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My Advocacy for the Digital Catalogue Raisonné

Patricia Hills

I never really considered doing a book version of a catalogue raisonné. When I got serious about creating a catalogue raisonné, I always imagined it as a website. The reasons are many and incontrovertible. Websites are accessible, affordable, correctible, connectible, and pedagogical.

Let me start with some background. When I began my exhaustive research on the American portrait and genre painter Eastman Johnson (1824–1905) for both my dissertation and the traveling exhibition I was organizing for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972, I did not even consider undertaking any sort of catalogue raisonné. My perspective for pursuing my two projects was just that I needed to locate as many Johnson paintings and drawings as possible in order to understand his artistic concerns and his trajectory as an artist. Hence, at the very beginning, I designed five-by-eight-inch cards that mimicked the accession cards of the Museum of Modern Art, where I had worked from 1960 to 1964 (fig. 1). After 1972, out of habit, I continued to fill out cards for each new Johnson work I examined.

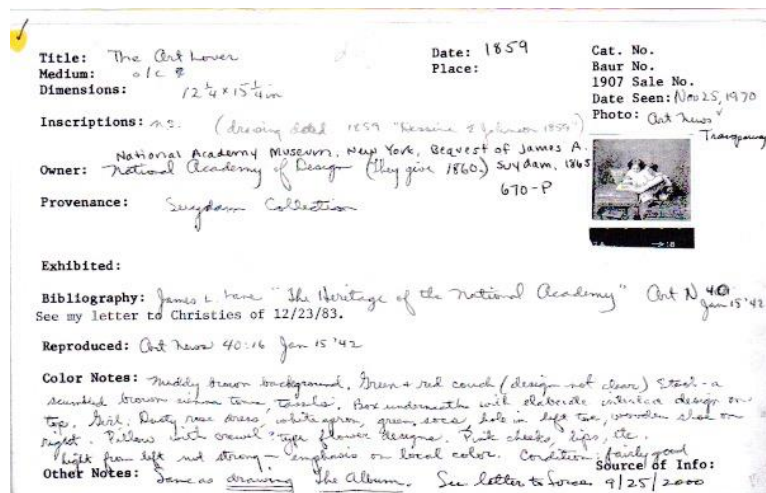


Fig. 1. Index card for Eastman Johnson's *The Art Lover* (1859), created by the author. Image courtesy of the author

Years went by; then the gallerist Robert Vose of Boston told me I should take my recordkeeping seriously and write up my examination notes. I did and made my cards available to scholars. By 1997, when Teresa Carbone was organizing the large retrospective traveling exhibition for the Brooklyn Museum, I had amassed 1,100 cards. Another fifteen

years elapsed when I met Abigail MacGibeny, a master's student at Boston University, where I taught. She suggested entering all the data from the cards I had collected onto FileMakerPro, a database then widely used by museums for their collections. The project was getting serious. With a small grant from the Wyeth Foundation in 2016, I could engage MacGibeny to work regularly to finish the work.

With our progress, we got ambitious and began to imagine a website. A large grant from the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for American Art, funded through our sponsor, The Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, provided travel funds, regular payments for MacGibeny, and the ability to secure the services of PanOpticon. Further negotiations with the National Academy of Design resulted in their agreeing to be the long-term steward of the *Eastman Johnson Catalogue Raisonné* (EJCR), dependent on our raising a substantial endowment fund so that once the website launched, it could be maintained. While MacGibeny worked to complete each section, holding long conversations with me about each entry, I began a blitz of fundraising letters for an endowment. Fortunately, the Lunder Foundation, eleven gallerists, fifty-three private people/couples, and six of my relatives responded. The paintings section of the EJCR was launched on July 29, 2021 (Johnson's birthdate), with sections about drawings and prints going live on April 5, 2022 (Johnson's death date). There are a number of concise points that articulate the project's value in its digital form.

Accessible. With a click of a button on a computer or smartphone to access www.eastmanjohnson.org, a student, scholar, curator, gallerist, collector, or any other interested person can immediately get all the available information on Johnson's (now, with continued research) more than 1,400 artworks. No need to go to a library. This means that information, standard for a book version of a catalogue raisonné, is available on each individualized numbered work: image, title, date, medium, dimensions, provenance, exhibition history, and bibliography. We also have brief informative comments that are not often included in print versions about each work in terms of subject, date, paint handling, or contemporary criticism. In addition, many of my opinion letters and examination notes are part of each entry. Most of this kind of material is not available in print catalogues. Moreover, we appended a gallery of related artworks to each entry; for example, for each entry of a Grover Cleveland portrait, all the images of other portraits are on view.

Affordable. The EJCR website is free and not a heavy tome (or series of tomes). No bookshelf space is involved.

Correctible. Through the endowment funds and temporary operating funds I raised for the EJCR, we can hire a responsible person to update the site periodically—adding new works when necessary and correcting information that has become available since the 2021 launches. Currently MacGibeny is handling maintenance, but in the future, an archivist/curator will be secured to maintain the site.

Connectible. Throughout the website are links that can immediately bring the viewer to other websites, such as the National Academy of Design website, and to published essays on Johnson by other scholars.

Pedagogical. The website was always conceived as a tool for students, scholars, and viewers interested in history and art history. For each theme—for example, “European Peasant Types, Men”—an explanation is provided. There are also longer essays on “Significance of Eastman Johnson to the History of American Art,” “Significance of Eastman Johnson’s Pictures to Contemporary Concerns,” “Guide to the Catalogue,” “Art Historical Context of Johnson’s Art: Genre Painting and Portraiture,” and “Technical Information on Johnson’s Practices.” A brief biography and chronology of Johnson’s life is also included.

While assembling the data, we were mindful that the language of the nineteenth century is not the language we would use today. Many of the titles given to Johnson’s work or phrases used in contemporary criticism are offensive to a twenty-first-century person. Hence, with the input from our five Consultants for Interpretation, we created the essay “Racist Language, Negative Stereotypes Statement,” which addresses these issues. To each artwork for which this is an issue, we added a clickable notice.

Another function of the website is that works can be bookmarked. This feature makes it possible for students to create their own PowerPoint-like folder—one that can be uploaded for a seminar or other presentation. And, finally, the information in the EJCR is in the public domain, with the caveat that the authors, MacGibeny and myself, be respectfully acknowledged. As to reproductions of the artworks for publication, many are in the public domain. For restricted photo images, the viewer must negotiate permissions from the owners.

One last remark. We like to think of the EJCR website as a resource available in perpetuity. But as one observer noted, perpetuity in the current world means twenty years. Hence, we have made one hard paper copy of the catalogue, which we donated to the Frick Art Reference Library—a fitting home, especially since I began my research there.

About the Author(s): Patricia Hills is Professor Emerita at Boston University, where she taught American and African American Art for thirty-six years.