Cut Aesthetics

Makeda Best on William H. Johnson
Themes

- Manipulation/Reconstruction of African American history
- Tribute to leaders of the African American struggle for civil rights
Context

William H. Johnson

- Papers at the Archives of American Art (1940’s)
- Fighters for Freedom
Techniques

- Print/Media and Graphics influence in 1940’s art
- Collage vs Scrapbooking
fig. 5 (opposite)
Page from William H. Johnson scrapbook, (1920s–47); 18 1/2 x 26 1/2 in. (closed), William H. Johnson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
fig. 6
Page from William H. Johnson scrapbook, (1920s–47), 10 ⅛ x 25 ¼ in. (closed); William H. Johnson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
fig. 7
fig. 8
Fig. 9
Page from William H. Johnson scrapbook, (1920s-47), 18 ¾ x 25 ¼ in. (closed). William H. Johnson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. For all from this figure, see the endpapers.
fig. 11
Harriet Tubman, 1911
Gelatin silver print,
8 x 6 in. Photograph
unknown. Photographs
and Prints Division,
Schomburg Center
for Research in Black
Culture, The New York
Public Library.
fig. 15

fig. 14 (opposite)
No. 17
William H. Johnson, 
Noticed in Evans, 
ca. 1945. Oil on 
paperboard. 29 in. 
× 37 ¼ in. Smithsonian 
American Art Museum. 
Gift of the Harmon 
Foundation 1967/9.646.
Fig. 18
William H. Johnson,
Women Builders,
c. 1945. Oil
on canvas, 79 3/4 x 54 1/2 in.
Context

- New Messages of the Black Experience
- Political Statements
- Heterogenous aesthetic styles
- Way of rebelling against stereotypes (i.e. Homogeneity)
Lois Mailou Jones, 
Significance/Relevance

- Alter emphases
- Propose links
- Introduce narratives
- Construct an artistic identity
- Diaristic account of life
- Act of Storytelling
“Envelope the present with the past.”
- Susan Stewart (literary critic)
Discussion Questions

- Author commented on strategic design (i.e. cutting the clippings awkwardly); How would one interpret what is purposeful or accidental?
- Comment on disunity in bodies of work (critics vs Makeda Best)
- Are collage and scrapbooking that different? (Purpose, style, communication, etc.)
- Elements of graphic design in his artwork? How can Graphic Design be used as a political instrument?