

Eastman Johnson, **Negro Life at the South**, 1859

Oil on linen, New-York Historical Society

Eastman Johnson established his reputation as an artist with this portrayal of urban slaves before the start of the Civil War. On the surface everything seems happy and relaxed but upon closer examination, things are as idyllic as they seem. A slave couple flirts on the left side and an older slave woman with a baby leans out of the window. An old slave man plays a banjo while a woman sits with children in the middle of the courtyard. Over on the right side, a white woman enters followed by another slave. The main house is in perfect condition while the slave home is falling apart. There is an axe and a scythe on the ground but no one is concerned with an uprising. Supporters of slavery pointed out how happy the slaves looked while critics of slavery noted the differences in between the wealthy white owner and her house and the poorer slaves and their decaying home.