

MARYLAND/REGION

Hagerstown museum gets rare paintings by first black portraitist in the country

By Greg Tasker

Western Maryland Bureau of The Sun

HAGERSTOWN — Two rare paintings by early Baltimorean Joshua Johnson, who is recognized as the country's first black portraitist and whose work is now being marketed for as much as \$850,000, have been donated to the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts.

The early 19th-century portraits of a Baltimore family that later moved to Hagerstown were donated to the small museum by a 93-year-old great-great-grandson of the man who commissioned the portraits.

Neither the donor, Hagerstown resident F. Sydney Cushwa, nor the museum would comment on the paintings' worth. Other sources familiar with the artist's work complimented the Hagerstown museum on its gifts, but would not speculate about their value, either.

Stiles T. Colwell, co-author of a catalog on Johnson's paintings and co-owner of a Baltimore art and antique gallery, noted that the artist's works have brought as little as \$30,000 in recent years, although they also have brought much more. He said the two donated portraits would benefit from cleaning, a step that could help establish their value.

But he added: "It's a wonderful addition for that museum because Johnson's work is quite rare. For a museum in Hagerstown to get a pair of his portraits — that's a major addition to its 19th-century collection."

The artist's most famous portrait, "Little Girl in Pink With a Goblet Filled With Strawberries," sold for \$680,000 at Sotheby's auction

house in New York in 1988. That portrait, which dates to 1805, is being offered for sale at a New York art gallery for \$850,000.

Johnson, who worked in Baltimore from the mid-1790s until about 1825, painted members of prominent families. Many of his subjects were children.

Several other curators and authorities agreed that the Johnson portraits are a significant addition to the Hagerstown museum, which has a wing under construction. Johnson's work, they noted, is sought after and is collected by, among others, entertainer Bill Cosby. Johnson's work also is on display at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the National Gallery in Washington.

The Hagerstown museum's oil-on-canvas portraits, dating to 1809, are of the family of Benjamin Franklin Yoe, Mr. Cushwa's direct ancestor. One portrait is of Yoe and his namesake son. The other is of his wife, Susanna Amos Yoe, and daughter Mary Elizabeth. Yoe was a tailor who moved his family to Hagerstown the next year.

Mr. Colwell, curator of an exhibit of Johnson's work at the Maryland Historical Society several years ago that included the Yoe portraits, said he believed that the Hagerstown museum's portraits are copies of the originals, which are on display at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Jean Woods, director of the Washington County museum, said she believes Johnson made two sets of the portraits — one for each of the children — a practice that was not uncommon. The value of the paint-

ings is not lessened because they are copies, curators agreed.

"We're delighted to have these portraits. It's quite a wonderful gift," Ms. Woods said. "The fact that they're from a Maryland artist and that the sitters were a Hagerstown family makes it even better."

The donor, Mr. Cushwa, is a member of a prominent Western Maryland family that made its money in coal and bricks. He has been a longtime member and supporter of the Hagerstown museum.

"I've always been interested in the museum — actually, since it opened, and I wanted my Hagerstown portraits to stay in the region," Mr. Cushwa said in a prepared statement.

Although Johnson worked as a portrait painter in Baltimore, little is known about his background before his arrival in the United States. Biographers believe he came to this country from the West Indies. Historians differ on whether he arrived as a freedman or as a slave who was freed later.

He first was listed as a painter in Baltimore's city directory in 1796. Later directories identify Johnson as "a free householder of colour." He described himself as a "self-taught genius" in an ad promoting his portrait painting in a Baltimore newspaper.

Art historians believe that Johnson may have received some training from Baltimore's renowned Peale family, which dominated the city's art scene around that time. Johnson's style often has been compared to that of Charles Peale Polk, a nephew of family patriarch Charles Willson Peale.



PERRY THORNTON/SUN STAFF PHOTO

This is one of two portraits by Joshua Johnson given to the museum.