PORTAGE

This image is a detail from a larger work of art—an accordion-fold book that is almost fourteen feet long (see CD-ROM for additional images). To create it, the artist William Kentridge arranged small pieces of torn black paper into figures. He then glued the figures onto pages that he removed from a French dictionary.

While the dictionary definitions in the background represent precise, factual information, the procession of shadowy figures presents a narrative that is more open to interpretation. Where are the people going, and why? Perhaps they are travelers on a road. Perhaps they are moving from one place to another. Maybe they are participating in a parade or celebration. The people carry various items such as chairs, tools, musical instruments, and other objects. What might these objects tell us about their stories?

The poses of the four figures pictured here give us clues about their feelings. The woman on the left seems to stride forward confidently, while the person in front of her looks down, perhaps tired or lost in thought. The next person holds something above her head. What could it be? The figure on the far right seems especially burdened with a heavy load. Whoever they may be, they move forward together.

Kentridge was born and raised in South Africa. His parents, who had Lithuanian and German-Jewish ancestry, were lawyers who worked against apartheid, a system of racial segregation. Kentridge’s work, which includes films, drawings, sculptures, and theatrical productions, often addresses political and social issues.