

Joshua Johnson



Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter



Sarah Maria Coward (1802–1860), c. 1804

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June 17–August 24, 1988

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

On December 19, 1798, an advertisement headed "Portrait Painting" appeared in the *Baltimore Intelligencer*:

The subscriber, grateful for the liberal encouragement which an indulgent public have conferred on him, in his first essays, in PORTRAIT PAINTING, returns his sincere acknowledgements.

He takes liberty to observe, That by dint of industrious application, he has so far improved and matured his talents, that he can insure the most precise and natural likenesses.

As a *self-taught genius*, deriving from nature and industry his knowledge of Art; and having experienced many insuperable obstacles in the pursuit of his studies, it is highly gratifying to make assurances of his ability to execute all commands, with an effect, and in a style, which must give satisfaction. He therefore respectfully solicits encouragement.

The advertisement is signed "Joshua Johnston." Joshua Johnson (the more common spelling) is the first black portrait painter in America; and he is the earliest known black American painter for whom an extant body of work—numbering over eighty paintings—survives. The "insuperable obstacles" Johnson mentions in his advertisement probably referred to his childhood as a slave. Having, however, become "a free householder of colour" sometime in the 1790s, as he was later listed in a Baltimore city directory, he probably lived a reasonably comfortable life, given his evident success in his chosen profession.

Despite this success and, in our own century, years of investigation and research, Johnson remains an elusive figure. Little documentary evidence exists to help us piece together the fabric of his life and work. It is, however, known that he lived and worked in Baltimore from about 1795 to 1825. It was a period in which Baltimore changed from a small town to a sophisticated industrial complex supported by an urban, heterogeneous population. By 1800, Baltimore had become the nation's third largest city; one-fifth of its population was black, and nearly half of the blacks reported themselves to census takers that year as "free persons." By 1810, free blacks outnumbered slaves in Baltimore by more than two to one. Many Marylanders had freed their slaves in response to more liberal manumission laws, the influence of early abolitionists, and a shift from tobacco to the more

seasonal wheat farming. By the 1820s Baltimore had the largest free black population in the nation. In contrast to Johnson, however, most blacks in Baltimore worked in “service” jobs and in the crafts—they were blacksmiths, gardeners, carpenters and, more rarely, boatbuilders, potters, cabinetmakers, and weavers.

It is believed that Johnson was brought to Baltimore from the French West Indies as a young child-slave by Robert Polk, a privateer, who was the brother-in-law of Charles Willson Peale, patriarch of a renowned family of American artists. After Robert Polk’s death in 1777, his son, Charles Peale Polk, was brought up in Philadelphia by Charles Willson Peale, who may also have taken Johnson in as a valet. While the extent of Johnson’s training as a painter is not known, and he proclaimed himself “a self-taught genius,” a comparison between his early paintings and contemporaneous works by the Peales and Charles Peale Polk shows that Johnson assumed their stylistic approach, itself based on artistic conventions derived from an eighteenth-century European portrait tradition that was widely adopted by colonial artists. Among the most obvious similarities between Johnson’s domestic portraiture and that of the various Peales is the selection of poses, as well as the use of swagged and trimmed curtains and open window vistas as background motifs. Letters, papers, and books proliferate in the hands of all these artists’ sitters; vignettes of fruit, occasionally in baskets, and children gesturing toward bushes are further shared motifs. Moreover, a number of Johnson’s earliest subjects were members of prominent Baltimore families who were also patrons of Polk and the Peales. This suggests that the established artists aided Johnson’s career by recommending him to prospective clients. It appears that once he was known to a few influential citizens in the town, including leading abolitionist families, Johnson’s clientele grew, his customers ranging from the wealthiest people in Baltimore to his shopkeeper neighbors.

Although Polk and most of the Peales left Baltimore by the late 1790s, Johnson remained. Artists of this period, whether highly trained and talented or untutored and naive, tended to be itinerants. In contrast, Johnson stands out as virtually the only painter to have spent his entire known career, almost thirty years, as a permanent resident of this city.

The development of Johnson’s art can be divided into three periods. The first, from about 1796 to 1803, is characterized by works that are more painterly—looser in brush handling—than his later pictures. Although shading and foreshortening lend the sitters a naturalistic appearance, the overall quality of details lacks the crispness found in his portraits after about 1803. The second period, from 1803 to about 1814, represents the decade of Johnson’s artistic maturation and also of his greatest activity. During these middle years, his painting and drawing became tighter and more assured, and rather standardized as well. Laces and diaphanous fabrics, while still painted thinly, are sharper in detail and yet appear to have been painted more quickly than the relatively labored works of the first period.

With one exception, all of the large family portraits by Johnson were executed during these years. They are ambitious works for a “self-taught” artist, and there are no portraits by Polk and few by Charles Willson Peale known today that could have served as prototypes. A number of these large family portraits feature full-length standing figures of children, a subject of which Johnson seems to have made a specialty. In the more than eighty portraits ascribed to Johnson, forty-six include children—more than in those of any other artist working in Baltimore during these years.

By about 1815, it appears that Johnson’s career began to wane. Only a small number of paintings have been identified for these years. And whereas some are as precisely finished and have the characteristic linear, smooth appearance of works of the middle period, others demonstrate a marked decline in anatomical drawing. It has been conjectured that Johnson may have taken ill in his later years or that his eyesight failed, or a combination of the two. No death or burial records for him have been found, but neither have works postdating about 1825, which suggests that, for whatever reason, Johnson’s career as a portrait artist ended at this time.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width.

John Spear Smith (1786–1866),
1797–98

Oil on canvas, 29½ x 24
Collection of Lee Ault Carter

Mary Buchanan Smith (1788–1868),
1797–98

Oil on canvas, 29½ x 24½
Collection of Lee Ault Carter

Mrs. John Moale (Ellin North,
1741–1825) and Her Grand-
daughter, Ellin North Moale
(1794–1803), 1798–1800

Oil on canvas, 40½ x 35⅜
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art
Center, Williamsburg, Virginia;
Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
Robert S. Wilson

Prudence Gough Carroll (1795–
1822), 1799–1800

Oil on canvas, 15 x 12
Private collection, courtesy
Hampton National Historic Site,
Towson, Maryland

Mrs. William Pitt (Anne Faris,
1773–1860) and Her Daughter,
Hannah Williams Pitt (1800–
1827), 1800–01

Oil on canvas, 32 x 27
Private collection

Letitia Grace McCurdy (1797–
1875), 1800–02

Oil on canvas, 41 x 34½
Hirschl & Adler Folk, New York

Eliza White O'Donnell (1800–
1865), 1802–03

Oil on canvas, 28¾ x 23
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton;
Purchase

Unidentified Child ("In the
Garden"), 1802–05

Oil on canvas, 27½ x 18¾
The Baltimore Museum of Art;
Gift of Col. Edgar William and
Bernice Chrysler Garbisch

Archibald Dobbin, Jr. (1764–1830),
1803

Oil on canvas, 22 x 18¼
Maryland Historical Society,
Baltimore; Bequest of
J. Wilson Leakin

Charles John Stricker Wilmans
(1797–1833), 1803–05

Oil on canvas, 38¾ x 36⅝
The Baltimore Museum of Art;
Bequest of Susan D.
Tilgham Horner

Sarah Maria Coward (1802–
1860), c. 1804

Oil on canvas, 36 x 20½
Private collection

Mr. and Mrs. James McCormick
(c. 1763–1841, 1762–1810) and

Their Children, William Lux
McCormick (1803–?), Sophia
Pleasants McCormick (c. 1801–?),
and John Pleasants McCormick
(1799–1862), 1804–05

Oil on canvas, 50⅓ x 69⅙
Maryland Historical Society,
Baltimore; Gift of
Dr. Thomas C. McCormick

Captain Thomas Sprigg (1765–
1810), c. 1805

Oil on canvas, 36 x 30
Collection of Mrs. Broadnax
Cameron

Emma Van Name, c. 1805

Oil on canvas, 29 x 23
Alexander Gallery, New York

Unidentified Gentleman, c. 1805

Oil on canvas, 31 x 27
Collection of Roger Haase and
Michael Birdsall

Unidentified Lady, c. 1805

Oil on canvas, 22 x 18
Private collection

- Daniel Coker* ? (1780–1846),
1805–10
Oil on canvas, 28 x 22
American Museum in Britain,
Bath, England; Gift of the
Halcyon Foundation
- Unidentified Gentleman*, 1805–10
Oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 22
Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, Maine
- Mrs. Hugh McCurdy (Grace
Allison, 1775–1822) and Her
Daughters, Mary Jane McCurdy
(c. 1802–1866), and Letitia Grace
McCurdy (1797–1875)*, 1806–07
Oil on canvas, 41 x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$
The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.
- Mrs. James Millholland (Isabella
Douglas, 1761–1820)*, c. 1807
Oil on canvas, 30 x 26
Maryland Historical Society,
Baltimore; Bequest of
Constance Moore
- Benjamin Yoe (c. 1772–1832) and
His Son, Benjamin Franklin Yoe
(1804–1883)*, 1807–08
Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 $\frac{3}{8}$
Museum of Early Southern
Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem,
North Carolina; Gift of
John W. Hanes
- Mrs. Benjamin Yoe (Susannah
Amos) and Her Daughter, Mary
Elizabeth Yoe*, 1807–08
Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$
Museum of Early Southern
Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem,
North Carolina; Gift of
John W. Hanes
- Hilmer (Helmer) Schumacher
(c. 1785–1831/1833)*, 1808–10
Oil on canvas, 22 x 18
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
Fred I. Seff
- Mrs. Hilmer (Helmer) Schumacher
(Rachel Cloberg, 1789–1844)*,
1808–10
Oil on canvas, 22 x 18
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
Fred I. Seff
- Edward Aisquith (1780–1815)*,
c. 1810
Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 $\frac{3}{8}$
Washburn Gallery, New York
- Elisha Stansbury (1756–1837)*,
c. 1810
Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$
Private collection
- John Carroll (1735–1815)*,
1810–15
Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of the Archdiocese of
Baltimore
- Charles Burnett (1768–1812)*,
c. 1812
Oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$
Private collection
- Mrs. Charles Burnett (Mary Anne
Jewins, 1776–1838)*, c. 1812
Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 20 $\frac{5}{8}$
Private collection
- John Jacob (?) Anderson (c. 1785–
1820) and His Sons, John (c. 1809–?)
and Edward (c. 1811–1845/
1850)*, 1812–15
Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Kathryn and Robert
Steinberg
- Mrs. James McCausland and Her
Son, James*, c. 1813
Oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{8}$
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk
Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia
- Basil Brown (1804/1805–1862)*,
1813
Oil on canvas, 25 x 20
Private collection, courtesy
Washburn Gallery, New York
- Captain James Dawson*, c. 1815
Oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$
Queen Anne's County Historical
Society, Queen Anne, Maryland
- Charles Reeder (1787–1853)*,
c. 1815
Oil on canvas, 32 x 27
Collection of Charles C. Reeder
- Thomas Boyle (?)*, 1815–20
Oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of William C. A. Boyle
and Frank B. Boyle
- Mrs. Thomas Everette (Rebecca
Myring, 1787–1833) and Her
Children, Mary Augusta Everette
(1812–1886), Rebecca Everette
(c. 1817–living 1835), John Ever-
ette (c. 1815–living 1833), Thomas
Everette, Jr. (c. 1807–living 1833),
and Joseph Myring Everette
(c. 1809–living 1833)*, 1818
Oil on canvas, 38 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 53 $\frac{3}{16}$
Maryland Historical Society,
Baltimore; Bequest of
Miss M. Augusta Clarke
- Sarah Jane Waite (1817–1848)*,
1819
Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 28
Private collection
- Mrs. Jesse Sumwalt (Louisa
Kalbfus, 1805–living 1850)*,
1820–25
Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{8}$
Private collection
- Mrs. Thomas Chandler (Elizabeth
Wise, 1783?–1833/1834)*, 1820–25
Oil on board, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$
Private collection

This exhibition was organized by the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center of Colonial Williamsburg and the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

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*Mrs. Thomas Everette (Rebecca Myring, 1787–1833)
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