



# “REFLECTIONS”

Volume 8 Issue 3

July 31 2002

## Jerry Pinkney Award-Winning Stamp and Book Illustrator



Jerry Pinkney has been illustrating children's books since 1964 and has the rare distinction of receiving three Caldecott Honor Medals – in 1995 for *John Henry* (Dial) by Julius Lester, two years in a row for *The Talking Eggs* by Robert D. San Souci (Dial) and *Mirandy and Brother Wind* by Patricia McKissack, (Knopf). He is the only illustrator to have won the Coretta Scott King Award three times and has received three awards for his body of work: the Drexel Citation for Children's Literature, the David McCord Award, and the Philadelphia School of Art and Design Alumni Award.

In addition to his work on children's books, he is an extremely successful illustrator who has had eleven one-man retrospectives at venues ranging from the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists to the Massachusetts College of Art, and has illustrated for a wide variety of clients, including *National Geographic*, RCA Records, the U.S. Postal

Service, and the Association of Booksellers for Children.

Born in Philadelphia, Jerry Pinkney states that he “took an interest in drawing very early in my life. It had to do with my two older brothers drawing – both from comic books and photo magazines. I actually started out mimicking them, but at some point, I realized I'd rather sit and draw than do almost anything else.” While growing up in the Germantown section of Philadelphia his interest in art was supported by his family – especially by his mother. “She certainly understood me and made it clear to everyone, and especially to my dad, that if art was what I wanted to pursue, then that's what she wanted to have happen. Later on, my father became very supportive in getting me into art classes.”

In junior high school, Mr. Pinkney had a newsstand and took a drawing pad with him to work every day and sketched passersby. That was how he met the cartoonist John Liney, who encouraged him to draw and showed him the possibilities of making a living as an artist. After graduating from the commercial art course at Dobbins Vocational School, where he met his wife Gloria, Jerry Pinkney received a full scholarship to attend the Philadelphia Museum College of Art (now University of the Arts). While at PCA, he and Gloria married. They moved to Boston after their first child was born, where Mr. Pinkney worked as a designer at Rustcraft Greeting Card Company, and at Barker-Black, where he developed his reputation as an illustrator. Eventually he opened Kaleidoscope Studio with two other artists. Later, he opened his own freelance studio – Jerry Pinkney Studio – and moved to New York.

Sensitivity to and an interest in a variety of cultures has always been a dominant theme of Mr. Pinkney's work. He has also drawn inspiration for a significant part of his work from African American culture. Among his numerous projects are his

eleven postage stamps for the U.S. Postal Service Black Heritage series. He served on the Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee from 1982 to 1992. He was invited to join the NASA artist team for the Space Shuttle *Columbia*. “I wanted to show that an African American artist could make it in this country on a national level in the graphic arts. I want to be a strong role model for my family and for other African Americans.”

Many of Mr. Pinkney's children's books celebrate multicultural and African American themes. “Working on both the *Uncle Remus* tales and *John Henry* has shown me an important link between pivotal and opposite African American folk heroes. *Bre'r Rabbit*, the sly trickster, originated during slavery and was the first African American folk hero. Slaves who wanted to get the better of their masters needed to be cunning and sly – hence the trickster role. However, later comes John Henry, a free man, whose strength, and valor bring him fame. He was the first strong folk hero for African Americans, a symbol of all the working men who made a major contribution to the building of the roads and railroads in the mountains of West Virginia – a dangerous job for which many paid with their lives.

*“Books give me a great feeling of personal and artistic satisfaction. When I'm working on a book, I wish the phone would never ring. I love doing it. My satisfaction comes from the actual marks on the paper, and when it sings, it's magic.”*

*Jerry Pinkney*

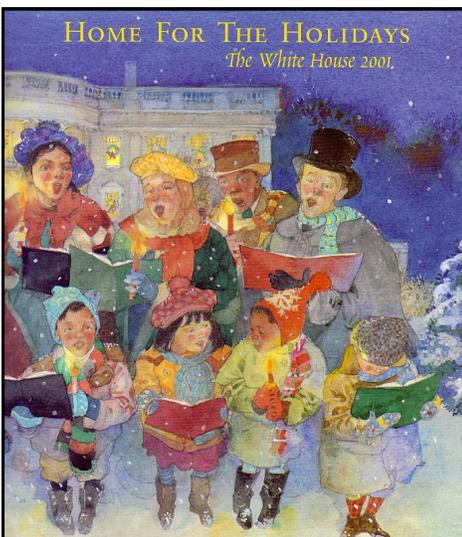
# Jerry Pinkney Stamp Designer and Book Illustrator

By Clarence McKnight and James E. Daniel

Jerry Pinkney lived in Westchester County, New York, with his wife, author Gloria Jean Pinkney. The Pinkneys have four grown children, Troy, Scott, Myles, and Brian. Two of the Pinkney children are also invoking in children's book illustration, Brian through illustrations, and Myles through photography.

In addition to illustrating children's books and other projects, Mr. Pinkney has also been an art professor at the University of Delaware and State University of New York at Buffalo and has given workshops and been a guest lecturer at universities and art schools across the country.

This past year, Pinkney was invited by First Lady Laura Bush to illustrate and design the White House Christmas Program. (See picture below)



On February 24, 2002, he hosted an exhibition at the Museum Gallery of the White Plains Public Library in White Plains, New York at 2 pm with a talk by Mr. Pinkney. This event was called "A Sense of Place – The Art of Jerry Pinkney. A reception was held to mark the opening of the exhibition, which was on view through April 24th. In addition to his illustrations, works showcased his collaboration with his wife, author Gloria Jean Pinkney and paintings and photographs by his sons, Brian and Myles, were on display. His entire family was in attendance for this

event including his grandchildren. My wife Sandra and son Kristian attended this event. My wife was very excited to meet Mr. Pinkney. We have over ten of his books he has illustrated in our home and in her classroom. She could not wait to return to her school and tell all her co-workers about meeting him. I had a chance to see



*(Jerry Pinkney, my wife Sandra and son Kristian having a couple books signed )*

and hear a lecture about his collection. We were all excited to see his collection of illustrations at this event. Some of his illustrations showed how he started from a simple sketch to the final book illustration. During his lecture he mentioned how he used some of his family members as models for some of his characters. For one of his books, he used himself as a model. Also attending this event was ESPer board member Eugene Robinson.

In addition to his work on children's books, he is an extremely successful



*(Mr. Robinson having a few of his books signed by Mr. Pinkney)*

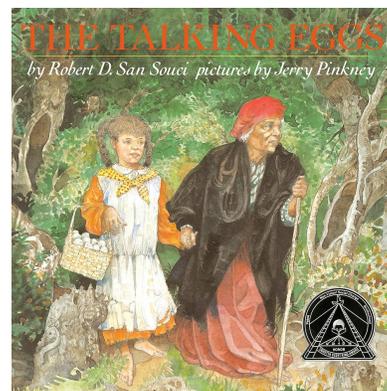
illustrator who has had eleven one-man retrospectives at venues ranging from the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists to the Massachusetts College of Art.

During one part of his talks, he mentioned he and his wife traveled to one southern state to gather research information for one his illustrations. To create his award-winning art Jerry frequently enlists models who are costumed appropriately and then photographed. Many of the models are family and friends such as a grandson who modeled for the boy in *Sam and the Tigers* (1996, Dial, \$15.99). Much of this work is carried out by Gloria Jean who works as his production assistant. She also reviews manuscripts. Research is essential to get the clothing, buildings, and trappings in each scene historically correct. Jerry wants those who experience his books to feel that they are there-wherever the book is set. The Pinkneys are a remarkable family of artists and writers committed to telling stories that celebrate human spirit and have universal appeal. Focusing on the African-American experience, Jerry Pinkney, his wife, Gloria Jean



*(My son Kristian having Brian Pinkney sign his book)*

Pinkney, and their son and daughter-in-law, Brian and Andrea Davis Pinkney, have created some of America's most highly acclaimed children's books.



Information for this story is from the White Plains Library flyer and web site <http://www.unomaha.edu/~unochlit/JerPinkney.html> and <http://www.friend.ly.net/scoop/biographies/pinkneyjerry> web pages. Photos on this page by Clarence McKnight  
Front page and interview photos by James E. Daniel

# The Jerry Pinkney Interview

By Clarence McKnight and James E. Daniel



(From left to right Jerry Pinkney, James E. Daniel and Clarence McKnight)

For a year and a half, I have been wanting to contact Mr. Pinkney but had a busy schedule at my job. James called me last November and asked, when are we going to interview Jerry Pinkney? I mentioned that I would try and set up something after the holidays. In the meantime, I was in contact with people at USPS asking about the Langston Hughes stamp ceremony. I asked one person would Jerry Pinkney be invited to the ceremony. She said, "Jerry who?" I told her that Jerry Pinkney designed the first stamp in this series. She asked if I had his phone number? I said I would call her back because I had his number at home. I called Mr. Pinkney and told him about ESPER then asked if someone at the USPS contacted him about coming to the Langston Hughes ceremony. He said no! I asked if I could give them his phone number. He said yes! Then I told him that I would like to interview him for our newsletter. He asked me to contact him after the holidays. I spoke with him after the Hughes ceremony and setup the appointment. James and I interviewed him at his home in Westchester County in New York on February 21, 2002. He welcomed us into his home and made James and me feel very comfortable. Both of us were very excited to meet him. Here is our interview.

## **In 1978 you designed the Harriet Tubman stamp for the Black Heritage series. Was this the first stamp you designed?**

*Jerry Pinkney-The Harriet Tubman stamp in 1978 was my first stamp and the first in the Black Heritage Series. I had been interested in doing work with the government. I knew a fellow artist that worked for the Bureau of Engraving and who had designed stamps for the Bureau. They were beginning to expand. I found out who the art coordinator was. The Black Heritage*

*Series was in the works and I was commissioned to do a stamp.*

## **How many did you design in this series?**

*Jerry Pinkney- Including the Harriet Tubman stamp I designed nine. They were Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackie Robinson, Whitney Moore Young Jr., Benjamin Banneker, Scott Joplin, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Sojourner Truth.*

## **Have you designed any other stamps other than the Black Heritage series?**

*Jerry Pinkney- Yes, I designed three other stamps. One was called Help in Hunger. Linn's called it the ugliest stamp for that year. I did the United Way stamp, and I did an embossed stamp on an envelope called the Honey Bee. After the Harriet Tubman stamp, they gave me a contact for three others. I was also invited to serve on the Citizens Advisory Committee.*

## **As a child artist. Who inspired you?**

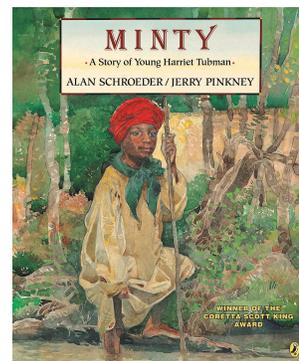
*Jerry Pinkney-When I was growing up, I didn't have any role models. There were no artists in my family. I loved to draw. I was always encouraged to draw by my mother and father. My dad was a little disappointed when I decided to go to art school, but my mother was always very positive about whatever you dream to follow it. It wasn't until high school that I met my first African-American instructor. He had a sign shop. I worked for him during the summer. We had a strong commercial art course but it was never connected to an outside world of making art. It wasn't until college that I began to make the connection. I received a scholarship to Philadelphia College of Art and there the inspiration really came from George McGovern was my anatomy instructor. All that time I knew that I loved doing art. There were very few African-Americans doing commissioned art and you were persuaded not to follow that. There really wasn't a vehicle for you. All that time I never believed that I was going to be making pictures for a living. I really did not understand that possibility. I just loved making pictures. I knew that there really was nothing else that I thought I could do well. It was like following a path.*

*Inspiration came from my professors. I went to college for 2 ½ years then I got married and moved to Boston. I dropped out of school. Boston was a magical town. In Boston I worked for Rustcraft*

*Greeting Card Company. I decided to get a little bit more involved in the community. I joined a Boston action group which was an African-American group. We did things like voter registration. In that group I met Thelma Lewis, she headed the National Center for African-American Artists and I realized that with that group I volunteered my service to do their graphics. During that time, they developed the National Center of African-American Artist Museum and I did start doing their graphics. I did some catalogs for them. I was about 22 or 24 years old and was introduced to the work of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff. I did this show for them called 5 Black Artists. Among those was Charles White III and I was moved by Pippin. This was the early 60's before they got national attention. When I saw the work of Charles, he brought such power and dignity to the African-American figure realistically. I was drawn to that. I was a young adult at that time. All of my training was in commercial art and then I studied advertising design. I know that in some way I wanted to use it and I think that's why I started working for the center.*

## **What was your most challenging stamp?**

*Jerry Pinkney- Stamps like Whitney Moore Young, when you are doing a stamp you had to figure out a way to find that element that is symbolic to the person's accomplishments, you had to cover that in a very small space. Whitney Moore Young's accomplishments visually was abstract, in words and the way he moved things and the importance in the Civil Right's movement and the Urban League. You don't want to ever use a symbol, so we ended up showing him at a desk. You take Jackie Robinson that was easy because I could put him with baseball mitt, at bat or sliding into a base Carter G. Woodson and Mary McLeod Bethune were also tough.*



# The Jerry Pinkney Interview

By Clarence McKnight and James E. Daniel



**Why do you think the last 9 Black Heritage stamps were done in monotonous instead of color?**

Jerry Pinkney- I can only suspect because I left the committee before that turnover. I suspect it can be a matter of the money involved. I suspect the graphics work was done inside the Bureau of Engraving instead of commissioning an artist. It costs a lot to commission an artist to design a stamp. So as with the Langston Hughes stamp, they used a photo image. All they had to do was go back to the engraver to do it, then they wouldn't have the high cost of production in full color. There is so much involved in research and in the cost of color production. They may also want to start a new trend for the Heritage series.

**Are there any other members in your family that are illustrators?**

Jerry Pinkney- My son Brian and his wife Andrea collaborated on books together. He illustrates and she writes. My son Miles is a photographer. He has done books with his wife Sandra.

**I heard that your two older brothers are artists. Have any of them received the same success as you?**

Jerry Pinkney- My older brothers drew when we were kids. They drew the kind of things that other kids drew as kids.

**I also heard that you have grandchildren. Have you seen any artistic talents coming from any of them yet?**

Jerry Pinkney- Yes, my oldest granddaughter Laurie Nicole spent part of her summer at middle school and high school art programs. She has been going to Saturday classes at F.I. T. This is her second year.

**When you are not drawing, what activities help you relax?**

Jerry Pinkney- Music helps me relax. I like music, art books, and I read

for information and pleasure.

**What was the first book you illustrated and when did you illustrate it?**

Jerry Pinkney- My first book was the *Adventures of Spider* in 1964, a South African folk tale. That was when I began to make the connection between myself and my African American roots. In a sense it gave me the opportunity to see the world a little clearer and also to break through some of the stereotypes we think about.

**How many books have you done?**

Jerry Pinkney- I'd say safely over 100. When I first got involved, artists didn't get any copyrights. I wasn't smart enough to keep everything. But I still own quite a bit.

**Other than stamps and books what other illustrations have you done?**

Jerry Pinkney- I did some covers for classical albums by Maulir, covers for classical R&B for the Whispers, and a cover for Jimmy Hendrix after he passed away. I also did a lot of illustrations in advertising.

**If you weren't involved in books and stamps what other artistic area would you have gone into?**

Jerry Pinkney- When I was a kid I always wanted to be a musician and I think that if I had a fantasy or a dream that would be it. I am fascinated by musicians. By the way, the other day I had a chance to meet Wynton Marsalis.

**Is any of your art in museums?**

Jerry Pinkney- Right now I have three traveling shows. One show has about 150 pieces of my work. It is now at the National African American Museum and Cultural Center in Ohio. It has been traveling for three years now. We will head up to the Boston African American Museum in April. I also have a two-man show which I share with my son Brian at the Manhattan Children's Museum. And on Sunday I have a show that will open at the Museum Gallery of the White Plains Public Library in White Plains, New York.

**Looking back in your career would you have changed anything, done anything different?**

Jerry Pinkney- That's a good question, because looking back I can honestly say no because now I am beginning to be able to use all of those

little facets I learned. Now when I'm working on a book project, I'm involved with the paper that is used, the typography and proofing. Now I know that everything I do is the sum total of all those things.

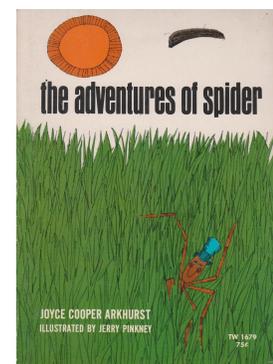
**In the next 20 or 30 years from now, what would you want people to remember you for? What do you want your legacy to be?**

Jerry Pinkney- A person that had a strong body of work that demonstrates the contribution of African Americans in this country - I think that maybe I want to be known as someone who set out to do things that I was interested in doing, and that I believe in those things.

**What was it like going to the White House and designing the Christmas holiday program and ornaments?**

Jerry Pinkney- First of all it was very exciting to get a call from the White House staff. It was unlike anything I expected. The courtesy there was very open. I was in the East Wing. The staff was cordial. I went down before September 11th. I was so excited about the project that I literally designed it on the way home. The program was designed as a keepsake for people touring the White House over the holiday season. The program describes how the White House was decorated. But the tour was canceled because of the September 11 problem. What they did was set up a center outside the White House. People could send for the keepsakes or pick them up. And people could receive them when they attended other special events happening around the White House.

**Mr. Pinkney, on behalf of James and myself. I would like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to give us the opportunity to interview you. We were honored to meet you.**



# Stamps designed by Jerry Pinkney

Cachets and Scott Joplin program are from the private collection of Eugene Robinson



Harriet Ross Tubman  
February 1, 1978



Martin Luther King, Jr.  
January 13, 1979



Benjamin Banneker  
February 15, 1980



Whitney M. Young, Jr.  
January 30, 1981



Jackie Robinson  
August 2, 1982



Scott Joplin  
June 9, 1983



Carter Goodwin Woodson  
February 1, 1984



Mary McLeod Bethune  
March 5, 1985



Sojourner Truth  
February 4, 1986



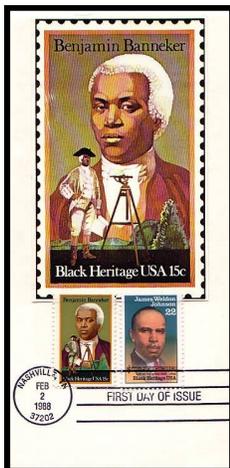
United Way stamp issued 1987



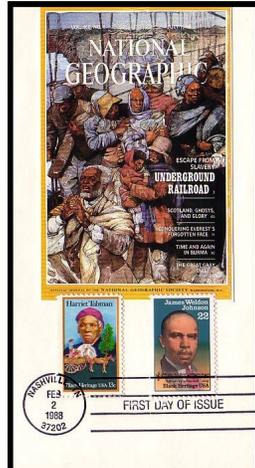
Honey Bee Stamp embossed envelope issued 1980



Help End Hunger issued 1985



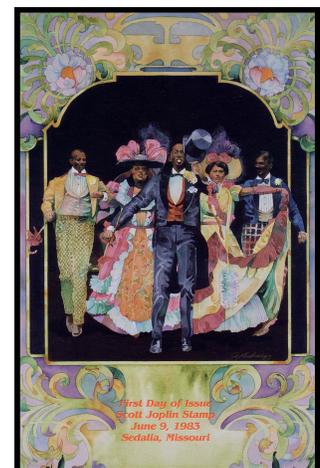
James Weldon Johnson Cachet with Benjamin Banneker stamp designed by Jerry Pinkney



James Weldon Johnson stamp Cachet with Harriet Ross Tubman and National Geographic mag. cover designed by Jerry Pinkney



Scott Joplin Ceremony Program and stamp on James Weldon Johnson cachet by Jerry Pinkney



Scott Joplin Ceremony Program designed by Jerry Pinkney