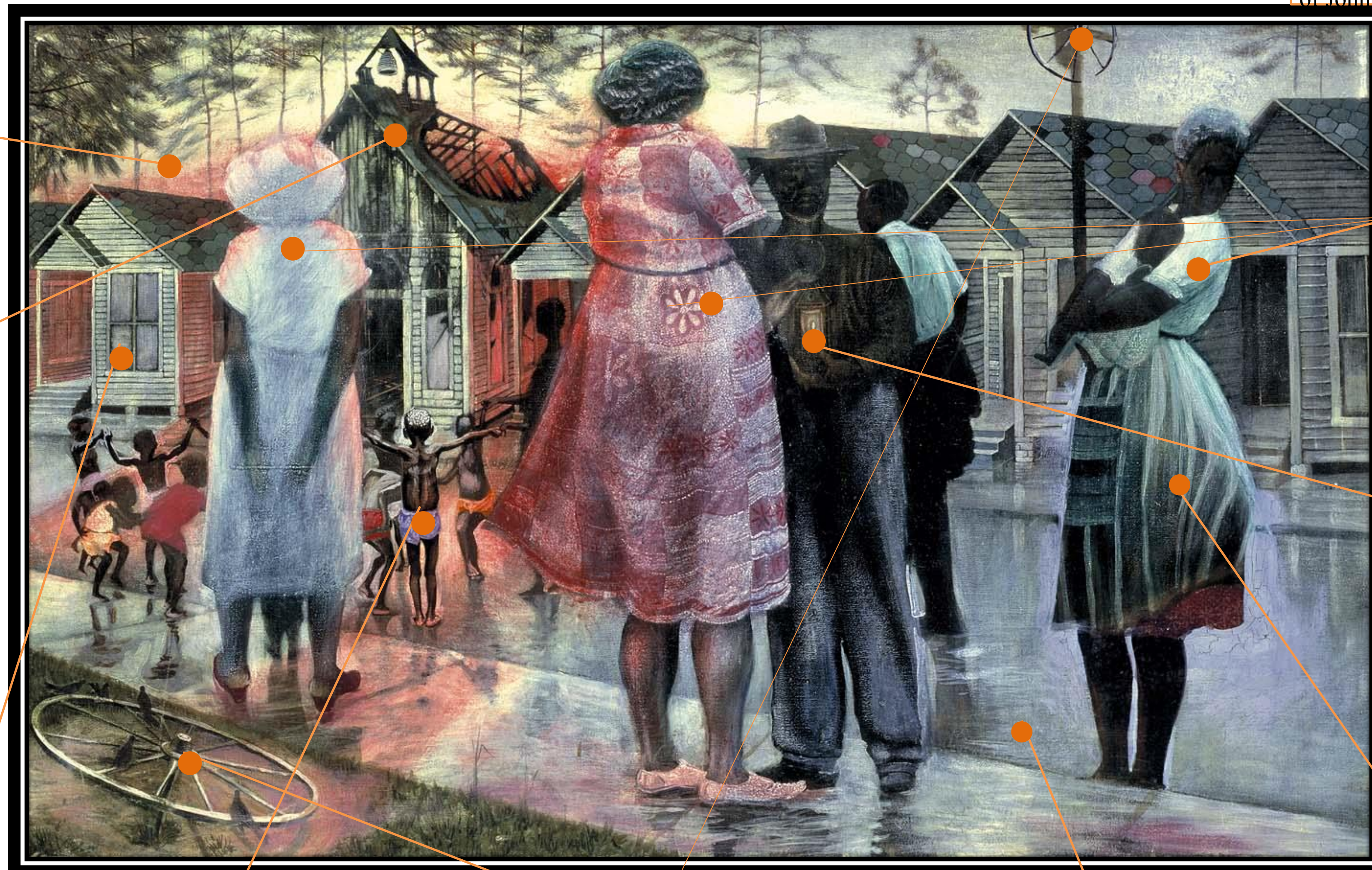


JOHN BIGGERS

John Biggers was born on April 13, 1924 in Gastonia, North Carolina. He was born into a large family that valued hard work, education, and creative pursuits. These positive reinforcements helped him to survive the “Jim Crow” racist attitudes that most whites held towards him and other African Americans at the time. The importance of close-knit family would later become a common theme in many of his works as an artist. He became interested in art after studying with Viktor Lowenfeld at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Several years later he established the art department for the new Texas State University for Negroes. By the 1950’s he was considered a major artist, especially in the black communities, and was beloved for his African heritage-themed art. *Shotgun Third Ward #1* is one of his most important depictions of African American heritage through its use of symbols, such as the Shotgun Houses and wheels, and depiction of events in African American lives.



SHOTGUN, THIRD WARD #1 (1966)



The **Third Ward** refers to Houston's Third Ward, a community of African Americans. Biggers once lived here. There is no specific evidence to suggest that this piece illustrates a historical event. Rather, it seems to be an illustration of a general event that touched all African American lives at some point, including that of John Biggers’.

The **time of day** in this piece is ambiguous. Is it sunrise or sunset? We are led to believe that it is most likely sunset by the clothing of the adults and children. The adults are fully clothed with day-wear, and children have light clothing and swimsuits on. The children’s light clothing and swimsuits also seem to allude to it being one of the warmer months, perhaps in late spring or summer.

The **women** are painted larger than the men to highlight Biggers’ belief in the wonderfulness of women and their great importance in African American culture. To Biggers, African American women played a huge role as the spiritual leaders of the family. As mothers they were in charge of taking care of the family and teaching children valuable lessons. They were also models of hard workers who had a work ethic and took pride in their work.

A **burning church** among untouched shotgun houses. It seems to be a small community church, judging by its placement among the shotgun homes. This symbolizes the contrast of everyday African American life: safety (equated with the shotgun houses) vs. danger (the burning church). Biggers had a strong belief in the importance and safety of the Shotgun House in African American culture.

The **candle**, with the man protectively covering it, symbolizes hope and determination. In contrast to the women and children, who turn away from the viewer and the threats of racism, the man is boldly turned forward. His clothing and stance are unimpressive, but nonetheless he is willing to persevere for freedom in the face of persecution.

Racism is the most likely cause of the fire, judging from the smashed windows in the front and sides. The arson is an attack on African American’s spirituality, one of the few things that they can find comfort in amid the intense opposition. The church, which is typically the symbol of safety, has had its usual meaning juxtaposed in this artwork.

The **woman** is accentuated by her half-turned position. She is the only other character besides the man with the candle who faces the viewer. Note the newborn child in her arms. While the man seems to be facing the viewer with courage and determination, the woman seems to be subtly pleading with the viewer to not submit her young baby to the horrors of racism.

Shotgun houses were important and recurring subjects for Biggers because they were an integral piece of African history. Shotgun houses were places of community, where families could interact in relative safety. The name “shotgun house” hails from the design of the house, where the rooms were built behind each other so that a shotgun could be fired from the front door and go through the whole house to the back without hitting any walls.

The **wheel** became a common symbol in many of Biggers’ works, symbolizing eternal movement and spiritual progress. Here in *Shotgun Third Ward #1*, the placement of the two wheels is important. The closest one is behind the women, symbolizing the continual movement of time and history, regardless of whether the women and their families are aware of it or not. Birds rest upon it, an assurance that spirituality will accompany the onward march of history. The upper wheel is located above a shotgun house, symbolizing the spirituality and eternal nature of African American life and culture despite the oppressive racism.

Note the way that the **pavement** is painted. It has the appearance of wetness, signifying the presence of firefighters and the use of fire hydrants.

The **children** here in this piece symbolize the next generation. They are carefree, despite the burning church in front of them, and unaffected by the racism that likely caused the church’s demise. The adults in the piece seem to shield them from the viewer, symbolizing their desire to shield the children from judgment and racism, much like Biggers’ family did for him and his siblings.

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