

## Jerry Pinkney

American, born 1939

## John Henry

1994

Watercolor and graphite pencil on paper

Cover illustration for *John Henry*, by Julius Lester (New York: Dial Books, 1994)

Image: 14 11/16 × 22 3/8 inches (37.3 × 56.8 cm); sheet: 16 15/16 × 23 15/16 inches (43 × 60.8 cm)

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### Let's Look

Describe the man in this painting.

What is he wearing? What is he holding in his hands?

What do you think are his strengths? How do you know?

What do you notice in the background of the picture? What do these details tell you about where this story is taking place?

## About the Painting

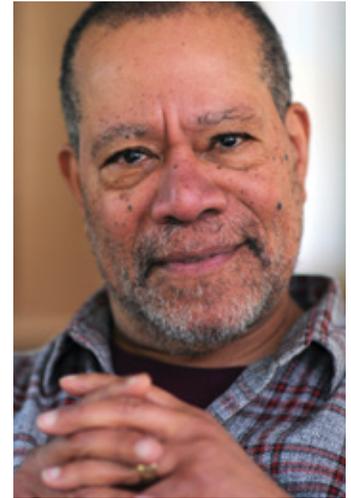
In this cover illustration for the children's book *John Henry*, the legendary hero sits comfortably and confidently on railroad ties, with a large hammer in each of his clenched fists. In the story, Henry accomplishes incredible feats, such as chopping down an acre of trees into firewood in an afternoon and outrunning a man on horseback.

This picture shows Henry at the site of his final accomplishment. After coming across a team of railroad workers who were using a new steam drill to dig through a mountain, he challenged the machine to a contest. With the drill on one side of the mountain, and Henry on the other, people gathered to see who would reach the middle of the mountain first. Amazingly, Henry dug through five times as far as the drill. Sadly, he soon died from physical exhaustion, but his admirers understood that "dying ain't important...what matters is how well you do your living."

Artist Jerry Pinkney collaborated with author Julius Lester on the retelling of this beloved folktale. The story was a childhood favorite of Pinkney's, and he embraced the opportunity to "create an African American hero that would inspire all."<sup>10</sup> A master visual storyteller and watercolorist, Pinkney captured key details of the story, such as the railroad, mountain, and onlookers, as well as Henry's confidence and pride.

# About Jerry Pinkney

A native Philadelphian, Jerry Pinkney grew up in the city's Germantown neighborhood. Although he struggled with reading due to dyslexia, he worked hard in school and won a scholarship to the Philadelphia Museum School of Art in 1957 (now the University of the Arts). He has illustrated numerous books featuring African American characters and exploring African American history and has won many awards, including a Caldecott Honor for *John Henry* and Caldecott Medal for *The Lion and the Mouse*. His beautiful **watercolors** and drawings pull viewers of all ages into each narrative. As he stated, "I am a storyteller at heart. There is something special about knowing that your stories can alter the way people see the world, and their place within it."<sup>11</sup>



Photograph by Thomas Kristich

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## Curriculum Connections

### Language Arts

#### John Henry (upper elementary school)

Read the book *John Henry* aloud and discuss Jerry Pinkney's illustrations. What details do you find in the illustrations that help you understand the story?

#### African American Heroes and Heroines (elementary and middle school)

John Henry is a heroic figure who continues to inspire people of all ages and backgrounds. What other heroic figures are represented in the works of art included in this resource? Why do you think so? What makes someone heroic?

#### Superpowers (elementary school)

John Henry can achieve unbelievable feats with his superhuman strength. Similarly, Cassie, the **protagonist** in Faith Ringgold's quilt *Tar Beach 2*, can fly among the stars. What superpower would you like to have? Describe it in words, and then create an image of yourself using this power to help someone else or accomplish an otherwise impossible task.

### Art

#### Pinkney's Process (adaptable for all grades)

Explore Pinkney's artistic technique of drawing a picture in pencil and then adding watercolor on top. First, decide on a story you'd like to illustrate in your picture. Then, sketch it in pencil and add layers of watercolor to bring your drawing to life.

### Social Studies

#### Oral Storytelling (adaptable for all grades)

Investigate oral history traditions in the American South through folktales such as *Tales of Uncle Remus* and *The Jack Tales*. How have these stories been passed down from one generation to the next? What is different about hearing a story told aloud from memory and reading it silently from a book?

A PowerPoint slideshow with all of the resource images can be found on the enclosed CD.

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<sup>10</sup> Norman Rockwell Museum, *Witness: The Art of Jerry Pinkney* (Stockbridge, MA: Norman Rockwell Museum, 2010), 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.