



ALBANY MUSEUM OF ART

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FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM EXHIBITION OPENS SEPT 2 AT ALBANY MUSEUM OF ART

William H. Johnson Paintings Headline the Fall 2022 Exhibitions at AMA

[For Release August 26, 2022 – Albany, GA] — In the mid-1940s, William H. Johnson painted tributes to African American activists, scientists, teachers, and entertainers who brought change to the world, and to international heads of state who worked to bring peace.

Those paintings in Johnson's *Fighters for Freedom* series were shown as a group only twice during his lifetime. Starting **Friday, Sept 2**, these paintings that brilliantly illuminate the stories and great accomplishments of the artist's heroic fighters will be on view in the Haley Gallery of the Albany Museum of Art, located at 311 Meadowlark Drive, through Dec 10. Admission is free for everyone.

The exhibition *Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice* is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support for this project is provided by Art Bridges.

Also opening Sept 2 will be *Wayna: Her Dreams of Ethiopia*, works by Atlanta artist Tracy Murrell, in the East Gallery, and the *Georgia Artists Guild of Albany 29th Annual Juried Exhibition* in the McCormack Gallery. Both will continue through Jan 7. The first viewing of the fall exhibitions will be **Thursday evening, Sept 1**, at a **5:30 pm** opening reception for members of the Albany Museum of Art.

"We are thrilled to collaborate with the Smithsonian American Art Museum on this loan of important works from one of the 20th century's most compelling African American artists," AMA Executive Director Andrew J. Wulf, Ph.D., said. "Marking a special phase of Johnson's career, these works tell the stories of those who fought courageously as individuals for basic human freedoms. These boldly painted, emotionally full images give deep insight into the values and ideals of this remarkable artist. It is an honor to show Johnson's work at the Albany Museum of Art, and we are grateful to the Art Bridges Foundation who makes this show possible."

Some of Johnson's fighters—Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, Marian Anderson, Mahatma Gandhi, and Abraham Lincoln—are familiar historical figures, though he also tells the stories of lesser-

known heroes. Linking the past and present, he presents the notable accomplishments of many individuals—some of them his contemporaries—who have made significant changes in the world.

Johnson infuses history with art throughout these works, using symbols, flags, and a storyboard-like approach to create realistic depictions of his freedom fighters. The exhibition highlights Johnson's many accomplishments as an artist, but also pays tribute to the difficult history that has shaped this nation. These paintings honor Johnson's heroes, who over some 200 years changed the lives of countless individuals across the globe.

"I am looking forward to this year's lineup of Fall exhibitions and another season full of visual storytelling," AMA Director of Curatorial Affairs Katie Dillard said. "We will be welcoming back old friends from the Georgia Artists Guild of Albany for their annual juried exhibition, and we will be welcoming new voices too. I am looking forward to sharing with our visitors the powerful messages laden within these new works. Tracy Murrell's creations are empowering with the quiet strength of her mission of supporting women of color. Then, there is the powerhouse of William H. Johnson's *Fighters for Freedom*, a series with great historical and artistic significance. His cast of freedom fighters reminds us why we do what we do here every day."

Johnson, who exhibited immense talent but also suffered great tragedy in his later years, was born in 1901 in Florence, S.C., only 36 years after the end of the American Civil War. Harriet Tubman was still alive at the time of his birth. At age 17, he left the Jim Crow South for New York City to become an artist. There he worked hard and gained admission to the National Academy of Design. By 1926, he was winning multiple awards for his work.

Like other aspiring artists of his generation, he moved to Paris. While in Europe, he met Danish artist Holcha Krake, whom he married in 1930. They spent time in North Africa and lived in Scandinavia for most of the '30s, moving to New York in 1938 as the threat of what would become World War II loomed.

Feeling a deep need to paint his own people, Johnson's style saw a dramatic change with his return to the U.S. He moved away from expressionistic landscapes and portraits to focus on African-American life, employing a rich folk art style in his work. The paintings in the *Fighters for Freedom* series are some of the last works Johnson completed.

In the series, Johnson elevates the lives of his fighters while he offers historical insights and fresh perspectives. In telling their stories, the artist suggests that the pursuit of freedom is an ongoing, interconnected struggle, with moments of both triumph and tragedy. As Johnson invites the viewer of his work to reflect on personal struggles for justice today, his *Fighters for Freedom* also serves as a reminder that individual achievement and commitment to social justice are at the heart of the American story.

Johnson showed his *Fighters for Freedom* series twice. It was on view at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library during National Negro History Week. The next year the series was shown in Copenhagen under the title *For Freedom and the U.N.* That was the final time Johnson exhibited his work. Despondent over the death of his wife in 1944, he became mentally ill soon after that show and was hospitalized for a short time in Denmark. He returned to New York, where he was hospitalized for the remainder of his life. While recognized today as one of America's most important painters of his generation, Johnson spent his last two decades at Central Islip State Hospital, where he lived in obscurity, unable to create art. He passed away in 1970.

In 1967, the Harmon Foundation donated more than 1,000 of Johnson's artworks, including those in the *Fighters for Freedom* series, to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Although individual panels

have appeared in exhibitions from time to time, the group as a whole had not been seen in the United States for nearly 75 years before this national tour, which started this past January at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, S.C.

After its exhibition at the AMA, *Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice* will travel to the Oklahoma City Museum of Art in Oklahoma City, Okla.; the Rockwell Museum in Corning, N.Y.; the Wichita Art Museum in Wichita, Kan.; the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum in Miami, Fla.

AMA EXHIBITIONS

- *Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice* is in the Haley Gallery, Sept 1-Dec 10, 2022. Organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support is provided by Art Bridges.
- *Wayna: Her Dreams of Ethiopia, Works by Tracy Murrell* is in the East Gallery, Sept 1, 2022- Jan 7, 2023.
- *Georgia Artists Guild of Albany, 29th Juried Exhibition* is in the McCormack Gallery, Sept 1, 2022- Jan 7, 2023.

AMA EVENTS

- *AMA ChalkFest*, Nov 19, 2022, 10 am-5 pm, Front Street and Veterans Park Amphitheater. Admission is free. www.amachalkfest.com.

ABOUT THE ALBANY MUSEUM OF ART

The Albany Museum of Art is located at 311 Meadowlark Drive in Albany, Ga., adjacent to Albany State University West Campus just off Gillionville Road. The museum is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The Albany Museum of Art is open to the public 10 am-5 pm Tuesdays through Saturdays. Admission is free.

For more information about the AMA please visit our website, www.albanymuseum.com, or call 229.439.8400. Be sure to follow the @AlbanyArtMuseum on Twitter, AlbanyMuseum on Instagram, and AlbanyMuseumOfArt on Facebook.

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