

Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder: Third Ward Art Treasure but a Memory

By Debbie Z. Harwell



The Mothers of the "The Father and the Son," 1970-1971.




Dere'sa's "Han Writin on de Wall," 1970-1971.

Images courtesy of Texas Southern University.

Harvey Johnson came to Houston from Port Arthur to study art at Texas Southern University under world-renowned artist, sculptor, and teacher, John Biggers, who founded the school's art program in 1949. The two had met when Johnson was in the tenth grade, and they connected instantly. Johnson recalled, "As soon as John and I met each other—our eyes met—immediately we started reading each other's mind. I mean I could read his mind, and he would read my mind, and we believed the same things. So he took what my mother gave me in terms of my culture, and he helped me to articulate it—to crystallize it—into visual imagery. That's what John did." Harvey Johnson completed his undergraduate degree at TSU and went on to get his MFA at Washington State University. He returned two years later to teach art at TSU for thirty-four years before retiring in 2007.¹

Biggers, who encouraged his students to think big and embrace their heritage, began a tradition by requiring senior students to paint a mural on campus. Those that stood the test remained permanent fixtures, while others were painted over after a few months. Johnson's work, which Biggers judged to be an important contribution, included two murals that have graced the university's administration building, Hannah Hall, since his days as a student: *Mothers of the Fathers and the Son* and Dere'sa's *"Han Writin on de Wall."* Both pictures symbolized Johnson's emphasis on the importance of mothers to society and the ancestral contribution of African art to American culture.²

Unfortunately, the murals did not withstand the installation of a new president, John Rudley, in 2008. Calling the murals near his office "eyesores," Rudley had them painted over with white paint in September 2010. He told a *Houston Chronicle* reporter, "When I bring dignitaries to campus, I can't have them seeing that kind of thing. All art isn't good art." After just two years at TSU, Rudley—trained in business—became the final art critic over John Biggers, the artists in the university's art department, and countless others who had appreciated the works for four decades.³

TSU museum director and art history professor, Alvia Wardlaw delivered the news to Johnson personally. Johnson was devastated. He saw it as akin to destroying a historical document—of Biggers who established the mural art program at TSU and of Johnson's own tenure there. A few days after the uproar at the mural's removal, Rudley committed \$50,000 to evaluate and restore some of the remaining murals. Too late for Johnson's work. Now TSU, Third Ward, and the city of Houston must suffer the consequences for the failure to preserve this piece of community history.⁴ 

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