

Man in Vest **by William H. Johnson**

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1939-1940
- Size: 30 x 24 inches
- Location: Smithsonian Art Museum, Washington D.C.
- Period: Harlem Renaissance
- Style: Abstract/Folk Art
- During this time in history, black Americans were impacting those around them through art, music, poetry, and literature.
- Rhythm and blues, often abbreviated to R&B, is a genre of popular African American music that originated in the 1940s.
- William H. Johnson's paintings of African Americans were often based on scenes he remembered from his life in South Carolina and later in Harlem.

Artist Facts

- Born 1901 Florence, South Carolina
- Died 1970 (Age 68 or 69)
- He was born in Florence, South Carolina to a poor African American family
- Johnson moved to Harlem when he was 17, at the onset of the Harlem Renaissance.
- He worked a variety of odd jobs to save enough money to pay for his education at a prestigious art school, National Academy of Design, in New York.
- After finishing at the National Academy of Design, Johnson's teacher arranged financial assistance for the young artist to study in France.
- Johnson lived in Paris and on the southern coast of France for three years while he absorbed the lessons of European artists.
- In 1929 Johnson returned for a short time to NYC, but it was difficult to be a black artist at that time.
- Johnson returned home to visit family in Florence. While there he painted the local landscapes, re-exploring his youth. While painting "The Jacobia Hotel", a local brothel, he was arrested and jailed for loitering. This experience left such a bad taste in his mouth that he did not return to the South for about 15 years.
- He moved to a small fishing village on the coast of Denmark. In 1930 he married Dutch artist Holcha Krake whom he met while studying art in France. She was 15 or 16 years older than he was, and she specialized in weaving and ceramics.
- They lived and worked in Denmark for several years, then moved to the coast of Norway.
- In 1938 when World War II seemed imminent, the couple returned to NYC.
- When his wife died in 1944, his mental and physical health declined rapidly and he ended up spending the last 23 years of his life in a state hospital.

- His artwork was largely unappreciated and was almost destroyed to save storage fees. It was rescued at the last moment by friends.
- His best known works depict African Americans in urban and rural settings in the 1920s.
- He is known for use of intense color, and a narrative and expressive style.
- Johnson is known as being a painter and printmaker.
- Johnson carved his work into scrap lumber or linoleum to create his prints.
- He often varied his prints from one to the next instead of doing the same print over and over.
- Folk art and African-American textiles inspired him.
- Now, over a thousand of his works of art hang in the American Art Museum at the Smithsonian.

Key Principle of Design to Teach

- **Contrast:** Often artists will juxtapose elements within an artwork to create tension or set a part of the work off from another for emphasis. This can be done by using opposing elements in close proximity (such as light and dark or large and small). The viewer's eye is naturally drawn to the area of contrast.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Contrast

- What two colors do you notice the most in this painting? The entire background is green and the chair is red. Using these complementary colors creates contrast.
- Do you see light or dark values in this painting? The point where the light values in the shirt meet with the dark values of the man's face, vest and pants creates visual interest because of the contrast between the values. Even the green background is a dark value compared to that white shirt. By squinting your eyes you can see the light values really stand out. Note that the eyes are also emphasized because of their light value compared to the rest of the face.

Keywords

- Contrast, complementary colors, color wheel, portrait, shape, abstract, line

Other Possible Questions

- Would you say this painting is abstract or realistic? Why?
- Is this man young or old? How can you tell? What do you think the blue hair means?
- How would you describe the lines in this painting? Straight or curvy?
- Does this man seem proportionate to you? What seems too big or too small?
- How would you describe this man's expression? Serious, calm, playful, disinterested?
- Can you see primary colors in this painting? Where?
- Do you see any other colors in this painting?
- How many hues of green do you see? They are all green, but different hues of green. Consider taking in several green crayons and talking about different hues and names.
- Do you see any interesting lines in this painting? (The lines around the red chair, the lines of his forehead and eyebrows, the lines around his shirt, the lines around his ears, the white line around his lips creating highlights...) How do you think he created the texture (lines) in the green background? What strokes might he have used with the brush to achieve it?