

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



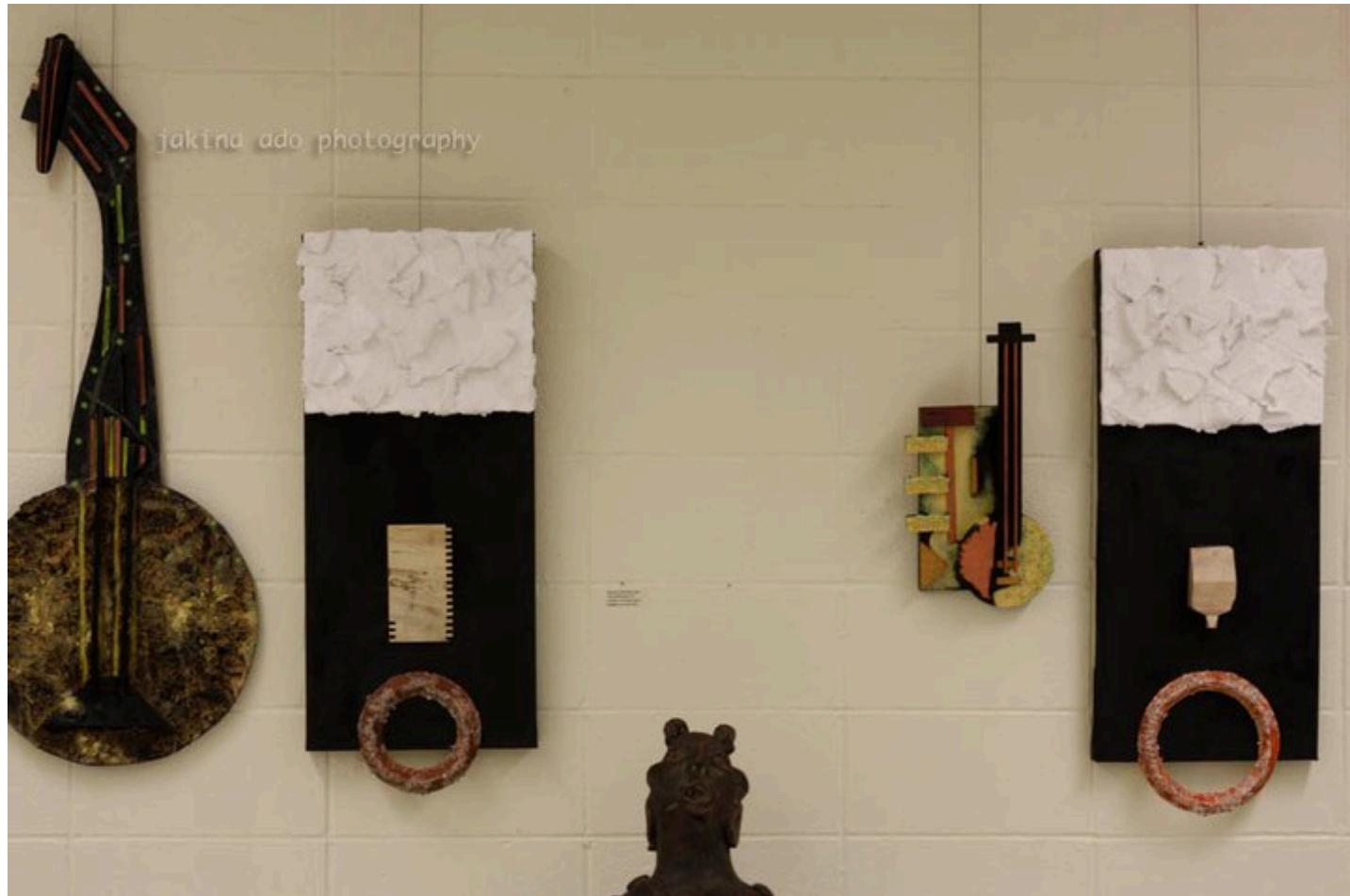
Banjo Series: 2012 thru 2020



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

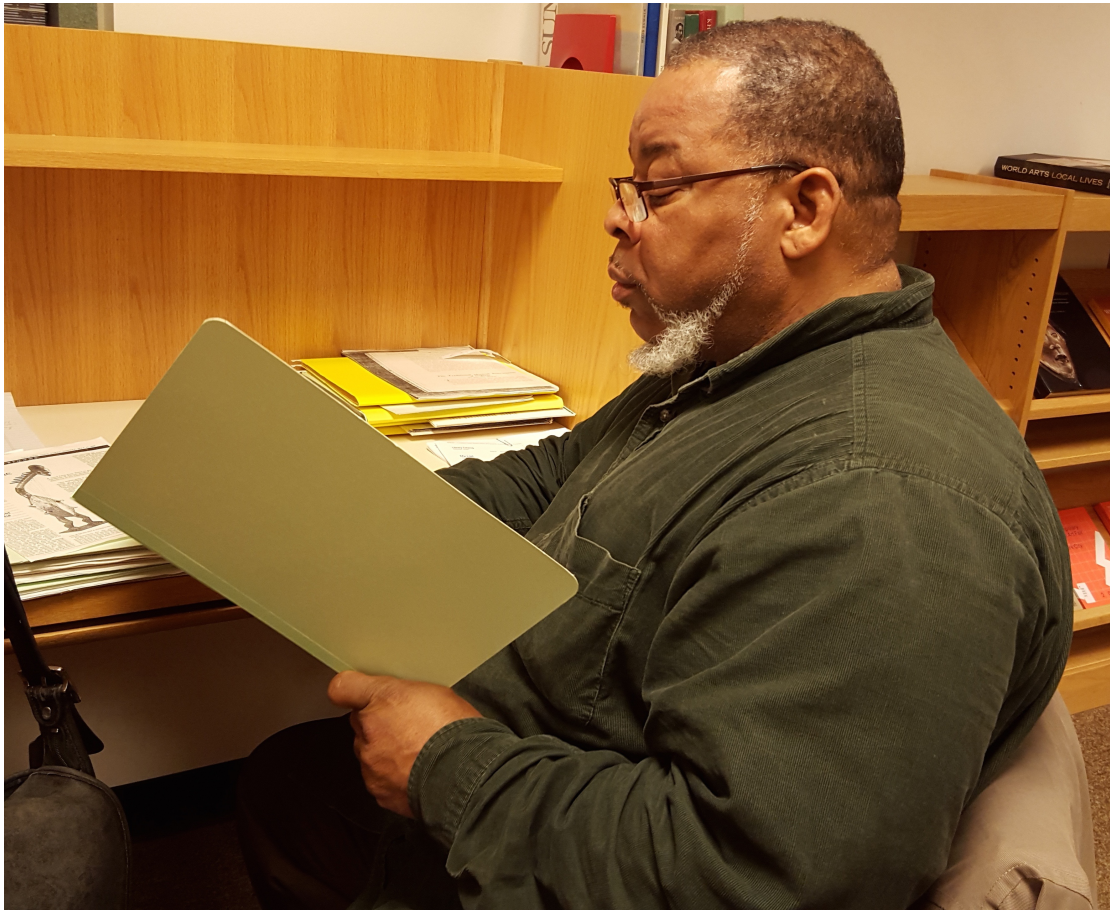




Najjar and Janet Stanley, Smithsonian Librarian at the African Art Museum in the Warren M. Robbins Library, 2016



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)



Atlantic Ocean: Banjo African Connection, 2014 - 2017

84 x 108 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood



Plantation: Banjo planted in America, 2015 - 2017

84 x 108 in., acrylic, burlap, and wood

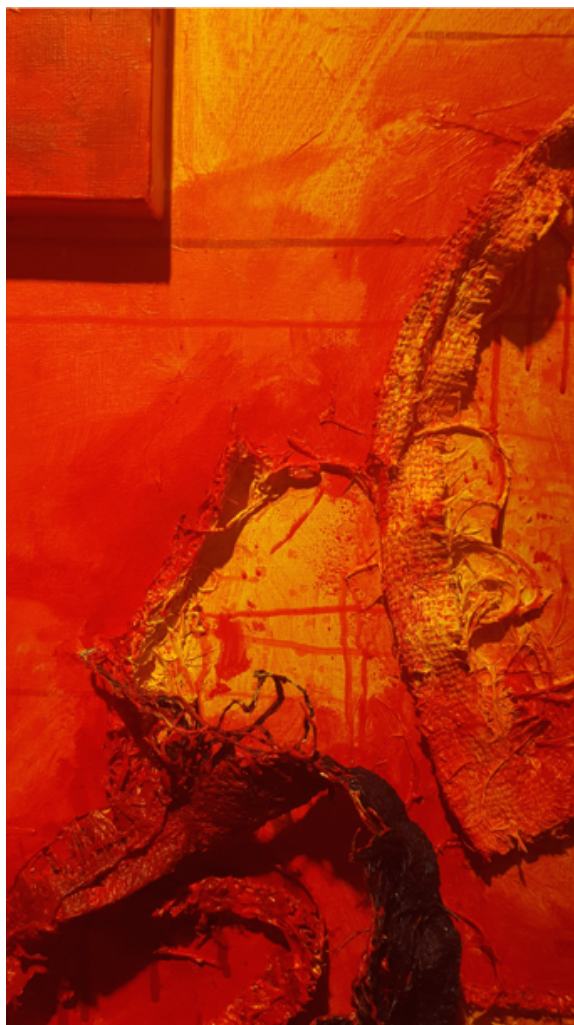


Revolt: Banjo Spiritual Fire, 2013 – 2016

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



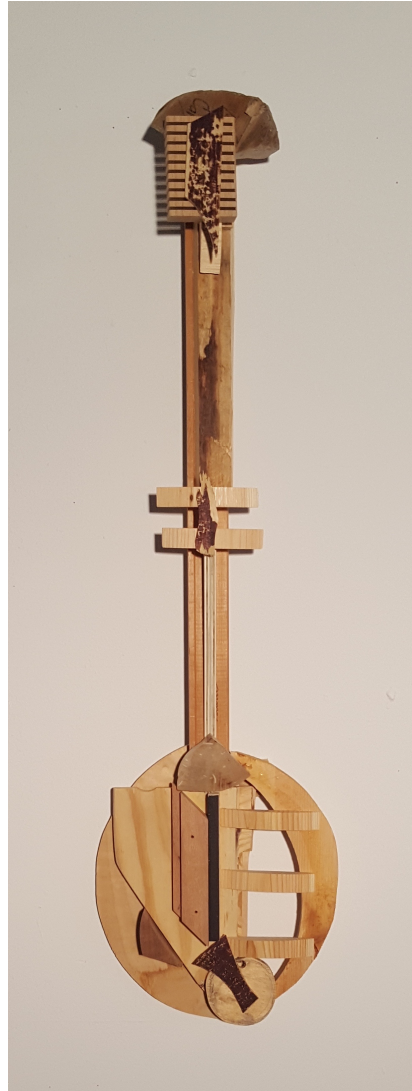
Banjo Series

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



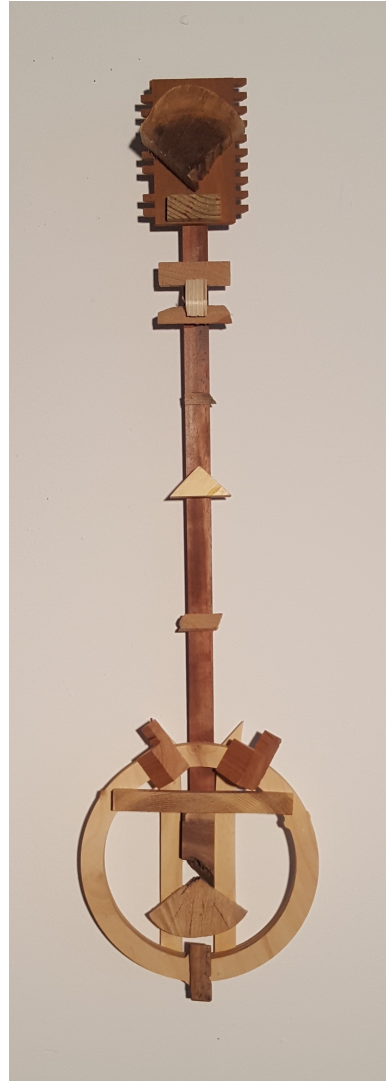
Banjo Series

25 x 8 in., wood, 2016



Banjo Series

30 x 8 in., wood, 2015



Banjo Series

37.75 x 11 in., wood, 2016



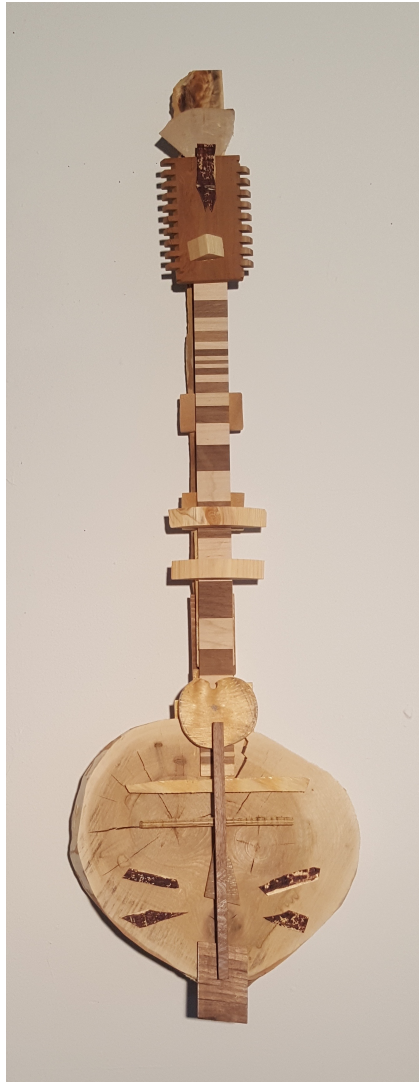
Banjo Series

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

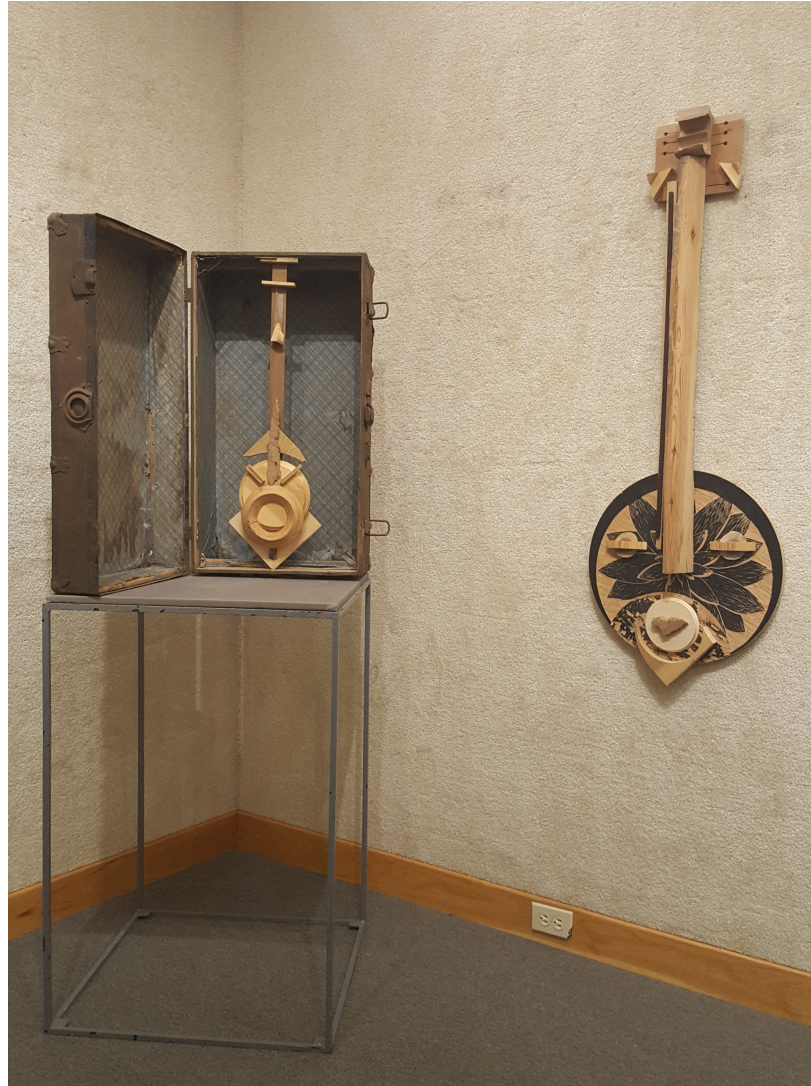
19.5 x 5.5 in., wood, 2016



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

