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Sargent Johnson's *Athletics*: A Modernist Experiment in Public Art

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When asked about the value of federally funded art programs, I think of the experiences of Sargent Johnson (1888–1967), a San Francisco artist who worked for the New Deal and about whom I am writing a book. Johnson was hired as a supervisor for three major projects under both the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP; 1933–34) and Works Progress Administration (WPA; ca. 1935–42) in Berkeley and San Francisco.² At a time of severe economic hardship during the Great Depression, Johnson's New Deal commissions and assignments to supervise other artists provided validation and employment, as well as, importantly, opportunities to experiment with new styles and mediums, reach broad audiences, and participate in a creative community.³

When hired for his first federally funded art project in 1933, Johnson was already known as one of the nation's leading Black modernists, and his work celebrated what Johnson himself described as "the natural beauty and dignity" of Black Americans—"that characteristic lip, that characteristic hair, bearing and manner."⁴ Given his reputation and his stated artistic aims, it is curious that his three most important federally funded artworks feature no figures who are obviously Black. There are different sets of answers as to why this is the case for each of his projects, but in this brief reflection, I offer some insight into the issue of race in Johnson's monumental frieze *Athletics* (1942; fig. 1).

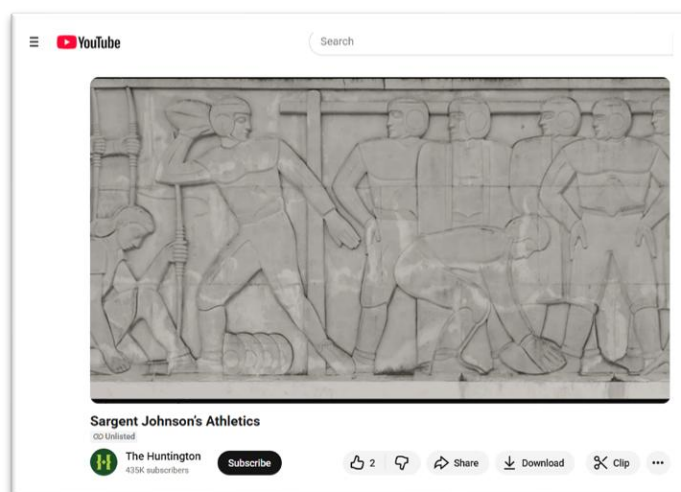


Fig. 1. Sargent Johnson, *Athletics*, 1940–c. 1942. Cast stone, 12 x 185 ft. George Washington High School, San Francisco. Video by César Rubio Photography, "Sargent Johnson's Athletics," posted February 6, 2024, by The Huntington, YouTube, 6:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cvK5DV9Yyc&t=3s>

I will first consider how Johnson responded to the strictures of the commission, which specified creating a monumentally scaled frieze depicting sport and fitness. To what degree did the directives, location, scale, and intended audience of *Athletics* liberate or limit Johnson? Did he feel empowered—able to create what he wanted—or constrained? What prompted him to experiment with a new stylistic approach here, which differed from both the style for which he had become known prior to his work for the PWAP and the WPA and from that of his earlier public artworks?

Johnson sculpted *Athletics* on the wall behind one endzone of the football field at George Washington High School (GWHS), opposite a stunning view of the Golden Gate Bridge. In March 2025, I led an onsite tour of this artwork as part of the Living New Deal convening titled "Forgotten Federal Art Legacies: PWAP to CETA." This meeting enabled me to share and test ideas about Johnson's work with scholars and CETA artists deeply informed about the history of public art in the United States. On the tour, I pointed out Johnson's combination of male and female figures engaged in sports and other activities demonstrating athletic prowess. In a frieze depicting signifiers of athletics, especially the Olympic rings, graceful allusions to Classical Greek art might be expected, yet Johnson condemned another artist's preceding design for the commission as "too Greeky."⁵ Instead, refusing the classicism of academic sculpture, Johnson carved the figures in *Athletics* with hard outlines and almost no roundness to their limbs and torsos.⁶ He delineated muscle edges crisply and depicted the figures in profile as if flattened against the wall, so that, while the carvings rise inches above the surface plane, they appear to be in low relief. The athletes' enlarged, lozenge-shaped eyes lack pupils; they show little emotion, and there is almost no eye contact among them. While the clothing, hairstyles, and sports equipment likely appeared familiar to San Francisco teenagers in the 1940s, the figures' stiffness recalls the pre-Classical relief sculptures of ancient Assyria, Predynastic and pharaonic Egypt, and archaic Greece.

Is it possible that in *Athletics* Johnson intentionally evoked artistic traditions of the ancient world prior to Classical Greece in order to represent race ambiguously and raise questions about how figural representation in art—since at least the early modern era—has always been either implicitly or explicitly racialized, much like competitive sports? When Johnson received the GWHS commission, four painters had completed murals at the school, and three of these included Black figures. Ralph Stackpole's library fresco, *Contemporary Education* (1936; fig. 2), for example, depicts the school's multiracial community of students engaged in everyday activities.⁷ Rather than represent a variety of differently racialized figures to suggest a harmoniously diverse community, I think Johnson purposely reimaged his earlier archaism—one that he had previously used to represent beautiful Black children and mothers as progeny of an



Fig. 2. Ralph Stackpole, *Contemporary Education*, 1936. Fresco, 5 1/2 x 27 ft. George Washington High School, San Francisco. Photograph by Mary Okin

illustrious Black past. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Johnson had developed an elegant style that drew on artistic traditions understood as archaic or “primitive”—not classical—to create idealized and racialized sculptures celebrating the beautiful physiognomy of Black people. For example, in *Chester* (1931, terracotta, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), Johnson used a sharp incision to define and emphasize the outer edges of a Black boy’s lips—his modernization of a technique Egyptian artists used when carving the Old Kingdom “reserve head” sculptures of Giza.⁸ In *Forever Free* (1933, painted plaster over linen and wood, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), Johnson used similar methods to sensitively define the forms of a Black mother’s face. In contrast, by making the figures in *Athletics* appear generally archaic in form, with no clearly racialized features, was Johnson experimenting with the stylization of archaic ancient art and its stiffness to present racialization as an unresolved—perhaps irresolvable—dilemma?⁹

While Johnson, like many Black artists of the New Deal era, made art that explored innovative ways of representing Black people and their history, culture, and experiences, *Athletics* is important evidence that, like some of his contemporaries, Johnson also created artworks that reflect critically on his artistic goals and methods. Having navigated whatever constraints federal sponsorship entailed, Johnson developed his project for GWHS into an opportunity to pose important questions about racialization, inclusion, and universalism facing modernist artists of the era—especially those engaged in making public art—in a dramatically scaled if understated conceptual experiment.

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Notes

¹ John Bowles is a member of *Panorama*’s Advisory Council.

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² In 1933, the PWAP commissioned Johnson to create decorative reliefs for the auditorium of the California School for the Blind in Berkeley, which he completed in 1934. Under the WPA, Johnson was hired as a supervisor for the Aquatic Park Bathhouse project in San Francisco, for which he created reliefs and mosaics for the building’s exterior and a carved lintel. For more about his projects, see Dennis Carr, Jacqueline Francis, and John Bowles, eds., *Sargent Claude Johnson* (Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, 2024).

³ As a supervisor, Johnson had two obligations: employ as many assistants as possible to help other artists survive the Great Depression and make art for a specific community or institution, tasks for which he was well prepared.

⁴ The quotations are from Sargent C. Johnson, “San Francisco Artists,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 6, 1935, D3.

⁵ Beniamino Bufano had been awarded the opportunity to create the frieze for the high school football field before the WPA took it away from him in 1940 and subsequently commissioned Johnson for the job. Johnson, interview by Mary McChesney, July 31, 1964, transcript, oral history interview, Archives of

American Art, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sargent-johnson-11474>.

⁶ The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin may have inspired Johnson. Among the medalists was the African American track star Jesse Owens.

⁷ The other murals are Lucien Labaudt's *Advancement of Learning Through the Printing Press* (1936) and Victor Arnautoff's *Life of George Washington* (1936) mural cycle.

⁸ See John P. Bowles, "New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Claude Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures," in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long and Tumultuous Relationship*, ed. Cynthia Mills, Lee Glazer, and Amelia A. Goerlitz (Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2012), 142–57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5479/si.9781935623083.142>. Helen Shannon has shown that Johnson must have been familiar with the Egyptian reserve head sculptures that likely inspired *Chester*; Shannon, "From 'African Savages' to 'Ancestral Legacy': Race and Cultural Nationalism in the American Modernist Reception of African Art" (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1999), 320–21.

⁹ As I continue to develop this essay into a book chapter, I will also explore to what degree Johnson's experimentation can be understood as an indication that he was participating in an intellectual recalculation among Black American artists, such as Hale Woodruff and Romare Bearden, who called for a move away from specifically "Negro" themes and stylistic conceits and experimented with creating a more universalist modernism characteristic of the American avant-garde of the 1940s.