

Guy Johnson, Benjamin West, and Cohoes Falls: Issues of (Mis)Identification

Thomas S. Abler

George R. Hamell

Arthur Einhorn

The American eighteenth and early nineteenth century artist Benjamin West produced a double portrait of a person of European ancestry partially in Native North American dress with a Native North American male standing at his side. The painting is now part of the Andrew W. Mellon Collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.



Evidence the painting was done by West is provided by the moccasins recently acquired by the Museum of Mankind in London from a descendent of Benjamin West (see King 1991)



2. Moccasins, Algonquian or Iroquoian, Pre-1776, 10 1/4" long (27 cm). Made of a single piece of smoked skin, with puckered toes and additional side flaps; decorated in porcupine quillwork with zigzag line technique; hair-filled metal cones. The vertical heel seam is quilted, and skin cord is attached to the front of the moccasins. These are the moccasins worn by Colonel Guy Johnson in Fig. 1. Cat. No. 1991 Am 92 A&B. Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum, London.

yellow colours with which they painted their ornaments.... The Indians also taught him to be an expert archer, and he was sometimes in the practice of shooting birds for models (Galt 1816:18).

This was a story told at London dinners, as were others about glowing memories of a boyhood that never indicated the tensions generally existing between settlers and Indians. As Abrams puts it:

in a correspondence with his friend and early patron, Dr. Jonathan Morris (1729-1819), West fondly reminisced about the Pennsylvania Indians. The letters recalled an utopian wilderness where as youths they had enjoyed "many innocent and diverting hours" in Indian wigwams. In his later years, West referred to his own transformation from the "Wigwams of American savages" to the "refinements of the Royal Palaces of Europe" as "an extensive scale in human progress" (Abrams 1982: 61-62).

By the time he was in his early twenties West was beginning to establish himself in the American colonies as a portrait painter. In 1760, thanks to patrons, West was able to travel to Italy where he spent several years educating himself, in part, perhaps, under the German neoclassical painter Anton Mengs (1728-1779), before coming to London in 1763. In Italy he won a reputation as an American. In part this arose because of an opportune comparison of the Apollo Belvedere, the Roman copy of a Greek marble, to a young Mohawk warrior: "I have seen them often," West said, "standing in that very attitude, and pursuing, with an intense eye, the arrow

which they had just discharged from the bow" (quoted in Alberts 1978:34).

On his arrival in London, with appropriate letters of introduction from British patrons and others in Italy, West soon established himself, although he had originally intended to return to America. If he had done this, however, he would have had to devote his time to painting portraits. And while on arrival in London West did paint portraits, he had ambitions to paint in the grand style, for which there were no patrons in America. In the 1760s, he painted large classical subjects that were very well received, as well as British portraits. His success was such that he met George III in 1768, was given direct commissions by the king, and in 1772 was appointed official history painter to his sovereign. While throughout his life West was a Loyalist, he retained in London — through the American Revolution — the sentiments of a Patriot.

While there are sixteenth and seventeenth century portraits of Native Americans, the first major oils are the four of the Iroquois and Mahican who visited London in 1710, executed by John Verelst, of Dutch descent, who worked in England circa 1706 to 1734 (Garratt 1985). These rather formal portrayals were followed in 1735 by two oils commissioned by John Penn, William Penn's eldest son, in Pennsylvania (Honour 1975:202; Katonah Gallery 1983:64). These naturalistic portraits of Tishcohan and Lapowinsa, executed in 1735 by



It has been suggested the Native North American in the double portrait was Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea). However compare the severed auricles in the double portrait with the ears of Thayendanegea.





*The portrait of
John Bowe
the "Mink Chief"*



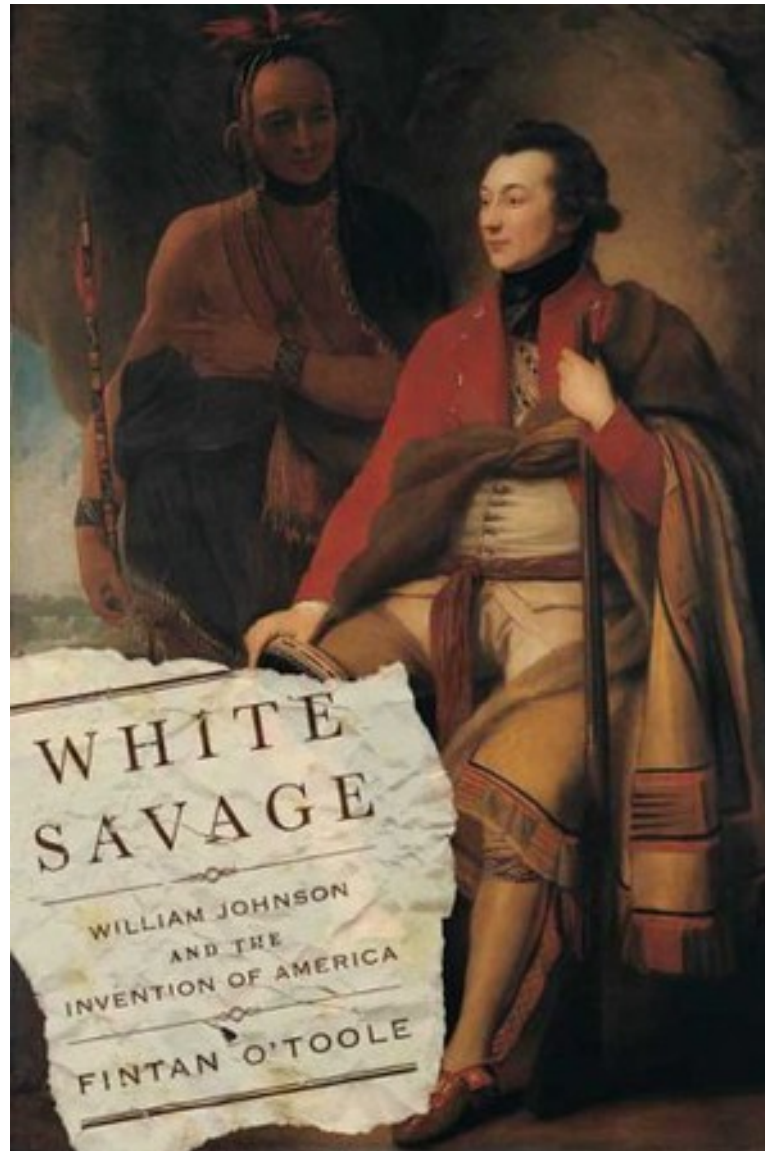
JOSEPH THAYENDANEKEN

The Mohawk Chief



It has been suggested that the other figure in the portrait is either Guy Johnson or Sir William Johnson.

Some favor the identification as Sir William even though there was no opportunity for Sir William to sit for West to paint his portrait.



WHITE
SAVAGE

WILLIAM JOHNSON
AND THE
INVENTION OF AMERICA

FINTAN O'TOOLE

But Captain David Hill (Karonghyontye) revealed in a letter written in Mohawk the existence of a double portrait depicting Guy Johnson and himself.



David Faux wrote to George Hamell about the letter. On Hamell's request, linguist Gunther Michelson confirmed the translation of the Mohawk passage. Hamell brought the identification to the attention of the National Gallery in Washington.

Last paragraph of Captain David Hill letter of Nov. 6, 1784

gyatyo	agwa	wagonyennitenda	dewagetonwinjonni
ukyetyo	akwa	wakuyanitáhta?	tewakstuwátsó:ni
brother-in-law!	very	I beg you for it	I want

ne	dsondsghshawy		D---reysdere	ne
ne?	tsutehsé:wi?		reya:tare?	ne?
it	you would carry it back here		his picture	the

rektsigenhe		John Hill	geghyetonghsere	nok ne
rekhtsi?kÁ:hs?			kahyatúhsere?	nok ne?
my late older brother		John Hill .	paper	and the

wastrori	ne	Theyendanege	oni	rogeryagon
wathró:ri	ne?	<u>theyatene:kA</u>	ó:inA	rokeryá:ku
it tells	the	Joseph Brent	already	he has paid .

geraghwetiron	nok ne	nii	D---yageniyedere
<u>kerahkwatí:ru</u>	nok ne?	ní:ʔi	yekeniya:tare?
Guy Johnson	and the	I	our (his & mine) picture

yonsehahawi	ne	gora	esharegowa
yuhsehshé:wi?	ne?	kó:rw	<u>eshare?kó:wa</u>
he carried it away again	the	governor	Haldinand (?).

ne	kati	sgwa	yongystonwenjoni
ne?	ká:ti?	skwá	yukyatuwatsóni
it:	therefore	very	we (he & I) want it

nayageniyondaahg	deyageniyeghshe	Thsyendenegen
yakeni ??	teyakeniyéhshe	<u>thayatsné:kA</u>
we (would be glad ?)	we two males	Joseph Brant

togast	sghsгани	oys	sonsayegonni
tóks?t	shskwé:ni?	ó:ya?	sussayekú:ni?
if	you would be able	another	someone would make it so

daendaghshewe
teutáhsswa?
you would have it here again

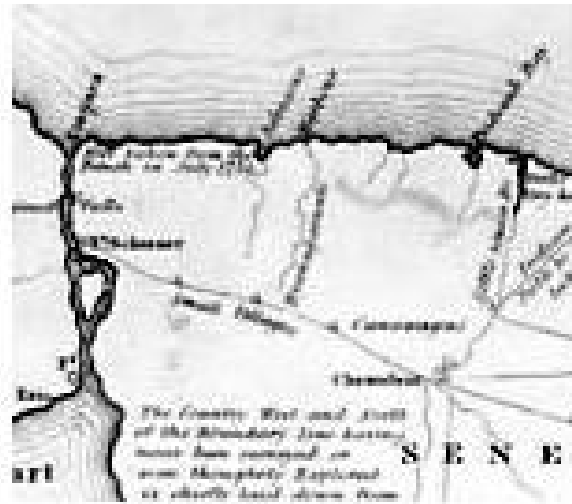
etho niyeriwage	jwá shyston
e?thó: niyeri:wake	? hys:tu
so many matters	written

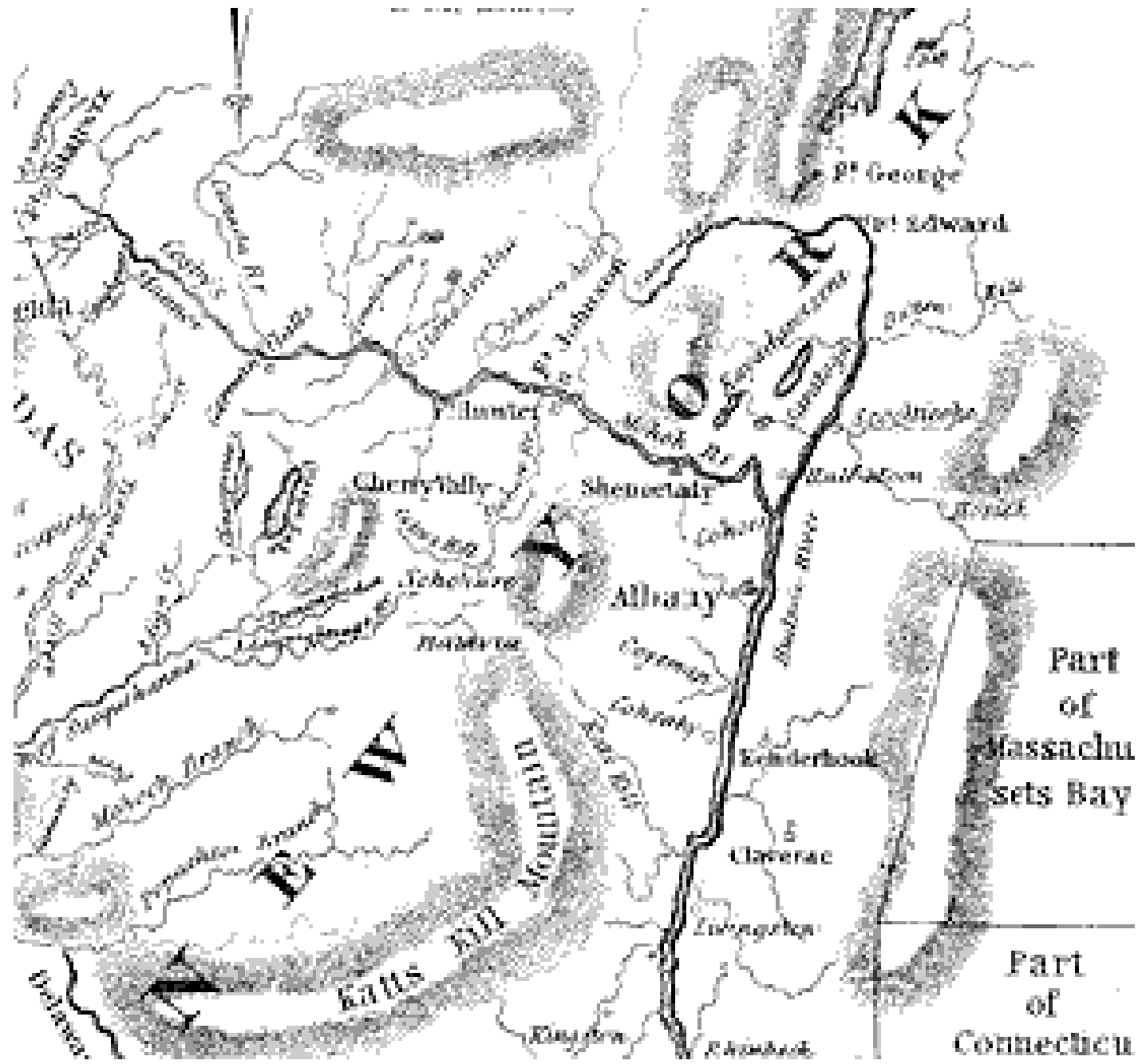
David Hill
Keronghyontye
kerubyútye?
(Floating Sky)

A third contentious identification in the double portrait is the waterfall in the background of the picture.









To depict Cohoes Falls, West could have used either of two available prints. One of these is a copperplate engraving by William Elliot after a sketch by Massachusetts Governor Thomas Pownall, probably printed in London in 1761.



A View of the Great Cataracts of the Mohawk River.
The Fall about seventy feet, the River more a Quarter of a Mile broad.

Vue de la Grande Cataracte de Colvée, sur la Rivière de Mohawk.
La Hauteur est Environnée de quatre à cinq toises de largeur.

Engraved by John Baskett, at W. & A. G. and printed, Published by W. & A. G. in New York. The Engraving is the Property of W. & A. G. and is not to be reprinted without their Consent. Printed by Paul Neale, at W. & A. G. in New York.

The second view is by Thomas Davies and published ca. 1768.



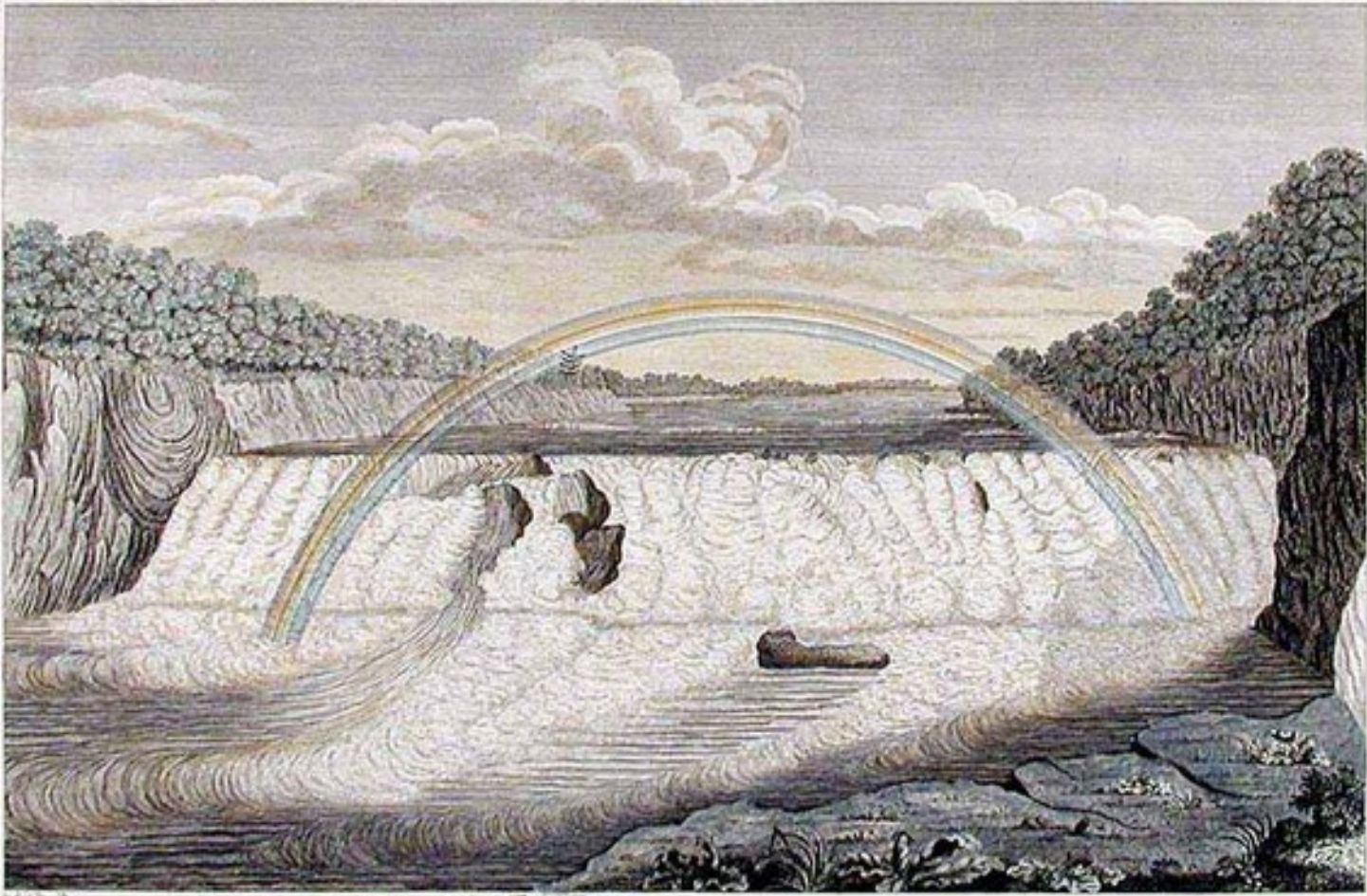
A North West View of the Chocoma, or Great Cataract of the Mohawk River, in the Province of New York in North America.

The highest and largest of the Falls is 200 yds. in length, and is the most beautiful of any in the world.

We can laterally reverse these two images and compare the results with West's painting.



The Falls of the River St. Lawrence, on the 12th of June 1776.
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The Falls of the River St. Lawrence, on the 12th of June 1776.



A View of the Falls of the Choptank or Great Pasture of the Rehoboth River in the Province of Virginia
Painted by J. M. Smith in 1765



One can also compare West's image with the Coho Falls as they continue in full flow today. Photograph by Arthur Einhorn.



