

Seward Johnson Sculptures On-Site at Willowwood:

Brief Introduction in Main Walkway near Shingle Barn:

John Seward Johnson (J. Seward Johnson) was a sculptor and philanthropist. He was born on April 16, 1930 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He died on March 10, 2020 in his home in Key West, Florida from cancer, a month before his 90th birthday. Seward Johnson was the grandson of Robert Wood Johnson I, the cofounder of Johnson & Johnson. His father was John Seward Johnson, Sr., Johnson and Johnson's director. John Seward Johnson, Sr., along with his brother, Robert, made J&J what it is today. Seward Johnson's mother was Ruth Dill: she was the daughter of Colonel Thomas Melville Dill, Bermuda attorney general and parliament member; sister-in-law to actor Kirk Douglas. The Johnson family had an estate in Highland Park, next door to New Brunswick.

Seward Johnson wanted his sculptures to be seen and felt viscerally, rather than attempted to be explained. As we walk, I invite you to communicate how the statues make you feel and what they remind you of-- your childhood, friends, family, partner, travel?

***Tour Guides can offer what the sculpture reminds them of, too, should the group be shy or hesitant at first.**

'Family Secret' (Parking Lot/Picnic Bench)

'Family Secret' was inspired by Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 'Two Sisters (On the Terrace)' (1881). This sculpture is part of the series "Beyond the Frame": sculptures that were inspired by Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, including the artists Claude Monet, Renoir, and Édouard Manet. These sculptures invite an intimacy that paintings can't invoke, and allow the viewer to almost become part of the scene. The sculpture was originally introduced in DC at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Notes on the original Painting, now in the Art Institute of Chicago: The "Two Sisters" title given by Renoir. The "On the Terrace" title was given by its first owner: Paul Durand-Ruel. The ladies were not actually sisters. It has a juxtaposition of solid ladies against a dreamy background with contrasting impressions. The older lady is wearing a fashionable blue boater's jacket.

***Talk about the Four Main Series as you walk to the Cottage Garden**

Seward Johnson had Four Main Series. We have 4 pieces from Celebrating the Familiar and 4 pieces from Beyond the Frame. The other pieces are not designated as belong to his four main series, but as independent pieces. The four series are 1) Celebrating the Familiar, 2) Beyond the Frame, 3) Icons Revisited- sculptures depicting cultural icons and their significance: Rosie the Riveter, American Gothic: Forever Marilyn: uninhibited sense of own vibrancy, Embracing Peace: the two people kissing symbolizing the end of WWII, 4) Points of Departure- sculptures that strayed from his standard sculptures, including "The Awakening," which became an international sensation in Washington, D.C.

'The Gardener' (Cottage Garden)

This sculpture is part of "Celebrating the Familiar," Seward Johnson's series that highlights the mundane and simple scenes from everyday life. For example, the series includes a woman holding her groceries. This sculpture weighs 350 lbs. 'The Gardener' is a sculpture that leaps out of its own bounds, as sites having this sculpture are able to customize of what the gardener is planting— the Gardener is likely to be planting something new at each place it is rented.

Prompt for visitors: What is the gardener is holding in his hand, and what is on the side that he is planting? What would you have the gardener plant?

Recommend for visitors to take Willowwood, Bamboo Brook, and the Frelinghuysen Arboretum garden and history tours at this stop.

***Talk about Johnson’s Youth here as you walk:**

Seward Johnson did not hit his stride with success until he was an adult. When he was young, he went to school at the Forman School in Litchfield, Connecticut. The Forman School was for people with dyslexia- (SJ says that dyslexia wasn’t called that at the time). Albert Einstein, who was dyslexic, was one of the academic advisors at the same time he went there. By the age of 6, he lived in London, Paris, Bermuda, and New Mexico. In New Mexico they lived on a dude ranch called Ghost Ranch, and the family befriended the painter Georgia O’Keeffe--Mother of American Modernism—and her husband, the famed photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Seward Johnson attended the University of Maine for poultry husbandry, but poor grades made him drop out. He attempted to join Johnson & Johnson with a job in management but was unsuccessful and was fired by his uncle. Seward Johnson had a troubled first marriage to Barbara Kline: he hired private investigators to see if she was being faithful (she had many extramarital affairs), she was surprised and shot one of them. They divorced officially in 1965.

‘My World’ (Rosarie)

This sculpture is part of “Celebrating the Familiar”. The sculpture shows a child reading a book depicting a porcupine-- or perhaps a hedgehog—saying that they missed out on so much (including a delicious coconut cream pie), pinning on a bow tie, seemingly getting ready to leave the house, and then says that he doesn’t want to miss out on anything more. One can assume Mr. Porcupine is leaving to seize the day and get a slice of coconut pie!

Prompt for visitors: What did you love reading when they were little? What childhood storybooks do you still recall? Did any of them encourage you to do certain things?

Recommend visitors to come back for Wednesday story time with their children, grandchildren, etc.

***Talk about Johnson’s Adulthood Here as you walk to the next stop:**

Despite all the bad luck in his youth, Seward Johnson found great success later in life as an adult.

Seward Johnson enlisted in the Navy during the Korean War from 1951-1955: Johnson spent 4 years on the U.S.S. Gloucester, the only ship hit by enemy fire during the Korean War. Upon his return home, Johnson set out on a 2,200-mile canoe trip from western Alberta to the upper edge of the Northwest Territories on the Arctic Ocean. Johnson originally was a painter who worked on canvas with acrylics. In 1960, Seward Johnson met Cecilia Joyce Horton while waiting to board an overbooked plane to Nantucket Island. She saw that he was good with his hands, and crafty, and she encouraged him to take a sculpting class. He signed up, and found a greater passion in sculpture. In 1964, he married Cecilia, and two years later their first child was born: John Seward Johnson III, who is the cofounder of BuzzFeed. In 1969 their second and last child was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts: Clelia Constance Johnson. She is a photographer and writer, and uses the alias “India Blake”.

‘Captured’ (2017): (On Bench in Lilacs)

This sculpture was inspired by his daughter, India Blake. It was named after India Blake Johnson’s first book *Captured* (poetry and photography). In 2017, Seward Johnson exhibited work with his daughter at Casina Valadier in Piazza Bucarest, Rome and was so inspired by his daughter’s work that it sparked more painting.

***Talk about Johnson’s First Sculpture Here, as you walk to the next stop:**

At age 38, in 1968, Seward Johnson worked on first sculpture, “Stainless Girl,” and was searching for someone to cast it. He met and hired Joel Meisner, who owned a foundry, to make his first cast. Against 11,000 entries, his first cast work of sculpture won the Design in Steel Art Award. Sculpting didn’t stop his “Midnight Snack” art. For “Midnight Snack,” Johnson would use trays from antique shops as his canvas, and oftentimes would put small trinkets on them.

‘Down to Earth’ (Lilacs/Patriots Path Intersection)

This sculpture is part of ‘Celebrating the Familiar’. Seward Johnson created eight editions of most of his sculptures. This particular sculpture is the original “artist proof” that he would have kept in his own private collection.

***Talk about Johnson’s Sculpting Process Here, as you walk to the next stop:**

Sculptures would take up to 2 years to complete. Johnson would make a *Maquette*: a tiny version of a sculpture that allows the artist to decide what they want the art to look like at full scale, without wasting resources. Real clothes are molded onto the sculpture. For molding, Johnson used the *lost-wax method (cire-perdue)*: metal is poured into a mold that has been created by means of a wax model. Once the mold is made, the wax model is melted and drained away. After it was molded, finely detailed electric tools were used to add his trademark clothing textures and other details.

‘Monet, our Visiting Artist’ (2008): (Patriots Path/Long Meadow)

This sculpture is part of the series “Beyond the Frame”. It is an homage to Claude Monet, and originally depicts Monet painting “Terrace at Sainte-Adresse”. The sculpture was originally titled “Copyright Violation!”. The painting is often changed to show the environment Monet is in; for example, a busy intersection in a city, or roses in a garden. Notice the details: paint on his fingers, on the paintbrush.

***Can talk about Monet’s & Impressionist influence on Seward Johnson as you walk to the next stop:**

Seward Johnson loved the work of Monet so much that he created a garden derived from Monet’s Japanese garden, including a pond with water lilies, weeping willows, and a green bridge. It even has a small boat—Monet employed a person to row out and clean the water lily leaves every morning before he would paint them. If you visit Grounds for Sculpture and eat at Rats, you can see his Monet-inspired garden.

‘A Little to the Right’ (1999) (Long Meadow Loop)

Seward Johnson’s use of patinas and paint changes dramatically over time, as we will see in the sculptures on site. This skin finish is considered a “champagne metallic,” an unrealistic skin color. Does it affect your view of this sculpture? How does it compare to the other sculptures we’ve seen?

Prompt: What might these two be looking for? Closeups of birds, trees, skyline?

‘La Promenade’ (Fall Bulbs/Hedge Row)

This sculpture is part of the series “Beyond the Frame.” It was inspired by Gustave Caillebotte’s “Paris Street; Rainy Day”.

Notes on the original painting: The view is of the Place de Dublin in Paris. Streets depicted are the Rue de Saint-Pétersbourg. The painting shows a scene of the “Hausmannization” of Paris: the reconstruction of Paris led by Emperor Napoleon III and Georges-Eugène Haussmann. The couple walking is depicted with the Haussman buildings behind them, built with “Paris Stone,” also called Luteian limestone. The couple is wearing fashionable clothes that indicate they are of the middle class. The lady is wearing a soft veil, a coat lined with fur, and diamond earrings. Her partner is wearing a top hat, bow tie, and has a well-groomed mustache. The painting shows a dark rainy day, where people are walking alone or in pairs, and not conversing with others around them. The umbrellas are almost used as shields to keep distance.

‘No Way!’ (2013) (Ted Styles Observation Deck)

This sculpture is one of the most recent pieces at Willowwood, sculpted in 2013. The person viewing the game from above is leaning on a stack of pallets, holding a pencil and game of Sudoku. One of the people playing is depicted as very focused, leaning forward, with a furrowed brow. The other person is smiling, but has upturned hands—perhaps from feeling defeated? *What do you think?* This sculpture was set in front of the Seward Johnson Center for the Arts, the first project in NJ to be LEED-certified, one of the most rigorous Green building certification programs. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. In order to become LEED-certified, buildings must meet certain requirements with carbon, energy, indoor environmental quality, and waste.

Prompt: Do you know how to play chess? Can you tell who might win?

Can encourage visitors to look out at the beautiful vista from this deck.

***Talk about the Atelier and Grounds for Sculpture as you walk to the last stop:**

In 1974, Seward and Cecilia established Johnson Atelier in Hamilton, NJ. They created the Atelier in order to help sculptors regain control over their artwork & ensure that people learning would be able to see certain techniques, which were previously well-guarded. The community brought forth apprentices who were able to work with artists including longtime family friend Georgia O’Keeffe, as well as George Segal, Michele Oka Doner, Joel Shapiro, and Toshiko Takaezu. In 1984, the developments for Grounds for Sculpture began, and in 1989 it opened to the public. In 2020, Seward Johnson passed, leaving behind 5 grandchildren.

‘Sightseeing’ (Elephant Walk Area): Final Stop

This sculpture is part of ‘Celebrating the Familiar’. It depicts an older style of a Polaroid camera.

Prompt: Have you ever seen this type of camera/did you have one? Question will depend on group.

Cameras are often used to capture moments we want to remember, from birthday parties, to weddings, to other events. Photographs are often kept and looked at to remember happy moments years later.

Likewise, here is a quote from Seward Johnson that we can end with.... **“It’s easy sometimes to forget the simple things that give us pleasure. If we open our eyes, life is marvelous.”** Enjoying art, walking in gardens, listening to music – these are all things that bring joy to one’s life, and should be done more often. Thank visitors for coming, and encourage visitors to come back for other programs.

Other FAQs you may be asked:

IF ASKED, high profile case that was all over the news when it happened: Johnson v Johnson in the 1980s: The late John Seward Johnson had bequeathed most of his estate to a former maid, Barbara Piasecka Johnson, who John Seward Johnson married late in life, in his will. Seward Johnson and his 5 siblings sought to overturn it. The decision was to give the majority to Barbara Johnson, and give some to the children.

Double Check Statue: Johnson made a sculpture, “Double Check”, of a businessman surveying the contents of his briefcase. On display in Liberty Park, it would survive the attack of the Twin Towers, despite being knocked over and covered in debris. It’s said that the sculpture is so lifelike, that the firefighters tried to rescue the statue.

Where else are Seward Johnson’s sculptures?

Grounds for Sculpture (Hamilton, NJ), Custom House Museum, Seward Johnson Atelier (Key West, Florida), MANY other places including Morristown, NJ—the statue portraying a blind man with a Seeing Eye dog around the Green, facing away from the Century 21 building, is titled “Way to Independence,” and is part of the series “Celebrating the Familiar”.

When did Grounds for Sculpture come to be?

Grounds for Sculpture began construction in 1989 and opened in 1992. It started as 15 acres with 15 works of art. Now, it has expanded to 42 acres with almost 300 sculptures.

Seward Johnson wanted the Sculpture park to be a place of Visceral Experience, Joy of Discovery, and Sensory Delight. In his Vision Statement, Johnson writes:

“Docents should guide Park visitors in a manner centered on the visitor’s observation of and experience with art rather than the artist’s intent. Docents should invite visitors to examine, think, and respond using their senses to make observations and discover meaning based upon their own experience.”

Seward Johnson Timeline

