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## American Commemorative Panels: William H. Johnson

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# William H. Johnson



ONE OF OUR foremost African-American artists, William H. Johnson (1901–1970) is best known for his dramatic Scandinavian landscapes and colorful, folk-inspired scenes of African-American life.

As a child in South Carolina, Johnson practiced drawing by copying newspaper comic strips. At 17 he went to live in Harlem, working at various jobs before attending the prestigious National Academy of Design and studying with noted painter Charles Webster Hawthorne. For three summers, Johnson also attended Hawthorne's Cape Cod School of Art.



In 1926, Johnson began studying modernism in Paris and the south of France. After briefly returning to New York, he moved to Denmark in 1930 and married textile artist Holcha Krake, whom he had met in France. They first lived in a Danish fishing village and later in Norway, exhibiting jointly and traveling throughout Scandinavia, Europe, and North Africa. During this period, Johnson's work began to reflect his interest in primitivism and folk art.

In 1938, the couple moved to New York to escape impending war in Europe. Johnson joined the WPA Federal Art Project and was assigned to teach at the Harlem Community Art Center, working later for the WPA mural project. His first major solo exhibition in New York opened in May 1941.

After his wife's death in 1944, Johnson's physical and mental health dramatically declined. Although he spent the last 23 years of his life in a mental institution, his artwork continued to inspire. In 2001, the William H. Johnson Foundation for the Arts was established to provide economic assistance to African-American artists early in their careers. In 2009, four of Johnson's paintings were chosen for display in the White House.

Designed by art director Derry Noyes, this 11th issuance in the American Treasures series showcases *Flowers*, a 1939–1940 still life. The two-dimensional, consciously “naive” style of painting was one of the many techniques of modernist abstraction and “primitive” art Johnson adopted during his career.



1901–1970

background and right: *Self-Portrait*, 1929, oil on canvas; left, top: *Flower to Teacher*, ca. 1944, oil on paperboard; left, bottom: *Mom and Dad*, 1944, oil on paperboard. All art: Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Harmon Foundation/Courtesy Art Resource, N.Y.

