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Jill Vaum Rothschild

exhibition review of

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Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore
Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown
April 17, 2021–January 23, 2022

Daniel Fulco, ed.,
Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore.
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Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore, on view from April 17, 2021–January 23, 2022 at the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts (WCMFA) in Hagerstown, Maryland, stages the first monographic museum exhibition on the artist since 1988.^[1] Joshua Johnson (or Johnston, ca. 1763–1824 or after) was one of the earliest professional artists of African descent operating in the United States, primarily painting middle-class white patrons in Baltimore, Maryland, where he practiced from ca. 1795 to ca. 1824–25.^[2]

The exhibition, curated by Daniel Fulco, the Agnita M. Stine Schreiber Curator at the WCMFA, situates the museum's two portraits by Johnson—the family pendants *Portrait of Benjamin Franklin Yoe and Son Benjamin Franklin Yoe, Jr.* and *Portrait of Susanna Amos Yoe and Mary Elizabeth Yoe*, both from 1809—within a range of the artist's portrait production that spans his thirty-year career (fig. 1). Thirteen additional Johnson paintings borrowed primarily from Maryland collections complement the Yoe portraits and form a tailored but informative survey of his oeuvre. These examples include single- and multi-figure portraits dating from 1803 to ca. 1820–25. Johnson's artwork is given a spatial context through urban views of Baltimore made at or around the time in which he worked in the city. Portraits by other local or regional practitioners in the WCMFA's collection add unexpected comparisons and further context to Johnson's work. Lastly, documents enclosed in a vitrine as you enter the exhibition shed light on Johnson's birth into slavery and his journey to freedom and powerfully draw Johnson's complex path to artistic success into the gallery space.

Fig. 1, Installation view of *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore*. [\[larger image\]](#)

A catalogue that expands narratives presented in the exhibition contains essays on Johnson by Fulco, David Taft Terry, an Associate Professor of History at Morgan State University and the former Executive Director of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, and Mark B. Letzer, the President and CEO of the Maryland Center for History and Culture (formerly the Maryland Historical Society); a catalogue of works with illustrated entries for each object in the show; and a selected bibliography.

Joshua Johnson was born around 1763 in rural Baltimore County, Maryland, to a white father, George Johnson, and an unidentified woman of African descent who was likely enslaved to William Wheeler Sr., the man from whom George would purchase his son in the following year. Virtually nothing is known today about Joshua Johnson's mother or the nature of her relationship to George Johnson. George Johnson arranged for his son's manumission to take effect at either the age of twenty-one or after the completion of an apprenticeship to William Forepaugh, a blacksmith in Baltimore City, whichever came first. The bound volume of Baltimore County Chattel Records on display in the exhibition contains the bill of sale for George Johnson's purchase of Joshua from Wheeler Sr., on October 6, 1764, and the deed of manumission in which George Johnson enumerated the terms for his son's freedom, recorded on July 15, 1782 (fig. 2). In his catalogue essay, Terry speculates that Johnson purchased his son's freedom in order to raise him and, without any land or money to give his son upon his legal freedom, secured the apprenticeship as a means for him to earn income in the future (7).

Fig. 2, Entrance to the exhibition, with the Baltimore County Chattel Records containing Joshua Johnson's bill of sale and deed of manumission. [\[larger image\]](#)

After training in this profession for two years, Johnson earned the title “journeyman blacksmith,” effectively ending his apprenticeship and shifting his legal status to free (7–8, 14n9). One of six text panels that highlight significant phases in Johnson’s life and artistic career throughout the exhibition notes that his personal life changed substantially during his early years in Baltimore, which included his marriage to his first wife, Sarah, the birth of their five children (born between 1786 and 1806), and frequent moves within the city.^[3] In the decade between 1784 and 1795, Johnson developed the skills needed to become a portrait painter, the profession under which he was listed in city directories from this date until the 1824–25 directory, the last in which he appears, which has led scholars to the conclusion that he died around this date.

Due to open in the fall of 2020, the WCMFA delayed the show for nearly a year to adapt to the changing landscape of museum safety during the Covid-19 pandemic and to ensure the exhibition could be seen in person. Johnson’s work, delicate in its rendering of fabrics like lace and subtle in its tonal play amid monochromatic passages of clothing and backgrounds, rewards such unmediated viewing. The exhibition’s frequent gestures to specific sites in Baltimore City and counties in Maryland suggests its primary audience was expected to be a regional one. The rare opportunity to see works by Johnson from various institutional and private collections assembled together is, however, worth a longer journey to Hagerstown.

The show is organized roughly chronologically, and its six section panels (“Prelude: Early Works,” “Beginnings and Apprenticeship,” “Success and New Clients,” “Baltimore: An Expanding City,” “Contemporaries and Competitors,” and “Epilogue: Late Years”) supply details about Johnson’s biography and the social context of early national Baltimore without mandating a particular path through the exhibition. This fluid organization allows the visitor to move freely through the show and provides a solution to organizing the artist’s output, almost none of which can be definitively dated.

To supplement the artworks on display, exhibition labels and corresponding catalogue entries reproduce companion works, lending a sense of Johnson’s wider oeuvre and the importance of certain motifs in his broader body of work. The labels also contain replicas of

pertinent primary source documents related to Johnson's practice, including the two extant advertisements he placed in Baltimore newspapers for his services in 1798 and 1802.

As a small survey, the interpretation attends to the artist's stylistic evolution. Identifying Johnson's idiosyncrasies and use of certain attributes remains a critical scholarly concern, as the majority of works "by" Johnson are, in reality, only attributed to him.^[4] The details of Johnson's training and the socio-historical contexts in which he lived and worked are also major and worthwhile arenas of inquiry in the exhibition.

The portraits included in *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore* offer a sense of the aesthetic variety of his output at different moments in his practice. Early examples, like his rendering of an unknown young child filling the frame of *In the Garden* (ca. 1805, Baltimore Museum of Art), or a three-quarter portrait of *Gentleman of the Shure Family* (ca. 1810, also Baltimore Museum of Art), place the sitter in a setting: vegetation with a butterfly behind the child, and a seascape seen through a window behind Shure, a figure likely tied to Baltimore's robust mercantile industry.^[5] These pictorial elements cede to Johnson's distinctive use of two-toned monochromatic backgrounds and faux mattes, done with blues in *Archibald Dobbin* (1803, Maryland Center for History and Culture), reds in *Charles Burnett* (1812, also Maryland Center for History and Culture), and greens in *Portrait of a Man (Abner Coker)* (ca. 1805–10, Bowdoin College Museum of Art).

A third type of background relies on pieces of period furniture to frame the sitter or sitters. While only fifteen of the eighty-some portraits attributed to the artist are in this exhibition, the selection still allows viewers to appreciate the ways in which Johnson engaged with his subjects. Fulco posits that the Federal-style brass-tacked sofa seen in *The James McCormick Family* (1804–05, Maryland Center for History and Culture) may have belonged to the McCormick household and functioned as a display of their wealth within the painting (56). The same desire to suggest affluence informs the five other works in the show that contain brass-tacked sofas or chairs, all rendered with detailed specificity by Johnson. The distinct furniture discernible across these examples suggests that in some instances, Johnson may have painted his patrons within their own homes, entering and disrupting spaces defined by an otherwise rigid racial hierarchy of wealthy white families and servants of African descent.

In the exhibition and catalogue, Fulco and the other essayists restate the long-accepted but speculative argument that Johnson may have received some fine art training, possibly from Charles Peale Polk (1767–1822), his Baltimore neighbor, or from Polk's uncle, the prominent Mid-Atlantic painter Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827). However, they assert more forcefully the likelihood that Johnson received training in painting from an artisan, either while he was enslaved in Baltimore County, or after moving to the city as a blacksmith's apprentice.^[6] Fulco also encourages us to imagine that Johnson, like many of his artistic contemporaries in the colonial and early national periods, studied the work of other artists via engraved copies (21). This is suggested by Johnson's likeness of the Catholic Bishop John Carroll (ca. 1810–15, Collection of Archdiocese of Baltimore), the largest, single-figure painting in the exhibition. On its label appears an 1812 engraved reproduction of a similar portrait by Jeremiah Paul Jr. (d. 1820) that might well have served as a model for Johnson. Ultimately, the exhibition emphasizes Johnson's claim to be "a self-taught genius" found in the 1798 newspaper

advertisement for his services in what can be read as a gesture of taking Johnson at his word and privileging the artist's own voice in this scholarly debate (8, 19).

Rebecca Myring Everette (Mrs. Thomas Everette) and Her Children (1818, Maryland Center for History and Culture) and the Yoe family pendant portraits contribute valuable details to our understanding of Johnson's practice beyond the speculative question of his training. In her will, Rebecca Myring Everette attributes this painting to Johnson and dates the work—both unusual archival confirmations in Johnson's oeuvre—and in the same document mentions that Johnson produced a copy of a portrait of her husband by the artist Caleb Boyle (active ca. 1800–22) intended for her son.^[7] The primary and secondary commission from the Everette family illuminate the kind of works Johnson produced for his clients. (Boyle's portrait of Thomas Everette, also in the collection of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, would have been a worthwhile addition to the exhibition, offering an example of a known work from which Johnson copied, as well as a comparative product of a contemporary working in Baltimore for similar clients).

Copies of the WCMFA's Yoe family portraits are in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA), with both sets attributed to Johnson. Fulco asserts that producing copies of family paintings—a notable aspect of Johnson's practice evinced by the Yoe and Everette family portraits—allowed multiple children to inherit a version and was a regular practice in the early national period (62). The MESDA set contains the kind of delicate details on clothing for which the artist was known, but that no longer appear in the WCMFA set, possibly due to past conservation treatments.

Throughout, Fulco draws comparisons between Johnson and artists from whom he may have learned (in person or through reproduction) and who worked as his contemporaries in early national Baltimore. These range from the Peale-Polk family members, established and probable referents for him, to less convincing suggestions, like Johnson's regional predecessors John Hesselius (1728–78) and John Wollaston (active ca. 1742–75), whose portraits of the gentry class differ significantly in style from Johnson's own. A companion exhibition in an adjacent gallery, *Face to Face: Portraits from the 18th and 19th Centuries*, contains a range of European and American portrait examples from the WCMFA holdings, some of which dialogue meaningfully with Johnson's portraiture. These include works by Charles Willson Peale, Sarah Miriam Peale (1800–85, Charles Willson's niece and daughter of his artist brother James Peale, who established a studio in Baltimore in 1825 just as Johnson's career was coming to a close), and William Matthew Prior (1806–73, an artist working outside Boston whose portraits share stylistic qualities with Johnson, making for interesting comparisons).

Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore makes its strongest intervention into the debates surrounding the artist's training and milieu by placing Johnson's portraits next to those by little-known Baltimore City contemporaries, like German émigré Frederick Kemmelmeyer (1760–1821) and Swiss émigré David Boudon (1750–1816), whose works were also selected from the WCMFA's collection. Kemmelmeyer's *Portrait of an Unidentified Girl* (ca. 1805–07), though executed in pastel, bears notable similarities to Johnson's depictions of children, including the strawberries in the young girl's hand and the way in which her body fills the composition. The section in which these works appear—"Contemporaries and

Competitors”—considers these figures as portrait painters with whom Johnson would have vied for commissions, evidently with success. Because these artists are not canonical figures like Peale, and are presently far less well known than Johnson, their inclusion prompts us to consider the impact of Johnson’s success and style on his white contemporaries, rather than asking the perennial reverse of this question.

This exhibition works to contextualize Johnson’s career not only aesthetically, but within the social, racial, and labor dynamics of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Maryland. The inclusion of Johnson’s bill of sale and deed of manumission materially frames viewers’ encounter with Johnson’s portraiture from the outset. Additional labels mention the presence of enslaved labor within the urban context Johnson and his patrons inhabited. However, a deeper consideration of the intertwined nature of Baltimore’s industrial development, the city’s fine arts community, and the economy of slavery would have enhanced the show’s interpretation of Johnson’s work.

Scholarship emerging concurrently with *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore* underscores our need as a field to reconsider the fundamentally intertwined relationship among these three forces in the United States. Such ties were explored recently by Nika Elder and Diana Seave Greenwald in their data-driven examination of the patrons of Johnson’s colonial-era predecessor, Boston portraitist John Singleton Copley.^[8] Johnson, like Copley, relied on commissions from residents in a North American port city whose work in mercantile, hospitality, or agricultural industries, in many instances, relied on enslaved laborers directly or indirectly. Anna Arabindan-Kesson’s new examination of the deep impact of the material trade of cotton on the content and taste of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art around the Atlantic world further enables us to imagine the ways in which the trade and shipping industries of early Baltimore, tied as they were to the exportation of plantation-harvested crops like wheat, could be a valuable framework for future analyses of Johnson’s oeuvre.^[9]

There were missed opportunities to comment on the social and racial context of early Baltimore in the interpretation of the cityscapes on display. W. H. Bartlett’s *View of Baltimore* (1839–40, engraved by Samuel Fisher), for example, features a romanticized image of the city from across the Inner Harbor, where a cluster of agrarian figures, including a woman holding bundles of wheat, draw our attention to the foreground. This composition, as Fulco notes, casts Baltimore’s growing shipping and trade industries in quite literally a positive light (102). In the context of this exhibition, however, the erasure of Black labor and the whiteness of the artist’s (and presumed viewer’s) perspective on the city’s prosperity seems worth confronting, surrounded as it is by the artistic output of a Black painter. Interpretations of this work and others in the show not by Johnson could have benefitted from more vocally articulating the way an artist’s race (and class, gender, and free status) may or may not be visible in their artwork.

In his catalogue essay, Terry proposes another critical avenue of inquiry, asking scholars to explore Johnson’s connections to Black-centered institutions within Baltimore rather than focus exclusively on the connections between the artist and his white patrons. His essay, and the inclusion of Johnson’s likeness of Abner Coker, one of only two portraits of subjects of African descent by Johnson, initiate this process; however, as Terry acknowledges, this area of

inquiry remains fertile ground for new research.^[10] Coker's portrait logically invites propositions that Johnson was associated in some way with the Black Christian community in Baltimore, as Coker and his brother Daniel were ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Given Daniel's prominent role in the abolitionist cause, writing pamphlets like *Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* (1810), Terry and Fulco also speculate about Johnson's connections to anti-slavery endeavors. Framing Johnson as a prominent Black Baltimorean is logical and certainly warrants greater exploration. Rather than, or in addition to, Johnson's potential links to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Johnson's Catholicism and the nature of the city's early mixed-race Catholic congregations also merits scholarly attention and is prompted in this exhibition by Johnson's striking portrait of Bishop John Carroll.

By turning a spotlight on Johnson in a monographic exhibition, *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore* gives new attention to a significant early national painter whose career remains undertheorized and replete with unanswered questions. This exhibition offers the opportunity to critically reassess the way in which we interpret Johnson's artistic output, as well as the topics of Blackness, whiteness, artistic training, enslavement, and freedom, at the moment when museums around the country are reinstalling their American art galleries and highlighting works by Johnson and other non-white artists anew in the process. The closing text panel "Epilogue: Late Years" asserts the intention of this show is to encourage future research, and this spark may be one of its primary achievements. Those taking this exhibition and catalogue as their starting point for more research on Johnson will find the literature review, particularly in Fulco's essay and in the citations of the catalogue entries, as well as the prompts in Terry's essay, to be a valuable place to begin this work.

Jill Vaum Rothschild, Ph.D.
Independent Scholar
jillvrothschild[at]gmail.com

Notes

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[1] The retrospective of Johnson organized by The Abby Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the Maryland Historical Society in 1987–88 was the last major monographic exhibition of the artist's work; see Carolyn J. Weekley and Stiles Tuttle Colwill, with Leroy Graham and Mary Ellen Hayward, *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter*, exh. cat. (Williamsburg and Baltimore: The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center and the Maryland Historical Society, 1987). While this publication remains a relevant survey on Johnson, one that builds on the foundational studies of Johnson's work by the art historian J. Hall Pleasants, the scholarship on Johnson has more recently emerged from academic journals, including Jennifer Bryan and Robert Torchia's article, "The Mysterious Portraitist Joshua Johnson," *Archives of American Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (1996): 2–7, in which the authors confirmed Johnson's mixed-racial ancestry and birth into slavery for the first time. As these publications' dates indicate, however, the fields of early American art history and African American art history have not focused on Johnson in a monographic study for decades.

[2] I have chosen to spell the artist's last name Johnson in this review for consistency with the exhibition's title. There are primary sources in which his name is spelled Johnson and Johnston, leaving the issue of his name's spelling unresolved. David Taft Terry, a contributor to

the catalog, elects to spell the artist's name Johnston based on documents including a neighborhood petition signed in the artist's hand as "Joshua Johnston" and a 1798 newspaper advertisement placed by the artist in which he also refers to himself as "Joshua Johnston" in the *Baltimore Intelligencer*, December 19, 1798. By contrast, an advertisement the artist placed in *The Telegraph* on October 12, 1802, spells his name "Joshua Johnson." Likewise, his deed of manumission, executed by his father, George Johnson, spells the family name without a "t." See Terry's essay, "Joshua Johnston: A Brief Social Biography of the Portrait Painter and the Meanings of Race in his Baltimore, ca. 1763–ca. 1824," and the reproduction of these primary sources, in the exhibition catalogue; Daniel Fulco, ed., *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore*, exh. cat. (Hagerstown: Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, 2021), 5–15, 45, 84–87.

[3] Johnson was married sometime in the early years of the nineteenth century to his second wife, Clara.

[4] The only painting signed by Johnson is the portrait of Sarah Ogden Gustin (ca. 1805, National Gallery of Art, Washington); see Weekley and Colwill, *Joshua Johnson*, 102, and Julie Aronson and Laurie Weitzenkorn, "Joshua Johnson," in Deborah Chotner, et. al., *American Naïve Paintings* (Washington and Cambridge: National Gallery of Art and Cambridge University Press, 1992), 225–26.

[5] Fulco casts doubt on the subject of this painting, asserting that it may depict a male member of a different branch of the same family with the surname Ross; members of the Ross family appeared in Baltimore City directories around the time the painting was made and had ties to shipping industries; see Fulco, 66.

[6] For the assertion that Johnson was trained by artisans, Fulco cites Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 41, and Donald R. Waters and Carolyn J. Weekley, *American Folk Portraits: Paintings and Drawings from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981), 133.

[7] This document has been cited in relation to the painting in prior scholarship; see Weekley, 161–62.

[8] Nika Elder and Diana Seave Greenwald, "Enslaved Labor and Cultural Capital: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Copley's Colonial Patrons and Their Circum-Atlantic World," *Winterthur Portfolio* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 223–43, <https://doi.org/10.1086/714271>.

[9] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[10] For an analysis of these paintings and a discussion of their relationship to other depictions of Black portrait subjects, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, exh. cat. (Andover and Seattle: Addison Gallery of American Art in association with University of Washington Press, 2006), especially entry with Emily K. Shubert, 100.

Illustrations

All images courtesy of the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts.

Fig. 1, Installation view of *Joshua Johnson: Portraitist of Early American Baltimore*. [\[return to text\]](#)

Fig. 2, Entrance to the exhibition, with the Baltimore County Chattel Records containing Joshua Johnson's bill of sale and deed of manumission. [\[return to text\]](#)