William Henry Johnson
Biographical Highlights Of Artist

Born in 1901 in Florence, South Carolina. Johnson was a mix of African American and Sioux Indian. During this time period blacks were strictly segregated in the United States. He enjoyed drawing cartoons, and copying comic strips as a boy, and knew someday that he’d be an artist.

To pursue his dreams Johnson had to leave the segregated south and went to New York City to “prove himself as an artist”. So in 1918, he did just that, working odd jobs i.e: cook, porter, dock worker, and was admitted to the prestigious National Academy of Design. There he excelled in painting, and he met and studied with the man who would help him throughout his life; Charles Webster Hawthorn.

In 1926 he departed for France with guidance and support from Hawthorn. Paris in the 20’s was vibrant and full of writers and artists, and Johnson soaked it all in. Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Josephine Baker and those he directly studied with; Chaim Soutine, Paul Cezanne, and Van Gogh (all considered post-impressionists) all played a roll in showing Johnson the modern movement of painting and thinking about one’s art. “Here the sun is everything, and I am not afraid to exaggerate a contour, a form, or anything that gives more character and movement to the canvas.”

To be young, and talented, and free to be an artist living in Paris at the time in History must have been like living in a dream, on a vacation of a lifetime, especially after such humble beginnings of the south. Johnson’s memories of endless fields of cotton and tobacco, one-room wooden shacks, rickety wagons pulled by powerful mules and oxen, would be for the moment put aside until he came full circle.

For 12 years he worked on finishing his village in France, Norway, and Denmark. Johnson met his wife who was older than him, a Danish potter and weaver, Hotcha Krake in 1930. The couple proved to be a good team. They traveled Europe and Africa with her sister and husband the sculptor, Christoph Voll. It was at this time that Johnson’s own style emerged.

In 1938 he returned to America, specifically Harlem, to his own people. He painted the vibrant life around him, the jazz clubs, religious events and working people. At the 1940 Worlds Fair his work was very popular. He also attracted the attention of the N.Y. art work with his French inspired work. He joined the WPA Federal Art Project, at the Harlem Artist’s Guild he met Gwendolyn Knight, Selma Burke, Norman Lewis and Jacob Lawrence. This was an exciting time for black artists and intellectuals. Perhaps even more than the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920’s, the 1940’s was a decade when artists and intellectuals achieved wider recognition and greater profits for their accomplishments, while still maintaining ties to African American social, cultural, and political realities.

In 1941 Johnson’s first major solo exhibit opened at the Alma Reed Galleries on 57th street, the heart of the New York art world. The exhibition was reviewed by two major art journals, Art News and Art Digest, as well as by all the large daily newspapers in New York.

In Harlem, Johnson scrutinized the assortment of sights, sounds, and people. Mesmerized by the stimulating life around him, he captured the gyrations of the contemporary dance craze, the jitterbug, and documented the hallmarks or urban fashion-broad-shouldered zoot suits, stylishly cocked women’s hats, platform shoes, and vibrantly colored gloves. He also observed the inventive games played by inner city children. Balancing these lighthearted depictions are darker views of violence in this city within a city, and families surrounded by poverty.

Johnson produced numerous paintings of black soldiers engaged in infantry training, ammunition drills, actual battle, and war-related support services. They addressed the heroism and humor, as well as the segregation, of the armed services.

In 1946 Johnson’s brain disease, caused by Syphilis, emerged. He did not paint during 1970. He died of pancreatic disease.

During 30 active years, Johnson produced 2000 works of art. The Harlem Renaissance (1922-1946) was a window of select number of people with good timing. In 1967, the Harmon Foundation found his works saved in an oversized scrapbook at archives Smithsonian including a prenuptial agreement, drawings, photographs, and clippings awards, documents, certificates, and letters.
**Information about THIS Painting**

Johnson’s style communicates the story of his people in a direct language using the geometry of form. The squared shoulders on the couple indicate a strength of character, a certainty of who they are. In Harlem in the 1940’s copules went out to have fun, dance, to be seen in their best church attire. In this picture it appears that the woman has control of the situation. She may even be paying the bill (is that a wallet?) Look only at the legs under the table and you see a whole story in pattern and color and movement. Those are dancing’ legs, the shoes are polished and ready to make some noise on the wooden floorboards. The jitterbug is a vigorous dance, energetic and powerful for the one who leads, and the look in the lady’s eyes says it all. “Honey, you’re comin’ with me!

There are multiple focal points - 3 distinct: vertical, horizontal, & mixed up.

African influence: These artists gave variety & interest to flat, solid shapes by breaking them into a variety of patterns. Side by side panels. Primary colors. Large hands.

Large area of plain paint were painted first. Focal points were highlighted with pattern and color: grids, diagonal, repeat, interlocking, stripes, alternating light an dark colors. There is no interaction between the subject and the viewer. Black outlines the most important contours.

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**Presentation Ideas and Questions**

William Johnson was a modernist, considered a “torchbearer” of his time. His work reflected joys and sorrows of daily life. Even though the themes are of resignation, they are positive and expressive of childhood memories and his dream world. They are of his deep personal belief in Church and Community.

Suggest a connection with Jazz.

“Expressive”, what does that mean?

Point out how Johnson used color and black outlining.

Focal point: Black and white contrast

Dressing up was normal when going out.

Question/Suggest that maybe he exaggerates things to draw attention to there importance.

“One idea of my painting is to give in simple and stark form, the story of black people as they exist.”  William H. Johnson

“I am not afraid to exaggerate a contour, a form or anything that gives more character or movement to the canvas.” William H. Johnson

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**Compare or Contrast to**

1. Johnson says “My travels have taught me that, in order to create, an artist must live and paint in his own environment”
Contradicts: Henri Rousseau who painted from his imagination - places he had never even been
2. Johnson made his figures flat, highly simplified, outlined, and brightly colored.

Compare to a realistically painted figure.