

Seward Johnson *The Living Sculpture* Audio Guide Script

Stop 30: Introduction to Seward Johnson and *The Living Sculpture*.

The Living Sculpture: A Seward Johnson Exhibition at Willowood Arboretum showcases the art of New Jersey-based artist Seward Johnson (1930-2020), known the world over for his realistic bronze sculptures. The Morris County Park Commission is proud to host 10 life-size works by the artist.

The Living Sculpture exhibition aims to delight visitors as you explore natural surroundings at Willowood Arboretum. The special exhibition explores familiar images portrayed in connection to the plant world to reinforce the connection of art in public spaces. Mr. Johnson brought a unique voice to the world of art in public spaces, creating a sense of wandering and discovery in spaces such as public gardens. To honor that intention, we have organized *The Living Sculpture* exhibition in two circular paths which will offer a jumping off point for your own wanderings of the gardens of Willowood Arboretum to enjoy our own living sculptures - the trees that surround you, as well as the shrubs and flowers beneath.

Together the two circular paths compromise a 1-mile loop around the Arboretum. The inner section, which is 4/10ths of a mile, contains: *Family Secret*, *My World*, *The Gardener*, *Captured*, and *Down to Earth*. The outer section, the remaining 6/10ths, contains *A Little to the Right*, *La Promenade*, *Monet*, *Our Visiting Artist*, *No Way!*, and *Sightseeing*.

Seward Johnson wanted his sculptures to be seen and felt viscerally, rather than attempted to be explained. While we hope to provide background context to what you are seeing as part of *The Living Sculpture*, the experience is truly centered on your own interactions and emotions as you encounter the sculptures.

Inner Loop -

Stop 31: *Family Secret* at the Picnic Table

Family Secret is part of the series “Beyond the Frame” created in 1997. Sculptures that are part of the “Beyond the Frame” series were inspired by iconic artworks in the Impressionism and Post-Impressionism movements of the late 19th and early 20th Century. *The Living Sculpture* exhibition has two other works from this series which are on the outer loop of the tour.

Family Secret invites the viewer to become part of the scene depicted in the painting *Two Sisters (On the Terrace)* by Auguste Renoir. In the original painting Renoir depicted the joy of a warm and beautiful day. The older girl, wearing the female boater’s blue flannel, is posed in the center of the evocative landscape backdrop of Chatou (pronounced Sha-Too), a suburban town where the artist spent much of the spring of 1881. She gazes absently beyond her younger companion, who seems to have just dashed into the picture. Renoir juxtaposed solid, almost life-size figures against a landscape that—like a stage set—seems a realm of pure vision and fantasy. The small basket with ball of wool contains all the colors that the artist used to create the rest of the painting.

We invite you to take a moment and put yourselves into the scene, letting the background of Willowood Arboretum form your backdrop.

From here your next stop is up the path and to the right in the Cottage Garden

Stop 32: *The Gardener*

The Gardener (1987) is part of Seward Johnson's "Celebrating the Familiar" series and what is more familiar to so many than spending time tending to a garden? Each location which hosts *The Gardener* has the opportunity to incorporate their own plants and gardens into the experience of *The Gardener*, and here at Willowwood Arboretum we are highlighting the work required to keep the Cottage Garden visitor-ready.

Seward Johnson's sculptures are primarily created from cast bronze using the lost wax method. The "Lost Wax" is the process by which a metal sculpture is cast from an artist's original sculpture. This ancient method has been used since the third millennium B.C. The term "Lost Wax" comes from the wax replica that is melted out creating a mould of the sculpture, thus it is "lost" to receive the bronze. Today, bronze casting is essentially the same as it was in the past and modern sculptors who want their pieces cast in bronze depend upon a foundry. In 1973 Seward Johnson opened his own, the Johnson Atelier which would remain open for 30 years and host the Johnson Atelier Technical School of Sculpture. Each finalized piece can weigh between 300 and 36,000 lbs. This particular piece which is on the smaller side, weighs 350 lbs. and you can see the bronze itself in the figure's skin tone.

From here your next stop is in the Rosarie, which you can find by following the path between the Tubbs House and the Red Barn.

Stop 33: *My World*

Seward Johnson enjoyed creating sculptures of both adults and children. While Seward Johnson would eventually become a successful artist, his own youth was full of challenges. Specifically, Johnson struggled academically due to his dyslexia and attended the Forman School in Litchfield, Connecticut which had opened in 1930 as school committed to utilizing the best available resources and latest research-driven techniques to address the specific learning disabilities of their students.

His Sculpture *My World* (1992) shows a child immersed in the world of a book. The reader is placed within Willowwood's Rosarie, a garden with its own touches of whimsy including a "door to nowhere" to match the whimsical nature of a woodland creature wearing a bow tie on the hunt for coconut pie.

Which childhood book do you read over and over? Was there a particular book's world that you wanted to fall into?

From here your next stop is in the lilac beds, which you can find by following the path behind the Rosarie and to the left.

Stop 34: *Captured*

Captured (2013) was inspired by Seward Johnson's daughter India Blake Johnson's book of poetry and photography which the sculpture features. Johnson's work throughout his career, of which this is a late

example, often highlight stillness as much as they do movement. In *Captured* its subject has an alert stillness reading its book. The stillness conveyed here asks the viewer to notice its presence, to slow down and contemplate what you are seeing.

Sculpting was not Seward Johnson's first foray into art. Johnson was first a painter who worked on canvas with acrylics. It was after meeting his future wife Cecilia Joyce Horton while waiting to board an overbooked plane to Nantucket Island that his creative trajectory would change. Cecilia encouraged him to take a sculpting class feeling the form was suited to his skills and artistic goals. He signed up, and found a greater passion in sculpture.

We invite you to peek over the reader's shoulder to read the poem she has been caught reading, or perhaps join her on the bench. Does the poem she is reading speak to you? If you were to write a poem, what around you now would inspire you?

From here your next stop is just ahead down the path.

Stop 35: *Down to Earth*

Seward Johnson created eight editions of most of his sculptures. The edition of *Down to Earth* (1995) on display is considered the artist proof which is the sculpture that the artist keeps in their collection. Many of the sculptures on view as part of *The Living Sculpture* are the artist proofs. Johnson's process always began with a maquette, a smaller clay model on which the artist can experiment in order to visualize how it might look and to work out approaches and materials for how it might be made before moving on to full scale. In his process Johnson would often take weeks or months at the maquette stage which he studied people in order to ensure he was producing the details he wanted to, especially in expressions.

One of the most difficult areas of realistic sculpture is capturing the human face. Seward Johnson embraced realism since it provides an immediate resonance with the viewer, and the face is an important component of that. In *Down to Earth* this gardener kneels to ready the ground for plantings. What emotions do you see on her face? Does it match your own feeling of working in the dirt? What do you think plants and flowers bring to a space?

From here your next stop is in the long meadow.

Outer Loop -

Stop 36: *Monet, Our Visiting Artist*

The siting, the placement, and an emphasis on blending the artwork with the environment became primary focuses of Seward Johnson's work during his "Beyond the Frame" series. Johnson was struck with the importance Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artist put on placing figures in natural contexts and on the beauty and appeal of the landscape. Johnson hoped the pieces within this series would open viewers to the emotional power of art viewed in nature by moving around, into, and through the sculptures allowing for the ability to see the piece from numerous perspectives, including that of the figures themselves. The sculpture has within it many details that reflect the artistic process, including paint on its fingers.

Monet, Our Visiting Artist (2008) was created as an homage to the artist's painting "Terrace at Sainte-Adresse". The bronze figure has since been shown "painting" other inspired scenes in an "art imitating art imitating life" scenario. Here in *The Living Sculpture* Monet captures a scene of the Long Meadow, one of the grand views of Willowood Arboretum.

From here your next stop is along the path to the right along the Long Meadow Loop.

Stop 37: A Little to the Right

Our brains simulate the actions, moods, and experiences captured in the art we see. As you approached *A Little to the Right (1985)* did you find yourself looking off to the horizon to see what the woman is looking for through her binoculars?

Much of Seward Johnson's work, over 150 sculptures, falls within his "Celebrating the Familiar" series. In it, Johnson is working to have his viewers engage with the idea of their humanity and of embracing the mundane. By choosing simple, everyday activities to be foregrounded and frozen in time Johnson gives us space to observe life as we live it.

Seward Johnson's use of paint and patina to represent skin has evolved over the more than 50 years he spent creating sculptures. The skin finish on this particular sculpture is considered a champagne metallic. Does an un-realistic skin color affect your interpretation of the sculpture?

From here your next stop is down the path to the right along the Hedge Row.

Stop 38: La Promenade

La Promenade (1995) is inspired by Gustave Caillebotte's (pronunciation: Kay -E-bot) famous painting "Paris Street; Rainy Day." (1887) Seward Johnson focused much of his work on the importance of relationships, of how humans interact with each other. Looking at *La Promenade* what do you notice about how Johnson has interpreted their expressions?

Johnson said that interacting with his pieces gives viewers a sense of intimacy which you cannot get from a painting. The painter took the three-dimensional and made it two-dimensional and in the two-dimensional space the viewer is limited to just one viewpoint. When conceptualizing his "Beyond the Frame" series Seward Johnson reverse engineered the process, making it three-dimensional once again, creating new avenues of scale, depth, and access.

In the "Beyond the Frame" works Johnson called 'his territory' the portions of the work that are not viewable in the original painting. These are the areas he must craft from research and attention to detail. In the original painting the legs of the figures below their shins are not viewable, so Johnson had to craft shoes and the bottom of the lady's skirt on his own. These are also the areas where Johnson liked to pull the viewer's focus, hoping that they would be on the lookout for where he interjects his own expression and humorous touches in the smallest details. The other component is having removed the subjects from their original background Johnson asks the viewer to focus on their new surroundings and how that effects their understanding of the figures.

The next stop in *The Living Sculpture* is ahead on the Ted Styles Observation Deck.

Stop 39: *No Way!*

There is an element of sweetness in Seward Johnson's people that grows out of their earnestness or their concentration on daily tasks. Johnson had the goal of showing people who may not see it that the daily tasks of their lives are central parts of the beauty in being alive, especially how we choose to recreate. In *No Way!* (2013) we see a group spending time together. The person viewing the game from above is holding a pencil and game of Sudoku. The others are focused on a game of chess, one 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 their posture is meant to express? Can you foresee who will win based on how the pieces are placed on the board?

Seward Johnson encourages interaction with his sculptures. In the case of *No Way!* What items are being leaned on by the standing figure are at the discretion of the institution hosting the sculpture.

The next stop in *The Living Sculpture* is down the path as you approach Pan's Garden and the Tubbs House in the Elephant Walk Area.

Stop 40: *Sightseeing*

One of Seward Johnson's early career goals was to encourage people to interact with public parks and gardens. He understood that the image of someone performing ordinary tasks comforted people and helped them feel at ease in their environments. It wasn't so long ago that someone visiting Willowood Arboretum might bring a camera like the one featured in *Sightseeing* (1987) but for many this ordinary task is now completed using their cell phone.

Seward Johnson has captured many aspects of time over the years, from headlines in newspapers to everyday fashion for more than 40 years and as he would say, "If you know where to look for it and how to look at it, life is marvelous." By portraying the daily activities of people in the time they were created his sculptures are a time capsule, reflecting change over time. What do you think might be completely different in how we interact in our environments over the next 40 years?