



Starry Crown
John Biggers, American, born 1924
1987, Acrylic on canvas, 59 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches
Dallas Museum of Art, Museum League Purchase Fund

About the Artist

John Biggers was born in 1924 in Gastonia, North Carolina. He was the seventh child in his family, and when he went to college at Hampton Institute in Virginia, he planned to study plumbing. During his first year there, he enrolled in an art class taught by an influential art educator, Viktor Lowenfeld. Lowenfeld was an Austrian Jew who had been forced to leave his country because of Nazi persecution. Professor Lowenfeld encouraged his students to learn about the culture and creativity of their own heritage, and he introduced John Biggers to African sculpture and to works by other African-American artists. Biggers recalls that at the time he thought the work was ugly, unlike anything I had seen before.

After leaving Hampton Institute, Biggers went to Pennsylvania State University where he earned his master's degree and later, his doctoral degree. In 1949, Biggers moved to Houston, Texas, where he became the founding chairman of the art department at Texas Southern University, then called Texas State University for Negroes. He held that position for thirty-four years, and during those years Biggers committed himself to teaching young, black artists.

In 1957, John Biggers made his first trip to Africa. He had hoped for some time to visit the land of his ancestors, and with the help of a grant from UNESCO, he was able to travel to West Africa. From this trip Biggers developed *Ananse: the Web of Life* in

Africa and 89 drawings that were a visual diary of his travels. During his stay, he tried to photograph and sketch all that he saw: men and women in the markets, the shrines, fishermen, boys and girls, and people involved in activities of everyday life.

About the Art

In *Starry Crown*, the patterns reflect images and symbols from African life and culture. The geometric shapes, seen in the background and foreground, resemble traditional patterns of kuba textiles and the patterns in quilts made by African-American women. These images are the images of Biggers' childhood and his African heritage. He uses the quilt as a metaphor for the meaning of the African and African-American experience. He refers to their geometric patterning and the other geometric shapes that he includes in much of his work as "sacred geometry."

The name "Starry Crown" comes from the line of an African-American spiritual. Stars, surrounded by the color blue, appear above the women as a reference to heaven. The woman in the center is making a star-like shape with string held in her mouth and hands.

The string represents the spoken word that passes traditions and knowledge from one generation to another. For Biggers, women represent the continuation of tradition. They are a symbol of cosmic power, traditional knowledge, and creative power. The women on either side of the central figure are creating a cradle with the string. This action symbolizes creativity and is a reference to string games played by children who had no other toys. The quilt itself refers to women's creativity and maternal giving, since quilts, made from scraps, frequently were the only "gift" that an African-American woman could afford to make for her family.

Additional Information

Visual symbols are images that represent a concept, an idea, or a quality. For example, an image of a lion might represent courage. Biggers includes many visual symbols in *Starry Crown* and his other work:

Stars: Stars can represent light, especially heavenly light, wisdom, and nobility.

Quilts: A quilt can be a protective, sheltering cover, but can also represent the care mothers provide for their children.

Strings: As the strings flow from mouth to hands and to mouth and hands again, they can symbolize the passing of words from person to person and from generation to generation.

Pots or kettles: Used for cooking and for washing clothes, they symbolize the nourishment and purification.

A spider: Spiders are characters in many myths and legends from cultures around the world. They are also spinners of webs, just as story tellers can be spinners of tales. Cloth is spun to make fabric for garments and for the quilts that are so prevalent in Biggers paintings.

A cow and two goats: Biggers says that these animals represent animals present at the

birth of Jesus.

Canoes or boats: Boats can carry people from one place to another on rivers and seas. They can represent a journey, perhaps to safety or through life.

The three women: The women are dressed in costumes of three of the major cultures of Africa: Benin, Egypt, and Dogon. They can symbolize motherhood and continuity.

About the Time and Place

During the height of the Civil Rights movement in the mid-sixties, interest in African culture was an important part of the lives of African-Americans who hoped to develop a sense of pride and purpose within their communities. Many black artists went to Paris or other European cities or to New York during those turbulent times. After Biggers' trip to Africa in 1957, he returned to Texas. He said:

"I'm a guy who didn't go to New York. My only obsession has been and still is to try to portray the meaning of African-American life in the South...I'm interested in the spiritual aspiration of Black people; how their spirit soars above the mundane and the material and all their problems...It's been a study of the meaning of vegetation, the landscape, the weather, the color of the South, the color of the people... the meaning of religion, the whole cultural pattern."