



figure 11
Harvesters I
Brown cardboard with conté
crayon and gouache
1947

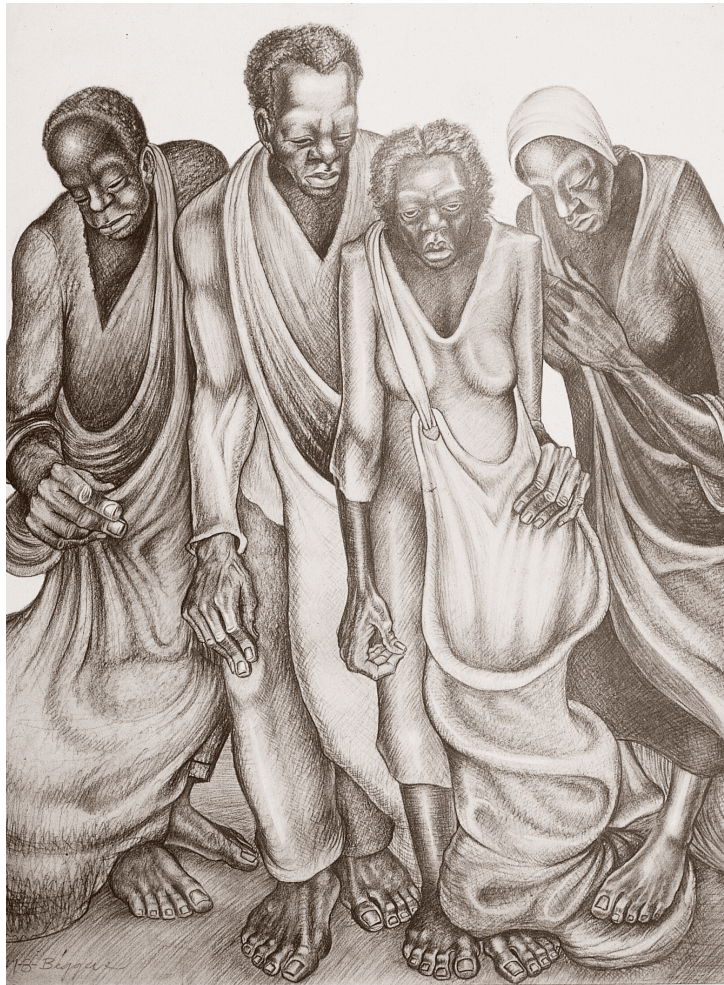


figure 12
The Cotton Pickers
Conté crayon on paper
1947

I'm trying to portray working people. I drew people I knew about. I knew the characteristics of hard working people. Got a joy out of making hands and feet large, even more than faces. Workers have strong hands and bad feet. That's why my work emphasizes backs, hands, and feet. I spent a good deal of time looking at the physiques of people who had been doing hard labor. Lots of people became disgusted with me, portraying this.³⁰

The Cotton Pickers (1947) (fig. 12) similarly depicts a moving image showing the effects of a lifetime spent picking cotton. This drawing too has a strong sculptural quality, created by skillful cross contour lines with conté crayon and gouache on brown board. Though anatomy and proportion do not yet reflect the classical standards, the skillful use of chiaroscuro creates the feeling of sculptural form.



figure 13
Night of the Poor
Preparatory drawing
for mural, Pennsylvania
State University
1949



figure 14
Day of Plenty
Preparatory drawing
for mural, Pennsylvania
State University
1949

In his senior year, Biggers threw himself into his work with deep feeling and produced a series of powerful mural drawings: *Burial*, *Sharecroppers*, *Baptism*, *Night of the Poor*, and *Day of Plenty*. They were installed on the Penn State campus and later, some at the Hampton University Museum. Working drawings for *Day of Plenty* (1948–1949) and *Night of the Poor* (1948–1949) are shown in this section (fig. 13, 14). Both murals were planned to depict the value of education and were to hang in the Burrowes Building, the education building on the Penn State campus. The pencil drawing for *Night of the Poor* (1948–1949) was to emphasize the effect that a lack of education has upon the circumstances of poverty.

Day of Plenty (1948–1949) was intended to show the power of people who have learned, through education, to work together for the common good. The drawing also reflected John Biggers's discovery of Diego Rivera, whose work he admired greatly. "Here I am, at cold, wintry Penn State, working in the style of a Mexican painter. I was so influenced."³¹ Those drawings reflect his passionate commitment to art expression as a response to the life he had known and cared about. The rituals of birth, life and death, regeneration, and hope had been at the core of his understanding of life.

The small pencil sketch, *First Shotgun Drawing* (1949) (fig. 15), was a pre-scient drawing. It was a preparation for an oil painting that Biggers was planning. Fifty years later, Biggers developed that motif into a spectacular series of works, believed by many to be the classic icon of African American life.³²

Biggers completed the Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees by 1948 and in 1954, earned his Doctorate in Education from Penn State University. Meanwhile, the friendship of John Biggers and Hazel Hales had slowly blossomed into romance. On December 27, 1948, they were married, but did not share a home until John had completed his studies at Penn State in the spring. He had already decided that he wanted to return to the South rather than follow the crowds of starving artists flooding New York City at that time. Biggers commented: "I felt