

11-4-87

0/10/7/35

Art

Bennard Perlman

## Retrospective Joshua Johnson Exhibit Was Worth the Wait

The long-awaited retrospective exhibition of America's first black portraitist, titled "Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter," occupies the entire third floor of The Maryland Historical Society, at 201 West Monument Street, and was well worth the wait.

Although the artist's dates of birth and death are unknown, he was active painting portraits in Baltimore between 1795 and 1825, and resided at various downtown locations on German Alley (now Redwood Street) at Charles, St. Paul's Lane near Centre, High Street in Old Town and Strawberry Alley in Fell's Point. He is thought to have emigrated here from the West Indies and to have learned to paint by working with Raphaelle and Rembrandt Peale and their uncle Charles Peale Polk.

The Historical Society exhibit is handsomely installed, with Johnson's austere portraits hung against a warm, yellow ochre background and detailed labels placed beside each work. Arranged in basically chronological fashion, one quickly recognizes the characteristics of the artist's style: Staring eyes, stiff poses, three-quarter views of the head and where two figures appear on the same canvas they invariably face inward.

Interspersed among the 44 Johnson paintings are a dozen by members of the Peale family which serve to show possible influences. For example, two portraits by Johnson — of *Mr. Hilmer Schumacher* (1808-10) and *Mrs. Schumacher* (1808-10) — are flanked by a pair of Charles Peale Polk likenesses painted a decade earlier. The layman can easily discern the subtlety of lighting effects, facial details and folds of clothing which reveal that Polk was the more highly-trained of the two. Yet Joshua Johnson's straightforward approach, lying as it does somewhere between that of a skilled professional and a folk artist, is bold and refreshing.

In another instance, Johnson's portrait of *Thomas Donovan* (1799-1800) is placed between a Rembrandt Peale figure from 1798 and one by Charles Peale Polk from 1792-94. All three of the likenesses have similar Napoleon-like poses with one hand placed inside the vest, and the juxtaposition encourages a study of the similarities and contrasts of the three works.

It is essential, however, that the gallery-goer look closely at the labels, for the names of the artists other than Johnson appear sufficiently small beneath the subject's name that one can sometimes mistake a Peale portrait for one by Johnson.

In addition to such wonderful pairings, there is the realization that Johnson's early work is, in some ways, more competently painted than that of his later years. For instance, two early portraits of children, *John Spear Smith* (1797-98) and *Mary Buchanan Smith* (1797-98), show an 11-year old boy holding gloves and a walking stick and his 13-year old sister cuddling a dog in her lap; in both cases the shadows on faces and drapery are sufficiently deep to provide an adequate three-dimensional illusion. In the later examples there is a lessening of chiaroscuro, with the result that figures appear closer to flat cutouts.

Of the various family groups in the show, Johnson's large, 38 1/4 x 56 1/4" canvas of *Mrs. Thomas Everett and Her Children* (1818) is easily the most ambitious. Here a mother and five offspring pose in front of and seated on a settee. Traditionally such family compositions have a parent at each end of the sofa acting as visual anchors for the rest, but because Mrs. Everett was a widow, the arrangement becomes more asymmetrical.

The Joshua Johnson exhibition is the largest to date boasting twice as many of his canvases as were included in the first Johnson show (held in January, 1948 at the Peale Museum), and the catalog for the current exhibit is the most complete writing about the artist to date. One of the major puzzles still to be solved, however, is whether the portraitist's name was Johnson or Johnston. The Historical Society publication refers to this only in a footnote, which states: "The preferred spelling of the artist's name is now considered to be Johnson, without the 't', since most period references cite his name in that manner." Yet a 1797 newspaper advertisement lists him as "Johnston," and that spelling was also used in the 1948 Peale catalog, *Romare Bearden's Six Black Masters of American Art* (1972), *Elsa Honig Fine's The Afro-American Artist* (1973) and *David C. Driskell's Hidden Heritage: Afro-American Art, 1800-1950*, the catalog for last July's exhibit at The Baltimore Museum of Art.

Perhaps someone will be able to solve this riddle in the not-too-distant future.

After the "Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter" Exhibition closes at The Maryland Historical Society on January 3rd, it will travel to The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center at Williamsburg and then to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.



Joshua Johnson's portrait of *Mrs. John Moale and her Granddaughter* (1798-1800), is one of 44 portraits by the Baltimore artist in a retrospective exhibition at The Maryland Historical Society.

VERTICAL FILE