



Smithsonian  
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for  
American Art and Portraiture***  
***Smithsonian American Art Museum***

News

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**Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents Never-before-exhibited Prints  
by  
African American Master William H. Johnson**

“William H. Johnson’s *World on Paper*” examines, for the first time, this artist’s involvement with printmaking. Never-before-exhibited prints reveal the African American modernist to be as powerful with graphic media as he proved to be with oils and tempera, and bold, rough relief prints and lively, colorful serigraphs mark Johnson as one of the most experimental printmakers of his generation. The exhibition is on view from July 1 through Jan. 7, 2007 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which holds the largest and most complete collection of work by William H. Johnson (1901–1970) and has done much in the past 30 years to preserve his art and establish his reputation.

“Johnson left a legacy of paintings, prints and drawings that range from European-inspired modernism to his own distinctive rhythms,” said Elizabeth Broun, the museum’s Margaret and Terry Stent director. “His works on paper, in particular, testify to a restless imagination and powerful visual expression—hallmarks of an inspired American artist.”

More than 40 relief prints and serigraphs, drawn from the museum’s permanent collection, provide an overview of Johnson’s career, both in Europe in the 1930s and in New York in the 1940s. Among the varied subjects of his work are early landscapes of Denmark, Norway and North Africa; portraits of his neighbors in Denmark; scenes of life in Harlem and the rural South; religious subjects and scenes of black enlisted men and female volunteers of World War II.

While in Europe, Johnson met artist Edvard Munch, whose experimental, symbolist woodcuts seem to have inspired Johnson to try new printing techniques. The uneven black areas of some of the artist’s woodblock prints, such as “Jon Fisherman (2),” suggest that Johnson did

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not print with a press but instead applied pressure to the back of the paper with the bowl of a spoon or the heel of his hand to transfer the wet ink from the surface of the block.

Johnson continued to make relief prints while at the same time investigating the relatively new technique of serigraphy. The experimental nature of the technique, as well as its capacity for composing with bright areas of color, appealed to Johnson. When he printed “Jitterbugs (II)” on newspaper, the images and type on the paper added to the sense of movement and urban vitality he sought to convey.

“Johnson often varied the printing from one impression to the next, more interested in experimentation than in uniformity,” said Joann Moser, senior curator of graphic arts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and curator of the exhibition. “The selection of works in this exhibition reveals Johnson’s stylistic development from his academic beginnings to a more expressionistic representation and finally to a distinctive form of figurative abstraction based on folk art and African colors and patterns.”

### **About the Artist**

The career of William H. Johnson was one of the most brilliant yet tragic of any early 20th-century American artist. Born in 1901 in Florence, S.C., to a poor family, Johnson moved to New York at age 17. Working a variety of jobs, he saved enough money to pay for an art education at the prestigious National Academy of Design. Johnson worked with painter Charles Hawthorne, who raised funds to send Johnson abroad to study. He spent the late 1920s in France, absorbing the lessons of modernism. During this period, he married Danish artist Holcha Krake. The couple spent most of the 1930s in Scandinavia, where Johnson’s interest in folk art had a profound impact on his work. Returning with Holcha to the United States in 1938, Johnson immersed himself in African American culture and traditions.

Although Johnson attained 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 deteriorated; he spent the final 23 years of his life in a state hospital in Long Island, N.Y. More than a thousand paintings, watercolors and prints by Johnson were given to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by the Harmon Foundation after Johnson’s death.

### **Credit**

“William H. Johnson’s World on Paper” is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The exhibition tour is supported in part by the C. F. Foundation, Atlanta.

## **Tour**

An expanded version of the exhibition that includes selected drawings and watercolors will tour to the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas (Feb. 3 – April 8, 2007), the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in Philadelphia, Penn. (May 20 – Aug. 12, 2007) and the Montgomery Museum of Art, in Montgomery, Ala. (Sept. 15 –Nov. 18, 2007).

The Smithsonian American Art Museum collection began with gifts of art donated to the federal government in 1829 and has evolved into one of the world's most important American art holdings, with approximately 40,000 artworks in all media, spanning more than three centuries. The museum's National Historic Landmark building, currently under renovation, is located at Eighth and F Streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district, above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station (Red, Yellow and Green lines). When the building re-opens July 1, 2006, it will be an outstanding showcase for American art and portraiture that celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans.

Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Please visit the museum's award-winning Web site at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu) or [www.reynoldscenter.org](http://www.reynoldscenter.org).