

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Gora Mbengue. *Al-Buraq*, 1975





Gora Mbengue
(Senegalese, 1931–1988)
Al-Buraq, 1975

Glass, paint, 13½ × 19¼ in. (34.3 x 48.9 cm)
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Blake Robinson,
2004.52.21

Description of the Artwork

A white horse with a long, thick tail and large, outstretched wings runs through a sparse landscape featuring two long-stemmed flowers and patches of low-growing plants. The horse has a human head with prominent female facial features and an elaborately decorated headdress with gold details and long, brightly colored feathers. The animal's tail and wings are also covered with multicolored feathers. Its legs, bent in motion, are adorned with bracelets, and its back is draped with stirrups and a floral-patterned textile that could serve as a saddle. This creature, the only figure in the scene, takes up the entire width and nearly the full height of the glass panel on which it is painted.

About the Artwork

Gora Mbengue was well-known among a group of Senegalese artists who created paintings on the reverse side of panes of glass. Popular in urban Senegal (a country located south of the Senegal River in western Africa), this type of art is referred to as *souwère* (pronounced soo-WARE), from the French *sous-verre*, which means “under glass.” Historically made for Senegalese homes to serve as colorful, instructive reminders of life lessons, they often use a moral or spiritual subject to illustrate fables, local tales, or important religious accounts. In this example, the subject is al-Buraq, a winged horse with a woman's head upon which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have flown to the heavens, to the throne of God. This important journey is known as the *miraj*.

Though the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam) does not expressly prohibit figurative art, the worship of an idol (a physical object such as a cult image) is strictly forbidden. A well-known subject in Islamic art, al-Buraq often appears without a rider so that viewers focus on the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous journey without seeing a representation of the Prophet himself.

Background Information

Mbengue was a Sufi, a practitioner of a mystical sect of Islam known as Sufism. Sufis choose to live without many of life's comforts in order to focus all of their energy on following the path to unity with God. In Senegal, some members of Sufi brotherhoods devote themselves to following the teachings and examples of inspirational religious leaders. Mbengue belonged to a brotherhood known as the Tijaan.

These brotherhoods began in the early nineteenth century when Senegal was under French control. In the early twentieth century, France's colonial government attempted to slow the spread of the Islamic faith in West Africa by banning colorful printed images that were widely traded in urban areas and served as inspiration for many religious *souwère* paintings. *Souwère* artists continued working after the ban, but with a more limited choice of source material. The art form, which still included imagery copied from preexisting Islamic *souwère* paintings, became associated with Senegalese resistance to French colonial control. After Senegal's independence in 1960, the market for *souwère* art became increasingly commercialized and tailored to meet a growing demand from tourists.

Questions for Viewing

Souwère paintings are made on the back of a glass surface. This requires the artist to start with the finest details, add layers of color on top, and then finally add a background layer. Look closely at the painting. Can you find evidence of all three steps?

What is happening in this painting?

What clues did the artist include to indicate where this story might take place?

Does the painting convey a particular mood? What do you see to support your idea?

What else do you notice? What details are included to suggest this figure may be special?

What different animal features are combined to create this creature? What abilities do these features offer the creature?

This winged horse with a woman's head is known by the name al-Buraq and is a familiar and important subject in Islamic art. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have ridden al-Buraq to the heavens, to the throne of God. What other mythological creatures combine animal features with human ones? What special abilities does this give them?

Classroom Activities

Art Making

On a piece of paper, draw an animal or person who is important to you (try not to use letters or words). Put a piece of clear acetate on top of the paper and trace your drawing onto the acetate with a black permanent marker. Use acrylic paint on the acetate sheet to add color to your drawing. (Tip: If the black lines get covered, you can still see them by looking at the other side of your acetate.) When the paint is dry, choose a color for your background and paint the entire sheet the same color. Turn the sheet over to view your finished work. Scan or take a digital picture and upload it to a free image site such as Flickr or Picasa to share your artwork.

Art and Writing

Stories such as that of the Prophet Muhammad's ride on al-Buraq help us share information with future generations. Think of an important journey you have taken during your lifetime—it might be a journey taken only once or repeated many times. Write a short story about your travels. Consider which details you want to include so that your story may be shared and understood by generations to come. Host a storytelling conference to share with others. Listen carefully to one another. What similarities or differences do you notice in your stories? What themes emerge?

Social Studies

Throughout history, artists have created artwork with ideas that challenge those in positions of authority. In Senegal in the mid-twentieth century, *souwère* paintings with Islamic images became symbols of resistance against the French colonial government.

Learn more about the history of civil disobedience in art. Research one of the following artworks: *Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso; *Artocracy in Tunisia*, by INSIDE OUT; or *Moratorium*, by Jasper Johns. What is the artist's main idea? What choices did the artist make to represent this point of view? Create a visual response to share or challenge the artist's point of view.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/ The Brooklyn Museum's online collection database with a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

Bouttiaux-Ndiaye, Anne-Marie. *Senegal behind Glass: Images of Religious and Daily Life* (Munich and New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1994). This exhibition catalogue covers the major themes of Senegalese *souwère* painting, along with the techniques, history, cultural context, and artists associated with the art form.

Children's Stories from Africa. Directed by Linda Korsten. Monterey Media Inc., 2003. A DVD of African fables recounted by storyteller Nandi Nyembe.

Demi. *Muhammad* (New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2003). A picture book about the Prophet Muhammad's life, elaborately illustrated in the style of Persian miniatures.

Roberts, Allen F. *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003). This book presents the art and culture of Islamic West Africa through the story of a dynamic popular religious movement in Senegal known as the Mouride Way.

Streissguth, Tom. *Senegal in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2009). This young-adult book offers background information on the history, culture, and politics of Senegal.

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