

Label Writing

Subject: Visual Arts, English Language Arts

Grade Level: Grades 6-12

Guided Instruction (To be self-directed, or with teacher, parent, caregiver, older sibling, etc.)

Sometimes the meaning and intent behind a work of art is hard to decipher via visual clues alone. Look at *Quilt #15, Harmonics 2* by the contemporary artist Sanford Biggers on page two or online here:

<https://nasher.duke.edu/artwork/19093/>

Before reading the label text, discuss the image by asking:

- What is going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Labels (or informational text) often found near a work of art on display in a museum, can provide useful information and context which may lead to deeper understanding and appreciation for a work of art.

Now, read the label text for *Quilt #15, Harmonics 2*

“For this work, Sanford Biggers painted organic designs on a quilt from the mid-1800s. Biggers relates *Quilt #15, Harmonics 2* to astronomy, music, and the role such textiles played on the Underground Railroad. Some quilts were used as signposts for safe houses along the secret network of routes from southern slave states to northern free states and Canada. Biggers has referred to renowned African American abolitionist Harriet Tubman as an “astronaut” who used the North Star as a guide while leading slaves to freedom.

Astronomers often use grids to identify and locate stars, constellations, and galaxies. In this work, the quilt itself provides a grid upon which Biggers has drawn his star chart or map. The central design on this work, a five-pointed star, is derived from Johannes Kepler’s astrological theories of the harmonies of the universe, but also references harmonic fifths in music and the five-pointed star used in quilt patterns.

The clouds beneath Biggers’s golden star allude to the Promised Land, and the form is derived from Tibetan Tangka representations of the heavens. The layered imagery draws connections between African American history and symbols of the universe, mathematics, music, and spirituality, illustrating the artist’s ability to create complex works that visualize human experiences and the interconnectedness of all things, from the Southern U.S. to East Asia.”

Discuss:

- How has your understanding of the work of art changed?
- Do you like the work of art more now? Less? Why?

Practice

Identify an object in your home that might benefit from the information provided in a label text. This could be a work of art, a photograph, a toy, a knick-knack, etc. Create an informational label for this object that provides context for why it is important. For this activity, there is no need to keep to the facts – use your imagination to create interesting or absurd details that make this object worthy of a museum!



Sanford Biggers, *Quilt #15, Harmonics 2*, 2012. Fabric-treated acrylic, spray paint, and cotton on repurposed quilt, 79 1/2 × 80 3/4 inches (201.93 × 205.11 cm) Frame: 85 3/4 × 85 3/4 × 3 inches (217.81 × 217.81 × 7.62 cm). Gift of Paula Cooper in honor of Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher