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From left: Pablo Picasso's "The Jester," Sanford Biggers's "The Cantor" and Alberto Giacometti's "Monumental Head." (Lee Stalworth)

At the Phillips Collection, a visual 'conversation' between the art of Europe, Africa and Japan

By: Mark Jenkins
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European and Africa-rooted traditions converse in Sanford Biggers's "Mosaic," the 30th installment in the Phillips Collection's "Intersections" series. But there's a surprising third participant in the cross-cultural dialogue: Japan.

The Los Angeles-raised Biggers is based in Harlem, and is deeply concerned with African American history and culture. But the multidisciplinary artist has done several residencies in Europe and Asia that have shaped his work. The one that seems to have influenced him the most was a stint in Nagoya in central Japan, where he studied Zen Buddhism and such local art forms as origami.

As always with "Intersections," Biggers's show juxtaposes items from the Phillips's collection with new works the featured artist has created in response. "Mosaic" is divided between two galleries whose contents are quite different.

In the first, sculptures by Picasso and other mostly European artists flank a black marble bust made by Biggers. In the second, five quilts sewn by women from Gee's Bend, a remote township in Alabama's "Black Belt," are complemented by two Biggers pieces: a wall-mounted 3-D construction made of old quilts, folded origami-style, and a floor installation of colored sand whose patterns partly emulate those of the quilts.



On the wall, left to right: Arlonzia Pettway's "Lazy Gals (Bars)," Aolar Mosely's "Blocks" and Malissia Pettway's "Housetop." On the floor: "Fool's Folly" by Sanford Biggers. The installation is featured in "Mosaic," an exhibition by Biggers at the Phillips Collection that is part of the museum's "Intersections" series. (Lee Stalsworth)

One of the two Picasso pieces, 1905's "The Jester," was acquired in 1938, during the museum's formative years. The Gee's Bend quilts were purchased in 2019, as the Phillips diversified its vision to include more Black and female artists. (Indeed, folk-art quilts from Gee's Bend weren't coveted by museums until relatively recently, after a 2002 rave review in the *New York Times*.) So Biggers's choices embody disparate ideas of what the Phillips is, or should be.

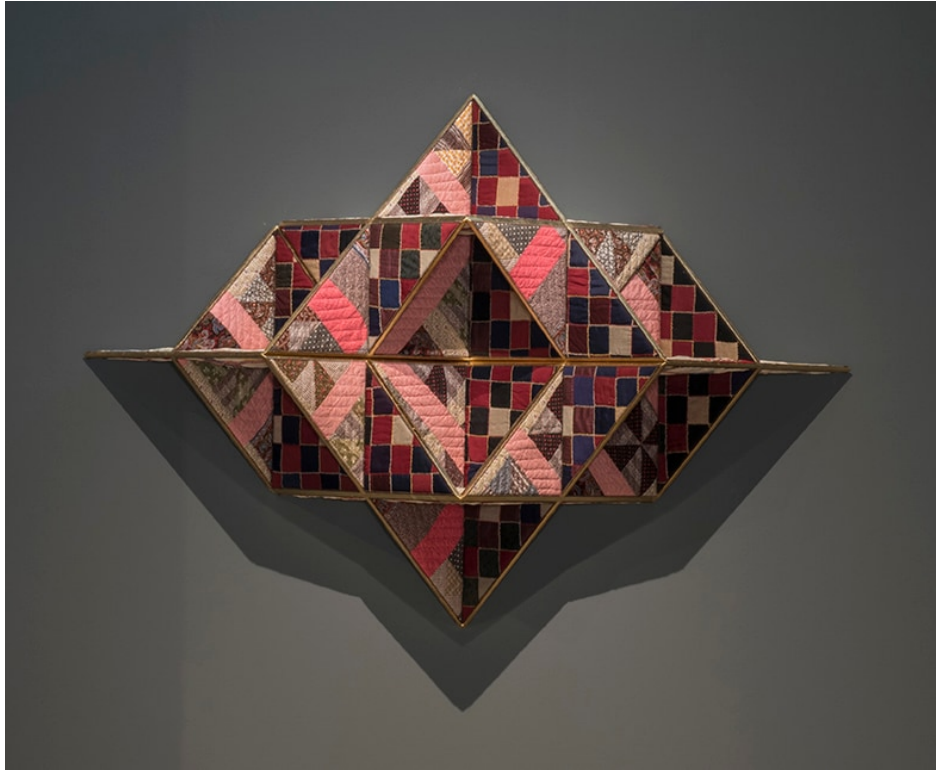
"The Jester" is a fairly conventional bronze, apparently made just before the period when much of Picasso's work was inspired by his exposure to African art. The second Picasso, "Head of a Woman," dates from 1950 but is more akin to the artist's African-influenced pieces. It's not strongly cubist, but its face is divided strikingly into multiple planes.

The later sculpture is more closely connected to Biggers's "The Cantor," in which a highly stylized visage is revealed to be a mask when viewed from the side or the rear. The sculpture can be seen as commentary on Western modernism's borrowing of non-European styles, or just as a playful hybrid of various artistic traditions.

Biggers does his own borrowing from various cultures. He once staged a bell-ringing ceremony in a Japanese Buddhist temple using bells made from melted-down hip-hop jewelry. The artist conceived the 2004 rite as a homage to what he considered rap's golden age: the 1980s and 1990s.

Biggers's floor piece draws on a Buddhist practice associated more with Tibet than Japan, although it is sometimes done in the latter country. Usually, the colored sand is arranged into a mandala: a symmetrical design that serves as a tool for spiritual guidance. But Biggers and his team organized the granules into quilt-like strips and blocks of color, set off by one frisky detail: a blob of pink that appears to drip across the entire composition, as if it were liquid pigment splashed by an abstract expressionist rather than tinted sand heaped precisely in place. The pink gesture seems to be a nod to colorist painting, the art for which the Phillips is still best known.

Buddhist sand drawings represent the impermanence of life, and so are eventually swept away. Biggers's floor piece will be undone in January, when "Mosaic" closes. The details of the sand-scattering event have yet to be announced, but it is likely to include an audiovisual performance, similar to those by the artist's band, Moon Medicin. There's nothing Japanese about the group's jazz-funk, which incorporates musical samples and video clips into its live performances. But Moon Medicin is another intriguing piece in Biggers's mosaic.



"Mosaic" by Sanford Biggers (antique quilt, birch plywood and gold leaf).
(Sanford Biggers/Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen)