MoMA ANNOUNCES A MAJOR SURVEY OF WILLIAM H. JOHNSON

William H. Johnson: Up North, Down South will celebrate the artist's singular oeuvre and situate it within the context of international modern art

NEW YORK, November 17, 2026 — The Museum of Modern Art announces ***William H. Johnson: Up North, Down South***, a monographic survey of the artist's singular career, with a special focus on his extraordinary work from 1939 to 1946. On view September 26, 2027, through February 6, 2028, the exhibition marks the first major presentation of William H. Johnson's body of work in more than 35 years. Born in 1901 and raised in rural South Carolina, Johnson was shaped by his travels across Europe, life in Scandinavia, the global reverberations of the Second World War, and the vibrancy of New York in the 1940s. The formative impact of his academic training and the European modernist milieu in which he worked—combined with his exposure to Scandinavian folk forms and traditions of both rural and urban Black American life—resulted in a uniquely complex, transnational story worthy of close looking and further consideration. The exhibition will feature roughly 100 works, including paintings, drawings, and prints drawn from MoMA's collection, alongside generous loans, that together exemplify Johnson's distinctive palette, confident line, and unmistakable style. *William H. Johnson: Up North, Down South* is organized by Esther Adler, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, and Sarah Suzuki, Associate Museum Director, with Taylor Ndiaye, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints.

Johnson moved to New York in 1918 and began his formal education at the National Academy of Design in 1921. Beginning in 1926, he pursued independent study in France, and he held his first solo exhibition in Paris soon after. Several years later, he met and married fellow artist Holcha Krake, a Danish weaver and ceramicist, and they settled in Scandinavia, traveling often and exhibiting across Europe and North Africa. Johnson's portraits, still lifes, and landscapes were informed by his academic training and the artistic company he kept. With frequent shows and modest sales, Johnson's continental career was active, but the increasingly fraught political climate of the late 1930s brought him and Krake back to New York in 1938. Based within Greenwich Village's expat community, Johnson soon found a job with the Works Progress Administration and taught at the Harlem Community Art Center, joining the talented cohort of African American artists who gathered there. This provided him the opportunity to experiment for the first time with screenprinting, a medium that became a critical tool from that point forward, furthering his robust painting and drawing practice. This generative moment came to an end in 1947, when Johnson was hospitalized following the onset of a debilitating illness. He remained institutionalized until his death in 1970. *William H. Johnson: Up North, Down South* focuses heavily on Johnson's time in New York from 1939 to 1946 as the culmination of his decades of study and travel—and the pinnacle of his most remarkable contributions to modern art—while tracing his achievements across academic study and the European years that were formative to his mature work.

The artist's return to New York in 1938 marked a turning point in the development and crystallization of his inimitable style, which referenced aspects of Post-Impressionism, German Expressionism, folk art traditions, the newspaper cartoons of his childhood, and the flattened perspective of his wife's weavings, among other sources. Such diverse influences, translated into a visual language uniquely his own, were revolutionary as applied to scenes of Black American life. Johnson's personal history, and his move from South

Carolina to New York as part of the Great Migration, was reflected in the tone and tenor of his subject matter, and infused his depictions with the duality—North/South, insider/outsider, American/other—of the Black migrant experience. Doubles and triples appear within many of Johnson's compositions, as in *Children* (1941), and serially across such works as *Jitterbugs II, III, IV, and V* (c. 1941). He was captivated by the private lives and struggles of people who had migrated North and those who remained in the South, and he adeptly synthesized these disparate realities in thematic images of couples at dance halls, street musicians, rural families at work (*Homesteaders*, c. 1942) and at worship, biblical scenes, and Black soldiers at home and abroad (*Training for War*, 1941). Johnson's final series, Fighters for Freedom, captures a multinational group of historical and contemporary figures who fought for civil rights and peace in collaged compositions drawn in part from mass media sources.

Flat, bold shapes and bright color defined Johnson's culminating visual language. The graphic quality of his work from this period extends across mediums, as he repeatedly examined the same motif in paintings, drawings, and prints, allowing the specific attributes of each to inflect the resulting work and suggest possibilities for the next. "MoMA's broad and exceptional holdings of Johnson's work in print allow us to analyze these objects, considering his working methods in a manner that hasn't been done for him previously," Adler notes. "His explorations of seemingly identical compositions in varied mediums reveal an iterative, experimental approach to making that emerged from his technical training as a draftsman and printmaker." Screenprinting, in particular, necessitated the refinement, planarity, and stylized forms characteristic of Johnson's later work. The process requires separating a composition into individual layers for each application of color—a methodology that forced Johnson to pare his imagery to the essentials and find the simplest, most compelling representation of any given subject.

Committed to depicting his own community, Johnson captured the nuances and diverse range of the Black American experience in the mid-20th century. An outlier throughout his life—a minority in the Academy, an African American immigrant abroad, and an American artist immersed in European art—Johnson developed a visual identity that was resoundingly modern and entirely his own. Suzuki describes the exhibition as "an opportunity to reconsider the work of William H. Johnson in the avant-garde modernist context in which it properly belongs. Johnson was someone inculcated in and completely fluent in all the languages of modern painting in Europe at this moment, who chose to metabolize this framework into a stripped-down modern idiom that's as inspired by abstract art as by folk art in the South and in Scandinavia, and by modernist titans like Chaïm Soutine, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and Edvard Munch. MoMA is a place where such a complex range of influences can come together through a prismatic lens and tell a meaningful story."

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