
Johnson, Joshua

(fl. 1795–1824),

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.34494>

Published in print: 15 March 2013

Published online: 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

painter, was probably born in the West Indies. It is now generally believed by scholars of American art and history that Johnson was black and may have come to this country as a young man, probably as a slave. Johnson might be identified as the “negro boy” mentioned in the 1777 will of Captain Robert Polk of Maryland. This boy is thought to have been purchased by Polk's brother-in-law, the noted artist Charles Willson Peale. Stylistic resemblances between the work of Charles Willson Peale and Joshua Johnson are apparent. Unfortunately, very little documentation on Johnson exists, and identification of his works is accomplished through provenance (mostly oral family tradition), and connoisseurship—observation of technique, subject matter, iconography, and style.

Johnson's artistic career spanned nearly thirty years, during which he worked only in Baltimore, painting portraits of many of its citizens. Like many artists of the period he more than likely also worked in a related field, such as sign painting or carriage painting, in order to make a living. It is likely that for most of his professional life he was a freeman. If he had ever been a slave, he was evidently free by 19 December 1798, when he placed an advertisement for his services as a portrait artist in the *Baltimore Intelligencer*. A slave could not usually have advertised for clients in this manner, and in the advertisement he alluded to the difficulties of his life: “As a *self-taught genius*, deriving from nature and industry his knowledge of the Art; and having experienced many insufferable obstacles in the pursuit of his studies, it is highly gratifying to him to make assurances of his ability to execute all commands, with an effect, and in a style, which must give satisfaction.” He is listed as a “Free Householder of Colour” in the 1816–1817 Baltimore city directory, and an 1810 census lists a Josa. Johnston as a “free negro.” “Johnson” was on occasion spelled with a “t,” and there is some disagreement among scholars as to whether “Johnson” is the correct form of the artist's last name. The only signed painting attributed to him (*Sarah Ogden Gustin*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) shows it as “Johnson,” while his advertisement spells his name as “Johnston,” as does his signature on a 1798 petition for the paving of German Lane, where he lived.



Joshua Johnson's painting of Sarah Ogden Gustin, the only signed painting by Johnson, a prominent portrait painter with a largely white clientele.

(National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

Johnson was able to earn portrait commissions because of the growing wealth of Baltimore's citizenry. Colonial Baltimore attracted major capital investors in the 1780s; along with this growth came a certain cosmopolitan atmosphere. By 1800 a fifth of Baltimore's population was black, and nearly half of those persons were free, a very high percentage for the American South. The increasing popularity of Quakerism and Methodism in Maryland, both with strong antislavery stances, encouraged manumissions. Unfortunately, kidnapping for resale into slavery was a constant and real possibility, but safety in numbers helped somewhat, and Johnson, like many free blacks, initially chose to live in the poorer Fells Point area. However, he subsequently moved near the intersection of German and Hanover streets, a wealthier neighborhood that boasted a number of abolitionists and no doubt provided many more clients. All but two of his approximately eighty known portraits are of white subjects.

Johnson spent his entire career in Baltimore, the only artist of the first quarter of the nineteenth century to do so. He is listed as a limner at eight different Baltimore addresses between 1796 and 1824, apparently never moving to other cities or towns in search of new clients. This consistency may in part be attributable to the difficulties he faced as a free black in a slave-owning society. Johnson often painted likenesses of his near neighbors. The majority of his late images are of working- and middle-class Baltimoreans, while his early subjects reflect more upper-class individuals—members of prominent families, many of whom were also clients of the Peales (once again indicating an early connection to the Peale family).

Johnson probably did not maintain a painting studio, but like many artists of this period, he worked in his sitters' homes. Children constitute a particularly large percentage of his portrait subjects. He often posed them standing, and he used such decorative devices as fruit, books, and even butterflies. A painting of an unidentified girl shows the young subject holding a flower in one hand while she stands in front of greenery (Baltimore Museum of Art). Just under her other hand, an overlarge butterfly sits on a bush. In another painting of a child, a young girl stands on a marble floor near a window with drapery pulled aside to reveal a hint of an exterior garden scene. (*Emma Van Name*, Whitney Museum

of American Art, New York). Emma holds a strawberry in one hand and gestures to a wine glass nearly as big as she is filled with berries next to her. Johnson modeled the forms of the figure to indicate depth and created spatial relationships by using overlapping forms that moved back within the composition. His linear approach with thinly applied paint reflects knowledge of, if not training by, Charles Willson Peale and indicates some awareness of European styles, though Johnson's works remain within the American folk tradition.

There are only two known portraits by Johnson of black sitters. These probably depict Abner (Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine) and Daniel Coker (American Museum in Britain, Bath, England), two dignitaries of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The Daniel Coker identification is based on a comparison with a known portrait of him, while the identification of Abner Coker rests on its apparent pairing in size and composition with the other portrait and the professional relationship of the two men. There are few extant images of African Americans from this period, and these two portraits are respectful and dignified likenesses. A portrait of the Most Reverend John Carroll, first archbishop of Baltimore from 1808 to 1815, reflects Johnson's ties to the Catholic Church, supported by baptismal and death records for his children. Stylistically the elongated eyes, thin paint, and crossed hands with book are all characteristic of Johnson's style.

Johnson's technical approach to painting was distinctive, helping with the identification of his works. Johnson stretched his canvases onto strainers with fixed corners using plain weave fabric that was tightly woven and quite textured. He apparently liked a colored ground, which ranged from gray to buff, and he painted with thin paint, making very few revisions. He would apply small areas of intense color that contrasted with the surrounding, more limited palette. His subjects, always portraits of individuals, place him squarely within the colonial tradition of American Art. Johnson's career parallels the development of painting in the colonies, and he is significant within both African American history and the tradition of American art. The date of Johnson's death is unknown; he last appears in the Baltimore City Directory in 1824, in which he is listed as "Johnson, Joshua, portrait painter, Sleigh's Lane, S side E of Spring."

Further Reading

Very little archival documentation on Johnson exists, but both the Maryland Historical Society and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center have taken an interest in the artist.

Bearden, Romare, and Harry Henderson. *A History of African American Artists from 1792–Present* (1993).

Pleasants, Dr. J. Hall. "Joshua Johnston: The First American Negro Portrait Painter," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 37, no. 2 (June 1942): 121–149.

Weekley, Carolyn J., et al. *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (1987).

See also

Coker, Daniel <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34311>>

