FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM

William H. Johnson | *Picturing Justice*

William H. Johnson (1901–1970) painted his *Fighters for Freedom* series in the mid-1940s as a tribute to African American activists, scientists, teachers, and performers as well as international heads of state working to bring peace to the world. He celebrated their accomplishments even as he acknowledged the realities of racism, violence, and oppression they faced and overcame. Some of his Fighters—Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, Marian Anderson, and Mohandas Gandhi—are familiar figures; others are less well-known individuals whose determination and sacrifice have been eclipsed over time. Johnson elevates their lives, offering historical insights and fresh perspectives. Through their stories he suggests that the pursuit of freedom is an ongoing, interconnected struggle, with moments of both triumph and tragedy, and he invites us to reflect on our own struggles for justice today. With *Fighters for Freedom* Johnson reminds us that individual achievement and a commitment to social justice are at the heart of the American story.

This exhibition draws from the collection of more than thirteen hundred works by William H. Johnson given to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by the Harmon Foundation in 1967. Since that time the museum has organized exhibitions and installations of Johnson's work and pursued an ongoing program of conservation for these fragile paintings.

Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with generous support from Art Bridges, Faye and Robert Davidson, William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment Fund, Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Whitney and Elizabeth MacMillan Foundation, Margery and Edgar Masinter Exhibition Endowment, Sara Roby Foundation, and Share Fund.

Who Was William H. Johnson?

Like the individuals he called Fighters for Freedom, Johnson understood struggle. He was born in Florence, South Carolina, in 1901, but left the Jim Crow South as a teenager to go to New York City. There he worked low-skilled jobs, saved money, and, in 1921, passed the entrance exam at the National Academy of Design. By the time he finished five years later, he had won most of the prizes the academy offered. Then, like many aspiring young artists, he left for Europe. In Paris and the south of France, he painted landscapes and light-struck villages that marked him as an up-and-coming modernist.

In 1929, after three years in Europe, Johnson returned to the United States, but he stayed less than a year. He spent time in New York, visited his family in South Carolina, stopped in Washington, DC, to meet with Harlem Renaissance luminaries Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, then left again for Europe. In Denmark he married Holcha Krake, a weaver he had met in France the previous summer. For the next eight years, the couple lived in a small fishing

village in Denmark, in Oslo, and among the mountains and fjords of western Norway.

In late 1938, with World War II imminent, the couple returned to New York. Johnson abandoned the dazzling landscapes he painted in Scandinavia to focus instead on the lives of African Americans. He painted Southern sharecroppers, city hipsters, Black soldiers training for war, religious scenes, and his last series, the *Fighters for Freedom*.

It was a trying time in Johnson's personal life. Holcha developed breast cancer, and after she died in 1944 Johnson's physical and mental health deteriorated. In 1947 he was confined to Central Islip State Hospital in New York, where he remained without painting until his death in 1970.

Three Great Abolitionists: A. Lincoln, F. Douglass, J. Brown
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1983.95.51

In *Three Great Abolitionists*, Fredrick Douglass (1818–1895) clasps hands with John Brown (1800–1859) and President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865). Brown represents the lead-up to the Civil War; Douglass the abolitionist cause; and Lincoln the abolition of slavery. Surrounding these figures, cotton bolls and men plowing speak to the backbreaking toil of enslaved agricultural workers. At the lower left, African American women raise their arms in praise.

Johnson's painting represents the reconciliation of three men who held conflicting ideas about how to abolish slavery. Brown and Douglass were deeply committed to racial equality, but when Brown asked Douglass to join the Harpers Ferry raid, Douglass refused. Lincoln publicly

condemned Brown's violence, saying it was damaging to enslaved people and abolitionists alike. Douglass also criticized Lincoln, who was elected on a promise to prevent the spread of slavery rather than to end slavery itself. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Douglass threw his support behind the president.

Toussaint l'Ouverture, Haiti

ca. 1945

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1154

Johnson presented Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803) as both statesman and general. He marked important moments in L'Ouverture's rise to power, from his leadership of the 1791 Haitian Revolution to his emergence as Haiti's governor general. As the country's leader, L'Ouverture, who had been enslaved on a sugar plantation, drew up a constitution that abolished slavery and ruled as though Haiti were no longer a French colony. His independence infuriated French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, whose troops captured the upstart L'Ouverture and deported him to France, where he died in a squalid prison. The following year, one of L'Ouverture's generals threw off French rule and established Haiti as the world's first Black republic and the first country in the Americas to outlaw slavery.

Self-Portrait with Pipe

ca. 1937

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.913

Booker T. Washington Revelation

ca. 1945

oil on fiberboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1143

In 1881, Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), an honors graduate of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University), was invited to establish a school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama. When he arrived, he discovered there was no money for buildings, so classes met in a space lent by a church. Within months Washington borrowed money and purchased a one-hundred-acre farm and put students to work constructing classrooms and dorms. By the time Washington died, Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute consisted of more than one hundred structures, fifteen hundred students, nearly two hundred faculty, courses in more than thirty-five fields, and an endowment of approximately two million dollars.

Johnson surrounded Washington with evidence of Tuskegee Institute's remarkable success. A plow, shovels, and other implements testify to Washington's belief in a practical education. Science Hall, the Agricultural Building, and other Tuskegee structures reflect Washington's vision of a school where students could study in well-equipped surroundings. Johnson also featured portraits of people Washington admired: community leader Rufus Herron, Hampton Institute instructor Major Robert Russa Moton (top left and right), Bishop George W. Clinton (above Bible), and Dr. George Washington Carver (lower left, in blue). The woman at center is probably Washington's wife, Margaret Murray Washington, a distinguished educator and administrator at Tuskegee Institute.

Commodore Peary and Henson at the North Pole

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1983.95.54

Johnson painted Matthew Henson (1866–1955) and Commodore Robert Peary (1856–1920) in a landscape that attests to their greatest accomplishment—-the discovery of the North Pole. The iceberg and ship symbolize their arduous journey, while the US flag signifies the nation for which they claimed victory. The two were an unlikely pair. In 1887, Peary hired Henson to be his personal valet. By the time they planted the flag on what they believed to be the North Pole on April 6, 1909, Henson was a coequal explorer who had accompanied Peary on eight expeditions to the Arctic.

Even though Johnson presented only the two men in the icy landscape, the 1908–09 North Pole expedition was huge. More than fifty men, women, and children, most of them Inuit, and more than seventy tons of provisions supported the venture, which took them by ship, dogsled, and on foot over the frozen land. In 1912, Henson published a book, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, but his role was eclipsed by Peary's until the 1940s, when Congress awarded him a silver medal for his accomplishments.

Crafting the Fighters

Johnson sought to tell each Fighter's story within a single painting. He studied books and pored over newspapers and magazines to identify episodes from the Fighters' lives that tell of their

struggles and accomplishments. Many of his fighters—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Mary McLeod Bethune—were famous during their lifetimes. Others—educators Lucy Craft Laney and Nannie Helen Burroughs, for example—were less so, even though their legacies continue.

Johnson was particularly attuned to Fighters—including Marian Anderson, Joe Louis, and Paul Robeson—who were making history during his lifetime. He depicted heads of state meeting in far-flung cities during World War II, and he painted portraits of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi, who were imprisoned for their efforts to throw off British colonial rule in India. Johnson carefully selected the emblems associated with each Fighter. Flags and buildings locate their experiences geographically; small vignettes reveal significant achievements in their lives.

Crispus Attucks
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1983.95.53

Johnson presented Crispus Attucks (1723–1770) in a Christ-like pose at the center of his scene of the Boston Massacre. Attucks and four other American colonists face a line of British soldiers who point muskets at the unarmed group. Tensions were already high on the night of March 5, 1770, when a group of colonials wielding sticks and snowballs confronted British soldiers. Shots were fired. When the smoke cleared, Attucks, a self-emancipated whaling sailor, and four others lay dead. They were the first casualties of the American Revolution.

For more than eighty years after the Boston Massacre, the martyrdom of this Black man was

largely erased from history. Not until 1855, when William Cooper Nell, a Black abolitionist from Boston, published a book on people of color who fought for American liberty was Attucks recognized as the first martyr in the battle for independence. His name became a rallying cry during the Civil War as a powerful symbol of courage and sacrifice.

Swearing in George Washington
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.653

George Washington, commander in chief of the victorious Continental Army, was the unanimous choice to become the first president of the United States when the Electoral College met after the Constitution was ratified. Although Washington had retired to Mount Vernon, his plantation outside Washington, DC, he accepted the offer because he was committed to the success of the country he helped create. In *Swearing in George Washington*, the new president looks out at us as he takes the oath of office. At far left is newly elected vice president John Adams. Martha Washington, in a stylish hat and earrings, observes the historic moment. Johnson chose not to acknowledge Washington's role as an enslaver nor include references to the labor of more than five hundred enslaved African Americans at Mount Vernon. Instead, this pared-down scene emphasizes the solemnity of the inauguration of the country's first president.

Nat Turner
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.658

Visionary liberator to some, murderous rebel to others, the enslaved preacher Nat Turner (1800–1831), along with six others, went from farm to farm killing entire families of white enslavers in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. Retribution was immediate. Virginia's militia hunted down Turner's raiders, and white vigilantes indiscriminately slaughtered hundreds of enslaved and free African Americans. Newspaper headlines expressed outrage, although some conceded the raiders' cause. The *African Sentinel and Journal of Liberty* wrote, "Slaves . . . have done vastly wrong in the late insurrection . . . but their struggle for freedom is the same in principle as the struggle of our fathers in '76." Johnson painted fifty white crosses at the left to stand for the murdered enslavers and their families opposite ninety crosses in shades of brown that represent African Americans who were slaughtered. Turner's sword, musket, and Bible symbolize the violence of the uprising and Turner's moral justification for leading it.

Harriet Tubman
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1146

Johnson's double portrait celebrates abolitionist, Civil War scout, and suffragist Harriet Tubman (ca. 1822–1913). He used a popular nineteenth-century woodcut for the commanding image of the younger Tubman. Standing tall in a striped Civil War–era dress, she holds a shotgun at her side. Behind her, paths and railroad tracks refer to escape routes Tubman used as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Above her, the North Star shines between rising and setting suns. At the lower right, Johnson featured an older Tubman, her head draped in a shawl much like the

one given to her by England's Queen Victoria, as a continuing presence in the fight for social justice.

Tubman, who probably used the Underground Railroad herself when she escaped slavery in 1849, led more than seventy people to freedom and helped them find housing and jobs in the North. More than seven hundred others were freed as a result of her work as a spy and scout for the Union army. After the Civil War she raised money for freedmen, ran a nursing home for African Americans, and campaigned for women's suffrage.

Three Great Freedom Fighters
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Collection of Hampton University Art Museum

John Brown, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass stand with hands clasped in unity. It is an imaginary composition that brings together three individuals who knew each other but followed different paths in the fight against slavery. For abolitionist John Brown, violent action, not peaceful protest, offered a way forward. Harriet Tubman, who led small bands of self-emancipators as they traveled north to freedom, saved hundreds more as a scout and spy for the Union army. Douglass's eloquence electrified listeners, and his writings passionately argued the abolitionist cause.

After the Civil War, Douglass wrote to Tubman:

> "The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no

one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have."

John Brown Legend

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1145

Tensions between Northern and Southern states were already high over the issue of slavery when John Brown (1800–1859) and eighteen men raided the armory and railroad junction at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). As the men secured key locations and took enslavers prisoner, local militias prepared to fight back. Brown and his compatriots had expected hundreds of enslaved people from the surrounding area to join their abolitionist cause, but few did. Two of the raiders escaped; those captured alive were convicted of treason and sentenced to hang.

Johnson showed Brown as a Christlike figure whose hair resembles a golden halo. The image of the child kissing the martyr drew on a popular story that circulated after Brown's execution. Johnson surrounded Brown with portraits of his sons, other abolitionists, fellow raiders, and sympathizers. The landscape at the upper right represents Harpers Ferry; the rifle to his right symbolizes Brown's plan to arm the enslaved.

Abraham Lincoln

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.643

Johnson surrounded Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) with key episodes from his life and the aftermath of his death: the log cabin where he grew up, his election to the United States House of Representatives (symbolized by the US Capitol), the capture of his assassin John Wilkes Booth, and the execution of Booth's coconspirators. At left, below the Capitol, a pair of hands holds a piece of paper. The paper might represent the Emancipation Proclamation, in which President Lincoln declared "all persons held as slaves" within rebellious states "shall be . . . thenceforward, and forever free." Or it could symbolize the Gettysburg Address, in which Lincoln described the Civil War as testing whether a nation "conceived in liberty" and "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" could endure. The crosses speak to the enormous cost of the war on both sides. At right Johnson illustrates the grim aftermath of Lincoln's killing. A Union soldier drags Booth from the burning barn in which he was captured after a twelve-day manhunt. Below are barred prison windows and a gallows from which Booth's four coconspirators hang.

Let My People Free
ca. 1945
oil on fiberboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.649

In *Let My People Free* Johnson spotlights the fraught relationship between Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln during the early years of Lincoln's presidency. Douglass (1818–1895) had fled slavery in 1838 via the Underground Railroad. In the 1840s, he helped fugitives cross the border into Canada. Douglass's 1845 book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, along with his published articles and forceful public speeches made him the

nation's most powerful and outspoken opponent of slavery.

Johnson placed these towering figures of the Civil War on opposite sides of a table. Although Douglass had endorsed Lincoln's candidacy, he vehemently opposed Lincoln's efforts to keep the Union together by allowing Southern states to perpetuate slavery and called him a "genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred." After the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Douglass spoke of Lincoln's "deep moral conviction" and recruited African American soldiers for the Union army (two of his own sons enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment).

Underground Railroad
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.645

In 1872 a Pennsylvania freedman named William Still (1821–1902) published *The Underground Rail Road*, a book that told the stories of almost three hundred self-emancipators, many of whom he sheltered on their dangerous journeys north. Johnson traced thirty-six figures and seven vignettes from engravings in Still's book. Each boat, train, wagon, even the scene of the man (Henry Brown) climbing out of a shipping crate, signifies the arduous travels of a specific individual. Maria Weems, for example, in a hat and purple jacket at the upper right corner, was separated from her family when she was just twelve. Two years later, an antislavery activist helped her escape and travel north where she was reunited with her family.

Through the stories of these individuals, Johnson told of oppression and cruelty, of pursuit by

brutal slave catchers, and of assistance offered to the sick and exhausted by caring individuals from all quarters.

Booker T. Washington Legend
ca. 1944–1945
oil on plywood
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.664

Here Johnson presented a formally dressed Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) addressing a class of Black students. He is framed by a blackboard on which a saw, trowel, and hammer represent the building trades, and a rake, shovels, and other farm implements attest to Tuskegee's importance as a center for agricultural research. The artist's palette, inkwell, and musical instruments may allude to the "Atlanta Compromise," a speech Washington gave at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895. Washington proposed vocational and industrial education as the most effective way to improve the economic status of African Americans. His detractors, including W. E. B. Dubois, cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued instead that higher education and civil rights activism offered the most effective paths to equality.

Dr. George Washington Carver
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1142

Dr. George Washington Carver (ca. 1864–1943) emphasizes key aspects of the distinguished scientist's life and career. Vignettes show Carver shaking hands with President Franklin

Roosevelt and speaking with automaker Henry Ford (in the green jacket), who provided financial support for Carver's lab at Tuskegee Institute. Peanuts, sweet potatoes, cotton bolls, laboratory equipment, a paintbrush, and an artist's palette (Carver's paintings won an honorable mention at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair), reveal the range of his accomplishments. At left, Carver massages the outstretched arm of a young polio patient with peanut oil.

Carver was born into slavery before the end of the Civil War. He was the first African American student to enroll at Iowa State College (today Iowa State University), where he studied agriculture, having previously pursued art at nearby Simpson College. In 1896, Booker T. Washington invited Carver to teach at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), where he remained for the rest of his life. Carver's agricultural research bulletins were distributed widely, and the extension program he set up to reach rural farmers made him a hero within African American communities throughout the country.

Dr. George Washington Carver
ca. 1945
oil on plywood
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.597

The impact of George Washington Carver's research on the science of agronomy and specifically on Southern agriculture is incalculable. His work on crop rotation—alternating cotton with soybeans, cowpeas, and sweet potatoes to return nitrogen to the soil—revitalized cotton farming after years of declining production. Carver's motivation was not simply to improve the economics of cotton cultivation. He was committed to helping undernourished subsistence farmers increase their yields and grow crops that would improve their diets. He sent

students into the countryside to teach cultivation techniques, livestock care, and food preservation practices. By the early twentieth century, Carver's work developing hundreds of new uses for agricultural products earned international acclaim. At the upper left, Johnson shows him shaking hands with President Franklin Roosevelt; at lower right, he receives an award from Henry Ford.

Women Builders
1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1150

Johnson borrowed the title *Women Builders* and the portraits in this painting from a 1931 book by Sadie Iola Daniel (middle row, right). Lucy Craft Laney, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Janie Porter Barrett (on the left side of the painting) created institutions where Black women could pursue education and learn practical life skills. Maggie Lena Walker (upper right) became the first female bank president in the United States, paving the way for others to enter professions. Jane Edna Hunter (middle left) provided affordable, safe housing for Black women working in Cleveland, Ohio, many of whom came north as part of the Great Migration. Educator and equal rights activist Nannie Helen Burroughs opened a vocational school in Washington, DC, for women to learn skills useful beyond the domestic sphere. Johnson pictured the figures adjacent to institutions they created to foster achievement within their communities.

Against the Odds

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Collection of Hampton University Museum of Art

Johnson drew the title for this pantheon of notable African Americans from *13 Against the Odds*, a 1944 book that presented biographies of thirteen who battled for equal rights. According to author Edwin Embree, each embodied a success story "in the best American tradition. . . . good tough personalities, with the joys and sorrows common to all men, with the extra pain that comes from the prejudices of their neighbors, and the added zest that comes with climbing from special depths to the pinnacles of distinction."

The top row features Paul Robeson, Mary McLeod Bethune, and George Washington Carver. Below are Joe Louis; Marian Anderson; Harlem renaissance poet Langston Hughes; Walter White, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and W. E. B. Du Bois, founder and editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*. Across the bottom are Richard Wright, author of the novel *Native Son*; A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; sociologist and Fisk University president Charles S. Johnson; Howard University president Mordecai Johnson; and composer William Grant Still, whose *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) was then the most widely performed symphony ever written by an American.

With these Fighters, Johnson said he had "now completed it all. . . . Great men, women—fighter[s] for Freedom . . . who accomplished great deeds for the freedom [fight]. Now all this is completed—all."

Reclaiming History

Johnson was not alone in chronicling the contributions of African Americans to the national story. In 1916 historian Carter G. Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History* and in 1926, with the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, declared the second week of February each year to be "Negro History Week" (the date corresponded with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln). He, Arturo Schomburg, Alain Locke, and others promoted teaching African American history in schools to instill a sense of heritage and racial pride among African Americans and to introduce a broad public to Black contributions to American culture. In 1940, in conjunction with the American Negro Exposition in Chicago (also known as the Black World's Fair), the government-sponsored Illinois Writers' Project produced *Cavalcade of the American Negro*, a commemorative book on African American history and culture. Artists, too, contributed. Aaron Douglas, Charles White, Hale Woodruff, and others created murals that celebrated individuals and recounted events in the ongoing fight for equality and social justice.

Marian Anderson
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.657

In 1939, Marian Anderson (1897–1993), an internationally acclaimed contralto renowned for singing operatic arias, spirituals, and Gospel music, was barred from performing at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, because of her race. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt protested, as did the

NAACP, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the American Federation of Labor, and other national organizations. Within weeks the Secretary of the Interior invited Anderson to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. She was initially reluctant:

> I said yes, but the yes did not come easily or quickly. . . . As I thought further, I could see that my significance as an individual was small in this affair. I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people.

More than seventy-five thousand people came to hear her perform; millions more listened on the radio.

Johnson painted at least three portraits of Anderson. Two show her in front of the Lincoln Memorial. In this, the third, she is surrounded by symbols of her international fame. Brazilian, Chilean, and Ecuadorean flags represent her 1937 and 1938 concert tours of South America. The Eiffel Tower in Paris, Saint Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, and other monuments track her popularity across Europe and Scandinavia. Johnson also honored Anderson's longtime accompanist Kosti Vehanen, who is seated at a grand piano.

Paul Robeson's Relations
ca. 1945
oil on hardboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.666

Paul Robeson (1898–1976) was already a star of stage and screen when Johnson met him in Copenhagen in 1935. Roles as Joe in *Show Boat* and the lead in *The Emperor Jones* had launched Robeson's career in the 1920s, but by the mid-1930s Robeson was as well known as a

civil rights activist as he was for his resonant voice and powerful stage presence. Robeson defied the stereotyping that pervaded movie and theater scripts by replacing demeaning lyrics with words of protest and affirmation. For example, he changed the lines "Tote that barge, lift that bale, get a little drunk and you land in jail" from *Show Boat's* "Ol' Man River," to "Tote that barge, lift that bale, show a little grit and you land in jail." Johnson presents Robeson costumed for his role in Shakespeare's *Othello* surrounded by a tiny paddle wheeler (*Show Boat*); a baseball bat; and the flags of Norway, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and Finland, which attest to his brilliant international career.

In 1934, Robeson traveled to the Soviet Union, where he said for the first time he was treated not as "a Negro but a human being . . . I walk in full human dignity." His lifelong work for social justice—from integrating professional baseball to opposing colonial rule in Africa—resulted in his being tracked by the FBI and blacklisted during the Cold War.

Historical Scene
ca. 1945
oil on fiberboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.646

The Reverend M. J. Divine (1876–1965), known as Father Divine, created the International Peace Mission Movement in the early twentieth century. A dynamic preacher, he advocated racial integration, universal peace, abstinence from alcohol and smoking, and celibacy. His followers lauded Father Divine as God incarnate and adhered to these strict tenets. His popularity skyrocketed during the Great Depression, when the Peace Mission hosted banquets that provided much-needed food for followers and visitors alike.

In *Historical Scene*, Johnson portrays Father Divine and his wife, Peninnah (Mother Divine), with a group of devoted followers, called angels. Across the top half of the painting are buildings the Peace Mission used as communal homes or offices. The exuberant women and multiracial waving hands in the bottom corners were probably inspired by *March of Time* newsreel coverage of the Mission's 1936 rally in New York City.

Historical Scene with Mary McLeod Bethune
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.651

Educator, civil rights champion, and presidential advisor, Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) was one of the most influential freedom fighters of the twentieth century. Dedicated to empowering African American women, in 1904 she founded the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, which merged in 1923 with the all-male Cookman Institute to form Bethune-Cookman College (now Bethune-Cookman University). Bethune targeted political change as well. She advised President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and in 1936 became a key figure in Roosevelt's National Youth Administration.

Johnson borrowed the images around the edges of *Historical Scene with Mary McLeod Bethune* from photographs by Gordon Parks. On the right science students work with microscopes, an agricultural student holds onto a cow, and a dance instructor performs. A portrait of Bethune anchors the left, along with a scene in which she passes the presidency of Bethune-Cookman College to James Colston. The men embracing at the center remain unidentified. They may have been associated with the college or part of a coalition of Black leaders who, with Bethune, served

as an informal advisory board to President Roosevelt (the so-called Black Cabinet). Alternatively, they mav have worked with Bethune to found the United Negro College Fund (UNCF).

Marcus Garvey
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.648

In 1914, Jamaica-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) read Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery*. It raised troubling questions for him. "Where is the Black man's government?" he wondered. "Where is his country?" The book prompted Garvey to establish the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). By 1920 his message of economic and cultural independence had struck a chord and the UNIA attracted tens of thousands of members in the United States and abroad. UNIA-affiliated restaurants, shops, and storefront factories flourished in Harlem, and Garvey established the Black Star shipping line as part of his "Back to Africa" philosophy.

Johnson shows Garvey as an orator, his wife seated at his side. Ships bearing Black Star Line flags float above an image of UNIA's headquarters. Below, a barred window, handcuffed wrists, and the words "deported U.S.A." signal the end of Garvey's time in New York. The object of a politically motivated investigation by the young FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, Garvey was deported to Jamaica in 1927.

Boxers

ca. 1945–46

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.652

In *Boxers* heavyweight champions Jack Johnson (1878–1946) and Joe Louis (1914–1981) jab and weave, their stylized stances based on photographs and sketches found among Johnson's papers. Johnson, who held the heavyweight title from 1908 to 1915, confronted racism in many forms, including white competitors who refused to fight him because he was Black and persecution because he married a white woman. Exploiting racial tensions to hype matches, promoters sought white boxers to challenge him. Former heavyweight champion James Jeffries came out of retirement to square off against Johnson. When Johnson knocked him out, African Americans celebrated; appalled white citizens rioted.

Joe Louis held the heavyweight title for a record twelve years. His 1938 rematch against the German Max Schmeling (he lost to Schmeling in 1936) was billed as a battle of race and ideology: the American "Brown Bomber" against Hitler's "Aryan Master Race." One hundred sixty million people worldwide tuned in on the radio. They were staggered when, two minutes into the first round, the referee called a technical knockout. African American Joe Louis defeated the stand-in for Nazi fascism. In 1942, Louis enlisted in the US Army. He fought exhibition matches and visited wounded GIs. By the war's end in 1945, he had entertained more than two million soldiers at home and abroad.

Three Great Dancers

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.667

Josephine Baker (1906–1975), Katherine Dunham (1909–2006), and Pearl Primus (1919–1994) take center stage in *Three Great Dancers*, which celebrates the influence of African and Caribbean dance on American choreography. Baker came to New York in 1921, where she appeared in the chorus line of *Shuffle Along*, a landmark Broadway show with an all-Black cast that launched her career and those of Florence Mills, Fredi Washington, and Paul Robeson. In Paris four years later, her eye-catching costumes, including her signature banana skirt, and unconventional moves catapulted her to international fame. Katherine Dunham (lower left with cigar and white polka-dot cloth), a University of Chicago anthropology major, filmed folk dances in Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad. Their African roots prompted her to develop new dance forms. In 1940, she and her dance company—one of the first all-Black troupes in the United States—debuted *Tropics and Le Jazz "Hot" (From Haiti to Harlem)*, based on African American social dances and Caribbean sources.

The third "great dancer" is probably Pearl Primus, who often addressed systemic discrimination. Her *Strange Fruit* (1943) was accompanied by the lyrics of a poem (sung by Billie Holiday) that addressed racism and the lynching of African Americans. Primus's energy and five-foot-high jumps commanded the stage. In 1943 she wowed an audience of twenty thousand at the Negro Freedom Rally at Madison Square Garden.

Three Allies in Cairo

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.663

Johnson copied a photograph from *LIFE* magazine to commemorate the historic meeting between US president Franklin Roosevelt (center), Chinese Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (left), and British prime minister Winston Churchill in Cairo in November 1943. Palm trees and pyramids identify the location, as does the green Egyptian flag at the top of the painting.

Roosevelt had multiple goals when he invited the Chinese leader and British prime minister to meet. He confirmed US support for China during World War II and sketched out a vision for the postwar future in which a world power in each major region of the globe would keep peace. In a photo op following the meeting, the three heads of state issued a press release that confirmed China's status as one of the four allied Great Powers, alongside the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union.

Historical Scene–WW II

ca. 1945

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.659

In *Historical Scene—WW II*, Johnson showed Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, president of Nationalist China, surveying a landscape filled with machines of war. In 1931, Japan invaded China's northern territory of Manchuria, and in 1937 occupied Beijing, took Shanghai, and decimated the capital of Nanjing (Nanking), slaughtering more than two hundred thousand

soldiers and civilians. With inadequate equipment and poorly trained troops, the government retreated to the country's interior.

The vignette at the lower right represents the 1943 Cairo Conference at which Chiang Kai-shek met with US president Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill to discuss Allied support for China. Johnson added Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who served as interpreter at the Cairo meeting.

Potsdam Meeting
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.655

Johnson presented the image of three world leaders—US president Harry Truman (center), British prime minister Clement Attlee (left), and Soviet premier Joseph Stalin standing on a Nazi flag, their hands joined in victory. The three met in Potsdam, Germany, from mid-July to early August 1945 to discuss the terms of the peace after Germany's surrender on May 8. Leaders of the three countries had met in Yalta the previous February to begin laying out terms for postwar peace. But the cast of characters at Potsdam was new. Truman replaced Roosevelt, who had died in April, and Attlee replaced Churchill midway through the meeting when the results of his recent landslide victory were announced. Much was still at stake. Germany had surrendered, but the conflict in Asia continued. Just days after the Potsdam meeting, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. After a second bomb decimated Nagasaki, the war in the Pacific ended.

A Career Cut Short

In October 1946, after completing the *Fighters for Freedom* series, Johnson set sail for Denmark, eager to reconnect with his late wife's family. All his possessions—Holcha's weavings, rolls of unstretched paintings, stacks of watercolors, and portfolios of prints—were packed into the ship's hold.

Before her death, Holcha had confided to a friend that Johnson was behaving erratically. In Denmark, her family was immediately aware of his increasingly odd behavior, and the visit was cut short, so Johnson traveled to Norway. Living on the street with his bundled possessions, he was picked up for vagrancy and returned to the United States, where he was diagnosed with a degenerative brain disease and hospitalized for the rest of his life.

Johnson's artworks went into storage with fees covered by money he earned working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In the mid-1950s, when his funds ran out, a court-appointed attorney recommended that the artworks be destroyed. Instead, the New York Surrogate Court awarded ownership to the Harmon Foundation. Many of the works were damaged, some in a 1942 studio fire, others from life on the streets and improper storage. Committed to preserving Johnson's work, the foundation undertook conservation, organized a huge show at the New York Public Library, and toured the exhibition *William H. Johnson: An Artist of the World Scene* to colleges, libraries, and community centers around the country.

The Story Continues

In 1966, the Harmon Foundation announced it would close and began looking for museums to take on the artworks in their care. More than 1,300 paintings, prints, and drawings by William H. Johnson were offered to the Smithsonian American Art Museum on the condition that SAAM conserve, exhibit, lend, and publish Johnson's work. The museum agreed, launched a conservation initiative and offered to give works to other museums. When Atlanta University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Howard University, and Morgan State University responded enthusiastically, SAAM transferred more than one hundred fifty paintings and prints to their collections.

In November 1971, SAAM opened *William H. Johnson, 1901–1970,* a major exhibition that traced Johnson's career and subsequently toured in Africa, Europe, and the United States. *Homecoming: William H. Johnson and Afro-America*, organized by guest curator Dr. Richard J. Powell in 1991, reintroduced Johnson's late work to national audiences. Powell's book, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson,* remains the most important account of Johnson's life and work. Since then Johnson's powerful paintings and prints have been featured in solo and group shows at dozens of museums across the country and around the world.

King Ibn Saud
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.650

In this painting Johnson refers to a secret meeting in 1945 between King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt aboard the battleship USS *Quincy* in the Suez Canal. Johnson shows a larger-than-life Ibn Saud receiving salutes from American naval officers and the homage of his countrymen. A green flag in the upper center locates the meeting in Egypt; the derricks dotting the arid landscape in the background are references to the communications network Ibn Saud established in a country primed for oil exploration. Although Saudi Arabia remained officially neutral during World War II, the country favored the Allies. Roosevelt met with Ibn Saud to secure access to his country's massive oil reserves. The charismatic Roosevelt charmed the powerful king, and the two laid the groundwork for a long-standing alliance.

Nehru and Gandhi
ca. 1945
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.665

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), known widely as the Mahatma (Great Soul), was an Indian lawyer who advocated nonviolent protest and resistance against British colonial rule of India. As a young man he practiced law in South Africa (another British colony) and campaigned for civil rights. On his return to India, Gandhi led the Indian National Congress and pushed for India's independence from British colonial rule. His protest marches, peaceful boycotts, personal fasts, and many arrests made him a national icon.

Johnson depicted Gandhi to the right of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), who led the Indian National Congress in the 1920s and 1930s and became India's first prime minister after the British withdrawal in 1947. Johnson portrayed the two nationalists wearing clothing that reflects

their roles. Gandhi, the Hindu traditionalist, is clad in the informal garb of the Indian people. Nehru's more formal dress reflects his vision of a modern India on the international stage. The skeletal bodies and shrouded remains that surround them are haunting reminders of famine and poverty during the final years of British rule.

Tehran Conference
ca. 1945
oil on plywood
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.647

In November 1943, after meeting with Chiang Kai-shek in Cairo, President Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill traveled to Tehran to discuss military strategy with Joseph Stalin, general secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. The previous two years had taken a brutal toll on the Soviets. In August 1942, German airstrikes on Stalingrad left the city in ruins. Losses on both sides numbered in the millions, before the German army, facing starvation during a brutally cold winter, surrendered. During the meeting, Roosevelt and Churchill committed to invading German-occupied northern France. Stalin, in turn, agreed to launch an offensive on Germany's eastern flank and to declare war against Japan after the Germans surrendered.

Press reports of the Tehran Conference considered the meetings successful. Stalin called Churchill and Roosevelt his "fighting friends." At the lower center Johnson featured the Sword of Stalingrad, a hand-forged ceremonial longsword that Churchill presented to Stalin as a tribute from the British people to those who had, at huge loss, defended the Russian city.

FDR and U.N.

1945

oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.644

Fifty nations, including the forty-six that had declared war on Germany and Japan in the Second World War, were invited to San Francisco for meetings that started on April 25, 1945; two months later they signed the United Nations Charter.

Johnson placed Franklin Roosevelt at the center of the image, even though he died two weeks before the conference began, to signify Roosevelt's longstanding commitment to establishing an international peacekeeping organization. The subject was on the agenda during Roosevelt's meetings in Cairo with Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek in 1943 (seated at the lower left), and at the Tehran Conference with Churchill and Joseph Stalin that immediately followed (the group at the lower right). Roosevelt discussed forming the UN again when he met with Stalin and Churchill in Yalta in February 1945. With this painting Johnson ensured Roosevelt's visionary legacy. At center right, a vignette showing him shaking hands with George Washington Carver reflects their shared efforts to secure food security throughout the world.

Haile Selassie

ca. 1945

oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.607R-V

Haile Selassie was well known in the United States by the time Johnson included him in the *Fighters for Freedom* series. *Time* magazine featured him on the cover and called him "the best

and wisest ruler ancient Ethiopia has ever had." In 1931, within eight months of being crowned emperor, Selassie introduced the country's first written constitution and took steps to establish a democratic form of government. Following invasion by Italian forces during World War II, Selassie went into exile in England. On his return, he abolished slavery, which had been practiced in Ethiopia for more than a thousand years.

Johnson presented Selassie as a commanding military leader, a wise civilian governor, and a man adored by his people. Flags of Ethiopia and Great Britain indicate places he lived; the Swiss flag is a nod to Selassie's success in gaining Ethiopia's admission to the League of Nations, the international organization formed after World War I to promote cooperation among member nations.

For India and China
ca. 1944–45
oil on paperboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.662

In February 1942, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, Soong Mei-ling, met with Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, head of the Indian National Congress. Nehru wanted to introduce Gandhi to the Chinese leaders and clarify the two countries' relationship at a critical point during the Second World War. By 1942, the need for an alliance was urgent. The Japanese had overrun Burma (today Myanmar) and cut off the primary supply line the Allies used to send munitions and equipment to China.

Johnson's composite image links multiple people and events. Gandhi is in the center beside his wife, Kasturba. Behind him stands Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The woman in white could be Madeleine Slade, known as Mirabehn, a supporter of the Indian Independence Movement, or possibly Margaret Bourke-White, the *LIFE* magazine photographer whose pictures of Gandhi were widely published.