

# Virtual Tour

## Materials and Activities

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### Introduction

Greetings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston! While we are so disappointed that you and your classmates could not visit our museum in person, we are excited to share some of the experience you would have had while visiting. Follow the outline below for how to best use the included documents to explore a work from the Museum's collection. Not ready for the fun to end? Complete one of the included activities to go deeper into the work!

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### Goals

- Students will practice visual literacy and communication skills.
- Students will develop observation skills.
- Students will develop aesthetic awareness, imagination, perception, and appreciation of John Biggers' *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival*.

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### Outcomes

- Students will describe a work of art.
- Students will create a "foil friend."
- Students will classify types of energy.
- Students will practice writing and spelling skills.

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### Materials

Pencil, paper, optional aluminum foil, curiosity

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### Outline

- Begin by reading through the "Learning to Look" document for some observation tips.
- Continue by opening the image file and expanding it to full screen. Spend a few minutes looking at the image in silence.
- Next, walk through the "Question Quest" document while looking at the image.

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### Ready for more?

#### Complete one of the following activities:

- Become a Part of the Art
- A-Z Game
- SmART Science



John Biggers, *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival*, 1959–63, tempera and acrylic on canvas, museum purchase funded by Duke Energy, 85.3.

A "jubilee" is a celebration of a special anniversary or season. What does jubilee mean to you? Create your own work of art and share with us on Instagram using #LearningThroughArtMFAH. Remember to tag your school or district!



John Biggers, *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival*, 1959–63, tempera and acrylic on canvas, museum purchase funded by Duke Energy, 85.3.





**Artist:** John Biggers

**Title:** *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival*

**Medium:** Tempera and acrylic on canvas

**Owner:** The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

**Credit Line:** Museum purchase funded by Duke Energy.

## Connecting to the Work of Art

*Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival* depicts the annual harvest festival, which celebrates the cyclical passage of the seasons, the renewal of the earth, and the rhythms of nature that are echoed in the life of the Akan people. The artist John Biggers created this painting based on a series of drawings that chronicle the rich culture and customs of the Ghana region in West Africa that he witnessed during his travels to Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria in 1957. In the foreground, women dressed in white sing the songs of the harvest and dance to the ceremonial drums. To the left in the background, a royal procession brings the king and queen, covered by great umbrellas, into the scene. At the far right, men beat out a rhythm on monumental, ceremonial drums. Biggers commented:

*Drummers enchant the crowd with a pulsating rhythm that excites performers and spectators alike... The inner happiness that can be shared only with one's dearest friend as well as the outgoing gaiety that one can share with all the world seem mirrored in the faces of the harvest time merry-makers.*<sup>1</sup>

Rather than focusing on the royal party overseeing the festival, Biggers instead provides a panorama of the festival including the joyous participation of both women and children. To Biggers, the focal point of the celebration was the dance as response to the drums: the swaying rhythms of the women in the foreground dominate the composition. The repetition of curving lines and forms and areas of white creates a sense of dynamism and movement that is enhanced by the warm colors. The depiction of richly decorated fabrics reveals Biggers's eye for detail and pattern.

In 1957 Biggers was a pioneer in traveling to Africa. His interest in his African heritage led him to apply for and receive a UNESCO fellowship to study traditional culture patterns in West Africa. Out of his experiences he developed a unique synthesis of African, European, and American art that influenced numerous younger artists. Alvia Wardlaw, director and curator of the University Museum at Texas Southern University, noted while discussing John Biggers and the influence of his travels:

*I think it represents in so many ways, just the richness of what Dr. Biggers found in those travels to Africa. For him, it was like a reaffirmation of what he valued in his culture here in America as a Black man.*

Born in Gastonia, North Carolina, John Biggers was educated at Hampton Institute and received his BA, MA, and PhD at Pennsylvania State University. In 1949 he moved to Houston to establish the

art department at Texas Southern University, a new university for Black students. Alvia Wardlaw described the profound impact that Biggers had on the university and Houston's creative community:

*Biggers brought to Houston a new era. Texas Southern was like a haven for all of us, there were no limits, and it was an incredibly vibrant intellectual atmosphere... The art department at Texas Southern was a visionary department. Students had to master drawing, painting, weaving, ceramics, sculpture, and mural painting. And this was part of the idea that John Biggers had when he came to Houston, to create a space for African-American artists, for young Black creative men and women to express themselves, to create history, to reflect on their own past, on their own roots, and to do it in a way that was technically very strong.*

Biggers also played a role in the desegregation of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The artist's drawing *The Cradle* was featured in the Museum's 25th Annual Houston Artists Exhibition in 1950, where it was awarded the annual purchase prize and became the first work by an artist of African descent to enter the collection. However, the Museum, like nearly all civic and cultural institutions in Houston at the time, strictly regulated admission in line with Jim Crow laws, and Biggers was excluded from the exhibition opening. Using this egregious injustice as an example, the Museum's director, James Chillman, forced the board of trustees to fully open the Museum to people of color.

During his long and distinguished career at Texas Southern, Biggers taught three generations of Houston artists and contributed immeasurably to the life of the city. He was strongly influenced by the tradition of Mexican murals, and all art students at Texas Southern created murals. Biggers himself contributed many murals to the city, including those at the Blue Triangle Y.M.C.A., the Science Building at TSU, and the Music Hall. He said of his work:

*The role of art is to express the triumph of the human spirit over the mundane and the material. It is also to express the universal myths and archetypes of the universal family of man.... My motivation is to portray the very rare and unseen spirituality of the Afro-American that is universal for all mankind.*<sup>2</sup>

### Footnotes

1. John T. Biggers, *Ananse, the Web of Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 93.

2. *Fresh Paint: The Houston School* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1985), p. 104.

# Learning to Look



## 1. Active Looking

## 2. Choices

## 3. Context

## 4. Interpretation

Use this guided looking process to slow down and take time to make careful observations that ultimately lead to deeper interpretations. Be sure to give enough time for silent looking and thinking and be careful about making assumptions. Support ideas with visual information and include contextual material carefully. This type of discovery works best in a collaborative conversation.

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The Learning Through Art program is endowed by Melvyn and Cyvia Wolff. The Learning Through Art curriculum website is made possible in part by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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### 1. Active Looking *Take an inventory of what you see.*

- Consider texture, surface, light/shadow, color, composition, narrative, subject, and other elements of art and principles of design.
- Talk about what you notice and try to avoid jumping to conclusions and interpretations. This step is crucial to secure a solid foundation for rich conversation.

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### 2. Choices *What could the artist have done differently?*

- Consider scale, materials, colors, subject, orientation, composition, etc.
- How would these changes affect the way we experience this work of art?
- Given the choices the artist did make, think about what they may mean for the work.
- Remember that the quality of the conversation is what is important, not finding the artist's "answer."

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### 3. Context *What connections or associations do you have with this work of art?*

- Does anything about this work of art remind you of something?
- What if you were told the title of the work or the country in which it was made?
- Act as the gatekeeper of information. Pepper the conversation with context as the students explore the work of art.
- Do you have outside knowledge that could contribute to an interpretation? Perhaps about politics, history, art history, technique, etc.?

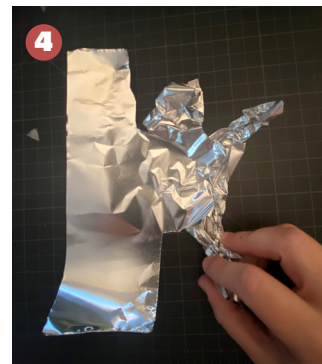
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### 4. Interpretation *What might the artist be trying to communicate through this work of art?*

- There is not just one grand, unifying meaning for a work of art. Use this observation process to collectively create an interpretation using the visual evidence, context information, and group discovery.

# Become a pART of the ART

- 1** Cut aluminum foil or other material of choice into a 6 x 8" rectangle.
- 2** Position the foil rectangle vertically and tear two 2" cuts on the top edge of the foil rectangle. The middle section will become the head, and the two side sections will become arms.
- 3** At the bottom of the foil, tear one 3" cut. This will become the two legs.
- 4** Mold the foil piece into a three-dimensional "person" by squeezing the "waist," and then mold the head, arms, and legs.
- 5** Show where your foil friend might be in the work of art. Support with evidence from the things you see in the work of art.



# A to Z Game



Observe John Biggers's *Jubilee: Ghana Harvest Festival* and list discoveries beginning with the letters on the right.

A  
B  
C  
D  
E  
F  
G  
H  
I  
J  
K  
L  
M  
N  
O  
P  
Q  
R  
S  
T  
U  
V  
W  
X  
Y  
Z

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# SmART Science

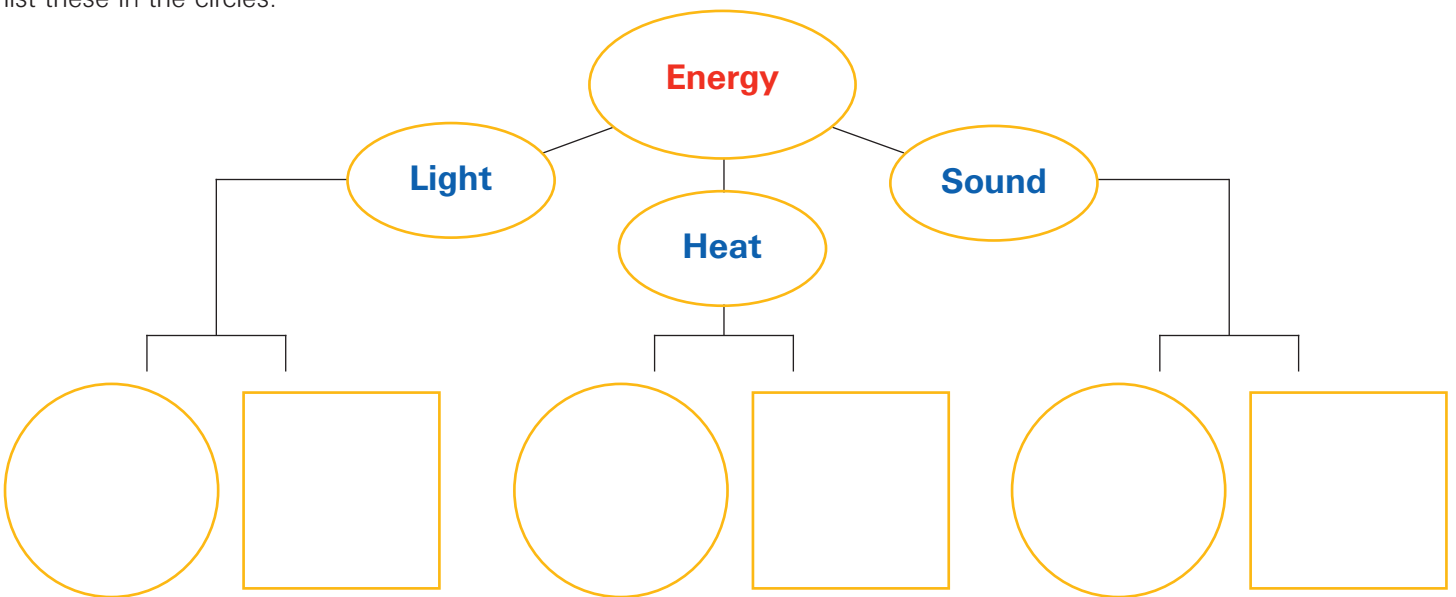
*Search and See...*

*Make a New Discovery!*



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**1.** Imagine you have jumped into this painting in Ghana, Africa. Where would you see examples of different forms of energy? List those in the squares. Now return to your classroom and observe the forms of energy you see in the room; list these in the circles.



Want to go deeper? Try your hand at the activities on the following page!

**2.** How would you describe the temperature in this painting? Would the highest temperature be near the water, on the footpath, or somewhere else? Explain, using heat and light energy clues.

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**3. Drum up some sound energy with this simple experiment!**

You will need: 1 rubber band • 1 large piece of plastic wrap • 1 large can • 1 ruler • 1 small can • salt

Pull the plastic over the open end of the large can while your partner puts the rubber band over it. Sprinkle salt on top of the plastic. Hold the small can close to the salt and beat it like a drum to create a sound. Notice what happens to the salt. What does this tell you about sound waves? Try tapping the small can louder and softer; how does the salt react? Now look at the painting, and guess how far the vibrations of the drumbeat travel. Who might hear the drums?

**Riddle to Solve**

*What has waves but doesn't require water?*