

A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves



A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves, March 2, 1862, 1862

Eastman Johnson (American, 1824–1906)

Oil on board, 25 x 29 in.

Paul Mellon Collection, 85.644

Object and Artist Information

This painting is by American artist Eastman Johnson (1824–1906), who began his career in the printing business. He apprenticed with Boston lithographer John H. Bufford from 1840 to 1842 and mastered the medium. In 1845 Johnson moved to Washington, D.C., where he created portraits of well-known people in chalk, crayon, and charcoal. He went to Europe in 1848 and studied academic painting in Düsseldorf, Germany, seventeenth-century Dutch art in The Hague (Holland), and French art in Paris. Johnson returned to America in 1855 and became widely acclaimed for his genre paintings, or scenes of everyday life. During the Civil War, many of his paintings focused on African American subject matter, particularly slavery, the critical issue of the time. Traveling with the Union army, he recorded events and battles he witnessed.

Johnson completed *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* in 1862, a year after the Civil War began. It depicts an enslaved African American family—father, mother, young boy, infant—fleeing on horseback. In contrast to some of Johnson’s earlier representations of black Americans as being resigned to their servitude, here the father is forceful and clearly taking charge of his family’s own fate. As the title notes, this enslaved family is attempting a daring escape to the Union army lines. On the back of the painting, Johnson wrote: “A veritable [true] incident/in the Civil War seen by/myself at Centerville/on this morning of/McClellan’s advance towards Manassas March 2, 1862/Eastman Johnson.” The painting and inscription serve as a primary source of an historical event. Johnson painted three versions of *A Ride for Liberty*, but only two are known—this one and another in the Brooklyn Museum’s collection. Apparently, they were never exhibited during Johnson’s lifetime, perhaps due to the charged subject matter.

Concept

By using this painting as a primary source of history, students can explore issues such as slavery and the Civil War.

Map

Using a map of the United States, identify the state of Virginia.

Resources for Grades 4–7

Observation and Discussion

Use the following suggested questions and discussion points while looking at *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves*

- What’s happening in this painting?
- Do you detect movement? If so, where? What are the signs of movement?
- What time of day do you think it is? Why?
- What clues does the artist give to indicate that this family is running away?
- Where is the woman looking?
- What is the woman holding?
- Imagine that you are one of the figures in this scene. Are you scared, excited, happy, confused?
- Slaves escaped on their own, like this family, or used the Underground Railroad, a system of hiding places, or stations, where they could safely stay on their way to the North. What do you know about the Underground Railroad?
- Johnson shows an African American family taking their fate into their own hands. Do you think this painting was controversial during the artist’s lifetime (19th century)? Why?

Resources for Grades 4–7

Activities

ACTIVITY 1

Ask the students to pretend to be one of the characters in the painting and complete the following sentences, as that person would:

My family and I are traveling to: _____

When I get there I will: _____

To me freedom is: _____

ACTIVITY 2

Have students choose a character from Eastman Johnson's *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* and develop a short narrative about that person, based on what they observe in the painting and by using their imaginations. Students could write about the character's past, present, future, or summarize the character's entire life. Next, ask the students to select a favorite scene, illustrate it, and give a title to their story and drawing.

Closure

Encourage the students to share their ideas about what they produced.

SOLs

Visual Arts 4.1, 4.3, 4.13, 4.20, 4.21, 5.1, 5.2, 5.12, 5.19, 5.21, 6.15, 6.17, 6.18, 7.3, 7.14, 7.18, 7.20

History VS.1 a,c,d,e,f, USI.9

English 4.1, 4.7, 6.6, 7.8

Educational Media Resources

Recommended Films, Videos, and DVDs

The Civil War

Varied; see below | color | 1990 | PBS | VHS | DVD

Middle school through adult

Produced by award-winning documentarian Ken Burns, *The Civil War* is widely considered the definitive film history of the war. It interweaves thousands of eloquent photographs and paintings with the words of those who lived through a war that shattered the Union and shaped a nation.

Forever Free (76 min.) **CW-3**

Convinced by July 1862 that emancipation was morally and militarily crucial to the future of the Union, Lincoln was forced to wait for a Union victory to issue his proclamation—but “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee saw to it that there were no Union victories. This episode takes viewers to the banks of Antietam Creek and the bloodiest day of the war.

Simply Murder (62 min.) **CW-4**

This episode chronicles three important battles: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Vicksburg. Lee loses his right-hand man, “Stonewall” Jackson, and some Northerners voice strong opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Note: These and other audiovisual resources related to VMFA’s collection may be accessed through our website:

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Statewide_Programs/Films,_Videos,_and_DVDs.aspx

Educational Media Resources

Recommended Websites

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/495/A_Ride_for_Liberty_-_The_Fugitive_Slaves/set/search?referring-q=Johnson%2C+Eastman

<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher-packets.php>

Link to Related Works of Art at VMFA

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Collections/American/>

Links to Related Programs

Teen classes

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Teens/Teens.aspx>

Families and kids

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Kids+_Families/Kids+_Families.aspx

Tours

<http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Educators/educators.aspx>

Teacher workshops

http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/Educators/Teacher_Workshops/Teacher_Workshops.aspx

Please check <http://www.vmfa.museum/Learn/> regularly to learn about new tours and other educational opportunities.



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