

Artist Resources – William H. Johnson (American, 1901-1970)

[Johnson at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#)

[The Johnson Collection](#)

[Johnson at SAAM](#)

[Johnson at MoMA](#)



Johnson, 1951

Listen to a museum educator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [speak about](#) Johnson's *Children* (1941), which has been in the collection since 2016.

Read the exhibition catalogue for [Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson](#), which was at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1991.

In 1995, [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) installed *William H. Johnson: Works from the Collection of Mary Beattie Brady*. The exhibition was the artist's first gallery show in over fifty years. Read a review in [ARTnews](#) by Eric Gibson and another in the [New York Times](#) by Roberta Smith.

Florence County Museum opened [W.H. Johnson: New Beginnings](#) in 2014, featuring works from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Florence Museum Board of Trustees, the Johnson Collection, and a private collector in Denmark.

[Kindred Spirit: The Personal Worlds of William H. Johnson](#) was at Florence County Museum in 2021, exploring Johnson's diverse heritage "between worlds: raised in the rural South, but educated in New York; black, but his unknown father was white; American-born, but lived much of his adult life in Europe."

[Watch an episode](#) of "Art As We See It" with the Museum of the African Diaspora about the paintings of William H. Johnson.

Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice was curated from the [Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection](#), featuring the entire *Fighters for Freedom* series from the 1940s, which were a tribute to African American activists, scientists, teachers, performers, and international leaders. Watch an [introduction](#) to the exhibition on SAAM's YouTube channel and read an article in [Smithsonian Magazine](#). The exhibition then traveled via Art Bridges to several venues, including: the [Gibbes Museum of Art](#), [Albany Museum of Art](#), [Oklahoma City Museum of Art](#), [The Rockwell Museum](#), [Wichita Art Museum](#), [Florence County Museum](#), [Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum](#), [Weatherspoon Art Museum](#), [Dayton Art Institute](#), and [Miami Museum of Contemporary Art of The African Diaspora](#). Read a [review](#) of the Frost Museum's installation by Brian Keith Jackson and another in [The Art Newspaper](#) by Veronica Pesantes. Listen to a [podcast](#) with curator Virginia Mecklenburg and Elizabeth Alexander about the installation at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston.

Read a [profile](#) on the artist by Tash Moore in *Black Art in America*, "Johnson's Paradox: The Lost Mind and Rediscovered Works of William Henry Johnson," published in 2025.



Johnson in his studio, unknown date
Photograph: National Archives and Records Administration

William H. Johnson (American, 1901-1970)
Jitterbugs (III), c. 1941
Pochoir with hand additions on paper

Private Collection; L2026:15.2

“My aim is to express in a natural way what I feel, what is in me, both rhythmically and spiritually, all that which in time has been saved up in my family of primitiveness and tradition, and which is now concentrated in me.” – William H. Johnson

William H. Johnson was born in North Carolina, but left at age 17 to study at the National Academy of Design in New York City. He quickly connected with artists working in Europe, spending over a decade in Scandinavia before returning to the United States in 1938. **Jitterbugs (III)** is part of Johnson’s iconic *Jitterbug* series using the handmade stencil technique called pochoir. The jitterbug dance became a craze in 1940s Harlem nightlife, which Johnson depicted in his “sophisticated primitive” style, a term he embraced as “the community values and folkways of all marginalized peoples.”

On view May 27 – August 30, 2026

