



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the William H. Johnson Papers, 1922-1971, bulk 1926-1956, in the Archives of American Art

Erin Corley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection
was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	William H. Johnson papers
Date:	1922-1972 (bulk 1926-1956)
Identifier:	AAA.johnwill
Creator:	Johnson, William H., 1901-1970
Extent:	1.5 Linear feet
Language:	The papers are in English, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish.
Summary:	The papers of African American painter William H. Johnson date from 1922 to 1971, with the bulk of the material dating from 1926 to 1956, and measure 1.5 linear feet. The collection documents Johnson's career as an artist in New York and in Europe and his marriage to textile artist Holcha Krake through scattered biographical material, including eight letters regarding the sale and exhibition of his work - one from Langston Hughes and two are from Alonzo Aden of the Barnett Aden Gallery. Also found are exhibition catalogs, news clippings, other printed material, and photographs of Johnson, Krake, and their artwork. One scrapbook contains news clippings, letters, and additional photographs. Another scrapbook contains travel postcards. Also found are a few scattered records and research notes compiled by the Harmon Foundation regarding William H. Johnson.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The William H. Johnson papers were originally donated to the National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian American Art Museum) by the Harmon Foundation in 1982. The National Museum of American Art subsequently transferred them to the Archives of American Art in 1982 and 1986.

Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **William H. (William Henry) Johnson** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2010, and total 713 images.

A scrapbook of postcards and photocopies of foreign news clippings has not been scanned.

Processing Information

Portions of the collection received a preliminary level of processing after donation, and were microfilmed on reels 2678 and 3829. The papers were merged, fully processed, arranged, and described by Erin Corley in 2008 and digitized in 2009 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

William H. Johnson papers, 1922-1971, bulk 1926-1956. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

The bulk of the collection is digitized. Use of material not digitized requires an appointment.

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Biographical Note

William Henry Johnson (1901-1970) was born in Florence, South Carolina, in 1901. He moved to New York City in 1918, and from 1921 to 1926 he attended the National Academy of Design, studying with Charles Hawthorne, and attending Hawthorne's summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. As a student he won many awards for his paintings but failed to win a traveling scholarship to Europe. Hawthorne and others believed there may have been some prejudice in this decision and raised money for Johnson to study abroad. From 1926 to 1929 he lived in Paris and southern France. While in Paris he lived and worked in Whistler's old studio and met African American expatriate painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner. He lived briefly in Harlem, New York, in 1930 and exhibited in the Harmon Foundation's exhibition of work by African American artists in which he won the Gold Award for "Distinguished Achievement among Negroes".

In late 1930 Johnson moved to Kerteminde, Denmark, where he married textile artist Holcha Krake whom he had met in Paris. In 1933 they traveled to Germany, France, and Tunisia, which had a great impact on his work. From 1935 to 1938 they lived in various parts of Norway, and Johnson met artist Edvard Munch.

In 1938 Johnson and his wife moved back to New York City. The next year he briefly joined the WPA Federal Art Project as a painting teacher at the Harlem Community Art Center. Johnson had his first solo exhibition in New York at the Alma Reed Gallery in 1941. After Holcha Krake's death in 1944, Johnson began showing signs of mental illness. He lived briefly in Florence, South Carolina, and in 1946 returned to Denmark. He was hospitalized in Norway in 1947 and was then transferred to the Central Islip State Hospital in New York where he spent the next 23 years, until his death in 1970.

In 1956 the Harmon Foundation acquired over a thousand of Johnson's works that were still among his estate. The foundation ceased operations in 1967.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of African American painter William H. Johnson date from 1922 to 1971, with the bulk of the material dating from 1926 to 1956, and measure 1.5 linear feet. The collection documents Johnson's career as an artist in New York and in Europe and his marriage to textile artist Holcha Krake through scattered biographical material, including eight letters regarding the sale and exhibition of his work. Also found are exhibition catalogs, news clippings, other printed material, and photographs of Johnson, Krake, and their artwork. One scrapbook contains news clippings, letters, and additional photographs. Another scrapbook contains travel postcards. Also found are a few scattered records and research notes compiled by the Harmon Foundation regarding William H. Johnson.

Scattered biographical material includes biographical sketches, a marriage certificate, award certificates from the National Academy of Design, lists of artwork, and the guestbook from Johnson's 1941 exhibition at the Alma Reed Gallery. Also found are eight letters regarding the sale and exhibition of his work, including a letter from Langston Hughes and two letters from Alonzo Aden of the Barnett Aden Gallery.

Printed material consists of exhibition catalogs, U.S. and foreign news clippings, and other materials, primarily published by the Harmon Foundation regarding African American art. Photographs are of Johnson, Johnson with Krake in their studio, Johnson with friends in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and of Johnson's artwork.

The collection includes two scrapbooks, one containing news clippings, exhibition materials, letters from Charles Hawthorne, Edith Halpert, Karl Nierendorf, and others, and photographs of Johnson and his artwork. Additional items from the scrapbook may have become detached at an earlier date and included among the material in other series. The second scrapbook contains Johnson's postcard collection from his travels in Europe.

Also found are scattered records and research material of the Harmon Foundation regarding William H. Johnson consisting of exhibition panels displaying original photographs of Johnson and his artwork, as well as translations and notes concerning the foreign news clippings found in the William H. Johnson papers.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 5 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1922-1967 (Box 1, 3; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 2: Printed Material, 1928-1971 (Box 1-3; 0.3 linear feet)
- Series 3: Photographs, circa 1923-1940s (Box 2-3; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 4: Scrapbooks, 1920s-1947 (Box 2-4; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 5: Harmon Foundation Research Materials Regarding William H. Johnson, 1950s (Box 2, OV 5; 0.2 linear feet)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African American artists

Types of Materials:

Photographs
Scrapbooks

Names:

Aden, Alonzo J., 1906-1963
Alma Reed Galleries
Barnett-Aden Gallery
Halpert, Edith Gregor, 1900-1970
Harmon Foundation
Hawthorne, Charles Webster, 1872-1930
Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967
Johnson, Holcha Krake, 1885-1943
Nierendorf, Karl

Occupations:

Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1922-1967

(Box 1, 3; 0.2 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Scattered biographical material about William H. Johnson and his wife Holcha Krake include several biographical sketches and chronologies of Johnson's life and one biographical sketch of Holcha Krake. Also found is their marriage certificate, eight National Academy of Design award certificates for Johnson's artwork, lists of his artwork, scattered receipts, and addresses written on slips of paper. Also found here is the guestbook for Johnson's show at the Alma Reed Gallery in 1941.

There are eight letters filed in this series, including a letter verifying Johnson was a student at the National Academy of Design, one letter to Johnson from Langston Hughes, two letters from the Barnett Aden Gallery regarding the sale of his work, a letter from the American Minister in Stockholm, a fan letter, a letter to Holcha Krake (in Norwegian) from a friend, and a draft of a letter from Johnson to Mr. Woodruff regarding the sale of a painting. Also found are three postcards sent to Johnson and Krake. Additional letters are found in one of Johnson's scrapbooks.

Arrangement: Item are arranged chronologically within each folder. This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 1	William H. Johnson Biographies and Chronologies, circa 1939, 1956
Box 1, Folder 2	Biography of Holcha Krake Johnson, after 1943
Box 1, Folder 3	Marriage Certificate, 1930
Box 1, Folder 4	National Academy of Design Award Certificates, 1922-1926
Box 1, Folder 5	Lists of Artwork, 1946, 1967
Box 1, Folder 6	Alma Reed Gallery Guestbook, 1941 (See also Box 3 for oversized items)
Box 1, Folder 7	Receipts, circa 1940s, 1941, 1942
Box 1, Folder 8	Addresses, circa 1920s-1940s
Box 1, Folder 9	Letters, 1922-1946
Box 1, Folder 10	Postcards, 1929, 1926, 1940
Box 3	Alma Reed Gallery Guestbook, 1941 (Oversized items scanned with Box 1, Folder 6)

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Series 2: Printed Material, 1928-1971

(Box 1-3; 0.3 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Printed Material documents William H. Johnson's career as an artist in both the United States and Europe. Included are a collection of magazine and newspaper clippings compiled by Johnson as resource material for his paintings. These clippings consist of advertisements and articles on current events. Also found are exhibition catalogs for solo shows, group shows, and joint shows of Johnson and Holcha Krake's artwork. Many of these catalogs are for exhibitions of artwork by African American artists at the Harmon Foundation. Numerous news clippings found in this series provide information about Johnson, Krake, their artwork, and exhibitions. Included are clippings from the United States, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Also found here are two brochures on African American artists published by the Harmon Foundation.

Researchers should note that some of these foreign clippings were partially translated by the Harmon Foundation and are found in their records in Series 5.

Arrangement: Items are arranged in chronological order within each folder. This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 11	Resource Material for Paintings, circa 1945-1946 (See also Box 3 for oversized items)
Box 1, Folder 12	Exhibition Catalogs, 1928-1968
Box 1, Folder 13	News Clippings, U.S., 1931-1941
Box 1, Folder 14	News Clippings, U.S., 1943-1946
Box 1, Folder 15	News Clippings, U.S., 1956-1958, 1971
Box 1, Folder 16	Undated News Clippings, U.S., circa 1939-1946
Box 1, Folder 17	News Clippings, Norway, circa 1930s
Box 1, Folder 18	News Clippings, Sweden & Denmark, circa 1930s
Box 1, Folder 19	News Clippings, Sweden & Denmark, circa 1930s
Box 1, Folder 20	News Clippings, Sweden & Denmark, circa 1930s
Box 2, Folder 1	News Clippings, Sweden & Denmark, circa 1930s
Box 2, Folder 2	Brochures on African American Artists, 1935, 1940
Box 2, Folder 3	Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1942-1956
Box 3	Oversized Resource Material for Paintings, circa 1945-1946 (Scanned with Box 1, folder 11)

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Series 3: Photographs, circa 1923-1940s

(Box 2-3; 0.2 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: A small number of photographs include two portraits of William H. Johnson, a photograph of Johnson painting outdoors near Chartres Cathedral, and a photograph of Johnson with his wife Holcha Krake in their studio. Also found are two photographs of Johnson with groups of unidentified people, believed to be students at Charles Hawthorne's summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Additional photographs include a portrait of Mr. and Mrs. David Harriton, four photographs of unidentified places in Europe, Photostats of artwork by Johnson, and a Photostat of a drawing by Holcha Krake for her Bolsershol Tapestry. Additional photographs of Johnson are found in his scrapbook.

Arrangement: Photographs have been scanned in their entirety.

Box 2, Folder 4	Photographs of William H. Johnson, circa 1927-1940 (See also Box 3 for Oversized Items)
Box 2, Folder 5	Photograph of William H. Johnson & Holcha Krake, circa 1935-1938
Box 2, Folder 6	Photographs of William H. Johnson with friends in Provincetown, Mass., circa 1923-1926
Box 2, Folder 7	Photograph of Mr. & Mrs. David Harriton, circa 1940s (Oversized; See Box 3)
Box 2, Folder 8	Photographs of Places, circa 1926-1930s
Box 2, Folder 9	Photostats of Artwork, circa 1930s
Box 2, Folder 10	Photostat of Drawing by Holcha Krake, circa 1930s (Oversized; See box 3)
Box 3	Oversized Photographs of William H. Johnson, circa 1927-1940 (Scanned with Box 2, folder 4)
Box 3	Oversized Photograph of Mr. & Mrs. David Harriton, circa 1940s (Scanned with Box 2, Folder 7)
Box 3	Oversized Photostat of Drawing by Holcha Krake, circa 1930s (Scanned with Box 2, folder 10)

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Series 4: Scrapbooks, 1920s-1947

(Box 2-4; 0.4 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: This series contains two scrapbooks created by William H. Johnson. One scrapbook consists of biographical documents regarding his career as an artist. Included are news clippings, event announcements, photographs of his artwork, and one award certificate from 1942. This scrapbook also contains photographs, including several portraits of Johnson, Johnson at exhibitions of his work, and several photographs from the 1920s of Johnson at the beach, with friends, and in art class. Also found are letters sent to Johnson, including a 1927 letter from his former teacher Charles Hawthorne, letters from the Harmon Foundation, gallery owner Karl Nierendorf, Reinhardt Galleries, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Edith Halpert of Downtown Galleries, and other letters of appreciation. Additional items from the scrapbook may have become detached and removed at an earlier date and may be included among other files within the papers.

This series also includes a scrapbook containing postcards collected by Johnson during his travels in Europe.

Arrangement: Loose items from the scrapbook were removed and placed in a separate folder. The scrapbook, 1920s-1947, has been scanned in its entirety. The scrapbook of postcards has not been scanned.

Box 2, Folder 11	Scrapbook, 1920s-1947 (Oversized; housed in Box 4)
Box 2, Folder 12	Loose Items from Scrapbook, 1920s-1947
Box 2, Folder 13	Scrapbook of Postcards, circa 1926-1938 (Oversized; housed in Box 3; not scanned)
Box 4	Scrapbook, 1920s-1947 (Scanned with Box 2, folder 11)
Box 3	Scrapbook of Postcards, circa 1926-1938

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Series 5: Harmon Foundation Research Materials Regarding William H. Johnson, 1950s

(Box 2, OV 5; 0.2 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Research materials created by the Harmon Foundation regarding William H. Johnson include seven exhibition panels about Johnson that have original photographs of Johnson and his artwork attached. Also found are reference documents created while researching the news clippings in the William H. Johnson papers that are from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Included are partial translations of the news clippings and photocopies of clippings with annotations regarding date and name of the newspaper. Also included is a list of possible foreign newspapers in which these clippings were found. The original news clippings are located in Series 3: Printed Material.

Arrangement: Annotated photocopies of foreign news clippings of poor quality have not been scanned.

Box 2, Folder 14	Exhibition Panels, circa 1950s (Oversized; Housed in OV 5)
Box 2, Folder 15	Typescript Excerpts from U.S. Newspaper Clippings, 1956
Box 2, Folder 16	List of Foreign Newspapers, circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 17	Translations of Foreign Newspaper Clippings, Denmark, 1956
Box 2, Folder 18	Translations of Foreign Newspaper Clippings, Norway, 1956
Box 2, Folder 19	Translations of Foreign Newspaper Clippings, Sweden, 1956
Box 2, Folder 20	Annotated Photocopies of Foreign News Clippings, Denmark, circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 21	Annotated Photocopies of Foreign News Clippings, Norway, circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 22	Annotated Photocopies of Foreign News Clippings, Sweden, circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 23	Letter Envelopes (does not include letters), 1957
Box OV 5	Oversized Exhibition Panels, circa 1950s (Scanned with Box 2, Folder 14)

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