

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)

Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007)

Brought up in Boston, Crite received his art training at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Harvard University Extension School in 1968. He worked for most of his life as an illustrator in the Planning Department of the Boston Naval Shipyards, retiring in 1976, but continued to paint at the same time. His work has been widely exhibited and well received in Boston, where a square is named after him. Crite's early paintings depict the daily life of Boston's African-American community, a community that was to be transformed in the following decade by urban renewal and housing projects. According to the artist, he sought to show viewers the "real Negro" as opposed to the "Harlem" or "jazz Negro," that was created by white people.

In his later paintings, magic-realist visions in which a black Virgin and Child ride on public transportation or float above the city streets, Crite used a bright palette rather than the more somber tones of his "neighborhood paintings." Compared with these earlier paintings, the religious works offer a message of hope and deliverance. During the 1950s Crite lectured on liturgical art and wrote and illustrated books with theological themes telling "the story of man through the black figure."

William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein, editors, with contributions by Dona Brown, Thomas Andrew Denenberg, Judith K. Maxwell, Stephen Nissenbaum, Bruce Robertson, Roger B. Stein, and William H. Truettner *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (Washington, D.C.; New Haven, Conn; and London: National Museum of American Art with Yale University Press, 1999)