



## Season 6, Episode 2: Seth Eastman Painting

Tukufu Zuberi: Our next story questions whether this painting of Native American life on the frontier is an original, possibly worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. May 1830: President Jackson signs the Indian Removal Act, expelling all Native Americans from lands east of the Mississippi river. On the edge of the frontier, one man saw the future and vowed to document what would soon be lost... the daily lives and culture of native peoples. Army captain Seth Eastman captures on canvas what many predict is a doomed culture. Today, over 170 years later, Jack Couch from Illinois believes he has found an authentic Eastman...a rare window on a long vanished world.

Tukufu: Jack couldn't believe his luck when he came across a Seth Eastman painting on an internet auction site.

Jack: To my surprise, up came a painting! And I thought well this is a great opportunity.

Tukufu: Jack's winning bid was just over \$300. Could it be that he's found a long lost Eastman oil painting worth tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars? I'm Tukufu Zuberi and I've come to see this painting for myself.

Tukufu: Tukufu Zuberi...

Jack: Nice to meet you... Come on in.

Tukufu: Thank you very much.

Jack: I obtained this painting online from a Belfast, Ireland dealer and it is an American Indian scene. I noticed it was signed down here with just the initials.

Tukufu: Do you know anything about the provenance or the history of the painting?

Jack: Unfortunately he had none. The only thing I have is the information given on eBay by the dealer.

Tukufu: Ok. Seth Eastman, American painting, oil on canvas. What do you know about Seth Eastman?

Jack: He was a professional military man who was known for painting Native American Indians. I would like to know if it is an original Seth Eastman painting.



Tukufu: I'm going to go see what I can find out, and get back to you as soon as I can. Do you mind if I take the painting with me?

Jack: No, take it with you.

Tukufu: All right, great thank you.

Jack: Thanks a million.

Tukufu: Could this be an authentic Seth Eastman? I'm not familiar enough with his work to judge. The scene is compelling – men and women in a Native American village – but I don't know if Eastman painted images like these. In the 1840's, Seth Eastman made hundreds of oils, watercolors, and drawings of the Dakota and Ojibway people while serving as the commander of Fort Snelling on the upper Mississippi river. But even though he used such a variety of materials, the colors in our painting seem more vibrant than what's reproduced here. Like many western artists of his time, Eastman was confronting major themes of American identity in the west and congress commissioned him to paint Native American scenes for the hall of the U.S. Capitol. One writer calls him "the pictorial historian of the Indian" but unlike most other artists, Eastman lived among Native Americans for years. He even had a child with a Dakota woman. Seth Eastman represents a kind of contradictory moment. On one hand he is this historic visionary chronicler of Native American life in the Minnesota area. On the other hand, he is a captain in the U.S. military, sent there to do a job, which, in part, meant displacing the very Dakota whose life he was documenting. I don't see Jack's painting here, but the imagery is very similar. I can't find any painting where Eastman signs with the initials "S.E." it looks like he writes out his full name or doesn't sign them at all. A quick search online for auctions of Eastman paintings brings up sale prices from around \$20,000 to over \$900,000. I suppose it's possible that Jack picked up an original Eastman for 300 bucks...but I got to wonder. I'm heading to St. Paul, Minnesota, where Fort Snelling is now a national historic landmark, and living history museum. This stone fort was once the most isolated post in the army. Established in 1820, the fort secured American power in the region as the federal government took possession of the land piece by piece.

Sentry: Good day, sir! Welcome to Fort Snelling!

Tukufu: Thank you. Which way to the Commanding Officer's quarters?

Sentry: Straight on through the gate here and across the parade ground.

Tukufu: All right, you stay warm!



Sentry: Thank you, sir.

Tukufu: The commanding officer's quarters is the oldest standing residence in Minnesota. And here, between 1841 and 1848, Seth Eastman commanded a garrison of soldiers. Today I'm meeting with a unique Eastman expert – historical artist, and Seth Eastman interpreter, David Geister.

Tukufu: Captain Eastman, I presume?

David: Ah, Professor Zuberi. Welcome. Do come in; warm yourself by the fire.

Tukufu: Thank you very much, look, I do know your name is David Geister...

David: Yes, sir.

Tukufu: With David's knowledge of Eastman's works, I'm eager to see what he thinks of Jack's painting. So, here's the painting I sent you the photos of. Have you ever seen this painting before?

David: It's interesting, but, no. But I have seen some of the images.

Tukufu: Oh, really?

David: This group of men right here, for instance. Ah, there it is. That's it. Yeah. Much more detailed than what we see in the painting there. This is entitled "Chippewa Indians playing checkers."

Tukufu: David also recognizes the image of the woman scraping the animal skin.

David: There you go.

Tukufu: Hmm. Okay.

David: It's called "Indian woman dressing a deerskin."

Tukufu: That's nice. This is your work?

David: Yes, it is. This is based upon an Eastman that you see here in this book.

Tukufu: Now, it's interesting, this woman is on the opposite side from the woman in the painting.



David: Yes, but I think it's the same character.

Tukufu: Does that mean that Jack's painting is a copy?

David: Not necessarily.

Tukufu: David says that Eastman's proximity to the Dakota gave him an opportunity to observe their daily life. While out in the field, he would sketch Native Americans, and then reuse them in painting after painting...in effect, creating stock characters. That means Jack's painting – with its Eastman-like figures – could be the real thing. I've located a descendent of Eastman's union with a Dakota woman. Perhaps she can authenticate the painting. I'm headed to Afton, Minnesota and the Afton historical society press to meet Kate Beane, Seth Eastman's great-great-great granddaughter, and an expert on the Eastman family.

Tukufu: Hi, I'm Tukufu.

Kate: Hi, I'm Kate. Come on in.

Tukufu: Thank you. What do you see when you look at this painting?

Kate: I see Dakota life. This is everyday life; it's not staged.

Tukufu: Do you know much about Seth Eastman?

Kate: I know what I heard growing up. Many people aren't aware of his Dakota relatives of the um, Dakota side of his family and we are alive and well in Minnesota. In the 1830's, he had a Dakota wife, Wakan Inajin Win, which means stands sacred. And that marriage produced a daughter by the name of Winona.

Tukufu: Kate tells me that the army called Seth Eastman away, and he left his Dakota family. When he returned to Fort Snelling as commander in 1841, he married a white woman and had five more children. Though he remained silent about his Dakota family, Kate sees the kinship he must have felt coming through in his art.

Kate: It's about relationships. He shows Dakota women as being mothers, as caring for their children. He doesn't just show it as if you were a complete outsider. He had this sense of artistry that Dakota people would have found very sacred.



Tukufu: How does the fact that Seth Eastman was an agent of the U.S. government and simultaneously married into a Dakota family, how does that impact the legacy of Seth Eastman among the Dakota?

Kate: I can't speak for all Dakota people, but I can speak for myself; we are raised to respect our ancestors and that's what I do. I respect all of my ancestors. I have to in order to have respect for myself.

Tukufu: Soon after Seth Eastman left Minnesota, the Dakota signed treaties that forced them onto reservations. Then, in 1862, after years of broken promises and near starvation, Dakota warriors attacked white settlements. Hundreds died. In the aftermath, the army loaded over 1300 Dakota people onto steamboats and removed them from the state of Minnesota.

Kate: And a lot of us don't live in Minnesota right now, because we were exiled after 1862. And when we see these pictures, what we see is the way we were meant to live.

Tukufu: So the Eastman images in Jack's painting seem to be an authentic record of Native American life, and hold deep meaning for many Dakota people. If Jack's painting is a real Eastman it would be an important find. I'm back in Saint Paul to meet with an expert on Eastman's art. Located across from the Minnesota state capitol is the Minnesota History Center. And here I meet the Minnesota Historical Society's Curator of Art, Brian Szott, who puts Jack's painting side by side with two genuine Seth Eastman oil paintings. And what is this fabulous piece here?

Brian: Well, this is one of the gems in our collection. This is "A view of Mendota". It shows a Native American family in the foreground on the Fort Snelling side of the river.

Tukufu: Turning his attention to Jack's painting, Brian notices a couple of consistencies right away.

Brian: If you compare the age of this canvas. This canvas does demonstrate some age along the edges, it's very similar to what you would expect in a 19<sup>th</sup> century canvas. And it's similar to the age on our canvases. You start seeing some of the subject matter in Seth's paintings that are replicated especially in this painting. You see groupings of Native Americans in various poses in and around their architectural setting.

Tukufu: Although I wasn't able to find a matching signature, Brian explains that's not unusual.

Brian: Seth Eastman isn't very consistent on his paintings sometimes they are signed and sometimes not. And if you look closely on this painting, you'll see, deep in this painting, very subtly written in... is the initials S. E. 1848. There are a couple of concerns, however.



Tukufu: Okay.

Brian: You'll notice in this painting and this one here that the color, the palate that Seth Eastman uses, is much more muted and very subdued. It's dominated by greys, even a little purple in the sky. And in this painting here you'll notice that this painting employs brighter greens and brighter yellows.

Tukufu: Right.

Brian: So when you stand back and do side-by-side comparisons, this is a much brighter painting. And the next step you would look at is how the paint is applied to the canvas.

Tukufu: Okay.

Brian: And if you look closely at the Seth Eastman painting here you notice that Seth Eastman painted very thinly. He was a watercolorist, first and foremost, and to create a watercolor, you layer the paint on very thinly on to the paper. He took that same technique to oil and canvas, and if you look closely you can almost see the canvas coming through. When you go back to your painting here you see a much brushier application of the paint. You can see where it is thickly applied in the corner here, for example.

Tukufu: This examination may be inconclusive, but I can still turn to technology for more definitive answers. I'm bringing Jack's painting to the Midwest Art Conservation Center in Minneapolis. Here, conservators Joan Gorman and David Marquis put their C.S.L. skills to the test. Using a spotlight to rake the painting's surface, David examines cracks and other clues to its age. So as not to injure the artwork, Joan chooses a test spot on the edge of the canvas, and then performs a paint solubility test with a light hydrocarbon solution.

Joan: The paint is very soluble. In fact the paint isn't just dissolving its melting.

Tukufu: All right.

Joan: Here we are.

Tukufu: So what have we learned? With their tests complete, Joan and David call me in to show me what they've found.

David: These ridges are what we call "craquelure".

Tukufu: Okay.



David: They are formed when a paint layer has aged a considerable amount.

Tukufu: Okay. And that's good.

David: Well, actually, no.

Tukufu: No?

David: Because they aren't in the upper paint layer, which you see here, but they're in an older paint layer that's beneath the painting that you see here.

Joan: So you said that this was sold as an oil painting?

Tukufu: Yes.

Joan: Well, there is oil here. But it is the lower level. The topmost layer, the design layer, tested as an acrylic paint. Acrylic paints were introduced to artists commercially in the late 1950's and the 1960's.

Tukufu: So you're telling me that Seth Eastman could not have painted this painting.

Joan: That is correct.

Tukufu: The painting may be a forgery, but the discovery of a layer of oil paint underneath the surface has piqued David's and Joan's interest. They want to x-ray it to see if they can get a clear image of what is being obscured.

David: So let me show you what we have. This is what's underneath your painting.

Tukufu: This is amazing! I know Jack was hoping his \$300 find wasn't too good to be true, but it's time to report back, and deliver the bad news.

Tukufu: You have a forgery.

Jack: Well, that's too bad.

Tukufu: This isn't the real mystery here. The real mystery is what we found next.



David: Look what we have here. We have a portrait.

Tukufu: Wow! So this is underneath the Seth Eastman painting.

Joan: That area is the craquelure that David pointed out to you.

Tukufu: This is it?

Joan: Yes.

Tukufu: So, he does have a 19th century painting.

David: He does indeed.

Joan: Yes he does!

David: Just not the one he thinks.

Tukufu: That's right.

Jack: It's a portrait of another gentleman.

Tukufu: I don't know who he is, but it was painted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So you did buy a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting, it just wasn't by Seth Eastman.

Jack: My word, well, we'll have to try and track this man down and see who he is.

Tukufu: That would be another whole investigation.

Jack: Yes.

Tukufu: Well, good luck on it.

Jack: Thanks a million!



Tukufu: Despite the lingering mystery of our painter's true identity, he or she clearly studied Eastman's work. The Native Americans depicted here were living like their ancestors before them...a traditional way of life, captured on canvas before it was destroyed.