

EDUCATOR GUIDE



William H. Johnson Picturing Justice

Fighters for Freedom

October 8, 2023 – January 14, 2024

William H. Johnson, *Three Great Abolitionists: A. Lincoln, F. Douglass, J. Brown*, about 1945. Oil on paperboard, 37 3/8 x 34 1/4 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation

Harriet Tubman. George Washington Carver. Mahatma Ghandhi. All are celebrated—along with less familiar historical figures—by William H. Johnson (1901–1970) in his *Fighters for Freedom* series. This tribute to African American activists, scientists, teachers, and performers as well as international heads of state was painted in the aftermath of World War II by Johnson, himself an African American artist. Through their stories, he suggests the pursuit of freedom is an ongoing, interconnected struggle, with moments of both triumph and tragedy, and he invites us to reflect on our own struggles for justice today. In *Fighters for Freedom*, Johnson reminds us that individual achievement and commitment to social justice are at the heart of the American story.

Like the individuals he called *Fighters for Freedom*, Johnson understood struggle. He was born in Florence, South Carolina, in 1901, but left the Jim Crow South while still a teenager to go to New York City. There he worked at low-skilled jobs, saved money, and built a portfolio that would earn him admission to the National Academy of Design—where he became a star student—in 1921. Five years later, like many artists of his generation, he left for Europe. In France, he painted landscapes and light-struck villages that marked him as an up-and-coming modernist.

In late 1938, with World War II imminent, Johnson and his Danish wife moved to New York City. There, he abandoned the dazzling landscapes of his Scandinavian years to focus on the lives of African Americans in New York City and the rural south. He painted sharecroppers, city hipsters, Black soldiers training for war, scenes inspired by Negro spirituals, and his last series, *Fighters for Freedom*. Although Johnson died in obscurity after a long health struggle, he is known today as one of the most important African American painters of his generation.

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](#).



LEARN MORE: wam.org/whats-on/exhibitions/william-h-johnson-picturing-justice

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SCHEDULE A SCHOOL GROUP VISIT

LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS EXHIBITION

Smithsonian American Art Museum resources for 6–12th grade students and teachers:

Who Were the Fighters for Freedom?

Decoding the Paintings

Online Gallery (scroll down)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What does it mean to be a “fighter for freedom”?

What struggles for justice are happening today?

Who are some leaders fighting for freedom today? What do they have in common with the figures in William H. Johnson’s paintings? How are they different?

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SELECTED WORKS OF ART TO EXPLORE

William H. Johnson, *Three Great Abolitionists: A. Lincoln, F. Douglass, J. Brown*, about 1945. Oil on paperboard, 37 3/8 x 34 1/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1983.95.51

Read about [this painting](#) on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

Learn more about Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown:

[Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum](#)

[Article about Frederick Douglass](#) from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture

[Resources](#) about John Brown from the Kansas Historical Society

SELECTED WORKS OF ART TO EXPLORE



William H. Johnson, *Harriet Tubman*, about 1945. Oil on paperboard, 28 7/8 x 23 3/8 in.,
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1146

Read about [this painting](#) on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

Learn more about Harriet Tubman

[Harriet Tubman biography](#) from the National Women's History Museum

[Lesson plans](#) for learning about Harriet Tubman through the arts
from The Kennedy Center (upper elementary)

[Lesson plans](#) from the National Endowment for the Humanities
(middle and high school)

SELECTED WORKS OF ART TO EXPLORE



William H. Johnson, *Booker T. Washington Legend*, about 1944-1945. Oil on plywood, 32 5/8 x 25 1/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.664

Read about [this painting](#) on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

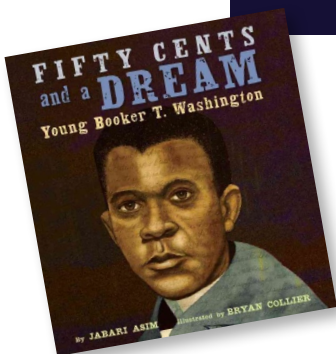
Learn more about Booker T. Washington

[Video](#) from PBS Learning Media

[Biography](#) of Booker T. Washington from Tuskegee University

[Fifty Cents and a Dream: Young Booker T. Washington](#)

by Jabari Asim and illustrated by Bryan Collier



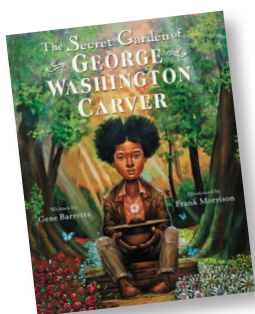
SELECTED WORKS OF ART TO EXPLORE



William H. Johnson, *Dr. George Washington Carver*, about 1945. Oil on cardboard, 35 ½ x 28 ½ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1142

Read about [this painting](#) on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

Learn More about George Washington Carver



Article: National Geographic Kids

Video: George Washington Carver: Scientist, Inventor, and Teacher
PBS Learning Media

In Search of George Washington Carver's True Legacy
Smithsonian Magazine

The Secret Garden of George Washington Carver
written by Gene Barretta and illustrated by Frank Morrison

SELECTED WORKS OF ART TO EXPLORE



William H. Johnson, *Marian Anderson*, about 1945. Oil on paperboard, 35 5/8 x 28 7/8 in.,
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.657

Read about [this painting](#) on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

Learn more about Marian Anderson

Video: Lincoln Memorial Concert from PBS The American Experience

“Denied a Stage, She Sang for a Nation” article from NPR

When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson
written by Pam Muñoz Ryan and illustrated by Brian Selznick

