

John Thomas Biggers:

An Inventory of His Art Collection in the Art Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Biggers, John Thomas, 1924-2001
Title:	John Thomas Biggers Art Collection
Dates:	1955-1983, undated
Extent:	17 drawings, 1 poster (18 items)
Abstract:	The John Biggers Collection includes the illustration drawings for John Mason Brewer's <i>Aunt Dicy Tales</i> (1956), a crayon drawing, and a poster.
Call Number:	Art Collection AR-00023
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research. A minimum of twenty-four hours is required to pull art materials to the Reading Room.

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gifts, 1959, 1962, and Purchase (R15206), 2003
Processed by:	Helen Young, 2004
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

John Thomas Biggers was born on April 13, 1924, in Gastonia, North Carolina, the youngest of seven children. He studied art first at Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1941, and then was drafted into the Navy in 1943. After his discharge in 1945, Biggers followed his mentor Viktor Lowenfeld to Pennsylvania State University. There he received his B.S. and M.S. degrees in 1948, and his doctorate in 1954.

In 1949, he accepted an offer to establish the art department at the newly created Texas State University for Negroes in Houston (now Texas Southern University). He would remain at the University for thirty-four years, until his retirement in 1983. While there, he established a mural program whereby each senior art student had to complete a mural on campus. One hundred and fourteen of these murals remain at Texas Southern University. His own legacy there is a fifty-foot mural at the student center, entitled *Family Unity*. Biggers' lithograph *The Upper Room*, from the Multicultural Art Print Series, is a detail from that mural.

John Biggers is best known for his murals, many of which are in Houston, including his well-known 1953 depiction of African-American women in American life at the Blue Triangle branch of the YWCA, which served as an inspiration for his drawings of Dicy. He produced the illustrations for *Aunt Dicy Tales* in 1955-1956 for his friend, author J. Mason Brewer, just a year before the artist's life-altering trip to West Africa. This trip inspired, among other things, Biggers' book *Ananse: The Web of Life in Africa* (University of Texas Press, 1962). Once Biggers had experienced his African roots by traveling to Ghana and Nigeria on a UNESCO grant in 1957, his art changed forever. The drawings of Dicy were the last commission in his early style. Biggers recognized these images as some of the strongest works he had ever done, spurred by his intent, expressed to Brewer, to bring illustration to a higher level of art.

In 1990 John Biggers was awarded an honorary doctor of letters degree from Hampton University. He died in January 2001, survived by his wife and sister.

Sources:

Cotter, Holland. "John Biggers, Painter Who Explored African Life, Dies at 76". *New York Times*, January 30, 2001.

The Web of Life: The Art of John Biggers. Getty Arts EdNet. 2001.
<http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/resources/Biggers/> (accessed 25 March 2001).

Scope and Contents

The John Biggers Collection includes the illustration drawings for John Mason Brewer's *Aunt Dicy Tales* (1956), a crayon drawing, and a poster. The *Aunt Dicy Tales* series consists of fifteen drawings, arranged in the order in which they appear in the book; their titles are also taken from the book.

Related Material

The Ransom Center's Art Collection also has in its Limited Editions Club Collection a portfolio of Biggers' lithographs for Maya Angelou's *Our Grandmothers* (1994). There are also John Biggers materials in the Ransom Center's Library.

Series I. *Aunt Dicy Tales* Illustrations, 1955-1956

Accession Number: 79.318.1 Aunt Dicy and Family Migrating to Lee County; endpapers illustration. 1955. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 50.8 x 76.2 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.15 Aunt Dicy and the Mailman. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon, col.), 77.8 x 91.8 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.2 According to Where the Drop Falls. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 67.1 x 48.6 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.3 Aunt Dicy and the Snuff Salesman. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 51.6 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.4 Aunt Dicy and the Chocolate Candy Bar. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 51.6 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.5 Uncle June and the Animal in the Woods. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 51.8 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.6 Aunt Dicy and the Peach Seeds. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 42.3 x 71.7 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.7 Aunt Dicy in the Courtroom. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 51 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.8 Aunt Dicy and Reverend Jackson's Sermon. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 50.4 cm. **Location**
Flat file

Accession Number: 79.318.9 Aunt Dicy and the County Sheriff's Election. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 50.2 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.10 Aunt Dicy and Booker T. Washington's Speech. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.5 x 51.3 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.11 Aunt Dicy's Train Trip. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.5 x 51.1 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.12 Aunt Dicy and the New Brand of Snuff. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.2 x 51.4 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.13 Aunt Dicy and the Family Will. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 76.5 x 50.2 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.14 Aunt Dicy at the Heavenly Gates. 1955-1956. 1 drawing (conté crayon), 75.7 x 50.8 cm.	Location Flat file
Accession Number: 79.318.18 Aunt Dicy and Her Friends. 1956. 1 painting (tempera and ink), 60.3 x 75.3 cm.	Location Flat file

Series II. Other Works, circa 1955-1983

Accession Number: 2004.6 Mid Passage [several hands reaching out through boards]. circa 1955. 1 drawing (crayon on corrugated board), 122.5 x 30.5 cm.

Location
Painting
storage

Accession Number: 79.318.16 John Biggers: Bridges [poster with illustration: *Wheel in the Wheel*]. 1983. 1 poster (col.), 60.9 x 45.9 cm.

Location
Flat file