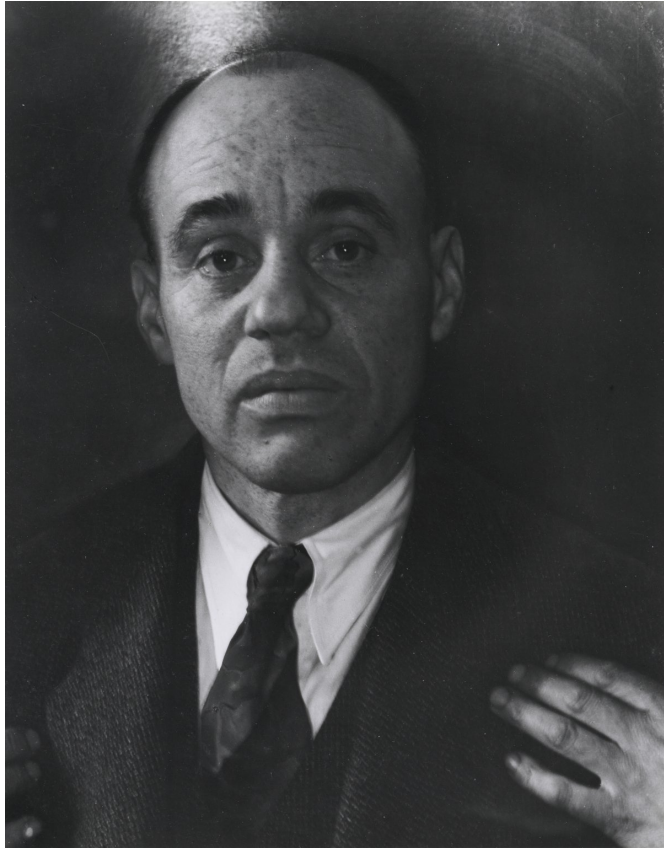


28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists



Sargent Johnson in 1934. Photo by Consuelo Kanaga.

While considered an important artist of the Harlem Renaissance, the American sculptor, painter, printmaker, and ceramicist **Sargent Claude Johnson** (1888-1967) was born in Boston and spent most of his career in San Francisco. His mother was of African-American and Cherokee descent and his father, of Swedish heritage; Johnson identified, however, as African-American. After losing both of his parents by 1905, Johnson and his five siblings were sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Washington, D.C. His aunt, May Howard Jackson (1877-1931), was an accomplished sculptor who likely offered her nephew some artistic instruction.

Moving to San Francisco in 1915 to pursue an artistic career, Johnson began taking art classes at the A.W. Best School of Art and at the California School of Fine Arts. Eclectic in style as well as medium--working in terra-cotta, copper, wood, cast stone, as well as in two-dimensional lithographs, drawings, and paintings--Johnson was equally wide-reaching in his themes. From ceramic portraits (such as the glazed stoneware *Elizabeth Gee*, 1927, bottom right) to the polychrome wood *Forever Free* (1933, top right), he channeled asian art, folk art, and Egyptian polychromy. In this latter work, the upward-looking mother, solid, stalwart, and columnar, protects two children incised in low relief. The deceptively simple nature of his work belies its inherent technical skill and universal appeal. His use of African-American subjects, employing the styles and techniques of the ancient world, suggests and provides a monumental timelessness to his figures.

Despite exhibiting regularly and being the most successful African-American artist working in the west, Johnson always found it difficult to support himself through his art. In the 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) offered some hope, as Johnson was provided employment creating art for public spaces. The first of these projects was for an enormous organ screen (below), a 22 foot-long low-relief sculpture carved in redwood; it was designed for the California School of the Blind in Berkeley. When the University of California, Berkeley, later took over the property around 1980, the organ screen was de-installed and forgotten. In an incredible story that made headlines, the University sold the work--valued at one million dollars--in 2009 as abandoned surplus for \$150.00 plus tax. Two years later the Huntington Library in San Marino purchased the reliefs for what one imagines was a much higher sum.



Sargent Johnson, *Forever Free*, 1933. Polychromed wood. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Sargent Johnson, *Elizabeth Gee*, 1927. Glazed Stoneware, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Sargent Johnson, *Untitled (Organ Screen)*, 1937. Polychromed redwood, 22 feet in length. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In his later career, Johnson was influenced by the art of Mexico, visiting the country several times between 1945 and his death in 1967. While his experimental eclecticism may have hindered his success during his lifetime, Sargent Johnson is now viewed as a canonical figure of twentieth-century Modernism.