Betye Saar's description of *Ancestral Spirit Chair*

My name is Betye Saar, and the name of my art piece is Ancestral Spirit Chair. The Ancestral Spirit Chair is a chair that is constructed from a chair that I bought in a garden shop. I wanted it to sort of represent what the chair was before, like a tree, and also what its artistic role is now, which is an ancestral seat of the Spirit.

And in certain cultures in Africa the spirit chair is where not only the ancestors sit but maybe where the King sits, or whatever ruler there is, and so it's decorated to protect him it's like the sacred seat.

So it's decorated with paint with little spots on it. It has bottles, mostly sort of antique old bottles that are glass or light tan, and that is directly from Africa but a particular tribe, a particular section where they hang bottles and mirrors on the tree to reflect and ward off an evil spirit.

Ancestral spirit chair was used in an installation. I had a hanging of my shadow painted on a piece of silk so you would have to walk around that to go into this space. On the floor of this space was a diagram of a slave ship and I had written something about passing the shadow and going past the spirit door (there's also like a screen door that's hanging there) and finding the ancestral chair, of like going back in time, regressing in time from wherever you are now back to Africa, seeking your roots are seeking your heritage.

Betye Saar's poem, related to *Ancestral Spirit Chair*

I cast a long shadow,
backwards my spirits wander,
from Willow Glen Gardens to zig zag to Louisiana to Iowa to
Missouri to Virginia Shores.

Blue illusions beckon in my spirit sail,
Some to Irish seas and some crawl deep into
the belly of a slave ship.

In search of the unknown,
my spirits pass through the spirit door
to seek the dark corner of the ancestral chair,
to breathe on the embers of Africa
and recall the memory of fire.