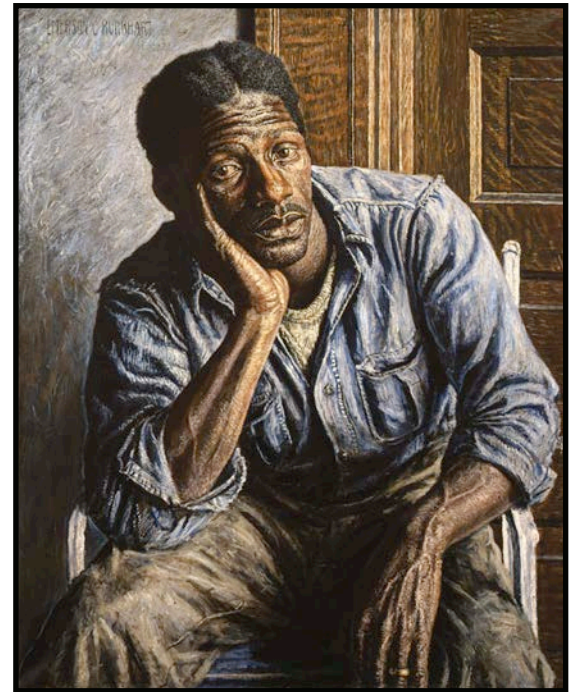




Celebrating Black History Month The Work of Roman Johnson

by Charles Swaney, Museum Docent

Roman Johnson (1917–2005) was born in Columbus, Ohio and lived there most of his life. As a young child, he had a prolonged illness that kept him bed-ridden. Since he displayed a talent for and love of drawing, his mother encouraged his interest in art. He studied two years under Columbus African-American artist Cletus Butler. In 1941 his wife encouraged him to introduce himself to the artist Emerson Burkhardt, who was often seen painting on the streets of his East Columbus community. Burkhardt famously told the younger artist that he was too well-dressed to be an artist: “Examine your priorities.” The two became close friends, often painting genre subjects alongside each other in the neighborhood. Interestingly, Johnson is best known as the subject of a portrait by his mentor, Burkhardt, entitled *The Confused Process of Becoming*, aka *Man is Man (Portrait of Roman Johnson)*, which Burkhardt painted in 1946. Soon after Johnson left Columbus to study at the Art Students League in New York City for ten years, where he was influenced by Edwin Dickinson, Ernest Fiene, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. His ties to Columbus remained strong, and he wrote a daily letter to his wife in his absence. After studying art in Paris for a year, Johnson returned to his Columbus, where he lived the remainder of his life. He was quoted as saying, “I do paintings in an effort to enhance or continue the culture of black people. In the '40s and '50s, when I visited the Museum of Modern Art (in New York City), I never saw any art by or about blacks.” He cared deeply about his community, which he documented for many years until his death at age eighty-eight in 2005.



Emerson C. Burkhardt (American, 1905–1969)
Man Is Man (Portrait of Roman Johnson), 1946
Oil on canvas
[Columbus Museum of Art \(2001.002\)](#)

It is instructive to compare the portrait of Roman Johnson by Emerson Burkhardt with Johnson’s self-portrait, which he painted one year later in New York City, perhaps influenced by his teachers at the Student’s Art League. Burkhardt’s portrait shows Johnson sitting comfortably in a chair with his head

(Continued on page two)

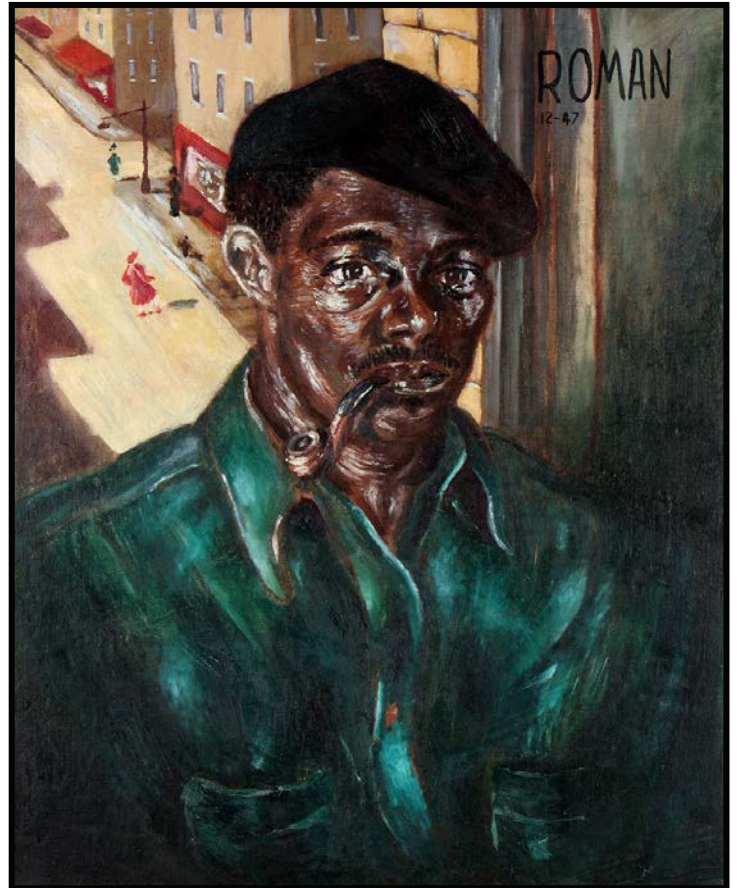


MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

resting on his right hand, deep creases on his forehead, and a tired look on his face. He is alert and dressed in work clothes as advised by Burkhart on their first meeting. Despite seeming to be tired, there is a determination in his countenance and his hands, but can we see some doubt or concern on the cusp of his leaving Columbus to study in New York? Was this a reflection of his “Confused Process of Becoming” or was this the normal apprehension of his pending journey to New York?

Johnson’s self-portrait in the Museum of Art and Archaeology was painted in 1947, and his transformation to a confident artist is remarkable. Any self-doubt is gone, and he looks at the viewer clear-eyed with a pipe clenched in the right side of his mouth, a beret canted to the left, wearing a dark jacket, the light reflecting off his deep, dark skin tones. He signed the work boldly in the upper right: ROMAN. The overall effect is that of a confident, worldly, and successful black artist. He sits in front of a window looking out onto a New York street where we are the observers. He documents the

scene from above, a technique utilized throughout the history of art, indicating his experience with and appreciation of works at New York museums. The style of the street scene is reminiscent of the work of Ernest Fiene, one of the artists of the Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney collection in the Museum of Art and Archaeology. Edwin Dickinson’s influence, possibly George Bellows as well, can be seen in the style of his self-portrait. The deeply shadowed chiaroscuro of Bellows and Dickinson and their predominately white subjects are reinterpreted by Johnson to celebrate his blackness and to declare that he had arrived. ■



Roman Johnson (American, 1917–2005)
Self-Portrait, 1947
Oil on canvas
Gift of Museum Associates (2013.10)

Supplemental Article: “Local artist Roman Johnson’s standing growing after death,” by Randy Ludlow.
The Columbus Dispatch, Columbus, OH, Mar 1, 2015.

<https://www.dispatch.com/article/20160122/ENTERTAINMENT/301229655>