John Biggers (1924–2001) was a master artist and educator whose works affected the country's awareness of the African American experience.

Born in 1924 in Gastonia, North Carolina, John Biggers was the youngest of seven children. His father, Paul Biggers, was a farmer, schoolteacher, and Baptist minister. John enrolled at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in 1941, where he planned to study plumbing.

**Beyond Plumbing**  Biggers forgot about his plumbing plans when he enrolled in an art course taught by Viktor Lowenfeld, whose ideas and guidance would influence him the rest of his life. Lowenfeld encouraged his students to explore their heritage through art, and he included Biggers's mural *Dying Soldier* in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943.

Biggers went on to serve two years in the navy, followed by admission to the graduate art program at Pennsylvania State University. There he earned a master’s degree in art education in 1948 and a Ph.D. in 1954. He also created a series of murals for the university throughout his studies there.

**To Texas**  In 1949 Biggers was hired by the Texas State University for Negroes (now Texas Southern University) to establish and run the art department. The following year, he won first prize for his painting *The Cradle* at the Museum of Fine Arts. However, at the time African Americans were allowed into the museum only on Thursdays, so Biggers could not attend the opening of the show.

**Africa**  In 1957 Biggers and his wife, Hazel, won a grant from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to travel to Africa and study the art and culture there. They spent six months visiting Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, and Togo. This trip influenced Biggers’s art significantly; most of his art after the trip included African themes and scenes. He would return to Africa three more times, in 1969, 1984, and 1987. Some of his most powerful pieces were created as a result of his study trips to Africa.

**An Art Giant**  Biggers’s art has been recognized and celebrated around the world, and his career was highlighted by one-man shows around the country. His art brought together the cultures of Africa and America as no other artist before him had done. The poet Maya Angelou said that Biggers “leads us through his expressions into the discovery of ourselves at our most intimate level. Biggers sees our differences and celebrates them, and in doing so he allows the clans of the world to come together with deliberate respect and respectful appreciation.”

John Biggers retired from Texas Southern University in 1983. He died in Houston on January 25, 2001, of a heart attack.

**Review Questions**

1. What did Biggers originally want to be when he went to college?
2. Who was the biggest influence on Biggers's art?
3. Which art department did Biggers establish and run until 1983?

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Understanding Cause and Effect**  How did Viktor Lowenfeld’s teaching lead to Biggers’s trip to Africa?