

Frances Benjamin Johnston The Hampton Album





Emergencies.
Tourniquet.
Bandage.
Splints.



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Frances Benjamin Johnston
The Hampton Album

Sarah Hermanson Meister

with a contribution by
LaToya Ruby Frazier

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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"In all its effects, learning the
meaning of things is better than
learning the meaning of words."
Section A.
Continue your work at repair-
ing and constructing telephones.

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Learning the Meaning of Things

Sarah Hermanson Meister

OVER SEVERAL WEEKS IN DECEMBER 1899 and January 1900, Frances Benjamin Johnston photographed the student body of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Almost a thousand strong, it was made up predominantly of African Americans—many the children or grandchildren of former slaves—as well as more than a hundred Native Americans.¹ Inside the classrooms and in the cool wintry light outdoors, male and female students held still before her eight-by-ten-inch view camera as a succession of choreographed tableaux was recorded onto glass plate negatives. The resulting nearly 150 photographs show the students dressed practically, if formally, according to Victorian codes of propriety. Whether in a geography lesson on European cathedral towns or a physics class estimating the combined draft of horses, they appear completely absorbed in their studies, and with very few exceptions seem determined (or were instructed) not to look into the camera.

Johnston had been commissioned by the school to make these images, which reached an international audience soon thereafter as part of the American Negro Exhibit in the Palace of Social Economy at the 1900 Paris Exposition. The intention behind this display, which was funded by the U.S. government, was to cast the country in a good light by showcasing the progress being made by African Americans after the abolition of slavery.² More specifically, Johnston's images were intended to illustrate Hampton's educational philosophy, which was based on the idea of vocational training, with a hands-on curriculum designed to train future teachers and to provide graduates with a range of practical skills.

This approach, which became known as the Hampton model, played into a growing controversy about African American education that would continue to resonate through the civil rights era of the 1960s and still echoes today.³ A few years after these images were made, it pitted two gifted African American leaders against one another. A vocal champion of Hampton's approach was Booker T. Washington, born into slavery and himself the product of a Hampton education, who subscribed to the belief that education for African Americans ought to be anchored in the instruction of practical skills, and that vocational training was the best way to improve the economic condition of the vast majority of African Americans, particularly in the South. But not long after Johnston's photographs were taken, W. E. B. Du Bois forcefully argued that economic advancement on these terms was far too limited a goal, acknowledging Washington's successes while arguing that "[his] programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races" and criticizing his failure to push for three key demands: the right to vote, civic equality, and "the education of youth according

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to ability.”⁴ Du Bois’s more radical position was, of course, less well received by those intent on maintaining racial hierarchies,⁵ although it would prevail over the course of the twentieth century, paving the way for the civil rights movement as well as spurring shifts at Hampton itself, which was accredited as a college in 1933 and in 1984 became Hampton University.⁶

The debate between Du Bois and Washington is mirrored in the reception of Johnston’s album, which has been beset by the question of how much her own photographs share in the problematic aspects of the Hampton model. One writer, James Guimond, memorably described *The Hampton Album* in 1991 as “a white dream for black people.” According to Guimond, Johnston’s photographs “inherently created an idealized conception of racial relationships that was very popular with white northerners and philanthropists: a separate-but-equal educational system in which blacks would be allowed to progress toward ‘civilization’ under the tutelage of conservative educators who would—like Johnston with her camera—benevolently approve of very limited black aspirations.”⁷ However compelling this argument sounds, others have, as is the case with Washington himself, argued that the truth is more complicated, especially in the context of the American South around 1900.⁸

Another question concerns how the aesthetic and formal qualities of Johnston’s images relate to the message they were intended to convey. They were both explicitly didactic *and* notable for their artistry; for Johnston these characteristics were not incompatible. Her photographs are striking in how they appear to offer a visual equivalent of lucid prose, seducing us with a transparency that seems incontrovertible. The students who listen with such rapt attention to lessons in ancient history and capillary phenomena, write their own music, and demonstrate their aptitude constructing telephones or inspecting milk are doing these things just three years after the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and at a moment when lynching was tragically common.⁹ Perhaps the serenity of Johnston’s images was itself part of their agenda; the feminist scholar Laura Wexler has put it like this: “A generation after the Civil War, with its 600,000 battlefield dead, it was evidently much more attractive for both Europeans and white Americans to believe that contemporary black life was like life at Hampton than to attend to evidence of its catastrophic degradation.”¹⁰

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, Johnston’s photographs and the display they were part of in Paris were considered a great success. The American Negro Exhibit was widely celebrated in the African American press at

home, and traveled to two venues in the United States in the years that followed. But as the pedagogic model espoused by Hampton fell into disfavor, Johnston’s images faded into obscurity, too, until they were rediscovered by a young art enthusiast and collector named Lincoln Kirstein during World War II. He was stationed near Washington, D.C., where he happened across a “plump, anonymous, leatherbound album, old and scuffed” in W. H. Lowdermilk & Co., a bookstore that specialized in American history and political science.¹¹

For more than two decades, the album “rested on [Kirstein’s] private shelves to be shown to a few photographers or historians, all of whom immediately relished its precious savor,” although none knew whom to credit as its maker.¹² By 1965 it appears that Monroe Wheeler, who was at the time responsible for The Museum of Modern Art’s publications department, persuaded Kirstein to give it to the Museum.¹³ Kirstein, Wheeler, and John Szarkowski (then director of MoMA’s Department of Photography) each appreciated the aesthetic value of the prints, the intelligent compositional structure of the images, and the rarity of finding such an album intact. On January 11, 1966, The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition of 43 of the original platinum prints (out of a total of 159) opened to the public and the album began to be recognized as an important piece of photographic history. This exhibition traveled to eleven venues around the United States and Canada, accompanied by a modestly scaled catalogue featuring handsome gravure reproductions of this same selection and a thoughtful if sanguine essay by Kirstein about the photographs, Hampton, and Johnston.¹⁴ Although the exhibition took place during the height of the civil rights movement in the United States, the Museum barely alluded to that context publicly in the materials accompanying the show.

Some fifty-odd years later, The Museum of Modern Art is now publishing all the images for the first time. The occasion brings with it a new opportunity to interrogate some of the historical biases and lacunae in our scholarship. New research has uncovered fascinating details about the material history of the album and the circumstances of its original display, while recent critical thinking around the possibility of discerning a plurality of voices from photographs long understood as neutral historical records challenges us to tease apart layers of intent and reception.¹⁵ Above all, these photographs speak across time to the complicated zones where race and representation, document and art, history and the present meet.

*The woman who makes photography profitable must have, as to personal qualities, good common sense, unlimited patience to carry her through endless failures, equally unlimited tact, good taste, a quick eye, a talent for detail, and a genius for hard work. In addition, she needs training, experience, some capital, and a field to exploit.*¹⁶

—FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON (1897)

Born on January 15, 1864 in Grafton, West Virginia, Johnston was the only child in her family to survive infancy, and she made the most of the considerable opportunities her white, middle-class parents were able to provide.¹⁷ By 1875, after some time in Rochester, New York, her family had settled in Washington, D.C. Her father worked at the Treasury Department and, unusually for the era, her mother covered congressional news as a journalist. Abandoning early plans to become a writer, Johnston spent two years at the Académie Julian in Paris training to be an artist. She returned to the U.S. capital city in 1885, joined the Art Students League, and began publishing short articles that she would illustrate with her own drawings. According to legend, taking advantage of her family's connections in Rochester, she wrote to George Eastman in 1888—the year after he had established the Eastman Kodak Company there—and he sent her one of the first cameras his company produced. Kodak's advertising campaign at the time, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest," targeted the vast amateur audience who sought to capture friends and family on film without needing to concern themselves with technical details.

Johnston had bigger aims, however. Her ambition to earn a living as a professional photographer soon led her to secure formal photography training with Thomas Smillie, director of the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Photography. Johnston began contributing to national magazines, most often *Demorest's Family Magazine* but also *Illustrated American*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Prompted in part by these assignments, as well as freelance work for George Grantham Bain's news service (the first such picture agency in the United States), Johnston made the bold decision, around her thirtieth birthday, to open her own portrait studio in a purpose-built two-story brick structure at the rear of the garden behind her parents' house in Washington, D.C.¹⁸

Her accomplishments did not go unnoticed. In 1895, *The Washington Times* noted: "Miss Frances Benjamin Johnston is the only lady in the business of photography in the city, and in her skillful hands it has become an art that rivals the geniuses of the Old World."¹⁹ Her confidence that this was so shines



Fig. 1. FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON
Untitled (self-portrait in her Washington, D.C., studio). 1896
Gelatin silver print, 7¼ x 6¾ in. (19.7 x 15.7 cm)
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

through in the 1896 self-portrait made in this studio, which shows her as a defiantly liberated woman, with her skirt hiked up, beer stein in one hand and cigarette in the other (fig. 1). Johnston's entrepreneurial ambition was entwined with her bohemian sensibility; her artistic training was essential to both.



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Without Education.

*Mrs. Black nail and Child.
Group.*

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Thanksgiving Day lesson at the Whittier.



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A cooking lesson.



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Virginia Hall.

*Containing Dining room, Chapel,
and rooms for Teachers and colored girls.*



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