Banjo: A Historical Aesthetic Response to Africa

Art giving understanding to the importance of knowing one’s self is timeless.

John A. Logan College, Diversity & Inclusion
“The deeper the roots, the taller the tree. The more you know about history, the more you can see into the future.”  - Dr. Johnnette B. Cole

Why do we value the artifacts or creative objects of the past in our culture or in any culture? Is it that artifacts provide evidence of our purpose through our human contributions? What does the past tell us about the present mindset? How does visual language convey what we do or do not understand? These are some of the questions raised in response to my university students’ discussion on Henry Ossawa Tanner’s painting, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893. Our discussion focused on how the banjo facilitated a learning moment for the young boy and the old man. The image also revealed a learning moment for us, and viewers, as well.

My interest in the banjo as an object symbolizing Africa’s presence in America was stimulated in the spring semester of 2000 during a discussion with my students in my African-American art history course. When I asked my students about the banjo depicted in this famous 19th century painting by Tanner, the reply was, “It is a southern white hillbilly musical instrument.”
At this pivotal point, I realized in a more profound way that the banjo was an object of historical importance, identifying this instrument as one of Africa’s major contributions to American culture. I shared with my students what Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1781 and what Joseph E. Holloway, and Winifred K. Vass, discussed in *The African Heritage of American English* (Indiana University Press, 1993) more than 200 years later:

“The instrument proper to them [African American] is the Banjar, brought from Africa, and which is the [form] of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.’
The Old Plantation, John Rose, 1785 -90
The Banjo Lesson, Henry O. Tanner, 1893
Banjo Series: 2012 thru 2020
Najjar in studio at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, 2013
Voice From A Creative Soul exhibition at the Africa International House in Chicago, Illinois,
Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, 2013
Sounds and Vision
Najjar in studio at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, 2015
2016 studio visit by Peter Nguyen, Director of the Crisp Museum
Najjar and Janet Stanley, Smithsonian Librarian at the African Art Museum in the Warren M. Robbins Library, 2016
Najjar researching African string instruments at the Smithsonian Museum’s Warren M. Robbins Library, 2016
Banjo at America’s Islamic Heritage Museum in Washington, DC (date unknown)
84 x 108 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood
Plantation: Banjo planted in America, 2015 - 2017
84 x 108 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood
86 x 82.5 in., acrylic, burlap, wood
Detail shot
Freedom: Standing in the Sun, 2014 – 2017
84 x 84 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood
Banjo Series
33 x 7 in., burlap and wood, 2012
Banjo Series
49.75 x 12 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
34 x 8 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
23 x 4.5 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
52.5 x 11 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
49 x 6.75 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
25 x 6 in., burlap and wood, 2016
Banjo Series
30 x 7.5 in., burlap and wood, 2015
Banjo Series
31.5 x 6.25 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
35 x 12.5 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
38 x 8 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
33 x 9 in., wood, 2014
Banjo Series
35 x 9.25 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
33.25 x 9 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
18 x 4 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
3 x 19 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
7.5 x 16.5 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
37 x 8 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
25 x 8 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
30 x 8 in., wood, 2015
Banjo Series
37.75 x 11 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
42 x 13.5 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
36.5 x 11.5 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
26.5 x 7.25 in., wood, 2016
Banjo Series
19.5 x 5.5 in., wood, 2016
Take Me With You, 2019
16 x 30 x 12 in., Trunk, wood, and ink
Olive DeLuce Art Gallery, Maryville, MO
Rediscovery, 2019
30 X 40 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood
Laila (Beautiful Night), 2019
30 x 40 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood