

DAVID CLAYPOOL JOHNSTON (1797-1865), c. 1859

Thomas Murphy Johnston (1834-69)

oil on panel/cardboard[?]

29 1/4 x 24 1/2 (74.30 x 62.23)

American Antiquarian Society purchase with funds provided by Charles Henry Taylor, Jr., 1933
Weis 71

Hewes Number: 72

Ex. Coll.: Family; to sitter's daughter Sarah J. F. Johnston (1850-1925); to sitter's granddaughter Mary E. Donovan and grandson the Reverend Richard S. Cartwright; sold by them to the Society.

Exhibitions:

1970, 'David Claypool Johnston,' Worcester Art Museum.

The artist David Claypool Johnston painted in oils and watercolor, worked as an engraver and lithographer, and published a popular comic annual, Scraps, from 1828 until 1849. Born in Philadelphia, in 1815 he was apprenticed there to engraver and actor Francis Kearney (1785-1837). After working as an engraver and actor in Philadelphia, Johnston moved to Boston in 1825 and quickly gained renown as a satirist. His lithographed caricatures of American politicians and military leaders earned him the title 'The American Cruikshank,' after the highly esteemed British caricaturist George Cruikshank (1792-1878).¹

In Boston, Johnston found steady employment with the Pendleton lithography firm. He illustrated sheet music covers, drew portraits of prominent actors and actresses, and designed scathing caricatures. His work came to the attention of several book publishers, who soon jobbed out their illustration needs to him. In books such as The Thousand and One Nights, or the Arabian Nights' Entertainments (1832) and Surgical Observations on Tumours, with Cases and Operations (1837), Johnston provided images for a variety of audiences ranging from young readers to professionals.² He also contributed illustrations to journals, including the Boston Monthly Magazine and the American Journal of Science and Arts. Many publications featuring his illustrations are housed at the American Antiquarian Society. Johnston also sent original drawings and watercolors to the annual exhibitions of the Boston Athenaeum and taught drawing to pupils such as Louisa May Alcott (1832-88) and his own son Thomas Murphy Johnston.³

The American Antiquarian Society holds a large archive of Johnston's work, along with some personal papers obtained from descendants in 1933. The collection contains dozens of the artist's prints, several drawings, books, and 174 original watercolors, including a small self-

portrait (fig. 20).⁴ Taken together, Johnston's artistic productions, and in particular his published caricatures, offer a substantial, visual record of nineteenth-century American life.

This portrait of the artist by his eldest son was included in the 1933 acquisition. Thomas Murphy Johnston studied drawing with his father and took lessons in painting from William Morris Hunt (1824-79) and Samuel Rowse (1822-1901). He worked in oils and crayon, and, like his father, was occasionally employed by Boston lithographers. The younger Johnston was known as a 'figure painter' and often exhibited portraits at the Boston Athenaeum, including an image of his mother, Sarah Murphy Johnston (1811-80), that was widely admired.⁵ Some of his other sitters included Charles Sumner, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁶ After the death of his father in 1865, Thomas Murphy Johnston went to France for further artistic education but died there less than a year after his arrival. His accomplishments were summarized in an obituary: 'His work was remarkable for correct and vigorous drawing, and his coloring was at once delicate, rich and pure. As a portrait painter he was eminently successful.'⁷

¹ For additional biographical information see Clarence Brigham, 'David Claypoole Johnston: The American Cruikshank,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 50 (April 1940): 98-110, and Malcolm Johnson, David Claypool Johnston: American Graphic Humorist, 1798-1865 (Lunenburg, Vt.: Stinehour Press, 1970).

² For a list of Johnston's illustrated books, see David Tatham, A Note about David Claypoole Johnston with a Checklist of His Book Illustrations (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1970).

³ Brigham, 'David Claypoole Johnston,' 107.

⁴ See the Johnston Family Papers, 1824-1940, AAS Manuscript Collection, and the David Claypool Johnston Collection in the AAS Graphic Arts Collection. See also the online exhibit at www.americanantiquarian.org/Exhibitions/Johnston.

⁵ Robert F. Perkins, Jr., and William J. Gavin, The Boston Athenaeum Art Exhibition Index, 1827-1874 (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1980), 86. This may have been the portrait, then owned by David Claypool Johnston, that Thomas Murphy Johnston exhibited in 1859.

⁶ Brigham, 'David Claypoole Johnston,' 108. Thomas Murphy Johnston's 1858 lithographed portrait of Emerson is preserved in the AAS Graphic Arts Collection.

⁷ Worcester Palladium, March 24, 1869, AAS Newsclipping File.