

# WoodmereArtMuseum

TELLING THE STORY OF PHILADELPHIA'S ART AND ARTISTS

## Discovering Connections Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia

### *NOTE to the Teacher / Parent / Homeschooler:*

This teaching resource packet is our way of bringing the educational ideas of the many class tours and teacher workshops provided by the Woodmere Art Museum to your home or classroom.

Each resource highlights specific learning skills and focuses on key works from the Woodmere collection. These resources are also designed to be interdisciplinary and include links to other information sites, as well as suggestions for extensions to meet the unique interests of your students/children.

We hope to expand on these resources and welcome your feedback. If you use this resource please take a minute to tell us of your successes and struggles.

Email your feedback to [education@woodmereartmuseum.org](mailto:education@woodmereartmuseum.org)

### *Close Looking and Critical Thinking about Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia*

*Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia* explored the inspiration of African culture and heritage in the work of Philadelphian artists Barbara Bullock (born 1938) and Charles Searles (1937-2004), and Nigerian artist, Twins Seven-Seven (1944-2011). Their collaboration and cultivation of ideas and assertions of African and African American cultural identity were largely developed through the Ile-Ife Black Humanitarian Center in north Philadelphia.



Conceived and established in 1969 by choreographer and dancer, Arthur Hall, Ile-Ife (Nigerian for "house of love"), offered visual arts, dance, drama, and musical arts classes for the community. It became Philadelphia's primary conduit for sharing and celebrating African traditions to build community through a shared sense of strength and pride.

The exhibition marked the work of these artists at a significant time in Philadelphia and American history. Propelled by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the advent of the Black Power movement and Black nationalism, Black American artists began consciously addressing their African heritage and their experiences as African Americans

### *The "Big Ideas":*

This teaching resource is designed to enhance three central skills:

**First, the skill of close looking** (sometimes referred to as observational focus). Deep thinking and deep learning cannot exist unless the student is able to look closely, see details, and gain the context to understand those details.

**Second, the skill of critical thinking.** Gaining experience and information is enhanced by the ability to examine what we see and experience. Critical thinking involves reflection, forming hypotheses based on our experiences, and finding a way of testing and revising those hypotheses.

**Third, the skill of cultural understanding and historical context.** From this, we hope to provide an understanding of cultural traditions and to celebrate the creativity and humanity that connects all cultures and peoples. In addition, the historical context in which these artists were working, (Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s), propelled Black American artists to search for their roots in a culture other than the US and address their heritage as well as their experiences as African Americans.

## Process Part I:



Oshun Wospers (Worshiper), 1988  
by Twins Seven-Seven, (Woodmere Art Museum:  
Museum purchase with funds generously provided by  
Robert and Frances Kohler, 2019)

1. [Click Here](#) to open the image: *Oshun Whospers (Worshiper)* by Twins Seven-Seven
2. **Twins Seven-Seven** was born and grew up in Nigeria, a country in west Africa, and lived in Philadelphia for many years. His art was inspired by the mythology of Yoruba culture and its traditional stories, deities, and belief systems. [Click Here](#) to read more about the artist. (Highlight and discuss world map, spotlighting Philadelphia and Nigeria.)



Twins was born in 1944 and grew up in Nigeria. He lived in Philadelphia for many years and would often travel back and forth to Nigeria. His impact was felt in the states and in the Nigerian city of Osogbo, where he refocused attention on the recovery of ancient cultural practices.

Osogbo's traditional industry, and still a major industry, is fabric dyeing and is famous for its different kinds of Adire cloth. Twins often incorporated the practice of fabric dyeing into his artworks.

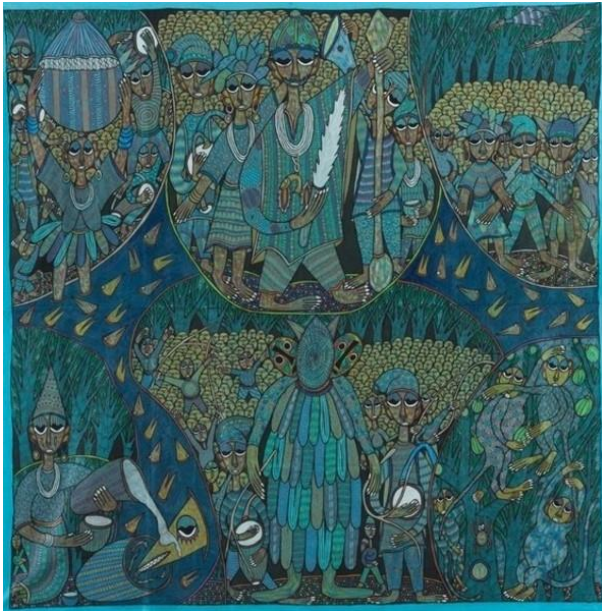
3. Inspiring Close Looking: **List/Share/Repeat** Activity:

Take a moment to look closely. On a piece of paper, list 10 things you see. (Students can work individually can be grouped in pairs.)

Then, if possible, share your list of 10 things with someone. After sharing, return to the image and list 10 more things that you hadn't seen earlier. If your students have the patience, you might repeat the process and return to list 5 more things.

(NOTE: What you are doing is using a scaffolding tool to look ever more closely. List/Share/Repeat allows us to see details we would likely have missed if not coerced to return to the observation stage. Close looking allows us to think of the art and form ideas that are more in-depth and more interesting.)

*Suggest students look at the work in sections:*



4. What different kinds of living beings do you see? What do you see that identifies some as human, animals, birds, fish? Which creatures appear imaginary?
5. What do the more human-like beings seem to be doing? (Use what you have learned through close looking to form opinions in response to this question.)

6. Your opinions about what the people are doing are considered hypotheses. In other words, they are ideas that have reasons behind them. Take a few minutes to examine and write down your hypotheses, and list your reasons for your opinions (your evidence).
7. What color predominates this painting, and why do you think that color choice was made? (The color blue connects all the figures, animals, and objects.) We know that Twins Seven-Seven drew inspiration from his Yoruba culture and traditions. Here Twins depicts a special Yoruba festival that takes place every August along the banks of the Osun River in Nigeria to celebrate the river orisha (goddess), Oshun.

Twins Seven-Seven's art was inspired by the stories and traditions of Yoruba culture which believes that all living creatures—snakes, spiders, animals, humans, plants and trees, are all connected. The artist physically connects the animals, fish, trees, and people through the color blue and patterns of shapes that repeat and intertwine.

Notice the 6 round shapes containing people and creatures. All of these shapes intertwine and connect with one another. The 3 portions of the river we see (with fish) touch and connect each of the 6 round shapes.

8. How does this context influence your reading of this painting?

**Note to Teacher:**

*If the class is struggling, consider giving them this information.*

*Repeat observations by children:*

People are celebrating Oshun (Osun), the orisha or goddess of the rivers. What makes rivers or sources of water important enough to have a goddess? (All plants and animals must have water to survive. If there is no water there is no life on earth.) People view the river as the giver of life. The river is regarded as both healing and purifying.

What are the people doing to celebrate Oshun? (playing drums, in costume, congregating, providing food to the fish, as a form of sacrifice) What are the monkeys doing in the trees?  
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Questions 4 through 8 take you further into the painting. Now you are using the details from your close looking to form hypotheses, and to offer reasons behind your hypotheses. (A process that will be explored further in the second part of this workshop.) This is the basis of Critical Thinking - a central skill that you use in everything from science and mathematics, to art and history and literature, even connecting to many aspects of everyday life.

9. Write down a clear statement of the hypothesis you are forming about this painting (perhaps about the title, or about what people are doing).

### **Assessment:**

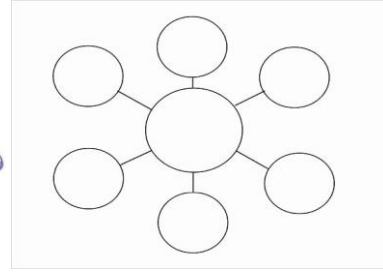
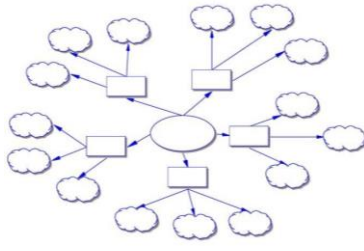
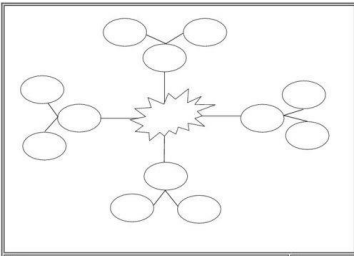
1. One final aspect of Critical Thinking is the extension of what you know to see if it is valid. This is corroboration, and it typically involves going beyond the initial item under consideration - in this case, the painting. (This skill was alluded to in Question #9.)

Go back to your hypotheses from question #6, and make a short list of research topics that would allow you to examine them further. (For example, researching the traditional rituals of water or ocean worship.) Go to other sources and dig deeper into one of your hypotheses, to see if what you were thinking seems to make sense. Share your results, either verbally or in written form.

2. Create a chart which presents a visual “map” of your looking and thinking process. Visual maps help students organize their thinking. By connecting a visual design with a specific thought process, students create mental visual patterns for their thinking.  
*Be sure to label (and explain) your chart/map.*

Examples of Visual Maps:





(NOTE: You can download many different visual map templates, or easily create your own.)

3. Select a different work of art, and apply the same process, to discover new details (and hopefully new appreciation) of that artwork.

### Process Part II:



Animal Healer, 1990, by Barbara Bullock (Woodmere Art Museum: (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: The Harold A. and Ann R. Sorgenti Collection of Contemporary African-American Art, 2004.20.12)

1. [Click Here](#) to open the image: *Animal Healer*, by Barbara Bullock
2. [Click Here](#) to read about this artist.
3. Activity: Take a minute to look closely at this painting. Make a list of the objects you see in this painting/collage.
4. From this list, create a chart with three columns. The columns should be labeled “What I know,” “What I think I know,” and “What I would like to know.” Take a few minutes to fill in as much as you can on this chart.

What I Know	What I Think I Know	What I Would Like to Know

(NOTE: #3 asks you to look closely, while the chart directs you to organize your observations. Organizing your observations not only helps to focus your attention - looking closely - but also prepares you for drawing conclusions and forming further hypotheses - critical thinking.)

5. How could you find out more to corroborate your interpretations? Make a list of possible sources of information or online search terms and explore these for more detail about this painting. For example, where might we go to find out more about interconnections between animals and humans in Africa?

*NOTE: If you aren't sure where to look for possible corroborations, examine your list of items under "What I would like to know" as well as your visual map. The topics in these two places are often suggestive of research ideas.*

6. What is the historical context in which the artist created this work? Why is this person a "healer"? *NOTE: you can find some background information to spur discussion at the end of this document under Additional Resources.*

7. At some point, return to the three columns on the chart created for this work. Revise the chart. Can any items under "What I think I know" be moved to the first column - or eliminated? Are there new items under the "What I would like to know" column? (As your students become more familiar with this process, the three columns will naturally become more fluid and revised more naturally.)

8. Conversation/Discussion among students: As before, corroboration involves collaboration as the last phase of critical thinking. Often,



since the idea behind critical thinking is that we carefully examine our opinions as well as the opinions of others. Open discussion (preferably in small groups so that each student can participate) is often seen as the most crucial phase of the critical thinking routine.

### **Assessment: Animal Healer**

1. If you were the “animal healer,” what animals would you depict in your painting/collage, and why would you select these? If, instead, you were seeking animals that would assist you in some way as a “healer,” what animals might you choose, and why? Select one of these interpretations, or another option you found as you observed this work, and expand on your ideas in a clear essay, designed to convince the reader of your interpretation.
2. From your research (step #6 above) write a brief essay focusing on one of the creatures in the painting. Describe your interpretation of this creature, your reasons for your interpretation, and what you discovered in your subsequent research.
3. Think for a moment of the idea that the world needs healing. How does this idea change how you view this artwork? Explain your changes and the reasons for your choices.

### **Process 3: Cultural Heritage and Historical Context:**

Barbara Bullock is an African American artist who grew up and studied art in Philadelphia where she continues to live and paint today. Twins Seven-Seven was born in Nigeria, came to the United States and settled in Philadelphia. He travelled back home to Nigeria many times. Both artists were deeply inspired by their African heritage.

**What does cultural heritage mean to you?** Often it is the stories, beliefs, and traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. These represent our history and inform on our identity. Cultural heritage is our connection with the past and what we choose to bring to the future.

What aspects of African stories, beliefs, and traditions can you recognize in these two paintings? What makes an artist explore his/her cultural

heritage and integrate it to his/her art? How do they honor their heritage by including stories, beliefs, and traditions of aspects of African culture? What aspects of Yoruba beliefs can you recognize in these two paintings?

These, of course, are difficult questions; and your responses to these questions take you much deeper than an examination of the paintings. They focus on the intentions of the artists and the historical and cultural context of their work. This can inspire research into the social, historical, and political contexts in which these artists lived to gain an understanding of the impact of their times.

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Barbara Bullock came of age during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. With the accompanying advent of the Black Power movement and black nationalism, the arts assumed a more assertive political role in the pursuit for social equality and economic opportunity. Black American artists began a search for their roots in a culture other than the US and began consciously addressing their African heritage and redefining their cultural legacy in their experiences as African Americans. This was accompanied by a broader desire among African Americans to travel to Africa for authentic, first hand experiences.

Bullock was distraught with the setbacks and turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement and developed a series of healer artworks that represent how deeply she felt the urge for healing and the power of art to heal.

Twins Seven-Seven:

The art of Twins Seven-Seven drew from the mythology of his Yoruba culture growing up in Nigeria. He translated its traditional stories, deities, and activities in a fresh and imaginative style.

Twins was a welcome, authentic presence for black artists who were searching for a deeper understanding of African art and identity. This impact was felt here in Philadelphia and in the Nigerian city of Osogbo, where he refocused attention on the recovery of ancient cultural practices.

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Bullock and Twins Seven-Seven met in 1972 while teaching at the Ile-Ife Black Humanitarian Center, founded by the dancer Arthur Hall in North Philadelphia. The Center offered visual arts, dance, drama, and musical arts classes and programs and focused on educating audiences in traditional African culture and aesthetics that infused African and African-inspired art forms into the contemporary Philadelphia experience. It was a community building environment that created experiences specifically addressing issues of identity and heritage and connections to that heritage.

Twins brought a special insight into the spirituality of the Yoruba people of Nigeria that had a strong impact on Bullock and other artists. It was after working with Twins that Bullock began travelling and living in Africa.

### **Cultural Traditions and Investigations:**

1. Ile-Ife was meant to nourish a latent, African cultural memory that had been suppressed since the first instances of American enslavement. Hall intended Ile-Ife to correct this problem, which had perpetuated in an American culture that devalued African lineage and history. Hall stated:

"For many, many years, there was no such thing as the black man in America identifying with himself or his heritage. It was the idea that we started here with slavery, and that was it. And you were not supposed to go beyond that."

...We needed to have a place in which we could come to find ourselves, find our energies, find our identity."

What does Hall's quote mean to you?

2. Twins's insight into Yoruba mythology and culture particularly resonated with Bullock, whose art is often inspired by Yoruba spirituality and reflects its traditional stories and imagery. Bullock was greatly inspired by the freedom and power she saw in Twins's work; the mixture of all different designs and sense of magic.

She conducted extensive research on African art and was fascinated with performance and the animistic aspects of African art and spirituality. The idea of "animistic" relationships is the foundation of Yoruba spirituality, a belief that all living creatures--fish, reptiles, insects, mammals, humans, plants and trees--and even the rocks of the earth contribute to a shared web of spiritual, life-giving--the soul or spirit that reaches across all life and creations on earth.

Where do you see this influence in Bullock's work?

3. Twins advocated for an embrace of Yoruba mythology as a means for understanding life. In his work he often intertwined his own family history with the story of the water goddess Oshun, the protector of bounty, fertility, and the life-giving water who came to earth at the site of modern-day Osogbo, the city where Twins lived. **What do you know or can learn about his life that is related to *Oshun Wospers (Woshiper)*?**

In *Oshun Wospers (Woshiper)* Twins depicts Yoruba ancestor worship and offerings made to the Oshun River, named for the goddess. **How is a celebration of the river goddess relevant to current environmental concerns about water pollution, the preservation of marine life and our ecosystems?**

4. Runs in the Family List Poem Activity and concept of Sankofa (Ghana)



The above Adinkra symbols are used by the Akan people of Ghana to express proverbs and other philosophical ideas. "Sankofa" translates as "go back and get it." In one of the above images, a bird has its head turned backwards taking an egg off its back. In the other, the lines of a heart symbol swirl back on themselves.

Part 1: Students write a poetic list beginning with the line: **My family gave me....**" The list should include favorable and unfavorable physical traits, behaviors, characteristics, habits, rituals, hobbies, heirlooms, tastes in food, and ailments that run in the family.

Part 2: Students add a second verse answering one or more of the following questions and begin with: "I'm taking or I'm carrying...."

-what have you been given through birth, inheritance, or circumstance that you will claim and take forward into your future?

-what will you leave behind?

Students find two photographs or create drawings: one of their family that reveals traditions, hobbies, food, etc; the other a self-portrait. Poems can be inserted below each image.

### Suggested resources:

- On the website for Woodmere Art Museum:  
*Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia: Bullock, Searles, and Twins Seven-Seven*, [click here](#)

Digital catalog, Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia, [click here](#)

Looking and Art Activities based on the work of Barbara Bullock and Twins Seven-Seven: *coming soon*

For a link to a playlist of the *Africa in the Arts of Philadelphia* podcasts, [click here](#)

- There are many TED talks on African culture, but these two are particularly helpful:
  - \* Wale Oyejide - Fashion that celebrates African Strength and Spirit [Click Here](#)
  - \* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - The danger of a single story [Click Here](#)
- African Contemporary has a page devoted to Twins Seven-Seven [Click Here](#)
- Information on Arthur Hall, The Legacy, [click here](#)
- For information on the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble, [Click here](#)
- Information on the Yoruba orisha, Osun (Oshun), [click here](#)
- Check out the African art collection at the Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology [Click Here](#)
- From Penn State - Teaching World Cultures Through the Visual Arts [Click Here](#)
- PBS: Civil Rights Movement: Black History and Culture, [click here](#)
- Temple University Library: Civil Rights in a Northern City: Philadelphia, Historical Perspective, [click here](#)
- From the African Journal of Physical Health, Educ Recreate Dance (2014) an article on Understanding Traditional African Healing [Click Here](#)