For Immediate Release

CLARK EXHIBITION TO FEATURE WINTER SCENES OF EARLY NEW ENGLAND MAPLE SUGAR CELEBRATIONS


Known in his day as “the American Rembrandt,” Johnson (1824-1906) is one of the most important American painters of the 19th century. At the time of the Civil War, Johnson created a series of oil sketches depicting the charm of Yankee life—kettle tenders, storytellers, children with sleds, and woodcutters—culminating in large oil sketches of the “sugaring off,” a party at which townspeople and farmers would gather around bubbling sap kettles for a feast. Fifteen of the best of these works will be featured in the exhibition, along with a video about maple sugar making past and present. Organized by the Clark Art Institute, Sugaring Off will later travel to the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California.

“Maple sugaring is still an important part of New England life today,” said Michael Conforti, director of the Clark. “This living tradition can be seen all around the Berkshires at the many farms that invite the public to watch them make maple sugar and host pancake breakfasts in the winter. Sugaring Off tells the story of this ritual through the work of a great American artist, and presents opportunities for exciting public programs about the history of rural New England and the very vital customs of maple syrup making today.”
Johnson celebrated maple sugar not only as a bit of nostalgia but also as a symbol of Yankee independence, according to Brian Allen, curator of American paintings at the Clark and curator of *Sugaring Off*.

“Johnson was an abolitionist, and these paintings done at the time of the Civil War represent free labor,” says Allen. “Unlike the cane sugar in the South, maple sugar was produced by free workers, not by slaves. This was an important notion for Johnson, who is known for his depictions of slavery in the South.”

Among the highlights of the exhibition are large, panoramic pictures of the entire maple sugar harvest, such as *Sugaring Off* (from the collection of the Huntington), *Party at the Maple Sugar Camp* (private collection), and *Sugaring Off at the Camp* (Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis). These evocative works depict the traditional party, usually in February, which celebrated the end of winter with bonfires, music, sugar-on-snow, doughnuts, and pickles. The sugaring off was more than a great party; it signaled the end of winter and marked the community’s spirit of egalitarian union. The festivities as envisioned by Johnson brought together a variety of “Yankee” types—townspeople and farmers, men and women, young and old—bridging social, political, and economic gaps. The nostalgic scenes laud the communal nature of the gathering as well as the hard work and self-sufficiency that maple sugar production represented.

Smaller, often highly finished paintings in the show include character studies of the people who populated the maple sugar camps: the bundled up lovers of *Down East Courtship* (Maryland State Archives, Annapolis); the top-hatted gentleman in *The Storyteller of the Camp* (Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, NC); and the hardworking kettle tender in *Making Maple Sugar* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT). Two young boys empty buckets into a barrel on a sled in *The Sap Gatherers* (private collection).

The paintings illustrate the production of maple syrup from clear, tasteless sap dripping into buckets to the dark, delicious sweet that served the needs of rural New Englanders. The methods and equipment depicted by Johnson will be compared with historical photographs and postcards of maple sugar production. Two lithographs by Currier & Ives will also be included, as will a group of 19th-century syrup bottles and a video about maple syrup production.

Johnson painted the maple sugaring sketches in Fryeburg, Maine, between 1861 and 1867, probably in preparation for a large oil painting that he started but never finished. Like Johnson’s well-known painting, *The Cranberry Harvest*, the works depict characters and rituals
that are unique to a region. The maple sugar sketches remained in Johnson’s studio until his death and were scattered at the sale of his estate. *Sugaring Off* represents the first time these works are considered together as a group.

Eastman Johnson was born and raised in southwestern Maine. As one of the most important American artists of his day, Johnson painted portraits of such notable figures as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Longfellow. Johnson studied in The Netherlands in the 1850s, where he was influenced by the great Dutch Old Masters, earning him the nickname “the American Rembrandt. He then returned to the United States where he developed a reputation for his depictions of American life, ranging from Civil War subjects to urban interiors to rural genre painting.

*Sugaring Off* will be on view at the Clark from January 18 through April 18, 2004. A variety of public programs are planned, beginning with a pancake brunch on Saturday, January 18, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., followed by an opening lecture at 2 p.m. Other programs will include family days on February 1 and March 28, a “Sugar Smack” Valentine’s Day party on February 14, and a series of lectures and films offered on selected Sundays at 2 p.m.

A 56-page catalogue will be published by the Clark and distributed by Yale University Press. The book will include 28 color plates. Retail price will be $16.95 (softcover).

*Sugaring Off* is the latest in a series of focused exhibitions at the Clark that advance new scholarship and critical thought while generating public interest. Recent traveling exhibitions organized by the Clark have included the popular and critically acclaimed *Renoir and Algeria* and *Turner the Late Seascapes*. Upcoming exhibitions include “Bonjour Monsieur Courbet!”: *The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier* (Summer 2004) and *Jacques-Louis David: Empire and Exile* (Summer 2005). For more information, call 413-458-2303 or visit [www.clarkart.edu](http://www.clarkart.edu).

**The Clark**

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is one of the country’s foremost art museums and also a dynamic center for research and higher education in art history and criticism. The Clark's exceptional collections of Old Master, Impressionist, and 19th-century American art on display in the museum's intimate galleries are enhanced by its dramatic 140-acre setting in the Berkshires.
The Institute is one of only a few art museums in the U.S. that is also a major research and academic center, with an international fellowship program and regular conferences, symposia, and colloquia, and an important art research library. The Clark, together with Williams College, jointly sponsors one of the nation’s leading M.A. programs in art history and encompasses one of the most comprehensive art history libraries in the world. Its Fellows and conference programs draw university and museum professionals from around the world.

The Clark Art Institute is located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Throughout the Eastman Johnson exhibition, the Clark galleries will be open Tuesday through Sunday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission is free.

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