

*George Johanson: Image and Idea*  
February 3 – March 31, 2007  
Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University

## Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *George Johanson: Image and Idea* and offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

### Goals

- To introduce students to the work of George Johanson.
- To examine the evolution of Johanson's personal style.
- To explore some of the major themes in the artist's work.

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of the artist's mature style.
- Identify recurring imagery and themes in the artist's work.
- Discuss the role of the human figure, narrative, and a sense of place in the artist's work.

### Preparing for the tour:

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Using the images (print out transparencies or sets for students, create a bulletin board, etc.) and information in the teacher packet, create a pre-tour lesson plan for the classroom to support and complement the gallery experience. If you are unable to use images in the classroom, the suggested discussions can be used for the Museum tour.
- Create a tour
  - Build on the goals and objectives from this packet, as well as concepts students have discussed in the classroom.
  - Have a specific focus, i.e. subject matter; art elements; etc.
  - Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
  - Include a simple task to keep students focused.
  - Plan transitions and closure for the tour.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

### **At the Museum:**

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Focus on the works of art. Emphasize looking and discovery through visual scanning (a guide is included in this packet). If you are unsure where to begin, a good way to start is by asking, “What is happening in this picture?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “What do you see that makes you say that?” or “Show us what you have found.”
- Balance telling about a work and letting students react to a work.
- Use open-ended question to guide student looking and to focus their thinking on certain topics and concepts.
- Slow down and give students a chance to process.
- Respect all responses and deal with them.
- Be aware of students’ interest spans (usually about 45 to 50 minutes) and comfort.

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## **INTRODUCTION: George Johanson: Image and Idea**

*Roger Hull, Professor of Art History and Curator of the Exhibition*

This exhibition documents and interprets the career of a major Oregon painter and printmaker who as artist, teacher, and arts activist has enriched the cultural life of the Pacific Northwest for more than fifty years. A student and later a teacher at Portland's Museum Art School (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art), Johanson represents a vital link between the work of his teachers at the school, including Louis Bunce and Jack McLarty, and younger generations of Oregon modernists.

Attracted to what he calls the "expressionist figuration" of Portland modern painting in the late 1940s, Johanson encountered the rise of Abstract Expressionism with both fascination and skepticism. Living in New York as a young artist just out of art school, he had a ringside seat for watching nonfigurative abstraction dominate the avant-garde painting of the period. He met Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and others at the Cedar Bar and the Friday evening meetings of the Artists' Club and absorbed their ideas. But for Johanson, the link between art and life was the human figure, an implied human narrative, and a sense of place.

For him, the place was to be Portland, Oregon, with its bridges, trees, vistas, and eventually erupting volcano. He explores human narrative elliptically in terms of personal memory, sensual engagement, historical reference, and the interior world of fantasy and dream. Renaissance figure painting, German Expressionism, Surrealism, British avant-garde art of the 1960s, and the modern painting of his friends and mentors in Portland all are elements in George Johanson's richly intertextual response to modern art and life.

*George Johanson: Image and Idea* is presented in the Hallie Ford Museum of Art's lobby, Melvin Henderson-Rubio Gallery, and Print Study Center as well as in the gallery of the Rogers Music Center at the east end of the Quad on Willamette's main campus. In addition, works by artists closely associated with George Johanson are on view in a portion of the Carl Hall Gallery at the Museum.

### THREE WORKS FROM THE EXHIBITION

(Background information from the accompanying book, *George Johanson: Image and Idea* and exhibition labels by Roger Hull)

1.



#### *Seventeen Bathers*

1949

Oil on canvas

27 x 35"

Collection of the Artist, Portland, Oregon

George Johanson showed an early talent for drawing, and while a student at Seattle's Roosevelt High School, he designed posters for dances and other school events and enrolled in as many classes as he could. After graduating in 1946, he moved to Oregon to enroll at the Portland Art Museum's Museum Art School (now the independent Pacific Northwest College of Art) with a scholarship from *Scholastic Magazine*. The Museum School at that time was full throttle with returning GIs, other nontraditional students, and recent high school graduates studying side by side in classes taught by faculty members who would become Oregon's canonical modern artists. Founded in 1909, the Museum Art School in the post-war years had a cadre of inspiring instructors, some of them brand-new to the faculty. In this thriving environment, according to Johanson, "a completely new world opened up for me."

Johanson painted *Seventeen Bathers* when he was a third-year student at the Museum Art School. In a choppy, discontinuous setting of a lawn and river or sea, angular figures recline, sit, stand, and swim. A dog lolls at the lower right. The figures are green-yellow, blue, or off-peach, while the landscape patches are strident green and whitened blue accented by gashes of pink, red, and ocher. "I was heavily influenced by **German Expressionism**, and this is evident in the drawing [the angular rendering of the figures]," Johanson states. "I used drawings of my two sisters...and combined them in making this composition." In acknowledging that he was "heavily influenced," he understates his initiative as a young artist in taking what he needed to build the foundations of his own creativity. The subject of bathers, which has a long tradition in art history, is continued by Johanson as one of "six or eight themes which I keep returning to." For Johanson, the riverside park with swimmers and pets, dissonant color and problematic light, becomes a subject of perpetual fascination and a prominent theme in Johanson's work.

- Describe this day at the beach. Discuss the artist's use of color, form, line, space and perspective. Is it realistic or expressive (emotion and mood communicated through emphasis and distortion of form, color, space, etc.)? How does his style, the way he has painted the scene, contribute to the mood?

- Look at other depictions of bathers in works by Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. Why is this such a popular theme for artists? What opportunities and challenges does it present for an artist?

**Cezanne**

[www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/cezanne/bath/](http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/cezanne/bath/)

**Matisse**

[www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA\\_Modern/pages/MOD\\_3.shtml](http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_Modern/pages/MOD_3.shtml)

**Picasso**

[www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso24.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso24.html)

2.



*Oh What a Jolly Time We Had at the Seashore*  
1958  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 48”  
Private Collection, Portland, Oregon

In the fall of 1950, after three years of study at the Museum Art School in Portland, George Johanson rode the bus cross-country to New York. He lived there for three years, working in a slaughterhouse and then in a frame shop, studying printmaking for a time at Atelier 17, and making art. Abstract Expressionism was just gaining official recognition at that time, soon to become a powerful force in American art. The large scale of the paintings, their totally nonrepresentational imagery, the reckless and energetic brushwork, and the heavy, messy **impastos** opened astonishing new visual and expressive terrain. Johanson was certainly familiar with this movement, and even met some of its pioneers – including Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock – at their hangout, the Cedar Bar, and the Friday night meetings at the Artist’s Club. But Abstract Expressionism posed a fundamental dilemma for Johanson as it did for many American artists at mid-century. “Mostly I was rejecting it because I was strongly figurative and felt that whatever I’d do would have to do with the figurative world,” he stated many years later. Because Johanson is primarily a figure painter and a narrator of implied stories, the human form conveys the meaning, mood, and focus in his art. Though he experimented with (virtually) nonrepresentational painting for several years, nonfigurative art was not to be a long-term commitment.

Although painted at the height of his engagement with the free brushwork of Abstract Expressionism, *Oh What A Jolly Time We Had By The Seashore* in both title and rendering reveals Johanson’s persistent interest in painting figures and environments. Thickly painted shards of black are held in balance with intervening trajectories of white and green-blue in a composition of high-voltage paintwork. At the same time, he provides a horizon line near the top of the painting and transforms the black areas into scrambling human figures having fun apparently, at the beach. Abstraction and figuration are held in taut mutual check, just as the light and dark areas hold their own against each other.

- Without giving the title, have students describe what they see. Note if they see things as figurative (figures, natural forms, landscape, etc.), or in a formal way (eg. the artist’s use of line, shape, color, brushstroke, the way he has arranged the composition, etc.).

- After giving students the title, have them again describe what they see. How has the title influenced their perceptions? Do they see a narrative (story) where they didn't before? How does having the title influence their appreciation of the work? Discuss the artist's use of abstraction to the point of non-representation, and the role the title plays in how the viewer understands a painting.
  
- In the spring of 1964, George Johanson told Beth Fagan, arts writer for the *Oregonian* newspaper: "Although all the principles of painting are in abstraction, it began to seem not enough. It didn't seem to reach out enough to life...[my new paintings] still have many abstract elements, but I want the observer to readily relate to specific forms, such as a bridge, for example – to draw the observer into the picture, and then have the observer wander around in it."
  - What does Johanson mean when he says "all the principles of painting are in abstraction?" Discuss his philosophy regarding his desire for the observer to readily relate to specific forms? Is it important to you as a viewer? Why or why not?



3.



*Evening at George Beach*

1990

Oil on canvas

37 x 73”

Private Collection, Portland, Oregon

In May of 1980, George Johanson retired from teaching at the Pacific Northwest College of Art after twenty-five years as an instructor of painting, printmaking, and drawing. He was fifty-one years old, at the height of his career, and had attained his full eloquence as an artist of modern times. In the majority of his work since 1980, the human form remains central in his imagination, as does his predilection for narrative – the sense of “something happening” in the works, even though the happenings are often puzzling and even ineffable in nature.

The subject of bathers (and other semi-nude figures in the vicinity of water) provided Johanson the opportunity for just such narrative explorations. It is a theme which originated in some of his earliest paintings and one that he returned to again and again in the 1980s and 1990s. For Johanson, the riverside with groups of would-be swimmers, people toweling off, sunbathers, and sometimes moonbathers, provided the opportunity “for drawing the figure in a situation.”

In *Evening at George Beach*, a direct paraphrase of **Neo-Impressionist** painter Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*, he combines the bathers theme with another old favorite, referencing art and artists of the past. This engagement with the work of other artists has continued as a fundamental aspect of Johanson’s creativity. A form of apprenticeship in his student days, it has evolved into a confident dialogue with Old Masters and Moderns alike. “Every artist including myself constantly looks at other artists’ work, and it all feeds one’s own work in one way or another,” Johanson told a group of students at Portland Community College in 2006, sixty years after his own students days.

In *Evening at George Beach*, the art historical reference is specific. Like Seurat, Johanson is interested in depicting a sense of place, painting the world around him, the world he knows. “George Beach” refers to the two Georges, as Johanson facetiously but tellingly aligns himself with his illustrious predecessor. Seurat is the master of ordered, grid-like pictorial construction. Johanson, with his own such proclivities, follows suit, adapting Seurat’s colonnade of trees and upright figures, as well as his strata of light and shadow, as organizing elements. But in place of Seurat’s couple with top hat and parasol, standing at the right, Johanson has his anchor couple wear swimming suits and half hide under the purple blanket covering their heads (the better to kiss and pet). In Johanson’s revision of Seurat’s world, blankets or towels replace umbrellas as head coverings in a number of instances. (Johanson speaks of his figures “cocooning” themselves, a behavior

that requires more muffling and enclosure than umbrellas provide, though he makes much use of umbrellas in other works.)

- Describe this evening at the beach. Discuss the artist's use of color, form, line, space and perspective. Is it realistic or expressive (emotion and mood communicated through emphasis and distortion of form, color, space, etc.)? How has his style (the way he has painted the scene), contribute to the mood?
- Compare and contrast to *Seventeen Bathers*. How are they the same? How are they different? What changes do you see in the artist's style?
- Compare and contrast with Georges Seurat's *Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*. How are they the same? How are they different? What do they tell us about life in the time they were painted?

To view and learn more about *Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*, go to the Art Institute of Chicago's website:

[www.artic.edu/aic/collections/eurptg/highlight\\_item?acc=1926.224&page=31](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/eurptg/highlight_item?acc=1926.224&page=31)

- Draw or paint “a figure in a situation” against a setting that is familiar and special to you. How do the situation and setting influence the way you draw the figure? What opportunities and challenges do they present?
- Choose a character and write a short paragraph about their time at the beach.

## GLOSSARY

**German Expressionism** An art movement dominant in Germany from 1905-1925, especially *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) and *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider). *Die Brücke* artists, which included Ernst Kirchner and Erich Heckel, were based in Dresden and Berlin between 1905 and 1913. They depicted landscapes, nudes, and members of high and low society in strong colors and broad, often exaggerated forms. *Der Blaue Reiter*, based in Munich from 1911 to 1914, included Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Their work, which ranged from pure abstraction to romantic imagery, was more concerned with expressing spiritual truths.

**impasto(s)** An application of paint that is thick or lumpy.

**Neo-Impressionist** A movement in painting which was an outgrowth of and a reaction to Impressionism. It was originated by Georges Seurat (French, 1859-1891), who employed a technique called pointillism, carefully composed separate touches of pure color, which blend into single color sensations observed by the rods and cones in the viewer's eye.

## RESOURCE

Hull, Roger, *George Johanson: Image and Idea*. Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon. Distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2007

## **COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS**

The suggested discussions and activities included in this packet can be used to support the following Common Curriculum Goals developed by the Oregon Department of Education. For specific benchmarks for your grade level check with your school district or the Oregon Public Education Network (O.P.E.N.)

[www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53](http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53)

### **The Arts**

#### Aesthetics and Criticism

- Use knowledge of technical, organizational and aesthetic elements to describe and analyze one's own art and the art of others.
- Respond to works of art, giving reasons for preferences.

#### Historical and Cultural Perspectives

- Identify both common and unique characteristics found in work of art from various time periods and cultures.
- Explain how a work of art reflects the artist's personal experience in a society or culture.

### **Language Arts**

#### Writing

- Use a variety of written forms (e.g. journals, essays, short stories, poems, research papers) to express ideas and multiple media to create projects, presentations and publications.

#### Speaking and Listening

- Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes and details.
- Demonstrate effective listening strategies.

## VISUAL SCANNING

Scanning is meant to guide the viewer in looking at a work of art. To avoid tedium, one may choose not to use all six points during each scanning.

### 1. SUBJECT

Subject is usually a good starting place, but should one of the other points “speak” to the viewer first, by all means, begin there.

What is the subject of the work?

What objects can be identified or recognized?

If there is no imagery, the formal qualities may be the subject (line, shape, color, etc.)

### 2. COMPOSITION

Identify the formal qualities (line, color, shape, form, etc.?)

How are these formal qualities organized?

*repetition*

*contrast*

*balance*

*movement*

*scale*

*unity*

*visual rhythm*

### 3. TECHNIQUE & MEDIUM

How was the work made? (painting, sculpture, prints, architecture, installation, etc.)

Does the particular technique contribute to the total? How?

### 4. EXPRESSION

What is the role of cultural conventions? (Egyptian, for example)

What is the mood or emotional content?

What is the message or meaning?

What has the artist done to “send” the message?

### 5. CONTEXT (STYLES)

How is the work a produce of a particular culture?

Where and how does the work fit into history?

### 6. CRITIQUE

Has the artist succeeded in expressing thoughts, emotions, and ideas? How?

Viewer’s response: like or dislike. Why?

How can a work that one dislikes still be a valid statement of the artist?







