

***William H. Johnson:  
Revisiting an African American Modernist***



William H. Johnson, *Aunt Alice*, 1940, Oil on cardboard, 33 3/4" X 28 1/2", Collection of the James E. Lewis Museum of Art, Morgan State University

***Opening Reception  
Sunday, February 19, 2006  
2:00-4:00 pm***

**Durham, N.C.**--Opening Sunday, February 19 at the North Carolina Central University Art Museum William H. Johnson: Revisiting an African American Modernist will bring to the Research Triangle community for the first time works by the Harlem Renaissance master. Museum Director Kenneth G. Rodgers says " We are honored to have the opportunity to bring one of America's most original artists to Durham. We view this exhibition as an opportunity for the community to learn something about an artist rescued from oblivion and today given a prominent place in American art history. It is by no means a comprehensive examination of this wonderfully creative artist, but there are many compelling paintings in the show."

William H. Johnson (1901 -1970), who developed his talent along a path that took him from the southern United States to New York to Europe and back again, was one of America's most powerful African American painters. Through intense paintings of single isolated figures, Scandinavian and South Carolina landscapes, Black biblical themes and Harlem street and nightlife, Johnson aimed to communicate the energy and beauty of the land and the dignity and vitality of the individual. His style ranges from straightforward naturalism to loosely painted works in highly saturated colors showing the French, Danish, South Carolina and Harlem people and landscapes, as well as still life, fjords and mountains which inspired him during his frequent bicycling trips. Distinct are the Soutine-influenced paintings of his years in France, expressionistic works in Denmark and the flattened, almost primitive style he adopted after his return to the United States in 1938. These works are his best and are included in the exhibition. They represent his most original period, when he was expressing his identity as an African American, and when he escaped from the academic tradition in which he was trained.

At the age of seventeen, Johnson left his home in Florence, South Carolina, to pursue job

opportunities in New York City. Three years later, he applied for and was admitted to the art school of the National

Academy of Design. There, for the first time in his life, Johnson worked closely with people of different races, nationalities, and religions. Johnson's teacher and mentor, Charles Hawthorne, was so impressed by his protégé's talent that he raised funds for a European fellowship. First living in Paris and southern France, Johnson moved to the small Danish fishing village of Kerteminde in 1930.

In the spring of 1930, Johnson left the United States and traveled to Denmark. There he and Danish artist Holcha Krake, whom he had met in Cagnes-sur-Mer, France, were married. The couple settled in the small fishing village of Kerteminde and remained there for five years. After living in Norway and Denmark for eight years, Johnson returned to the United States. A desire to return home and the growing threat of World War II were among reasons that Johnson returned. Living once again in a black community after many years abroad triggered real changes in Johnson's art. He was influenced by the philosophies of Alain Locke, the Howard University professor and spokesperson for the Harlem Renaissance, commonly referred to as the "New Negro" arts movement, which encouraged African Americans to portray the life, personality, and culture of their people. His relatively brief career ended in 1946 when he was admitted to a mental hospital in New York, where he died in 1970, just when events began to unfold that would bring him such acclaim.

This exhibition includes works borrowed from historically Black institutions. Lenders include Hampton University, Howard University and Morgan State University. The show has approximately 50 paintings, watercolors and prints that are unique to this independent Black artist. The works which are shown in this exhibition have become so well-known through frequent reproduction that it is difficult today to imagine that they, like the artist who produced them, almost vanished many decades ago.

The North Carolina Central University Art Museum is located on Lawson Street across from the Farrison-Newton Communications Building. Every effort is made to make all museum events accessible to the handicapped. For general information or assistance, please call 530-6211. For group visits, please call in advance. The Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free.