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Practicing Art History

Dealing with Historical Titles: The Case of the Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné

by Abigael MacGibeny and Patricia Hills

Little attention has been paid in the discipline of art history to the titles of works of art. It is common knowledge that the majority of titles, especially in the case of works done before the practice of public exhibitions of contemporary art in the nineteenth century (such as the Salons in Paris or the Royal Academy Exhibitions in London) were not composed by artists themselves but by dealers, collectors, and/or museum curators. Still, many nineteenth-century works bear titles today that were not coined by their authors. Only in the twentieth century did it become common for artists to give titles to their works.

Whether given by artists or by others, titles reflect the times and places in which they were composed. Historical titles subsequently may acquire new connotations that render them offensive to certain viewers, who, identifying with the subject of a work of art, may feel demeaned by such titles as *Portrait of an Old Jew* (Rembrandt), *Indian Squaw* (Charles Marion Russell), or *Uncle Remus* (Eastman Johnson). This can become a problem for the art historians and curators, as well as art dealers and auctioneers, who write about those works.

Working on the catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Eastman Johnson ([published online](#)), we (Abigael MacGibeny, project manager, and Patricia Hills, founder and director) were directly faced with this problem, as a small number of the artist's paintings bear titles that are seen today as offensive, if not outright racist. This article describes how we dealt with the issue of problematic titles as well as historical descriptions of paintings that, today, sound bigoted and racist. It is a case study—one that, we hope, may be useful to others faced with similar issues in their work.

Eastman Johnson (1824–1906), the subject of our inquiry, was a major genre painter in the United States during the 1860s and early 1870s.^[1] Born and raised in Maine, he first drew crayon portraits of such luminaries as John Quincy Adams and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his circle in Washington, DC, and Boston in the 1840s. He left for Europe in 1849 to learn to paint—staying six years, first in Düsseldorf and later in The Hague. He returned in 1855 and embarked on a project specifically to paint the people and scenes of his own country. His subjects included the Ojibwe people near Lake Superior and broadened to include images of Black Americans in “everyday life” settings, as well as incidents from the Civil War, farmers in Maine, local residents picking cranberries in Nantucket, and interior scenes of reflective women. All along, Johnson painted portraits but, after 1880, almost all of his paintings were portraits, many of civic and business leaders and their wives and children, including three US presidents from life.

Historical accounts suggest that Johnson was a progressive: his family members were involved in the abolitionist movement, and he was a member of the Union League Club

(that supported the Union effort).^[2] As far as we can determine, he only once gave a title to an artwork that today would be considered racist or offensive. However, after his death, beginning with the sale of his estate by the American Art Association in New York on February 26–27, 1907, titles were applied by others, including his widow Elizabeth Johnson and art galleries—no doubt with an eye on the market.

Each entry in the Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné (henceforth EJCR) is made as robust as possible—including not only the work's title, date, physical description, provenance, and textual references, but also its popular significance during Johnson's lifetime, as evidenced by excerpts from historical texts that discuss the works. These texts include biographical articles about Johnson, reviews of the works he exhibited, descriptions of his works published in auction catalogues, correspondence from patrons, letters written and notices of copyrights filed by Elizabeth Johnson, and more. Some of these writings merely offer short descriptions of the works for marketing purposes, like the 1907 estate sale descriptions. (Such descriptions, which sometimes offer alternate titles for specific works, have been immensely helpful for identifying works that otherwise would be lost to us.) Others, particularly critical reviews, inform us about the ways in which Johnson's works were seen and interpreted over time. To add historical depth to the catalogue entries, as well as to make hard-to-find content easily available to EJCR visitors, we decided to quote many of the sources rather than simply providing citations. Since the online format of the catalogue did not restrict us to a certain length, it seemed beneficial to include full text. (More extensive sources, including writings by Hills, are not quoted at such length but are cited in the Bibliography section of the catalogue entries.)

In the course of preparing the EJCR, we found that a small portion of the language in those historical texts—as in the 1907 sale titles and descriptions—was problematic. (Ultimately, about 2.4 percent of more than 1,400 catalogue entries are affected.) They include terms that are offensive today, although they were common parlance at the time they were used. In all cases but one, they are not Johnson's words, but they are part of the reception history of his work. In preparing the EJCR, we discussed the implications of using the historical language as current content. How would visitors react when encountering this language, and how could we explain its meaning in relation to the artwork? Should we even include it? We decided that it was important to include for a comprehensive view of Johnson's work, but that remediation was necessary.

In the case of the 1907 estate sale titles, which, as a practice, are used as main titles for those artworks in the EJCR, we replaced two particularly egregious ones with descriptive titles. For example, the title *Uncle Remus* was used in the sale but was not acceptable as a main title for the picture. Joel Chandler Harris invented the trickster Uncle Remus based on figures he knew; his collection of African American folktales, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, was published in 1880.^[3] Johnson does not present the Black man in his painting as a trickster and would not have used or approved that title. In Hills's 1972 retrospective exhibition *Eastman Johnson* at the Whitney Museum, she called the painting *Head of a Negro Man*; in the 1999 exhibition *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* at the Brooklyn Museum, it was retitled again to *Head of a Black Man*, the title that we use in the EJCR today.^[4]

The 1907 estate sale titles are still included in the catalogue entries as alternate titles, so that the history is not lost. Although they appear in a smaller font than the main title, and generally within a list of other alternate titles, they are still there to be encountered by the visitor.

The digital format of the EJCR shaped both that anticipated encounter with the visitor and a promising remedy for those alternate titles and other problematic language. We chose to publish the EJCR as a website partly for its ability to grow and change and partly for its open access. A traditional printed catalogue raisonné is likely to attract a specialized audience interested in the artist: art historians, gallerists, researchers, collectors, and connoisseurs. Printed catalogues are often expensive to purchase and difficult to access. By contrast, we designed the EJCR website to be freely available to the public, even removing the barrier of registration that some free catalogue raisonné websites require. This format invites a worldwide audience with varying levels of familiarity with Eastman Johnson's work. At any given time, we do not know who is visiting or why, much less their likely reaction to specific language. Yet the website also offers flexibility to integrate the content of the catalogue raisonné itself with supporting context.

In 2020, Jeremiah William McCarthy, then the curator at the National Academy of Design, which is the long-term steward of the EJCR, queried us on some of the titles that were racist or that simply used a term not in circulation today. He suggested that we engage and collaborate with consultants who have worked with issues of race and/or with the presentation of educational materials to the public. Hence, we got in touch with educators whose writings reflect these concerns. We are grateful for the participation of these consultants for interpretation: Rika Burnham, a leading theorist and practitioner of art museum gallery teaching; Adrienne Childs, an art historian and curator specializing in the representations of Black people in European art; Scott Manning Stevens, a citizen of the Akwesasne Mohawk nation and associate professor and director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Program at Syracuse University; Jeffrey Stewart, a professor and former chair of the Department of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; and Alan Wallach, Ralph H. Wark Professor of Art and Art History Emeritus and professor of American studies emeritus at the College of William and Mary. All participated in crafting the multipart "Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement" on the EJCR site (see Appendix below), as well as Stewart's colleague, curator Fath Davis Ruffins. They met with us on several occasions to share perspectives. It was a learning experience beyond the document they created.

Their helpful texts reaffirmed our belief in the importance of providing context for the problematic language at the point of contact. In catalogue entries that contain such language—for example, the word "Piccaninnies" (fig. 1)—we include the following notice in close proximity, highlighted in blue:

Fig. 1, Screenshot of the top section of the catalogue entry for Eastman Johnson, *Servant's Hall at Mount Vernon*, ca. 1857, from the Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné. Available from: [Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné](#). [larger image]

This catalogue raisonné strives to reproduce the available historical information, as it was written in the period, while acknowledging that readers today may find many of these terms objectionable or racist. Please see the [Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement](#). [5]

By clicking the hyperlinked phrase, the viewer is taken to the “[Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement](#)” (fig. 2). We took a liberal approach to linking entries to the statement; not everyone would be offended by a woman being called a “girl,” for example, but we considered that language to require context nonetheless. In addition to being included as a link within certain catalogue entries, the statement also lives as a standalone document under the main menu item “About” on the EJCR website.

Fig. 2, Screenshot of the first section of the “Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement” from the Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné. Available from: [Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné](#). [larger image]

Clicking through to the statement, the visitor finds the explanations written by the consultants for interpretation—scholarly in perspective but written in plain English—of what the language was, why it is demeaning, how it has evolved, and what language is preferable to use today. The notice within the entry and the statement it links to are

intended to become part of the visitor's experience, offering ways to see the historical language from their own contemporary viewpoint.

Another important method of remediation, advocated by Burnham and Childs, was to deprioritize the historical language throughout the catalogue raisonné by presenting the descriptive texts in reverse-chronological order. The visitor first sees remarks written by us, or quoted from post-nineteenth-century published sources, to provide an initial contemporary perspective on the works.

Before launching the EJCR website, we conducted a usability test to make sure it was easy to use and easy to comprehend. Testers were invited to rate those aspects of each type of content (catalogue entries, biographical information, etc.) on a scale of one to five and to provide comments as desired. When we asked about the "Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement," most testers responded that it was very easy to find and comprehend. Most of the additional comments we received echoed that result; one went further, expressing surprise at the depth of the statement and affirming its importance. One offered constructive feedback that we incorporated, an important step in increasing the relevance of the statement to our website's visitors. Perhaps in the future such a statement will become not only an accepted feature of catalogues raisonnés using historical language, but also an expected feature.

Of course, sensibilities are always changing, and what is seen as offensive today may not be offensive tomorrow. The online format of the EJCR allows it to be updated as language continues to change. We plan to continue to build it into a vital educational resource about Johnson, his work, and his time. We are pleased to hear that this fall a faculty member in art history at a university in Washington, DC, has been using the EJCR website as part of a discussion about publication formats in her research methods seminar. We hope in the future that the statement will be used for pedagogical purposes for other students. Through the EJCR, it is our mission to integrate history with contextual cultural studies, in which the arts, language, music, social patterns, and political ideologies are inextricably linked. Together they tell us about our past and give us the knowledge and the courage to move on to a better future.

Appendix

Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné: Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement

Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes—Patricia Hills and Abigail MacGibeny

Language, and particularly terminology used to identify ethnic, racial, religious, and gender groups, is continuously changing. Some of these words have become critical issues in the Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné (EJCR); current and past titles of artworks, as well as comments on artworks from historical sources, including letters to and from Eastman Johnson, auction sale catalogue descriptions, and newspaper reviews, may contain what we today realize is racist language or reinforcement of negative stereotypes. Such materials should be seen in the context of their time period and as reflections of the attitudes of the

time. The EJCR authors consider that previously written language found in this catalogue raisonn to be part of the historical record, and it does not in any way represent their views. In some instances in which a current title of a work has no historical basis and the title is descriptive, then the authors have been mindful to give the work a title compatible with current language use. As language changes the statements that follow will be updated. (The authors acknowledge the Connecticut Historic Sheet Music Collection’s statement on offensive language, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sheetmusic/859/>.)

Statement on people of African descent—Jeffrey Stewart, Adrienne Childs, and Fath Davis Ruffins

The EJCR examines an era of history in which racist language is used routinely to both describe and demean enslaved and free African Americans. Language is not a passive reflection of reality, but in fact helps to create the culture of racial subjugation. Terms such as “pickaninny,” “negro,” “slave,” “negress,” “Mammy,” “mulatto,” and “colored” appear in the titles and literature surrounding the work of Johnson. These terms are grounded in and reflective of the attitudes and language of the past. It is because of the ways in which language has been deployed to degrade that throughout this history African Americans have taken great pains to generate and control the terminology used to describe them, and continue to do so.

Over time, people of African descent within the United States have changed the ways and nomenclature by which they wished to be referred, sometimes as a reaction against racist or demeaning nomenclature used by Whites. For example, in the 1700s and earlier, sons and daughters of Africa was a common appellation. By the 1830s, another designation became common: Colored American and People of Color. For example, people of African descent in New York chose the title, *The Colored American*, for the name of their newspaper published between 1837 and 1842. Yet, during the same period, the term Afro-American was popular. By the end of the nineteenth century, Colored was the preferred term of self-identification for progressive-minded African Americans. By the early 1900s, Negro became preferred among younger people as a term of self-identification, if not self-description. Some, like W. E. B. Du Bois, lobbied newspapers and magazines to capitalize this appellation. During the 1940s, the *New York Times* changed its practice to one of using the capitalized word Negro. Similarly, in the 1960s, a young generation of activists chose the word Black or Black American, in reaction to the relentless criticism of the term Negro by Malcolm X in his speeches. During the 1970s, many chose African American to refer to themselves, in part in resistance to the insistence on the part of certain newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, to print black in lower-case letters, since white, when referring to European-Americans, was often printed with lower-case letters. After the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the protests that followed them, the *New York Times* as well as other newspapers have begun to print Black with an upper-case first letter. In the EJCR, Black will be capitalized when authored by editors and contributors, in line with the *New York Times* practice. In this document, we have sought to retain the nomenclature of the times in which a subject in a painting or drawing is referred to, except in those cases where the terms are clearly racist and designed to offend.

Statement on Jewish representation—Alan Wallach

During the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, white majorities tended to regard Jews as exotic and other. Like so many other types of prejudice, anti-Semitism was pervasive and socially acceptable in “polite society,” even if a small percentage of Jews managed to attain economic and political power. Terms used to describe Jews and Jewish subjects in art and literature ranged from the innocuous to the demeaning. In this document, we have retained the original nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century titles and descriptors (e.g., “a Jew of a rather low type”), even though, from a twenty-first century viewpoint, the reflexive anti-Semitism of the period is often obvious.

Statement on Indigenous Peoples—Scott Manning Stevens

The term “Indian,” when applied to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, is one of history’s most notorious and enduring misnomers. Every school child is taught Columbus’s famous mistake concerning where he had landed in 1492, but the correction of his misnomer for the inhabitants of that place has been long in coming. Other terms would follow, including savages and redskins. While those two are obvious slurs other terms were treated as though somehow more accurate. The terms “squaw,” “brave,” and “papoose” were applied to Native American women, men, and children as though neutral and appropriate descriptors, much in the way doe, buck, and fawn are applied to deer. The word “squaw” seems to have taken on a derogatory sensibility early on, most likely as an expression of racist misogyny, while “brave” remained a sort primitive honorific that could be appropriated by sports teams.

In Canada both the term “Indian” and “aboriginal” were used in everyday language and official documents. American Indian became a better means of distinguishing the indigenous peoples of the United States from natives of India, but the term American was not used by Canadians in combination with Indians because of its common association with the U. S. rather than the continent. Following social advances made during the Civil Rights Era in the U.S., many indigenous peoples rejected both the terms Indian and American Indian as signs of a continued ignorance and disinterest in the diverse cultures of the original inhabitants of this hemisphere. The term Native Americans came into common usage in the U. S. and First Nations in Canada.

In both nations the term Indians is generational within Native communities, with older people used to and accepting of the term Indian and the younger generations less so. More recently the term Indigenous, capitalized, has also come into use by Native American and First Nations activists and academics. One other change has been the preference for ethnic or national specificity over a generic category such as Native American or Indigenous. Indigenous individuals often prefer to identify themselves with their Native nation, such as Lakota, Hopi, or Mohawk. When a specific ethnic or national identity is known it is preferable to Native American, First Nations, or Indigenous.

Statement on Gender issues—Patricia Hills

During the nineteenth century young unmarried women and women servants were often referred to as “girls,” when they were clearly mature women. For reasons of historical accuracy, the authors have generally kept the term “girl” or “girls” in the historical titles. There seem to be no instances in which Johnson called a figure that was clearly an adult man, a “boy.”

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Notes

[1] See Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1972); and Teresa A. Carbone and Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson: Painting America* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1999).

[2] See Patricia Hills, “Eastman Johnson’s *The Field Hospital*, the U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women in the Civil War,” *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin* 65 (1981–82) (Minneapolis: Institute of Arts, 1986), 80n30; and Patricia Hills, “Afterword/Afterwards: Eastman Johnson’s Transition to Portrait Painting in the Early 1880s,” in *Eastman Johnson: The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket* (San Diego: The Putnam Foundation, 1990), 90–91n55.)

[3] See Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Appleton, 1880).

[4] See Hills, *Eastman Johnson*; and Carbone and Hills, *Eastman Johnson*.

[5] “Racist Language/Negative Stereotypes Statement,” Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné, July 29, 2021, <https://www.eastmanjohnson.org/>.

Illustrations

Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné

Patricia Hills, PhD, Founder and Director | Abigail MacGibeny, MA, Project Manager

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Catalogue Entry

[enlarge](#)
Photo: Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida

Hills no. 6.0.5

Servant's Hall at Mount Vernon

Alternate titles: possibly *The Interior of Kitchen of Mt. Vernon with Four Figures*; possibly *Washington's Kitchen, Cook and Piccaninnies*; *Kitchen at Mount Vernon*

c.1857

Oil on panel

12 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. (31.8 x 52.1 cm)

Initialed lower left: E.J.

[Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida, Bequest of Ninah M. H. Cummer \(C.0.117.1\)](#)

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[\[return to text\]](#)