie Champney noted for *Century Magazine* in 1885:

Nantucket (is) one of the rare spots which preserve the flavor and atmosphere of the olden time. The island – with its types of old men and women that are fading out elsewhere, even in other remote nooks of Massachusetts, its queer houses and windmills, its antique furniture and costume – has long been the artistic "property" of Mr Eastman Johnson. The man and the place have a natural sympathy for each other. He is a chronicler of a phase of our national life which is fast passing away, and which cannot be made up with old fashion plates and the lay figure of the studio.¹⁷

Johnson clearly had a story to tell and what and how he tells it says much about the way people wished to idealize a disappearing America. His visions of the island inhabitants inevitably present us with Americans who bring to mind such adjectives as proud, dignified, honest and hard working.

It comes as a surprise that during the 1870s Nantucket was suffering through a period known as their "Great Depression." The whaling industry, which had used the island as a central port, collapsed in the mid 1850s. The population had fallen from 9000 inhabitants to approximately 2800 by the early 1870s. The tourist industry had not yet begun and the people in the Matthews Center sketch were certainly picking the cranberries to eat, not to sell. The cranberry industry was not established on Nantucket until 1904 or 1905.¹⁸ The slightest hint of these troubles never appears in Johnson's Nantucket scenes, however. This tendency to idealize views of rural America is typical of Johnson and his contemporaries, Johnson's differing from most only in his suppression of blatant sentimentality.

Finally, in examining the questions of authenticity and dating, the title "Cranberry Pickers in Nantucket" was given it by the University Art Museum. In the

correspondence between Oliver James and the previous owner, the M. Knoedler Gallery of New York, it was referred to as simply the "Cranberry Pickers."¹⁹ As for authenticity the sketch is not signed, although typical of his sketches. His hand in this case is not disputed. The topic itself was uniquely Johnson's, it follows closely other sketches and the finished work.

Regarding the sketch's date, because the final version was painted in 1880, the sketch could have been painted any time during the decade. However, both Patricia Hills and Edouard Stackpole believe it should be dated closer to the mid 1870s. Dr. Hills has stated that c. 1875-1880 is a good approximation because of a sketch done on the back of a painting which is similar to works exhibited in 1874 and 1875.²⁰ Mr. Stackpole notes the bog was adjacent to the property Johnson purchased in 1871 but that for the two summers of 1872 and 1873 the artist was busy painting portraits commissioned in New York. He does not feel Johnson turned his attention to the cranberry pickers until the mid to late 1870s.²¹

The Johnson sketch owned by Arizona State University, while not a major work by the painter, reveals much about the artist's working method and choice of subject matter.