

William H. Johnson (1910-1970)

By almost any standard, William H. Johnson (1901–1970) can be considered a major American artist. He produced hundreds of works in a virtuosic, eclectic career that spanned several decades as well as several continents. It was not until very recently, however, that his work began to receive the attention it deserves.

Born in South Carolina to a poor African-American family, Johnson moved to New York at age seventeen. Working a variety of jobs, he saved enough money to pay for an art education at the prestigious National Academy of Design. His mastery of the academy's rigorous standards gained him both numerous awards and the respect of his teachers and fellow students.

Johnson spent the late 1920s in France, absorbing the lessons of modernism. As a result, his work became more expressive and emotional. During this same period, he met and fell in love with Danish artist Holcha Krake, whom he married in 1930. The couple spent most of the '30s in Scandinavia, where Johnson's interest in primitivism and folk art began to have a noticeable impact on his work.

Returning with Holcha to the U.S. in 1938, Johnson immersed himself in the traditions of Afro-America, producing work characterized by its stunning, eloquent, folk art simplicity. A Greenwich Village resident, he became a familiar, if somewhat aloof, figure on the New York art scene. He was also a well-established part of the African-American artistic community at a time when most black artists were still riding the crest of the Harlem Renaissance.

Although Johnson enjoyed a certain degree of success as an artist in this country and abroad, financial security remained elusive. Following his wife's death in 1944, Johnson's physical and mental health declined dramatically. In a tragic and drawn-out conclusion to a life of immense creativity, Johnson spent his last twenty-three years in a state hospital on Long Island. By the time of his death in 1970, he had slipped into obscurity. After his death, his entire life's work was almost disposed of to save storage fees, but it was rescued by friends at the last moment. Over a thousand paintings by Johnson are now part of the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's Smithsonian American Art Museum.

National Museum of American Art. *Homecoming: The Paintings of William H. Johnson, A Book of Postcards* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art in association with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1991)