

Blind Singer

by William Johnson

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on Plywood
- Date: c. 1940
- Size: 92.2 x 71.6 cm
- Location: Smithsonian American Art Museum
- Period: Harlem Renaissance
- Style: Abstract/Folk Art
- This image is very similar to a print at the Museum of Modern Art in NY.
- 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.
- Johnson may have based Blind Musician on such singers as Blind Boy Fuller, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, or the Reverend Gary Davis. These performers attracted notice in the South and made their way to Chicago and New York City, where their recordings helped make the blues tradition familiar to mainstream audiences.
- The background of crosshatched lines signals that these itinerant musicians belong in no particular place, and must make their way with only their voices, guitar, and tambourine.
- <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=11549>

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 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 the print.
- 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 Element of Design to Teach

- **Shape** is a two-dimensional line with no form or thickness. Shapes are flat and can be described as being geometric or organic. Geometric shapes have hard, defined lines and angles. Often man-made things have these kinds of forms, which usually must be measured to come out correctly. Circles, squares and rectangles are geometric shapes. Organic shapes have no set form, and no geometric lines or angles. Things found in nature are often organic shapes such as clouds.

Possible Questions to Teach Shape

- What shapes did the artist use to create the man and woman? Are they organic shapes (cloud shaped) or geometric (squares, triangles, circles etc.)?
- Are the shapes repeated or always different?
- Can you find circles? Squares? Triangles? Diamonds?
- A shape is two-dimensional. Draw a circle and a square on the board. Point out that they are flat, two-dimensional shapes. Then show a ball and a Rubik's Cube (or something similar). Point out that they are three-dimensional forms. Ask students if the picture is 2-D or 3-D. It is two-dimensional because the shapes are all flat.

Keywords

- Portrait, abstract, folk-art, shape, cool colors, neutral colors, line

Other Possible Questions

- What are these people doing?
- What colors do you see in this painting? Are they warm or cool?
- Do you think this work is realistic or abstract? Why?
- What is wrong or missing in this print? (Missing facial features, disproportionate body parts, etc.)
- Play some music from the 1940s that you can hear the guitar and tambourine. (Maybe Lonnie Johnson "Tomorrow Night". You can play a short snippet from iTunes for free.) Talk about how at that time it was common for musicians to play on street corners. If spectators liked what they heard, they would leave money in the performers' hat (or container).
- Bring in a guitar and tambourine and have two students recreate this pose in real life.
- What lines do you see in this painting? Are they diagonal, vertical or horizontal?