

Sargent Claude Johnson

1888–1967

Untitled (screen for pipe organ)

1937

Carved, painted, and gilded redwood

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, 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

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Johnson was commissioned in 1937 by the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal to carve this screen for the California School of the Blind, then located in Berkeley. In the screen, one child reaches up and while the other plays a cymbal at the foot of a stylized tree, whose radiating branches seem to broadcast the sound into the forest. In the side panels, deer perk up their ears, as if listening to the concert in the central panel. Serving as a bridge between the animal and human worlds, music creates an Eden in which two rabbits and a fox—normally enemies—gather peacefully to hear the children and birds make song. The screen's subject matter echoes the stress that education for the blind once placed on music instruction, which is wholly appropriate given its original location.

One striking aspects of the screen is Johnson's use of the color of natural redwood, red paint, and gilding to give a heightened sense of depth in an otherwise relatively flat relief sculpture. In a short but consequential interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1935, Johnson explains the relevance of color in his work:

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 ... I am concerned with color as a technical problem, but also as a means of heightening the racial character of my work. The Negroes are a colorful race. They call for an art as colorful as it can be made.

Although the simplified forms and the figures' almond shaped eyes are likely taken from African sculpture, "racial character" is not overtly at play in this screen's subject matter. However, the screen does illustrate the importance of color as a key component of sculpture. As such, this screen is vital for understanding his vast production of polychrome sculpture, including such works as *Forever Free* (1933), a painted work in which color both signifies race and articulates the solid cylindrical shape of the woman's body.



Sargent Claude Johnson, *Forever Free*, 1933. Wood, gesso, cloth, and lacquer. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mrs. E. D. Lederman

A Masterpiece Restored, Lightly

Johnson carved the screen for the California School for the Blind's Music Hall. The Huntington's screen hung opposite another panel, also by Johnson and part of the same commission, which is now displayed in a classroom on the Clark Kerr Campus of the University of California, Berkeley. When the School of the Blind relocated in the late 1970s to Fremont, the Huntington's screen was removed and placed in storage. At that time, the screen was probably attached to a plywood panel. Thanks to this sturdy backing, the screen survived largely intact, though, as a period photograph shows, there were once two additional panels. Although the plywood saved the screen, it expanded and contracted at a different rate than the redwood, which exacerbated splitting. Indeed, there was enough damage that conservators constructed a metal armature to support loose pieces and provide a sturdy backing for the entire screen.

Although we know that Johnson placed great weight on the color and finish of his sculptures, we have limited knowledge of the actual appearance of the

original surface. The black-and-white photograph, now in the National Archives, is only known image of the screen at the school. However, we can be reasonably certain about how Johnson finished the screen's surface. In a 1964 interview, he stated that he oiled the wood, let it dry, then applied a thin layer of wax. Unfortunately, one cannot be certain of the visual effect this process had. Was it glossy or matte? To what degree did the oil bring out the redwood's russet tones? With little definitive information about how the screen looked in the 1930s, Huntington curators asked the conservators to largely leave the surface alone. They only addressed damaged areas, gently cleaned surfaces, and removed residues left from the plywood. Happily, during restoration conservators found a piece of the rough cloth that once backed the screen and were able to closely match the original weave, though the fabric's color undoubtedly had changed after many decades. By adopting a strategy of light restoration, the conservation process left open the possibility further work should more photographs or archival evidence emerge and insures that the public sees the work of Johnson's hand.



Untitled (Photograph of Sargent Claude Johnson's Screen at the California School of the Blind), ca. 1930s–1940s. Photograph. (Source: The Harmon Foundation Collection, Still Picture Collection, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.)



Sargent Claude Johnson, *Untitled*, 1937. Loose fragments and damage during restoration process. (Photo: Jessica Todd Smith)



Sargent Claude Johnson, *Untitled*, 1937. Carved, painted, and gilded redwood. University of California, Berkeley. This is the screen that once hung opposite the Huntington's, as it is now installed at the Clark Kerr Campus of the University of California, Berkeley.