

***“Life on the Trail”, 1935. By Frank Tenney Johnson***  
**Spotlight Paper by John Tuttle, 2017**



- Frank Tenney Johnson; American born in Iowa in 1874 and died in California in 1939
- Education: classes with F. W. Heine, Richard Lorenz, John Henry Twachtman
- Influences: F. W. Heine, Richard Lorenz, John Henry Twachtman, Maxfield Parrish, Clyde Forsythe, Charles M. Russell, Frederick Remington
- Art movement: American western art
- Medium: oil on canvas
- Technique and methodology: layered painting
- Artist’s impact on the art world: world famous nocturne painter

**Background**

Along with Charles M. Russell and Frederick Remington, Frank Tenney Johnson was one of the leading painters of the American west. Johnson was born in 1874 near Oakland, Iowa, the younger of two boys. He was raised on a farm not far from the old Overland Trail, the western migration route of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He remembered seeing Indians and pioneers passing by and would later recall these images of childhood in his paintings.

In 1886 Johnson’s mother died. The family struggled to maintain the farm but in 1888 the family moved to Milwaukee. As a student, Johnson was taken to the Layton Art Gallery in Milwaukee. He was very impressed with the paintings and was determined to become an artist. In 1892 Johnson quit school and became an apprentice to F. W. Heine, a German watercolorist who had a studio in Milwaukee. Soon thereafter he began taking lessons from artist Richard Lorenz, a former Texas Ranger. He worked for several engraving firms, doing freelance piece work such as line drawings and watercolors for greeting cards and newspaper ads. While in Milwaukee, Johnson became involved in the Milwaukee Art Students League as an exhibitor.

In 1895 Johnson inherited \$225 from his aunt. This allowed him to travel to New York where he took classes under John Henry Twachtman (1895-1902) of the New York Art Students League. Twachtman was one of America’s greatest landscape painters. One of Twachtman’s skills was using blue tones in shadows – a technique Johnson was to develop on his own throughout a long career. In 1896 Johnson returned to Milwaukee and married Vinnie Ray Francis, who was to be not only his life-long companion but also his business manager and promoter.

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In 1902 the couple moved to New York, where Johnson took classes from Robert Henri and William Merritt Chase. He did free-lance work for department stores and newspapers. Johnson made two important contacts using the Barnes Crosby Agency: Winchester Rifles and *Field & Stream* magazine. *Field & Stream* agreed to provide him with rail transportation so that he could make extensive trips through the west to take photographs and make sketches that he could later turn into illustrations for *Field & Stream* to reimburse the magazine. His decision to work for *Field & Stream* was the most important decision of his life.

The Johnsons spent the winter of 1903 and the spring of 1904 planning a trip to cattle country and Indian country. The *Field & Stream* editor, Emerson Hough, advised them to go to the Lazy 7 Cattle Ranch, in the heart of cattle country, to observe old-time cattle operations. While at the Lazy 7 Johnson studied colors in the shadows at different times of the day – early morning to moonlight – experimenting with blues for which Maxfield Parrish was famous. In the evenings Frank went to deep rocky canyons to observe the moonlight. Johnson studied in depth the simulation of daylight colors under the effects of moonlight – he was a master of this skill. On this trip the Johnsons travelled extensively in New Mexico for the first time, exploring places such as Espanola, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Juan pueblos. The sight of Navajos going about their business by the light of the moon and stars when it was cooler was a revelation to Johnson and he began to develop his technique of moonlight painting that was to become his trademark. By the end of 1904 Johnson was back in New York and producing the illustrations to repay *Field & Stream*.

In 1912 Johnson became a member of the Salmagundi Club, an association of painters in New York. This membership gave him an outlet for selling easel work. Later in the year he took his second trip to the west, including visits to the Blackfoot Indian Reservation and Glacier Park in Montana, and returning to New York by way of San Francisco, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming. On his return Johnson added more publishing houses to his portfolio.

In 1919 at the Salmagundi Club Exhibition Johnson met the artist Clyde Forsythe and they became lifelong friends. Forsythe lived in Southern California and suggested that the Johnsons should relocate there and for Johnson to become a full-time easel artist. Forsythe’s thought that western art would sell better out of Los Angeles than New York. In 1922 the Johnsons drove to Los Angeles, where Frank exhibited several of his paintings at the Stendahl Gallery in the Ambassador Hotel. Unfortunately, he did not sell many paintings and the Johnsons returned to New York.

In 1923, Johnson’s painting *The Wanderer* won the coveted Samuel T. Shaw Purchase Prize at the Salmagundi Club Exhibition. His paintings started to sell well at the Stendahl Gallery and the Johnsons decided to move to Los Angeles. Finally, he had achieved success as an easel painter and retired from illustration.

By 1924 Johnson’s nocturne paintings were making him famous. The most challenging aspect of a nocturne painting was to achieve the proper simulation of natural colors of subject and landscape under the glow of moonlight or starlight; colors that varied in density from the close foreground into the farthest depth of the background, as well as the shifting values of light and shadow. These night paintings were the ultimate in Johnson’s work. He spent many hours studying and experimenting to accomplish the simulation of daylight colors under moonlight and starlight, and was continually improving his technique. He had his own special preparation of using the white underpainting on the canvas before starting the painting of a nocturne. Underpainting is a chalk-white base with various additives that provide a smooth base and luminosity for the

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painting. Johnson’s formula was different and special, and few other artists have perfected the nocturne as Johnson had. Once he had completed an underpainting he put the canvas aside for several months so that the paint could completely harden and properly adhere to the canvas.

Also in 1924, Johnson and a group of fellow artists formed the Painters of the West, an association modeled on the Salmagundi Club. Their goal was to promote and support painters of western subjects and provide exhibition space. The group chose the Biltmore Galeria Real in the newly built Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles for its exhibition outlet. Johnson’s fellow artists included Clyde Forsythe, Jack Wilkinson Smith, Maynard Dixon, Edgar Payne and many others. The elderly Thomas Moran of Santa Barbara was an honorary member.

In 1925 Johnson worked on one of his most famous assignments, three monumental paintings for the opening of the Carthay Circle Theater in Los Angeles. The subjects included *The Donner Party* (30’ x 40’ center curtain) and *The Indians and The Miners* (18’ x 11’ side panels). These paintings made Johnson famous and heightened the demand for his work. Unfortunately, the movie palace was demolished in 1969 and the paintings were lost.

In 1926 the Johnsons moved into their new home in Alhambra. By this time Johnson was strictly an easel painter with one of the largest and best equipped studios in Southern California. Other eminent artists lived near them, including Norman Rockwell, Clyde Forsythe and Sam Hyde Harris. Together they formed the Champion Place Group. Johnson sold everything he painted.

The single greatest honor to come to Johnson was in March 1929 when he was named Associate of the National Academy (ANA) in New York. From that point on he could proudly use the prestigious initials of ANA on all his paintings. The Great Depression slowed but did not stop sales and Johnson continued to receive honors and awards. In 1930 Johnson was elected to Honorary Life Membership in the National Arts Club of New York. In 1937 Johnson was raised to Academician (as opposed to “associate”) in the National Academy of Design. From this point on he would proudly sign his name with NA after his signature.

Death came suddenly and ironically to Frank in 1938. At a gathering of old friends on December 19 Frank greeted an old friend, Mrs. Callahan, with a kiss. A few days later Mrs. Callahan died from spinal meningitis. Unknowingly, Frank had contracted the disease from Mrs. Callahan and he died on January 1, 1939 at the age of 64.

### **My Impressions**

While “Life on the Trail” is not one of Johnson’s famous nocturne paintings, we can see elements of nocturne paintings in it. Color values he has chosen are very similar. The luminous color quality of the green/gray grass and blue/gray mountains in the background are reminiscent of a nocturne painting. We enjoy the contrast between the brighter foreground and the dim and distant background. The painting depicts a typical erect and sturdy cowboy astride a horse gazing behind and beyond the pack mule that accompanies him. Perhaps he is gazing at where he has come from; or perhaps he is on the watch for others. What catches our eye is that the cowboy looks self-confident and in command. Johnson has composed the painting well, placing the figures in the center of the painting with enough space on either side to give a sense of the vastness of the landscape.

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While the cowboy and the horse are the central and dominant figures and slightly to the right of the painting, Johnson balances them well with the mule and the blue/gray mountains, which are in the distance and slightly to the left.

When we look at this painting our eyes are immediately drawn to the cowboy; our eyes travel vertically from the grass to the horse; then to the cowboy; then out to the distance as the cowboy gazes out over the landscape. The painting is satisfying to view because it invites us in; we enjoy the contrast between the tight group of figures set against the vastness of the landscape. We want to be in this restful scene enjoying the fresh air in this benevolent environment. The painting is typical of Johnson. He excelled in painting cowboys and horses, probably because he spent many years in their company throughout his life.

I chose this painting because I admire the skill, artistry and serenity of the scene. The painting is similar to many other western paintings, including those of Frederick Remington and Charles M. Russell. The Palm Springs Art Museum has other nocturne paintings by Lockwood de Forest.

#### **Comparisons & Contrasts**

It is useful to compare and contrast *Life on the Trail* with other western paintings in the museum’s collection. *A Yearling* (1929) by Walter Ufer is a good place to start. Both artists were contemporaries and had excellent reputations as painters of southwest landscapes, architecture, horses and people. In both paintings we see common elements: coloring, rugged and arid southwest landscape with big views, horses and riders in the foreground and middle ground and dark mountains and threatening sky in the background. Both paintings are balanced and nearly symmetrical. In Johnson’s painting the cowboy is looking up and to the side and exudes strength and confidence. The mood is reflective. In Ufer’s painting the Indian couple is looking down and seems at least weary and possibly dejected. The mood is somber – almost anticipatory.

Another painting we can compare to *Life on the Trail* is *Canyon Sin Nombre* (1965) by Bill Schenck. Again, common elements include arid southwest landscape with big views, a horse and rider in the middle ground and dark cliffs and possibly threatening sky in the background. Schenck’s painting is nostalgic and as so portrays an Indian brave looking as strong and confident as Johnson’s cowboy. A big difference between the paintings is use of color. Johnson uses warm natural colors; Schenck uses extreme or “hot” colors. Johnson’s painting says, “this is the way it IS in the west.” Schenck’s painting says, “this is the way it WAS in the west.” Befitting his pop art roots, the painting is not symmetrical. The mood is reflective but not somber.

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**Sources:**

- Jean Stern, Executive Director of the Irvine Museum writing in the California Art Club Newsletter (April 1998)
- Western Artists Catalog (Peterson Galleries 1981)
- George Schriever, Curator of the Anschutz Collection in Denver writing in the Southwest Art (December 1975)
- “The Frank Tenney Johnson Book” by Harold McCracken (1974)

Note: All sources found in the Toor Library.

Here is an example of one of Johnson’s famous nocturne paintings; it is similar to *Life on the Trail*.

