








**William H. Johnson’s lifetime (1901–1970) intersected with momentous events in African American history** and with the lives of several of those he called Fighters for Freedom. This timeline divides Johnson’s life and career into four eras, focusing on the 1930s and ’40s, his most productive years as a painter. On the right side of the timeline, select historical events illuminate the world in which Johnson lived and created his *Fighters for Freedom* series.

[Johnson’s Life]	[Historical Events]
<b>Artistic Beginnings: [1901–1929]</b>	
<p><b>1901</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>William H. Johnson is born in Florence, South Carolina, on March 18, 1901. He attends school while working odd jobs at the Florence Railroad Station, the YMCA, and other locations.</li> </ul>  <p>[Image credit] Florence, South Carolina, 1914, courtesy Florence County Museum</p> <p><b>1918</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoping to become a commercial cartoonist, Johnson leaves home for New York City at seventeen. New York’s galleries, museums, and art schools offer opportunities to engage with art and refine his skills.</li> </ul>  <p>[Image credit] Portrait of William H. Johnson, ca. 1918, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution</p>	<p><b>1901</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Booker T. Washington's autobiography <i>Up from Slavery</i> is published and becomes a bestseller.</li> </ul> <p><b>1903</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>W. E. B. Du Bois publishes <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i>, an influential collection of essays on Black life and race relations.</li> </ul> <p><b>1909</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the United States’ oldest and largest civil rights organization, is founded. Its influential publication, <i>The Crisis</i>, debuts the next year.</li> </ul> <p><b>1910</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Heavyweight world champion boxer Jack Johnson defeats the white former champion Jim Jeffries in “the fight of the century.”</li> </ul>  <p>[Image Credit] Photographic postcard with photos of Jack Johnson and James J. Jeffries, 1910, silver and photographic gelatin on photographic paper and card stock with adhesive, Collection of the</p>

	Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2010.36.1.4
<p><b>1921</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Johnson enrolls at the National Academy of Design (NAD), where the student body includes artists from diverse racial, religious, and class backgrounds. His instructor, Charles W. Hawthorne, encourages students to work emotionally and spontaneously to “raise the mundane to the level of the profound.”</li> </ul>  <p>[Image credit] William H. Johnson, <i>Self-Portrait</i>, ca. 1923–26, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.679</p> <p><b>1926</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having won nearly every prize the NAD awards, and with funds raised by his teacher, Johnson sails to Europe. In Paris, he schools himself in European modernism, embracing bright colors and bold brushwork. In 1927 he has a show at the American-run Students and Artists Club.</li> </ul> 	<p><b>1917</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The United States enters World War I. More than 380,000 African Americans serve in segregated regiments during the conflict.</li> </ul>  <p>[Image Credit] Photographic postcard of soldiers in World War I at Verdun, July 1918, silver and photographic gelatin on photographic paper with ink and paper (fiber product), Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Greer-Calmeise Family of Cincinnati, Ohio, 2019.18.11</p> <p><b>1920</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The NAACP flies a flag bearing the phrase “A man was lynched yesterday” from the window of their New York headquarters to advocate for federal antilynching legislation.</li> </ul>  <p>[Image Credit] Flag announcing lynching flown from the window of the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Ave., New York City, 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-33793</p> <p><b>1923</b></p>

[Image credit] Photograph of William H. Johnson, ca. 1926–27, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

### 1927

- After a year in Paris, Johnson heads south to Cagnes-sur-Mer, where he is inspired by the artist Chaïm Soutine. He writes to Hawthorne, “I am not afraid to exaggerate a contour, a form, or anything that gives more character and movement to the canvas.”



[Image credit] William H. Johnson, *Cagnes-sur-Mer*, ca. 1928–29, oil on burlap, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.702

### 1929

- In Cagnes-sur-Mer, Johnson meets the Danish textile artist Holcha Krake, along with her sister Erna and brother-in-law Christoph Voll. They travel to Corsica together. In the fall Johnson returns to the United States, Holcha to Denmark, and the Volls to Germany.
- Johnson rents a loft in Harlem and applies for the Harmon Foundation’s 1929 Award for Distinguished Achievements among Negroes in the Fine Arts Field.

- The National Urban League begins publishing *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, an academic and literary magazine that supports the emerging field of African American studies.

### 1925

- Alain Locke publishes *The New Negro*, an anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays considered a foundational text of the Harlem Renaissance.



[Image Credit] *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925, cloth on cardboard, paper with ink, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2013.21

### 1926

- Josephine Baker dances at the Folies Bergère in Paris wearing a skirt made from sixteen rubber bananas, an iconic moment that makes her an international star.



[Image Credit] Josephine Baker in Banana Skirt from the Folies Bergère production “Un Vent de Folie,” 1927, Wikimedia Commons

### 1929

- The US stock market crashes, ushering in the Great Depression. At the height of the crisis, African Americans

experience an unemployment rate of 50 percent, two times higher than that of the general workforce.

**Life Abroad: [1930–1938]**

**1930**

- The Harmon Foundation awards Johnson its top prize and features him in their annual exhibition.



[Image credit] Harmon Foundation exhibition catalogue featuring a self-portrait by Johnson, 1930, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

- Johnson visits his family in Florence, South Carolina, where he has a one-day exhibition at the YMCA. A local newspaper notes that the artist’s “real genius may someday make the city of his birth famous.”

**1930**

- Mohandas Gandhi leads his Salt March in India, a major nonviolent protest against British colonial rule that would inspire civil rights activists in the United States.



[Image credit] Gandhi during the Salt March, March 1930, Wikimedia Commons

- Katherine Dunham founds the Ballet Nègre, one of America’s first Black dance companies, in Chicago.

**1931**

- Nine Black teenagers are falsely accused of raping two white women on a train near Scottsboro, Alabama. The trial and subsequent retrials of the Scottsboro Boys fuel public outcry against racism in the American legal system.



[Image credit] Britton & Patterson, *Scottsboro Boys and Juanita Jackson Mitchell*, 1936, gelatin silver print, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired through the generosity of Elizabeth Ann Hylton, NPG.2011.25



[Image Credit] William H. Johnson, *Young Pastry Cook*, 1930, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.693

- In the spring, Johnson returns to Europe. He reunites with Holcha Krake in Denmark and they marry in May.

#### 1934

- Harlem's Apollo Theater opens its doors to African Americans for the first time. It becomes a landmark venue for Black entertainers.



[Image credit] Johnson and Krake at their home in Norway, ca. 1935–38. William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

#### 1936

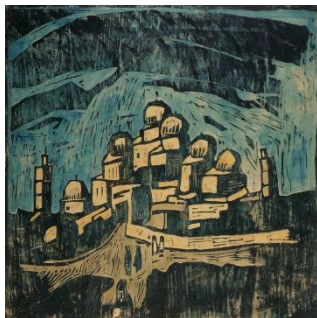
- Mary McLeod Bethune is selected by President Franklin Roosevelt to direct the National Youth Administration's Division of Negro Affairs, becoming the administration's highest ranking Black official.



[Image credit] Mary McLeod Bethune and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt speaking before a National Youth Administration

### 1932

- Johnson and Krake travel to North Africa for a three-month stay in Tunis, Tunisia, where they engage with the local community and learn about Tunisian artistic traditions.



[image credit] William H. Johnson. *Landscape with Mosques, Tunis*, 1932, hand-colored woodcut on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.857

### 1933–34

- Johnson and Krake live and work in the small fishing village of Kerteminde, Denmark. They exhibit their work in Copenhagen and other Danish cities.



[Image credit] William H. Johnson. *Danish Roadside*, 1930, oil on burlap, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.731

meeting, between 1935 and 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF34-007948

### 1937

- A. Philip Randolph leads the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American–run labor union, to an agreement with the Pullman Company for increased wages and a cap on hours.
- Joe Louis becomes the first African American heavyweight boxing champion since Jack Johnson claimed the title in 1908.



[Image credit] Ticket to a championship boxing match between Joe Louis and Jim Braddock, June 22, 1937, ink on paper, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2013.219.1

**1935**

- In January, Johnson and Krake travel to Norway. They meet Norwegian painter Edvard Munch in Oslo then spend the summer travelling in Norway's Gudbrandsdalen region. In September they settle in Volda, a western fjord town, where they stay for two years.



[Image credit] William H. Johnson, *Volda*, ca. 1935–36, oil on burlap mounted on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.871

**1937**

- Johnson and Krake spend their summer travelling in northern Norway and painting under the midnight sun on the Lofoten Islands. In September, Johnson has a solo exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden.



[Image credit]: Johnson painting outdoors in Norway, ca. 1935-38, National Archives photo HNE 20-36

**1938**

- Amid growing tensions in Europe, Johnson’s brother-in-law Christoph Voll and other modern artists are harassed by the Nazis, who confiscate Voll’s artwork. Johnson and Krake decide to leave Europe and sail for the United States, arriving in New York on November 24.

**An American Homecoming: 1939–1946**

**1939**

- In February, Johnson and Krake exhibit their work together at the Artists Gallery. In May, Johnson is hired by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project to teach painting at the Harlem Community Art Center. He experiments with a new modern style and focuses on African American subjects.



[Image credit] “Wm. H. Johnson Put on Art Center Staff,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 10, 1939, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

**1939**

- Marian Anderson performs before 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution bar her from singing at Constitution Hall because of her race.



[Image credit] Marian Anderson at Lincoln Memorial: series, #136: cellulose acetate photonegative, April 9, 1939, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

**1940**

- The American Negro Exposition, or the Black World’s Fair, is held in Chicago to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the abolition of slavery. More than 120 exhibitions celebrate African American achievements in art, culture, science, and industry.

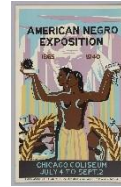


**1940–41**

- Johnson’s work is shown in group exhibitions across the United States; *Chain Gang* is shown at the New York World’s Fair. His 1941 solo show at the Alma Reed Gallery features his Southern, “folk”-inspired paintings. Richmond Barthé, Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Selma Burke, Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, Norman Lewis, and Augusta Savage all sign the guestbook.



William H. Johnson, *Chain Gang*, ca. 1939, oil on plywood, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.675



[Image credit] Robert Savon Pious, *Poster for the American Negro Exposition in Chicago*, 1940, ink on paper, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Gift of Ingrid Rose in Memory of Milton M. Rose, 2015.178



Reception for Johnson’s solo exhibition at the Alma Reed Gallery, May 1941. William H. Johnson is third from left and Holcha Krake is second from right. William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

**1942**

- In conjunction with National Negro Achievement Day, Johnson is honored for “Distinguished Service to America in Art.” Mary McLeod Bethune, Joe Louis, Adam Clayton Powell Jr, and Paul Robeson were also honored.



[Image credit] Page from Johnson’s scrapbook featuring certificate from the Committee of the National Negro Achievement Day, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

**1943**

- Holcha is diagnosed with breast cancer. She succumbs to her illness in January 1944.

**1941**

- The United States enters World War II. An estimated 1.2 million African American men and women serve in all branches of the still-segregated military during the war.



[Image credit] [Untitled photo shows: Tuskegee airmen training, Tuskegee, Alabama], January 23, 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF34- 007952

**1943**

- Paul Robeson stars as Othello, the first Black man to do so on Broadway. He purchases two of Johnson’s paintings from a show at the Wakefield Gallery.

## 1944

- In June, Johnson visits his mother in Florence, South Carolina, and paints portraits of family and community members.



[Image credit] William H. Johnson, *Li'L Sis*, 1944, oil on paperboard, 26 x 21 ¼ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1023

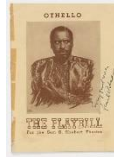
## 1945

- Johnson works on his *Fighters for Freedom* series. He creates sketches of prominent figures based on newspaper and magazine articles, as well as books on African American history.



[Image credit: left] William H. Johnson, *Two Boxers*, ca. 1945, recto: pencil and carbon tracing on paper verso: carbon tracing on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.505R-V

[Image credit: right] William H. Johnson, *Mary McLeod Bethune*, ca. 1945, pencil on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.487R-V



[Image credit] Program for *Othello* signed by Paul Robeson, 1944, ink on paper, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of June Barnes, AD/NPG.99.2

- Outrage over the shooting of a Black soldier by a white police officer in Harlem sparks two days of civil unrest and property destruction. Johnson depicts the events in *Moon Over Harlem* (1943–44).



[Image credit] William H. Johnson, *Moon over Harlem*, ca. 1943–44, oil on plywood, 28 1/2 x 35 3/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.577

## 1945

- Representatives of fifty countries sign a charter founding the United Nations, a culmination of the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt's work toward international peace.
- *Ebony* magazine, which chronicles Black life and achievement through photojournalism, debuts.

**1946**

- Johnson has a solo exhibition in March at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library. In October he leaves for Denmark and stays with Holcha’s family in Odense and Copenhagen. The warm familial welcome he receives is clouded by his increasingly erratic behavior, and after several months he departs for Oslo, Norway.



[Image credit] Johnson at the opening of his exhibition at the New York Public Library’s 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch, 1946, from Nora Holt, “Primitives on Exhibition,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 9, 1946, William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



[Image credit] *Ebony* Vol. V No. 1, November 1949, ink on paper (fiber product), Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Stephanie Capparell, author of *The Real Pepsi Challenge*, 2011.35.1.12, © Ebony Media Group LLC

**Later Life and Legacy: [1947–1970]**

**1947**

- In Oslo, Johnson roams the streets with his and Holcha’s possessions. He is arrested for vagrancy, transferred to medical care, and diagnosed with syphilis-induced paresis. His motor skills and mental state have deteriorated to the point that improvement seems unlikely. After several months, the US embassy in Oslo arranges for Johnson’s return to the United States.
- In New York a court-appointed attorney becomes Johnson’s legal custodian. His belongings, including the couple’s artworks, are secured in a warehouse paid for with his savings.

**1948**

- President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9981, desegregating the US military.

**1954**

- The US Supreme Court declares racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in its ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In December Johnson is admitted to Central Islip State Hospital on Long Island.



[Image credit] Home I, Central Islip State Hospital, courtesy asylumpostcards.com



[Image credit] Thomas J. O'Halloran, *School integration. Barnard School, Washington, D.C., May 27, 1955*, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03119

#### 1955

- Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago, is abducted and murdered in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman.



[Image credit] Dave Mann, *Till boy's funeral, Burr Oaks Cemetary sic, September 6, 1955*, silver and photographic gelatin on photographic paper, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Lauren and Michael Lee, 2013.92

#### 1955

- Johnson's finances are depleted. The attorney recommends that his warehoused items, including his artworks, be destroyed. Helen Harriton, who befriended the Johnsons in Scandinavia, alerts the Harmon Foundation, which is awarded ownership of Johnson's art by the Court.

- The Montgomery Bus Boycott begins in Alabama, following Rosa Parks's arrest for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger.



[Image credit] Helen and David Harriton, ca. 1940s. William H. Johnson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

**1956**

- The Harmon Foundation returns Holcha’s possessions to her family and painstakingly sorts through Johnson’s work, which is in poor condition after nine years in storage. In December, the foundation arranges an exhibition of Johnson’s work that is installed in multiple reading rooms at the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library and later tours to colleges, libraries, and community centers across the country.



[Image credit] View of youth room installation of Johnson’s exhibition at the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library, December 5, 1956, to March 1, 1957, photograph by Adolph Studly, National Archives photo HNE 24-3

**1966**

- The Harmon Foundation announces it will cease operations. Director Mary Beattie Brady and associate director Evelyn S. Brown must find new homes for hundreds of works in the foundation’s care. The Smithsonian American Art Museum,



[Image credit] Rosa Parks and journalist Nicholas Chriss sitting at the front of a city bus after court ordered integration, Montgomery, Alabama, December 21, 1956, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-47366

**1963**

- Over 250,000 people convene on the National Mall for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech.



[Image credit] David L. Harris (David Lowell), *People holding signs at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool with the Washington Monument in the distance during the March on Washington*, August 29, 1963, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-70889

**1964**

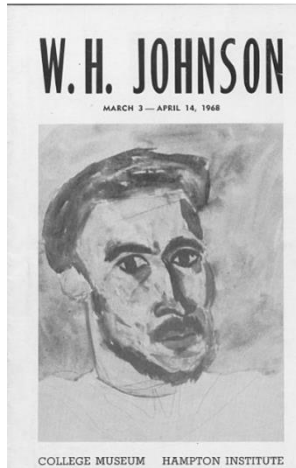
- The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

**1965**

then called the National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA), accepts into its collection more than 1,300 paintings, prints, and drawings by William H. Johnson.

### 1968

- The Hampton Institute College Museum organizes an exhibition of Johnson's work in Hampton, Virginia.



[Image credit] Exhibition brochure, Hampton Institute College Museum, 1968, Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery Library

### 1970

- William H. Johnson dies at age sixty-nine.

### 1971

- In November 1971, the NCFA (now SAAM) opens *William H. Johnson, 1901–1970*, which traces Johnson's entire career. Johnson's sisters, Lillian Johnson Cooper and Lucy Johnson McAfee, attend the opening with his niece, Ernestine Brown,

- John Lewis leads six hundred peaceful demonstrators in a march for voting rights. They are violently beaten by state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.



[Image credit] Spider Martin, *Two Minute Warning*, 1965; printed 1995, silver and photographic gelatin on photographic paper, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2011.14.12, © 1965 Spider Martin

- The Voting Rights Act outlaws racially discriminatory practices in voting such as literacy tests.

### 1968

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

### 1969

- The nation's first college of ethnic studies is established at San Francisco State University, a result of student activism. It inspires similar programs across the country, reshaping the study of American history, culture, and identity.

the subject of the portrait *Li'L Sis*. The exhibition tours the United States and internationally.



Johnson's niece Lillian Cooper with a painting of herself, *Li'L Sis* (1967.59.1023), at the National Collection of Fine Arts, November 1971, Smithsonian Institution Archives

[Image credit] Washington Post, Nov. 5, 1971.