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African American Art History: Dr. Bullington

**The Many Levels of William Henry Johnson: *Going to Church***

Something new was happening during the 1920’s in America. It was a time of change, growth, and ambition for everybody, but African Americans especially were bursting with this bright attitude. Rooted in the New York City community of Harlem, a cultural explosion of African American poetry, art, writing, and music spread across the United States. For the first time since their emancipation, it was, as Langston Hughes wrote, “the period when the Negro was in vogue.” This aptly named “Harlem Renaissance” found black artists migrating north to the big cities, producing vast amounts of work. One of these artists was William Henry Johnson. His story is initially similar to most young artists working in Harlem, and yet his artwork is relatively unknown compared to some more prominent names. Johnson’s work, however, contains an intricate mixture of style and subject matter that is truly unique and yet easily overlooked. When studying one specific work especially, his silkscreen print *Going to Church*, these complexities become clear. Johnson’s blend of traditional subject matter, modernist techniques, and African elements produced a powerful and multi-leveled image that today remains underappreciated in the study of African American art and the Harlem Renaissance.

When standing before *Going to Church*, it is difficult to know where to look first. The saturated, flat colors cover the space in bold patterns and forms. The scene itself, a family taking a wagon ride on their way to church, is not one commonly seen around Johnson’s residence in Harlem. It is perhaps more reminiscent of his upbringing in South Carolina. The image is of a family on their way to the church on a hill, driving through the farmlands and crops. Johnson’s unabashed use of stripes throughout the composition effectively captures his mentioned sense of “rhythm,” equalizing the chaos on either side of the painting. Like the Jazz of the Harlem 20’s, the viewers’ eyes dance from place to place, from color to color, and yet the print in all its business remains well balanced.

Johnson is balancing more than just the composition with this work. He is uniquely balancing multiple styles and ideas. True, many African American artists at the time had similar aesthetics. The paintings of Bill Traylor or Jacob Lawrence look very similar at first glance. And Johnson wasn’t alone in his subject matter, either. Artists like Tanner and Archibald Motley are known for their iconic genre scenes. It is William H. Johnson’s combination of these elements, his subtleties and intricacies that make him unique. In *Going to Church,* Johnson is drawing on numerous sources. There is a clear reference to the work of Synthetic Cubists, with the image being constructed and framed seemingly piece by piece. The figures are broken into sections but also assembled back together, much like work of cubists like Picasso or Braque. Even the basic technique itself – screen-printing – was rather modern. For a silkscreen print, ink is stenciled and squeezed through a woven mesh. Silkscreens were a popular medium because they could be recreated several times. But while some aspects of *Going to Church* are quite modern, the print is also loud with folk elements and rural tradition. The patterns of the picture are reminiscent of fabric and texture, and the structure of the work itself is even like that of a quilt. Quilting, while being an obvious staple of American folk art, was also an integral part of African American history. Quilts were used as symbols and warnings during the period of slavery, and also as a way of passing on stories in alignment with oral traditions. Johnson likewise uses a patchwork and buildup of colors and patterns to tell his story. The “fabric-like” qualities of *Going to Church* also suggest African textiles, as well as the slight abstraction of the figures draws upon traditional African sculpture and masks.

*Going to Church* was made in 1938, the very year that Johnson returned to New York from his time abroad. His life before then was somewhat scattered back and forth, all over the globe. Johnson created many images similar to *Going to Church*, using stylized figures and bold, clashing colors. Many of his other images were of Harlem life: jazz clubs, dancers, parties, and other urban scenes. But it is *Going to Church* that contains the deeper feeling of complexity. Even the image itself screams of multiple meanings. The stripes boldly imply repetition. Also, there are two pairs of people riding in the wagon, two wheels, two crosses, two trees, and two buildings. The contrasting and balancing elements of repetitions suggest opposing and complementary forces at work. (Powell) Johnson’s diverse and somewhat confused life experiences add a background for the print’s seeming conflict and balance. Looking at his history makes sense of the multiple levels found in his work as time progresses.

William H. Johnson moved to New York in 1918 from his hometown of Florence, South Carolina. His migration north mirrored a popular move for African Americans at the time. This period, actually termed the Great Migration, found cities like New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia pulling thousands of African Americans in. Economy was prosperous in the industries of cities, and blacks living in the agricultural, rural parts of the south experienced increasing racial tensions. (Patton 110-111) Living in Harlem and other predominantly African American areas provided artists, musicians, and writers with a community of support. On top of this, different organizations were developed to provide literal support for African Americans. The Harmon Foundation, the NAACP, federal programs like The WPA and Public Works of Art Project, and negro art organizations like the Harlem Community Art Center all created environments of learning and encouragement for both professional and amateur African American artists. Johnson especially benefitted from these groups.

After moving to New York City, William Henry Johnson enrolled in the prestigious National Academy of Design. His early work reflects a rather conservative training and basic subject matter of still-lives and landscapes. But Johnson was quick to assert himself as a serious artist, and worked rigorously. He participated in a few shows and traveling exhibits for the Harmon Foundation. In 1926, however, he was encouraged by a professor to study in Europe. This was also not uncommon for African American artists at the time. Life in Europe was often much easier and tolerant, and Europe was still the cultural center for most artistic achievement. William H. Johnson moved initially to Paris, where he met the artist Henry Ossawa Tanner. Johnson did quite well for himself, exhibiting in solo shows within his first few years in Paris. He continued to travel and study throughout Europe, eventually making his way north. With his work as evidence, it is obvious that Johnson was attracted to the northern painters like Van Gogh and Edvard Munch (Smith). Johnson’s paintings from this period are very expressionistic. His landscapes and even portraits contain frantic brushstrokes to almost an impressionistic degree. While in Denmark, Johnson met his wife, Holcha, and stayed and worked in and around Denmark for several years. He was very successful and happy there, but the threat of the Nazi’s brought the couple back to New York in 1938 (Smith).

Once back in Harlem, Johnson’s style changed radically. He became focused on what he labeled as a sort of “primitivism.” He said that his goal was “…to express in a natural way, what I feel both rhythmically and spiritually, all that has been stored up in my family of primitive tradition” (Scott, and Rutkoff). Johnson’s first major project upon returning was with the WPA, working on murals and paintings from 1939 to 1943 (Patton 153). He continued to paint, draw, and make prints, most of which would became his most inventive and original work. His earlier landscapes and still lifes of bright expressionism became abstracted, yet still extremely approachable. This move towards simplicity and also a more abstract aesthetic remained as Johnson worked in New York, and he enjoyed several solo and group exhibitions. Still, life was not necessarily easy. Success and happiness was never as easy to come by in New York as it had been for William Johnson in Europe, but this was often the case for African Americans. Johnson nevertheless did well enough to ensure relative stability for himself and his wife. Time after time, it was with the encouragement and patronage of the Harmon Foundation that prompted Johnson to persist and endure. (Turner, and Dailey 41)

Things started to get worse for William H. Johnson, however, starting with the sudden death of Holcha in 1943. His work became somewhat inconsistent and erratic, although he did continue to work all the same. He eventually cut off all of his connections with friends and with the Harmon Foundation, returning to Denmark in 1947. He was soon after found wandering the streets, alone and impoverished, with all of his artwork. The Foundation stepped in again and Johnson was brought back to New York and placed in a mental institution. He spent the rest of his life in the institution on Long Island, creating no more work for those last 23 years. All of William Henry Johnson’s works were collected and protected by the Harmon Foundation, almost 800 paintings and 400 prints and drawings. (Smith)

When Johnson was asked to define his art earlier in his life, during his first stay in Denmark, his answer was chillingly foretelling: “I just try to live my own life. Words are only a shield behind which life is hiding…I think all this talking is dangerous to your own inner life…” (Turner, and Dailey 24) Johnson’s mental illness, a result of advanced syphilis spirochete (Powell), cannot be ignored as an element of his artwork. The collection of work left behind reflects a sense of a jumpy rhythm, shifting states of mind, and the tension of balance and disharmony (Cotter). This could be the effect of Johnson’s worsening condition as he neared his admittance, or a reflection of his never-ending travels and moving around the world. But it also can be seen as a telling portrayal of the Negro experience. African Americans were in the midst of a huge shift themselves at this time. They were beginning to experience new life in the big cities during a period when Harlem was fashionable. But they also could not escape from prejudices and growing racial tensions. Also, African Americans still contained within them the history and traditions of their ancestors, and remnants of a painful past. All of these loaded and opposing elements are also essential to understanding the multiple interpretations of Johnson’s work. In a work such as *Going to Church*, the viewer can see these many elements all coming together, clashing, overlapping, and working together. Even in the most basic sense, Johnson himself was a contradiction. He was half-Negro and half-Indian (Turner, and Dailey 17). William H. Johnson’s art is reflective of personal experiences, but also of those experiences occurring for a greater population during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

The Harlem Renaissance reflected the changes occurring within the African American community. And while these changes in race were an essential part of Johnson’s artwork, as well as all artists during the Harlem Renaissance, there was also an element of the general changes occurring within America. Industrialism and urban growth were rapidly expanding. The Great Migration was happening for all people, not just African Americans. These changes created a more complex mix of issues for Americans, which Johnson reflects in his artwork. While some Harlem Renaissance artists focused on one, particular statement, William H. Johnson seemed to struggle with many issues at the same time. It was an exciting but also confusing time, and this comes through in Johnson’s work. *Going to Church* is the perfect example, and is an image that Johnson used several times in paintings and other pieces. It embodies material and aesthetic elements of his identity as an southern, African American, as an artist who has studied in Europe, as an urban city dweller, as a resident of Denmark and Norway, and all of the experiences that entailed. *Going to Church*, as well as all of Johnson’s later work, embodied both an African American and essentially American vernacular. (Cotter)

When Johnson returned to America and created the print *Going to Church*, he began to find his distinctive voice. His style is at first seemingly simplified and almost childlike, but within this is the complexity that has often been overlooked. His work was both primitive and sophisticated, energetic and controlled. There was a paradox that existed for many African Americans creating art at the time, one which Johnson himself addressed. “I myself feel like a primitive man,” he wrote, “like one who is at the same time both a primitive and a cultured painter.” (Bernier 122) This duplicity is what gives Johnson’s work the complexity evident after studying the work as well as the life of the artist. Because of his tragic and somewhat obscure final years, William H. Johnson’s work is not given the attention of many of his Harlem Renaissance peers. His images are stripped-down, stark representations of Negro life, simplified and somewhat brazen. They convey an immediate emotion and story, but there is more at work. African American traditions, folk elements, modern aesthetics and techniques all come together to create an image like *Going to Church*. But still, the viewer can feel that Johnson finds his images personal and deeply felt. The complexities of William Henry Johnson’s life mirror the diverse pressures and contradictions placed on African Americans in the changing times of the 1920’s to 1940’s in America. And these complexities reflect the fact that no human life is without its many levels. Every person is a multifaceted assemblage of his or her experiences, and Johnson reveals this in his artwork. He is an example of the fact that an image can be much more than simply an image. Every piece of artwork, especially those of William Henry Johnson, deserves a second look.



William Henry Johnson: *Going to Church*, c. 1938. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, TN.

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