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Eastman Johnson, *A Ride for Liberty* George Inness, *On the Delaware River*

Dominic Carter: According to the artist Eastman Johnson, this painting was based on a personal experience during the Civil War.

Day was breaking over the battlefield near Manassas, Virginia, March 2, 1862. Johnson, to his astonishment, saw a slave family flee on a horse from the Confederate side to the freedom of the Union lines. Shortly afterwards, he fixed his memory of it in this dramatic, backlit image.

Terry Carbone: There is no parallel in American art for this picture.

Dominic Carter: Curator Terry Carbone says that at the time African Americans were rarely depicted in American art, and then almost always with white people.

Terry Carbone: Not only is this black family independently making their way to freedom without the help of a white presence, the man is the one leading the way and the woman is looking backward. And to empower a black man in an image of this period was very radical.

Dominic Carter: So radical that Johnson never exhibited the painting publicly in his lifetime.

Terry Carbone: Many people looking at this picture comment on the fact that the woman has very nontypical black features, and I think this ties in very tightly with Johnson's desire to portray African Americans as individuals.

Dominic Carter: Surprisingly little work addressed the realities of the Civil War directly. To your right is another work from the era, by George Inness. Agriculture and industry blend harmoniously here in a hopeful vision of peace and prosperity—far from the tragedy of war.

On the wall to your left is a cane that commemorates the Emancipation Proclamation, the ending of legalized slavery. The artist isn't known to us, but the way the cane is decorated suggests it was made by someone familiar with African traditions of craftsmanship. As in Europe, canes in Africa were used as symbols of authority and stature, but African canes were frequently ornamented with a spiral narrative, as this one is.