

## Artist Profile – Jack Whitten

b. 1939 Bessemer, AL; d. 2018 New York City

Growing up in Alabama, Whitten was surrounded by people like his aunt and uncle who made clothes from scraps of fabric and cars from junkyard parts, his father worked in a mine which is often reflected through materials in Whitten's work like coal and iron. After studying pre-med at Tuskegee Institute, Whitten enrolled at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to study art in 1960. Whitten had been involved in activism his whole life, participating in Civil Rights demonstrations in Louisiana, but feared he would become violent after seeing so many violent responses to segregation. To avoid this kind of outcome, Whitten moved to New York City in 1960 and began studying at the Cooper Union where he graduated with a BFA in 1964.

Whitten is an abstract painter and sculptor who created works based on his interest in African culture, art, and history as well as his interest in science, technology, and astrophysics. Whitten often created sculptures carved from wood that were inspired by African art and the meanings and materials behind them. Whitten's early works included sculptures that resembled folk art because of the objects used and his paintings incorporated mixed media that had surrealist gestures and were termed "assemblage art". Whitten's paintings often seem soft or feathery because of a technique where he places nylon mesh fabric over the wet paint.

In the late 1960s, Whitten moved away from assemblage art and started making solid sculptures from single pieces of wood. These works used both geometric and organic shapes and start a research into the history of the black visual. Whitten's sculptures often accompany his paintings and it was around the 1970s when he started experimenting with texture. His paintings from the 70s used objects like manhole covers, cellar doors, and bricks that were cast in acrylic and then affixed to the canvas.

Later, in the 1990s, Whitten took this process a step further and used hand-made tiles to create mosaic-like works, along with this he researched mosaics from around the Mediterranean and Egypt. Whitten's later works, in the 2000s, started using more current objects like the insides of a computer or cell phone to show the mass production of the new century. Although Whitten used these new technologies in his works, he still continued to use older objects as well, juxtaposing those computer and cell phone parts with Cretan walnut and Dionysian marble.

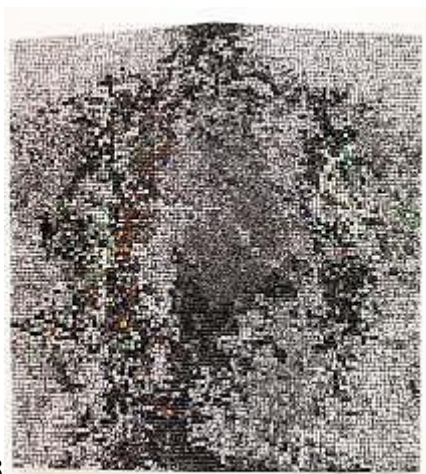
Examples of Whitten's works include *Lovers (1)*; a wood sculpture relating to African culture, *The Heart of Humanity (2)*; when he started carving from a single piece of wood and began using geometric shapes and abstraction, and *Black Monolith III (For Barbara Jordan) (3)*; an example of his paintings where he used mosaic tiles on the canvas.



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