

This resource includes all in-gallery text in the exhibition in an order that follows the layout of the galleries. It can be used with a text-to-screen reader program or printed before you visit the exhibition.

Sargent Claude Johnson (1888–1967) was the first Black modernist on the West Coast to gain national acclaim. His artistic practice drew from a range of international influences, including traditional and contemporary arts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, particularly Mexican modernism and Indigenous art making. Spanning the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, Johnson's career was devoted to sensitive, ennobling portrayals of people of color.

Though best known as a sculptor, Johnson worked expertly in a variety of media—from painting and printmaking to enamelwork and ceramics—each illuminating his multifaceted identity as an artist. This exhibition is the first in over 25 years to survey Johnson's work.

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image caption

San Francisco News-Call Bulletin Photo Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

image description

In a black and white photo, a man, Sargent Johnson, stands on a ladder double his height while carving details into a tall mural. He grips the ladder's handle with his left hand while wielding a chisel-like tool in his right hand to carve the head of a man depicted leaping over a hurdle.

GALLERY 1

Artist of the Black Renaissance

Born to a mother of African and Cherokee heritage and a white father who was of Swedish descent, Johnson was a multiracial artist who identified as Black. He emerged as a powerful voice within the burst of Black creativity in the 1920s and '30s now known as the Harlem Renaissance, or more broadly, the Black Renaissance. It was an era when music, dance, theater, film, poetry, literature, and visual arts flourished in cities across the United States.

Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Johnson built a national reputation, creating artworks that asserted Black humanity and dignity. Like other Black artists of the period, he often found inspiration in African sculpture, which he used to forge his own distinctive modernist style.

Masks

In the early 1930s, Johnson embarked on a series of hand-hammered copper masks. He was inspired by the elongated shapes, gold decorations, and abstracted facial features of traditional African masks, but he also drew from his own life experiences.

Writing in 1939, journalist Verna Arvey commented: “These are African heads...not from genuine African subjects—but from the various Afro-American faces he saw in his daily round in Northern California where he now makes his home. By taking an eye here, a nose, mouth, or chin there...he was able to create something unusual.”

LEFT TO RIGHT ON PANEL

Mask

1933

Copper

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

Mask (Negro Mother)

ca. 1935

Copper with paint

Collection of Halley K. Harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York

Mask

1933

Copper

Collection of Faye and Robert Davidson

Mask (Negro Mother)

1935

Copper with paint

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

Mask

1936

Copper with paint

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

image caption

African masks from Albert C. Barnes's collection, published in Alain Locke's 1925 article "The Art of the Ancestors." Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

image description

In a page from a black and white publication, reproductions of three African masks and a bronze sculpture of a tall, thin figure wearing a conical hat and holding a bow.

Untitled (Totem)

ca. 1935

Graphite and Conté crayon on paper

This drawing resembles a West African sculpture made during the late 19th or early 20th century. Johnson may have seen the artwork reproduced in author and cultural critic Alain Locke's essay "The Legacy of Ancestral Arts," in which he encouraged Black artists to study African art.

San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society,
Pearl Johnson Collection

ON PEDESTAL

Forever Free

1933

Painted plaster over linen and wood

Forever Free depicts a mother holding two small children close to her body. They are inscribed into her dress, reinforcing the intimacy of their bond. She turns her head upward and to the side, as if looking with hope into the distance or, perhaps, the future.

The title of this work recalls the famous passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, the executive order that granted freedom to millions of enslaved people in 1863, during the Civil War: “All persons held as slaves . . . Shall be then, thenceforth, and forever free.”

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Mrs. E. D. Lederman

Representing Motherhood

In the 1930s, some critics praised Johnson's representations of Black motherhood as strong and beautiful. Others struggled with this artwork, finding it too similar to negative stereotypes of Black domestic laborers.

What do you think?

ON PEDESTAL

Negro Woman

ca. 1935

Painted plaster over linen and wood

This sculpture depicts a kneeling female figure who bears similarities to modernist Mexican imagery of the 1930s, especially that of Diego Rivera. Like his contemporaries in Mexico, Johnson studied Indigenous cultures and created idealized, romantic images of women.

Around the time Johnson made this sculpture, he declared his interest in portrayals of Black Americans that “show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip, that characteristic hair, bearing and manner.”

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

Johnson's Technique

Johnson used an unusual process to make the two large sculptures in this room. First, he carved a wooden core. Then he wrapped it in fine linen and coated it in plaster—a process that helped the plaster adhere to the wood. Finally, Johnson delicately modeled, incised, and painted the surface. This method was based on techniques from ancient Egypt and the Italian Renaissance.

IN CASE

Negro Woman

1933

Terracotta

Johnson created dignified portraits of Black women throughout the 1930s, challenging prevalent racist stereotypes. In 1936, Alain Locke wrote that Johnson had “come to reflect more than any other contemporary Negro sculptor the modernist mode and the African influence.”

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

Mother and Child

1932

Chalk on paper

Johnson, who was orphaned by age 10, was among the Black Renaissance artists and writers who explored motherhood as a central theme in their work. Images of this familial relationship communicated the powerful creation of new life and the loving bonds between Black women and their children. Writer Alain Locke chose this drawing to be the frontispiece of his influential 1940 book *The Negro in Art*.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

image caption

Frontispiece to *The Negro in Art*, ed. Alain Locke, 1940. © Estate of Sargent Claude Johnson. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

IN CASE

Standing Woman

1934

Terracotta

This sculpture in terracotta—a type of baked clay—demonstrates Johnson’s interest in ancient artistic traditions and his modernist sensibility. The regal body posture, closed eyes, and clasped hands of this robed woman are reminiscent of African terracotta figures. Here, Johnson creates a streamlined, modernist sculpture that mediates between representation and abstraction, yet seems timeless.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum collection,
Federal Art Project

Singing Saints

1940

Lithograph

Johnson's lithograph *Singing Saints* was offered for sale through the *San Francisco Chronicle* as part of the newspaper's effort to make modernist art accessible to the public. In the image, two women sit while one strums a guitar. Their round bodies and skirts echo the abstract curves of the instrument. Johnson returned to this composition in the 1960s to create the enamelwork displayed in the final gallery of this exhibition.

Collection of Hannah Kully

image caption

Sargent Johnson's *Singing Saints*, tempera and enamel on steel, 1967. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

image description

At center, a figure with a dark skin tone dressed in a white garment plays the strings of an instrument. Their short black hair has tight, textured ringlets, their eyes are closed, and their lips are parted. To the left of the figure's face are two masks and a white, uplifted arm.

Dorothy C.

1938

Lithograph

Johnson's *Dorothy C.* is the epitome of a fashionable, cosmopolitan woman—body turned in motion as she reads a newspaper, cigarette smoke wafting in the air. The subject of *Dorothy C.* may be Dorothy Collins, San Francisco art patron and a supervisor for the Federal Art Project (FAP). Johnson created this print as part of the government-sponsored FAP, which supported contemporary artists during the Great Depression.

Collection of Hannah Kully

Black and White

1938

Lithograph

The Family of John and Margery Magnani

Material Experiments

Johnson searched for new forms of expression throughout his career. He was a painter, printmaker, engraver, sculptor, ceramist, enamelist, and mosaic artist. As he found inspiration in ancient artistic traditions and learned from fellow artists, he mastered an impressive range of media.

Redwood, Cast stone, Terracotta, Oaxaca clay, Copper, Enamel

Explore some of the many materials Johnson used throughout his career.

IN CASE

Untitled

1940s

Stone

University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund

Untitled (Seated Bird)

ca. 1960

Diorite

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

Lovers

ca. 1935–40

Terracotta

Johnson presents the subject of love as an intimate and universal experience. This small sculpture depicts two abstracted figures: their hands grasp at each other, their bodies intertwining to form a loop that suggests eternal love.

Courtesy, M. Hanks Gallery

The Cat

1947

Terracotta

The Melvin Holmes Collection of African American Art

Primitive Head

1945

Oaxaca clay

Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University,
Gift of the Nora Eccles Treadwell Foundation

Teapot

1941

Glazed earthenware

New Orleans Museum of Art, Museum purchase, William
McDonald Boles and Eva Carol Boles Fund

Woman's Head

ca. 1940

Cast stone

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender
Collection, bequest of Albert M. Bender

GALLERY 2

Portraits of Children

In the 1920s and '30s, Johnson sculpted a series of portraits modeled on children who lived in or near his multiracial yet segregated neighborhood in Berkeley. Some are named as specific individuals, while others are anonymous, such as *Head of a Boy*. Made in an era when many depictions of children of color were racist, Johnson's dignified and poised figures are powerful symbols of hope and the promise of youth.

With each of these works, Johnson experimented with surface, texture, and color, often responding to ancient artistic traditions, such as Egyptian sculpture and Persian and Chinese ceramic glazes. Johnson's regal and meditative sculptures appear both timeless and modern.

image caption

Sargent Johnson, ca. 1928. Everett Collection / Bridgeman Images

image description

In a black and white photo, a man, Sargent Johnson, shown in profile, gazes down at the clay bust of a youth, which he cradles in his hands. Behind him is a shelf with tools and small sculptures.

ON PEDESTAL

Head of a Boy

ca. 1928

Glazed terracotta

This sculpture has what might have been described in the period as a “fine Persian green glaze.” It contains a significant amount of lead oxide with copper and cobalt, which turn green and blue when fired. The lead causes the glaze to run in the kiln, pooling in the deepest areas and swirling around the facial features. Traces of gilding around the eyes and lips highlight these areas.

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens.
Purchased with funds from the Art Collectors' Council and the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation Acquisition Fund for American Art, 2015.5

ON PEDESTAL

Head of a Boy

ca. 1930

Terracotta

Johnson sculpted at least two clay versions of *Head of a Boy*: one is glazed (at left) and the other unglazed. The unglazed bust relates more closely to Johnson's other terracotta works of the 1920s and '30s. The earthy tone, nearly pupilless eyes, and bust form suggest ancient likenesses of gods or royalty, yet the boy is also individual and modern.

Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA

ON PEDESTAL

Elizabeth Gee

1927

Glazed stoneware

Elizabeth Gee was a Chinese American playmate of Johnson's daughter, Pearl. Johnson portrays her with a front-facing gaze and stiff posture similar to Italian Renaissance and Chinese Buddhist sculpture. The green, crackled glaze derives from celadon-style Chinese ceramics. Later in life, Gee described the San Pablo Park neighborhood of Berkeley where both families lived as "a racial oasis in a desert of discrimination."

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender

ON PEDESTAL

Esther

ca. 1929

Terracotta

In 1930, the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery (now the San Diego Museum of Art) became the first museum to acquire one of Johnson's works. Local advocates for modern art and members of the NAACP and the city's Inter-Racial Committee donated this portrait of a young Black woman, considering it an important example of "progressively modern" sculpture.

San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of The Colored Citizens of San Diego

ON PEDESTAL

Chester

1931

Terracotta

Chester is a portrait of a neighborhood boy who the artist described as “that kid [who] used to come to my studio.” Johnson sculpted the child’s head and right hand pressed against his cheek, poignantly evoking the sense of touch.

Chester, Johnson’s most award-winning sculpture, was exhibited and published widely during his lifetime, adding to his fame as one of the most-recognized Black sculptors in America.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, bequest of Albert M. Bender

GALLERY 3

California School for the Blind Commission

In 1933, Sargent Johnson began a monumental architectural installation for the California School for the Blind in Berkeley. It was commissioned by the federally sponsored Public Works of Art Project—part of the New Deal. Johnson carved and decorated large redwood sculptures in a dramatic Art Deco style that were installed in the School's auditorium, where students staged musical and theatrical performances.

When the School moved to a new campus, the surviving pieces were dispersed. Now belonging to four institutions—The Huntington, the California School for the Blind, the African American Museum and Library at Oakland, and UC Berkeley—the various parts of the commission are reunited here for the first time in over four decades.

Organ Screen

1933–34

Gilded and painted redwood

This screen concealed the pipe organ at the back of the auditorium. The central panel features an abstracted tree with branches that radiate out like sound waves. Two children play along with the music, as woodland animals gather to listen. Each section is backed with a coarse fabric and perforated to allow sound to pass through. Only three of the original five panels survive.

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. Purchased with funds from the Art Collectors' Council, the Connie Perkins Endowment, and the Virginia Steele Scott Acquisition Fund for American Art in honor of George Abdo and Roy Ritchie, 2011.5

image caption

Organ screen installed at the California School for the Blind, ca. 1934. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The United States General Services Administration allocation to SFMOMA

[Infographic]

Take a closer look at the details carved on this organ screen.

Johnson used the grain of the redwood to create textures and shapes in the work.

Most of the animals have gilded eyes, but this rabbit does not.

Birds sing at the top of this composition, echoing the organ music that flowed through the screen.

Johnson once said, “I try to apply color without destroying the natural expression of sculpture, putting it on pure, in large masses without breaking up the surfaces of the form.”

image caption

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens,
photo © 2014 Fredrik Nilsen

Three Window Lunettes

1933–34

Gilded and painted redwood

The tall, arched windows of the auditorium were capped with carved redwood lunettes. Delicate tracery and small round holes allowed air to flow through the upper windows and let light stream through on sunny days. In Johnson's carvings, birds alight on leafy, fruit-laden branches.

Left and right: California School for the Blind

Center: African American Museum and Library at Oakland,
Oakland Public Library

image caption

Window lunettes installed at the California School for the Blind. Johnson created six for the original commission. Photo, ca. 1972. California School for the Blind, Fremont, CA

Stage Proscenium

1937

Gilded and painted redwood

Several years after his initial commission, Johnson returned to the California School for the Blind to add a carved proscenium arch above the stage in the auditorium.

The composition features stylized foliage with masks, birds, animals, and musical instruments. Some of the masks recall Johnson's copper masks from the early 1930s, while others seem to represent Egyptian, Greek, and Latin American theater or dance masks.

Courtesy of University of California, Berkeley

image caption

Stage proscenium installed at the California School for the Blind, after 1937. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The United States General Services Administration allocation to SFMOMA

image caption

The bold, stylized design of the screens may have been partly inspired by the Art Deco interior of philanthropist Templeton Crocker's apartment in San Francisco, designed by Jean Dunand in 1927–28. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

image caption

The unfinished proscenium sections, in process at Johnson's home and studio in Berkeley, ca. 1937. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The United States General Services Administration allocation to SFMOMA

Louis Braille

ca. 1937

Wood

This carved lunette—placed above a doorway at the California School for the Blind—features the French educator Louis Braille teaching students. Braille (left) and a young girl (right) reach out to touch a tablelike surface. They run their hands over it, as though tracing braille characters embossed on paper.

Braille's system of writing letters and numbers with raised dots was in use at the California School for the Blind in the 1930s, when Johnson made this carving, and is still used today.

California School for the Blind, Fremont, CA

PLEASE TOUCH

Run your fingers across the surface of this replica.

Can you make out the forms Johnson carved using your sense of touch alone?

GALLERY 4

Travels to Mexico

In 1944–45 and 1949, Sargent Johnson traveled widely in Mexico, where he studied ancient art and met with modernist painters and sculptors. He also learned from Indigenous potters in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, who worked with a dark, rich clay from the region. These encounters had a dramatic impact on his work, and he produced a number of artworks in the 1940s in clay and stone in a distinctly Mexican style.

Earlier in San Francisco, Johnson had likely come into contact with the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who painted three large murals in the city in 1930–31 and in 1939, during the Golden Gate International Exposition, where Johnson also showed his work. Critics often compared Johnson's work of the 1930s with that of Rivera and other Mexican muralists.

image caption

Johnson's *Athletics* mural at George Washington High School seems to quote from a section of Rivera's fresco *Pan American Unity*, which features a graceful backward dive of Helen Crlenkovich, a champion athlete from City College who gained fame in the late 1930s. Photo © César Rubio; City College of San Francisco © 2023 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

IN CASE

Woman's Head

ca. 1940

Cast stone

The frontal pose and large beaded necklace of this bust recall ancient sculpture, though Mexican modernists also often portrayed Indigenous women and mothers. Johnson was one of many Black American artists who traveled to Mexico and worked in the tradition of the Mexican modernists. Others included Hale Woodruff and Charles White, and later Elizabeth Catlett.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, bequest of Albert M. Bender

IN CASE

Teapot

1941

Glazed earthenware

In the early 1940s, Johnson made a small group of ceramics in San Francisco using the kiln of art teacher John Magnani. The handle and the animal form on the lid of this teapot are reminiscent of Mexican figures, while the body has a modern, oval form covered with an earthy brown glaze.

New Orleans Museum of Art, Museum purchase, William McDonald Boles and Eva Carol Boles Fund

IN CASE

Primitive Head

1945

Oaxaca clay

In 1945, Johnson traveled to San Bartolo Coyotepec in southern Mexico, where he learned to work with Oaxaca clay. He fired works like this one in kilns in the village, using a reduction technique that turned the gray clay to black.

This sculpture's rounded head and shallow eye sockets recall not only ancient West Mexico sculpture but also African sculptural traditions that were such an important part of his early career.

Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University,
Gift of the Nora Eccles Treadwell Foundation

IN CASE

The Cat

1947

Terracotta

With its almond-shaped eyes and crouching stance, this feline is one of Johnson's most engaging sculptures. He likely found inspiration in ancient Mesoamerican and Egyptian works. Here, he has colored the surface to appear like hand-hammered copper.

The Melvin Holmes Collection of African American Art

IN CASE

Lovers

ca. 1935–40

Terracotta

Johnson presents the subject of love as an intimate and universal experience. This small sculpture depicts two abstracted figures: their hands grasp at each other, their bodies intertwining to form a loop that suggests eternal love.

Courtesy, M. Hanks Gallery

IN CASE

Untitled (Seated Bird)

ca. 1960

Diorite

Johnson carved this enigmatic sculpture from a black diorite rock that he collected along the California seashore around Big Sur. The small work follows the natural curves of the stone, with shallow cuts to subtly indicate eyes, wings, and feathers.

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

IN CASE

Untitled

1940s

Stone

A rarity in Johnson's work, this sculpture is shaped like an ancient stone pestle, or grinding tool. Abstract elements like the upturned face relate to Costa Rican and Caribbean examples.

University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund

GALLERY 5

WPA Projects

During the Great Depression, Sargent Johnson created several works sponsored by the U.S. government. The Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were vast relief programs that employed over 10,000 artists across the country as part of the New Deal. Notably, Johnson was one of only three African American supervisors in the WPA nationwide.

Johnson's successful completion of the project for the California School for the Blind in the 1930s led to more WPA commissions in the Bay Area, including for Aquatic Park (1939) and George Washington High School (1942) in San Francisco.

image caption

Athletics mural 1942, George Washington High School, San Francisco. Photos © César Rubio

image caption

Tile mosaic and entrance facade, 1939, Aquatic Park Bathhouse, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, San Francisco. Photos © César Rubio

image caption

Organ Screen, 1934, California School for the Blind, Originally in Berkeley. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, photo © 2014 Fredrik Nilsen

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The United States General Services Administration allocation to SFMOMA

Model for the George Washington High School *Athletics* Mural

1941

Concrete with aggregate material

For the mural commission at George Washington High School, Johnson created this preliminary model featuring archers and tennis players in a heroic style, recalling ancient Greek, Phoenician, and Egyptian reliefs. The composition is notable for its inclusion of both male and female athletes. Johnson carved the figures from a concrete aggregate and covered some areas in a thin layer of plaster to give the faces greater definition.

George Washington High School, San Francisco

George Washington High School *Athletics* Mural

In 1942, Johnson completed work on a 185-foot mural for George Washington High School in San Francisco. The cast stone mural—titled *Athletics*—runs along the south side of the school's football field. The process of making the mural involved creating a clay model that was then cast in dozens of large sections and assembled.

Johnson's sculpture of athletes was part of an ambitious architectural and artistic program for the school. The building complex was designed by architect Timothy Pflueger and included painted murals by San Francisco artists Ralph Stackpole, Victor Arnautoff, Lucien Labaudt, and Gordon Langdon.

VIDEO ON WALL

Sargent Johnson's *Athletics*

Video by César Rubio Photography

Editing by Antonio Iannarone

Run time: 6 minutes, 2 seconds

To watch this video of Johnson's mural, scan this QR code.



image caption

Sargent Johnson working on the clay model of the George Washington High School Athletics mural, 1940. *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin* Photo Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

image description

In a black and white photo, a man, Sargent Johnson, stands on a ladder double his height while carving details into a tall mural. He grips the ladder's handle with his left hand while wielding a chisel-like tool in his right hand to carve the head of a man depicted leaping over a hurdle.

**Preparatory Drawing for the George Washington High
School *Athletics* Mural**

1940

Graphite on paper

The Family of John and Margery Magnani

GALLERY 6

Experiments in Enamel

In the late 1940s, Johnson began to experiment with a new industrial material, enamel porcelain, to create both painting and sculpture. He worked with the Paine-Mahoney Company in Oakland, adapting a technique typically used for making signs and household items. Johnson painted in enamel on prepared steel plates, which were fired at a high temperature, fusing the colors into a glossy surface.

Learning on the job, Johnson became involved in large commercial projects, including ones for Dohrmann's department store in San Francisco (1948) and City Hall in Richmond (1949). His work for Harold's Club, a casino in Reno, Nevada (1949), was considered the largest enamel sign created at the time. He continued to innovate stylistically and technically in this medium for the last two decades of his life.

image caption

Sargent Johnson, *American Pride and Purpose*, Richmond City Hall, 1949. Photo © César Rubio

image description

A colorful enamelwork with irregular outlines and asymmetrical panels, resembling a jigsaw puzzle piece and showing a turquoise-hued aerial view of a bay to the far right and a rust-hued street map of Richmond. At top right, a white couple emerges from a hilly landscape to survey the urban grid and city harbor.

Singing Saints

1967

Tempera and enamel on steel

Singing Saints draws from a composition Johnson created nearly three decades earlier (at right). In both works, two seated figures sing while one of them strums a guitar. Johnson captures the energy and emotion of 20th-century African American music, both sacred and secular.

For this enamel, Johnson added a color palette suggestive of traditional African textiles and visual culture, which African Americans have celebrated since the Black Pride era of the 1960s. He also changed the composition to insert an arm and a mask-like presence, the meanings of which are ambiguous.

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

image caption

Sargent Johnson's *Singing Saints*, lithograph, 1940. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

image description

Two figures are seated on a bench facing the viewer, their eyes closed and their mouths opened wide. The figure in front plucks the stringed instrument on their lap. The figure in back wears a wide-brimmed floppy hat.

Untitled

1957

Enamel on steel

Johnson mixed powdered enamel with oils and gum to create a thickened liquid that he could paint on a coated steel panel. When heated to 1,500°F, the layers of enamel fused together to form a glossy, colorful surface.

Johnson used this innovative industrial material at the same time that artists were debating about abstraction in painting. In some enamelworks, he painted recognizable figures, while others feature simple, geometric forms.

The Kinsey African American Art and History Collection

Sailing II

1966

Enamel on steel

Stripes of black, red, white, and blue stretch across the gray background of this work. Johnson used a sgraffito, or scratching, technique on the surface to render outlines of figures. Below, abstract, seaweed-like forms occupy the blue area, as though in some aquatic realm.

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

Mask, No. 1

1966

Enamel on steel

Near the end of his career, Johnson returned to the theme of masks that appeared in his work of the 1920s and '30s. This enamel painting has a more abstract style than his earlier copper sculptures but with allusions to eyes and other facial features.

San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society,
Gift of Pearl Johnson

Self-Portrait

ca. 1950s

Enamel on steel

This self-portrait of Johnson appears as a double portrait, suggesting a double consciousness. Here, a brown-skinned figure reaches out to put on, or perhaps take off, a mask. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”

University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund

Untitled

1966

Enamel on steel

Made near the end of his life, Johnson's untitled self-portrait seems to depict him as a much younger man. The figure's brightly colored facial features and light skin have a mask-like, theatrical quality. This self-portrait may be an attempt to present the complexity of Johnson's multiracial identity. Could this be a meditation on life lived as a light-skinned Black man?

San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society,
Pearl Johnson Collection

image caption

Consuelo Kanaga (1894–1978), *Sargent Claude Johnson*, 1934. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Wallace B. Putnam from the Estate of Consuelo Kanaga, 82.65.372. Photo © Brooklyn Museum

image description

In a black and white photo, a man, Sargent Johnson, faces the viewer. He has short, dark hair and a receding hairline; thick, slightly raised eyebrows; and widened, deep-set eyes. He wears a plain, collared white shirt and a dark tie, both of which are tucked under a fitted coat.

ON PEDESTAL

Maypole

ca. 1955

Enamel on steel

Johnson's *Maypole* references the tall structure built for spring and summer festivals in Europe and North America. Steel strips resemble human figures who have linked arms to dance around a decorated maypole. The sculpture doesn't move, but its bright color and intertwining forms suggest joyous energy.

Courtesy Steve Turner, Los Angeles

ON PEDESTAL

Venus

Mid-20th century

Painted wood

For centuries, artists have depicted Venus—the ancient Roman goddess of love—as the ideal of feminine beauty. Johnson’s sculpture is more abstract than most, as if to ask questions about how art has played a role in defining standards of beauty. His choice to sculpt the figure in dark brown wood, suggesting the color of Black skin, celebrates the beauty of Black women.

Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Charles and Diana Stine

Exhibition design by Stephen Saitas Designs and graphic design by Polymode.