

# Gifts for a Journey

*A Song for Travelers*, Robert Pruitt



Robert Pruitt. *A Song for Travelers*. 2022. Charcoal, conté crayon, and pastel on paper, mounted on aluminum. 84 x 240 in. (213.4 x 609.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Koplin Del Rio Gallery

What would you take with you on a long journey?

Between 1915 and 1970, nearly six million Black Americans left the rural South in search of social and economic opportunity in what is now called the Great Migration. While many people left their southern homes for cities in the North and the West, others chose to continue living in the communities they'd already established.

Robert Pruitt spent his childhood in Houston's Third and Fourth Wards. A ward is a political geographic district, similar to a city council district. Each of the six wards in Houston has stores, organizations, and people who make it unique. In *A Song for Travelers*, Robert explored how communities like the ones he grew up in both provide support and change over time.

Sixteen figures bring offerings and gifts to a traveler preparing for a journey. The traveler is adorned in a headdress inspired by an African American face jug and ceramic sculptures produced by art students at Texas Southern University. For Robert, the combination of these two artistic approaches brings the past into the present. Inspired by a 1970s family reunion photo, the figures in *A Song for Travelers* reference the artist's family members, people from old photographs found during Robert's research, and people related to historical events in Houston, Texas. Each figure's outfit was carefully selected to acknowledge the communal impact of Black institutions like schools, churches, and social groups. In the bottom left corner, a soldier from Camp Logan, a World War I (1914–1918) training camp, presents letter-writing materials. The young woman at left wears a shirt from Texas Southern University, the historically Black college where the artist earned his undergraduate degree, and sports athletic jackets in homage to the Black high schools of Houston.

She brings the traveler a gold watch. Depicting both his mother and a beauty pageant winner, the pregnant woman in the blue dress offers the gift of life. The veiled woman, inspired by an old photo of a bride, gifts the traveler a bouquet of plants native to Houston. The figure preparing for travel is a stand-in for the artist himself, who had recently moved away from Texas.

## Classroom Activities

- Each figure in Robert Pruitt's artwork brings a gift for the traveler's journey. Ask students to consider what they would give a traveler. Have students draw their gift and share with the class what they would give and why.
- Many figures in this work reference historical events in Houston. Turn students' attention to their own community or city. Working in small groups, assign an important local figure or event for students to research. Students can share their findings with the class.

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### Key of people and gifts in *A Song for Travelers*

- 1 A Camp Logan soldier brings the gift of letter-writing materials to write back to the community.
- 2 A woman representing historically Black educational institutions brings a watch. The jackets represent Worthing High School (green and yellow), Sterling High School (blue and white), Jack Yates High School (red and gold), and Wheatley High School (purple and white.)
- 3 A woman inspired by a photo of the Friendship Baptist Church Jubilee Choir has written the song the group is singing.
- 4 A bride brings a bouquet of plants native to Houston.
- 5 A woman wearing a money tunic offers a stack of money.
- 6 A pageant winner, inspired by the artist's mother, is pregnant, implying the gift of life.
- 7 A young man with a necklace of hurricane symbols brings a piece of chain.
- 8 A woman wearing a lightening dress inspired by the album cover for *Tighten Up* by Archie Bell & the Drells brings a Silver Surfer comic book.
- 9 A man in striped boxers inspired by a photo from the Texas State University "riots" in 1967 and a TSU mural has the Black Power fist.
- 10 A woman wearing a leaf shift inspired by a photo of a woman with an intricate hairstyle has a Black and Mild cigar behind her ear.
- 11 A man with a catfish brings an assortment of fishing lures.
- 12 A woman with a big hat inspired by a photo from the historic Gregory School archives brings a peppermint candy.
- 13 A Conjure woman with a snake brings a *gris-gris*, a Voodoo amulet originating in Africa which is believed to protect the wearer from evil or bring luck.
- 14 A woman in a robe inspired by a photo of two sisters brings a bit of soil in a resealable plastic bag.
- 15 A man with a Masonic cap represents the artist's grandfather.
- 16 An infant brings a game of jacks.
- 17 A chicken brings a ticket.