

excerpted from Portland School System lessons

Introduction to the artist, Jonathan Green

Jonathan Green was born in 1955 in Gardens Corner, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. This is a marshland and tidal river area near the Sea Islands, which are barrier islands extending along the Atlantic coast. The Gullah people have lived in this area since the early days of slavery. Because of their geographic isolation, they have been able to retain the culture of their African ancestors, which places importance on community and spirituality. These people have a strong tradition of storytelling to teach the children about their culture and family histories. Storytelling also provides entertainment for all ages. The language of the Gullah people, which is still used today, is a blend of English, West African and Caribbean languages.

Green spent most of his early life in Gardens Corner and while his mother found employment in New York, he lived with his grandmother. He was born with a membrane, or “veil” over his face, which in the Gullah culture is a sign of a special person who will become a “seer,” prophet or leader of his people. Therefore, he received special training by the elders of the community as he was growing up. Today, he sees his special gift as that of recording through his paintings the Gullah culture he knew in his childhood and youth. Since then, the population of the Lowcountry and Sea Islands has increased (immigration, Northern transplants, and general population growth) and some of the Gullah Community’s traditions and culture have already disappeared, though personal and institutional efforts, such as Louise Miller Cohen and the Gullah Heritage Commission, are making considerable efforts to preserve and nurture.

Green’s interest in art was evident when, as a young boy, he used an iron to press out the wrinkles of brown paper bags on which to draw and paint. During the early ‘70s, Jonathan Green served in the Air Force and studied illustration. Later he attended the Art Institute of Chicago, from which he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1982. He received an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the University of South Carolina in 1996.

In addition to his painting, Jonathan Green places importance on his civic and social responsibilities, and thus is the recipient of numerous awards for his humanitarian service. Annually he donates the proceeds from the sales of his calendars to an organization or project which serves low income people in some way. He actively supports art education in the schools and has taught young people who have shown artistic talent.

Notes on Jonathan Green's subjects, and aspects of the Gullah culture

- Jonathan Green records history by painting the everyday life of the people, such as women hanging out the laundry, men and women plowing the fields or gathering the harvest, people having a party, catching fish, or going to church.

- Storytelling has long been very important to the Gullah people. The Brer Rabbit tales have Gullah origins, containing "coded" language about the plight of slaves. In these tales, the animals took on the characteristics of people. Brer Rabbit was small and apparently helpless compared to the bear, fox or wolf, but the storytellers made the rabbit clever and able to outsmart the bigger animals. *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton (see bibliography) includes these stories with excerpts written in Gullah and explanations of the meanings of some of the stories.

- Talk with the students about the importance of storytelling in the past when most people did not read or write and how in some cultures today in which many do not read or write. This is a way to pass on their history, traditions, values and teachings to succeeding generations. Although we have other ways of passing on information, many families like to tell their stories too.

- The Gullah people live on the "Sea Islands" off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina and in the "Lowcountry" on the mainland across from the islands of South Carolina. Over 1,000 islands, many of them uninhabited, make up this barrier coastline extending northward. Among the early inhabitants of the islands were people who escaped from the ships bringing slaves from the Gold Coast of Africa. These people were skilled agrarians who successfully farmed this land for generations. Because of the remoteness and the difficult access to the Lowcountry from the west, the people who settled there have been able to maintain their traditional ways of life.

Only in the late 20th Century were bridges built to some of the islands and today, many can still be reached only by boat. For additional information, refer to "Jonathan Green in Motion, Gullah Anointed" (see bibliography).

- The Gullah people are a unique group of people in the continental forty-eight states. Since the early days of slavery in the South until recent years, these people have lived in relative isolation from outside influence. Thus, they offer us an opportunity to study a culture which is part of our history, but has been able to retain much of the culture, values, traditions and spirituality of their African ancestors. Refer "Jonathan Green in Motion, Gullah Anointed" by Bettye J. (Mbitha) Parker Smith for more about the culture of the Gullah people. Other sources for information about the Gullah people include *When Roots Die, Before Freedom*, and *Ain't you Got a Right to the Tree of Life* (see bibliography).