

Black Expression in the Earlier 20th Century—Visual Art¹

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a broad cultural, artistic, and literary movement among black Americans based in Harlem, New York. During the 1920s, **Alain Locke**, the leading critic and spokesman for the Harlem Renaissance, promoted the idea of racial equality by highlighting distinctively African-American contributions to the arts. In ***The New Negro: An Interpretation (1925)***, an anthology of African-American literature, Locke, as editor, asked black writers and artists to draw inspiration from their African heritage and racial origins. The Harlem Renaissance encompassed much more than the visual arts, but the period following World War I marked the emergence of African American art on the national and international levels. Picasso and other [European] artists in Paris helped to stimulate interest in African art. Although some black artists in America rejected identification with African art, others spoke of the need to develop an African American art idiom based on African forms. [During the] decades of the 1920s and 1930s, racially conscious African American artists dealt with many of **the themes that were articulated in the “New Negro” movement** [i.e., the Harlem Renaissance]: **the celebration of the beauty of black people, the illumination of the history of the African American experience, and the search for identity and roots.**

Graphic Art: The Negro Renaissance was primarily a literary movement and African-American authors demanded from their publishers images of African Americans that befitted the new era. Some of the best examples of African-American graphic arts could be found in New York City, which was by now the center for America’s proliferating book, popular magazine, and journal publishing.



Aaron Douglas (1889-1979): One of the most successful artists to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance was Aaron Douglas. Douglas, a native of Kansas, regularly read publications such ***The Crisis*** (the journal of the NAACP), ***Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*** (the publication of the Harlem-based National Urban League, an African American organization founded in 1910 to help black migrants from rural areas adjust to urban life) and ***Survey Graphic*** (a magazine focused on sociological and political research). When the opportunity arose for him to travel to Harlem and pursue his art career, he moved without hesitation. Upon his arrival in 1924 he immediately became friends with **W.E.B. DuBois** and **Alain Locke**, African American poets Countee Cullen and **Langston Hughes**, and whites such as Albert C.

¹ Excerpted and adapted from: Bjelajac, David, *American Art: A Cultural History* (Prentice Hall, 2000); Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities: Culture, Continuity and Change* (Pearson, 2011).

Barnes and Carl van Vechten, who belonged to the intimate circle of New Negro leaders. Barnes, one of several wealthy white patrons of black artists during this period, allowed Douglas to examine his extensive collection of West African sculpture and his modernist European paintings. Douglas proceeded to combine the stylized² forms of the two worlds to create a series of illustrations and murals that spoke to Locke's call for a new Negro art informed by Africa and celebrating the lives and history of African Americans. On the strength of his illustrations for Locke's publication *The New Negro*, Locke called Douglas a "pioneering Africanist." In his black-and-white drawings, human figures are [often] stylized, and, like the schematic patterns which they complement, they are flat shapes. Like much of Douglas's graphic art work, *Ma Bad Luck Card (1926) (below)*,



utilizes flat, sharply outlined silhouettes, geometric forms, and contrast between light and dark.

Douglas became closely identified with Locke's notion of a "New Negro" movement and began receiving numerous commissions. The powerful profiles of Douglas's figures suggest the representations of the human form found in Egyptian wall paintings. These "Egyptian form" figures, as Douglas called them, are silhouetted in profile with the eye rendered from a frontal viewpoint as in ancient Egyptian tomb reliefs and frescoes. With such images, Douglas led the way into a new field of African American art with wall decorations in Nashville (Fisk University), Harlem, Chicago, and elsewhere.

In 1925 Douglas wrote to Langston Hughes:

our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. . . . Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep through the laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it . . . Let's create something transcendently material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.

Douglas conveys this range of emotions in his work, combining hope and determination in *Ma Bad Luck Card*, which was used as an illustration for the poem "Hard Luck" by Langston Hughes in the October 1926 issue of *Opportunity*. Douglas has given dignity to his figure, omitting the mundane details of everyday life and conveying, instead, a sense of monumentality and timelessness. The figure represents the struggles of Africa and of Africans in America.

² stylized: in the visual arts, artworks that are "stylized" reflect an emphasis on the manner in which thing is represented rather than the way it appears to the eye; to "stylize" an image means to make the image conform to the rules of a particular style

Even when dealing with a historical figure, as Douglas does in **his 1931 mural (right) devoted to the escaped slave Harriet Tubman**, who repeatedly returned to the South to help others escape, he generalizes her form to represent all black women who broke the shackles of slavery to flee north. The mural also utilizes a limited palette [of colors] and shafts of light that function as veils across the surface of the works, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. The gradually enlarged circular shapes of color create a visual rhythm, evocative of music and spirituality. In *Harriet Tubman*, Douglas celebrates and memorializes a history that too often had been misinterpreted or forgotten altogether.



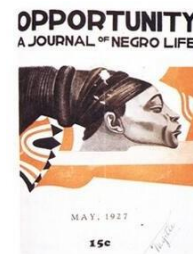
In 1934, Douglas completed a well-known mural (consisting of four separate panels) for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (known today as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, located in Harlem). The four-part mural, titled *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934), depicts the cultural and historical background of African Americans. Taken as a whole, *Aspects of Negro Life* was Douglas's most impressive response to Locke's directive to use African art and African-American folk culture as an inspiration. It also reflected the conviction of **W.E.B. DuBois** that any art of value must be morally responsible and instructive. The historical narrative, on Africa and African descendants in the United States, is shown in two horizontal and two vertical compositional formats. In these murals, Douglas restricted his palette [of colors], ranging from light mauve-browns to dark blue-purples, interweaving his silhouetted figures of abstract geometrical design.



In the first painting of the mural series, *The Negro in an African Setting* (left), Douglas employs the popular tropes³ of “primitivism”—dancing figures, standing figures holding spears, drummers, and a highlighted fetish⁴ statue (located in the middle of the top third of the painting). The figures are painted in Douglas's elongated “Egyptian style.” The only ethnographically accurate image is of the dancing woman, whose profiled hairstyle is that of the *Mangbetu Woman* whom Douglas had portrayed for the



cover of *Opportunity* magazine (May 1927); the original photograph that inspired Douglas's artwork is shown to the left, with the related magazine cover shown on the right:



³ **tropes**: in visual art, a trope is a commonly recurring visual motif that functions as the visual equivalent to a literary figure of speech (in which the words or expressions are used not in their literal sense but to call to mind another meaning)

⁴ **fetish**: in traditional African art, a fetish is a statue or other object believed to embody supernatural power

The second panel of the series is entitled *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*⁵ (below):



From Slavery through Reconstruction displays a subtle divergence from the African scene in subject matter and aesthetic style. From right to left, the panel depicts, in Douglas's words,

the slaves' doubt and uncertainty, transformed into exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation; in the second section, the figure standing on the box symbolizes the careers of outstanding Negro leaders during this time; the third section shows the departure of the Union soldiers from the South and the onslaught of the Klan that followed.

Cotton, the cash crop on which the slave system was driven, is foregrounded, as it grows even from the bottom border of the mural while men stand in various poses of work, resistance and exultation around it. Union troops are depicted, but both their comings and goings fade deep into the background of the painting, demonstrating both the promise of emancipation and the ultimate failure of Reconstruction. Even the threatening image of the Ku Klux Klan on the far left of the piece is faded and somewhat ghostly, more a haunting presence than a direct threat. The piece is clearly most interested in the black toilers who work the fields and stand in resistance: one, near center, forcefully breaking the chains around his wrists and raising a fist above his head in triumph or revolt.

The third panel, *An Idyll of the Deep South*⁶, is shown on the next page. In *An Idyll of the Deep South*, Douglas subverts the myth of the "happy southern plantation Negro" by

⁵ the commentary on *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* is taken from: Gardullo, Paul. "'Just Keeps Rollin' Along': Rebellions, Revolts And Radical Black Memories Of Slavery In The 1930S." *Patterns Of Prejudice* 41.3/4 (2007): 271-301. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.]

⁶ **idyll**: 1) a short literary work describing a picturesque episode or pleasant scene of country life 2) an event or scene of rural simplicity 3) a carefree experience

flanking the central theme of the painting—cheerful and contented African Americans singing, dancing, and playing music—with the images of black southern reality, the aftermath of a brutal lynching and black workers toiling in the fields:



This reality of racism and economic hardship is underscored through Douglas's incorporation of a star and its emanating ray of light in the left-hand corner of the composition. Although this star has generally been perceived as a representation of the North Star, in April of 1971, during a conversation with David Driskell, Douglas revealed that in fact the star was his version of the red star of Communism. Douglas added that he had included this star in *An Idyll of the Deep South* to illustrate the hope held by some black Harlem intellectuals that true equality might be attained through the alternative policies of communism and socialism.

In the last of the four murals, *Song of the Towers* (below), the Statue of Liberty has replaced the African fetish statue included in the first painting (*The Negro in an African Setting*, shown earlier), and the saxophone player has replaced the dancer. Considered together, the first and last paintings represent the quintessential symbols of African and African-American culture.



However, *Song of the Towers* also carries a “social realist” message, a critical comment on the forward march of science and technology, which has had little effect in improving the economic and social lot of African Americans.

⁷ the commentary on *An Idyll of the Deep South* is taken from: Fleming, Tuliza. “Narratives of African American Art and Identity.” The David D. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora. Web. http://www.driskellcenter.umd.edu/narratives/exhibition/sec2/doug_a_02.htm

The icons of American secular society modernism—industrialization and urbanism—are represented by skyscraper buildings, smokestacks belching smoke and mechanical wheel cogs. At the center of this nightmarish urban-industrial landscape stands a jazz saxophonist, juxtaposed with New York harbor's Statue of Liberty in the far background. However, the distant promise of African-American freedom appears overwhelmed by an inhuman socio-economic environment. In the lower left corner, an exhausted, muscular figure holds his head in despair as serpentine and claw-like clouds of smoke threaten to imprison him, sapping his strength. The plumes of smoke and towering urban-industrial forms create the demonic characteristics of a hellish underworld.



Douglas's critical interpretation of American urbanism and industrialization expressed his socialist political views and strong support for labor unions. Socialist organizations attracted many African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s because of their credo of social and economic equality, and anti-racism. Artist's organizations, such as the left-wing Artists' Union (est. 1934), functioned like any other labor union, fighting for occupational solidarity, better working conditions and economic benefits. . . . Douglas also belonged to the Harlem Artist Guild, an African-American alternative to the Artists' Union, whose members desired the visibility and economic opportunities which were denied to most of them.

In his essay "The Negro in American Culture" (1936), Douglas wrote:

Our chief concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality. This has been a difficult fight as we have been the constant object of attack by all manner of propaganda from nursery rhymes to false scientific racial theories. In this struggle the rest of the proletariat⁸ almost invariably has been arrayed against us. Some of us understand why this is so. But the Negro artist, unlike the white artist, has never known the big house. He is essentially a producer of the masses and can never take a position above or beyond their level. This simple fact is often overlooked by the Negro artist and almost always by those who in the past have offered what they sincerely considered to be help and friendship.

⁸ **the proletariat:** the working classes; term particularly associated with Marxist economic theory, used to refer to the collective class of industrial wage-earners who do not control any capital or means of production and so who can only earn a living by means of selling their labor

The potential victimization and continued precarious survival Douglas refers to in his essay is suggested in the image of a man on the verge of falling into grasping skeletal hands, seen in the lower left corner of the painting *Song of the Towers* described earlier, and also seen in an 1928 illustration entitled *Charleston* (right) which Douglas designed for Paul Morand's book *Black Magic* (1929).



Jacob Lawrence (left, 1917-2000) Another important African American painter whose work has been associated with raising consciousness of black history and experience is Jacob Lawrence, who was among the many young artists supported by the WPA Artists Relief Program ["WPA" refers to the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal government program operating during the Great Depression].



Lawrence (shown in a photo from 1941 above) dealt with American themes, particularly work and the urban experience. Like some other black artists who were deeply influenced by European modernism, Lawrence experienced hostility not only toward his race but also toward his manner of painting. However, this did not deter him from creating a remarkable body of work, which can be associated not only with the African American past but also with the shared and universal themes of freedom and repression, human life, and work.

Lawrence painted several important series that narrate major events in African American history, including his thirty-two panel Frederick Douglass series (1938-39) and **his series of thirty-one paintings devoted to Harriet Tubman**. The seventh panel in the Tubman cycle (right) shows the power of Lawrence's imagery. Tubman is represented, one knee on the log she is sawing, as a massive physical form that nearly fills the picture area. This suggests that in her strength lies her ability to survive, to fight, and to gain her freedom.



Perhaps the best known is Lawrence's **series on the "Great Migration" (completed in 1940-41)** The migration of blacks from the rural South to the industrial North of America in the first decades of the twentieth century was the biggest internal migration in American history and, in the words of **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**, "the largest movement of black bodies since slavery." It involved at least a million people—due to defects in the records, the number will never be known. It went largely uncommemorated, except by historians and sociologists. No novel, in or out of the African-American tradition, has handled it on the scale it deserved—it provoked no black equivalent, for instance, of [John Steinbeck's novel] *The Grapes of Wrath*, and although Richard Wright's *Native Son* dealt with a part of its aftermath in Chicago, there was no fictional work to match the drama of the migration itself. No monuments commemorate it, no documentary films were made about it. Lawrence simply picked up the subject and made it his own. The subject had personal relevance to Lawrence; members of his own family had migrated from South Carolina to northern industrial cities.

As Lawrence explained:

I was part of the migration, as was my family, my mother, my sister, and my brother . . . I grew up hearing tales about people 'coming up,' another family arriving . . . I didn't realize what was happening until about the middle of the 1930s [when Lawrence was about 18 years old], and that's when the *Migration* series began to take form in my mind.

The Great Migration had an epic character. It was forced by the merciless Southern white reaction that came in the wake of Reconstruction, plunging the black population of the Southern states—all poor, and nearly all rural workers—into a purgatory of abrogated⁹ rights. In the South, the years 1900-25 brought the high tide of Jim Crow laws, of lynchings, and the unrestrained terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. Moreover, most of the work available to "free" blacks depended on the cotton industry; and the invention of cotton-picking machines knocked the bottom out of their labor market. Deprived of work, unable to vote, and powerless to change their political status, Southern blacks voted with their feet and started flocking to the Mid-Atlantic, Northeastern, and Midwestern cities, repeating en masse the old perilous journey on the abolitionists' Underground Railroad, north out of bondage in the nineteenth century. They were looking for a better America than they had known—not a hard one to find, one might have thought; except that racism and unemployment were also endemic in Chicago, Boston, and New York. Those who imagined they were heading for the Promised Land were sharply disappointed, especially after 1929, when they arrived in a North economically devastated by the Depression, with little work and less chance of finding any.

In "Po' Boy Blues," 1932, the black poet **Langston Hughes** put words in the mouth of the migrants caught between two worlds:

⁹ **abrogated**: nullified; abolished by authority

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world's turned cold.

But there was no way back. Thus the South was drained of its black proletariat, while the North acquired a new one, out of which grew a radically altered conception of black culture in America: distinctively urban, but still Southern in its origins and collective memory. This was the culture whose synthesis, in New York, produced the Harlem Renaissance; and through it, American blacks reinvented themselves.

Lawrence was one of them. Born in Atlantic City, he spent part of his childhood in Pennsylvania and then, after his parents split up in 1924, he went with his mother and siblings to New York, settling in Harlem. When years later he told an interviewer that "I am the black community," he was neither boasting nor kidding. . . . He trained as a painter at the Harlem Art Workshop, inside the New York Public Library's 135th Street branch (known today as the Schomburg Center for Black Culture). Younger than the artists and writers who took part in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Lawrence was also [different from] them: he was not interested in the kind of idealized, fake-primitive images of blacks—the "Noble Negroes"—that tended to be produced as an antidote to the toxic racist stereotypes with which white popular culture had flooded America since Reconstruction.

Nevertheless, he gained self-confidence from the Harlem cultural milieu—in particular, from the art critic **Alain Locke**, a Harvard-trained esthete¹⁰ (and America's first black Rhodes scholar) who believed strongly in the possibility of an art created by blacks which could speak explicitly to African-Americans and still embody the values, and self-critical powers, of modernism. Or, in Locke's own words, "There is in truly great art no essential conflict between racial or national traits and universal human values." This belief was vital to Lawrence's own growth as an artist. Locke perceived the importance of the Great Migration, not just as an economic event but as a cultural one, in which countless blacks took over the control of their own lives, which had been denied them in the South:

With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro migrant becomes more and more like that of the European waves at their crests, a mass movement towards the larger and more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, *but from medieval America to modern.*

To narrate this event, then, would require a modern language, a deep immersion in the experience, and an awareness of the harsh toll that contact with American modernity exacted on the blacks. From childhood, Lawrence had been steeped in family and community stories of the Migration, and when—encouraged by Locke—he decided to paint it, he worked hard to get the historical background right. Months of painstaking research in the

¹⁰ esthete: one who cultivates a superior appreciation of the beautiful

Schomburg Collection of the Public Library, New York's chief archive on African-American life and history, followed—even though the finished paintings rarely allude to specific historical events. He took on the task with a youthful earnestness that remains one of the most touching aspects of the final work, and goes beyond mere self-expression. As a result, you sense that something is speaking *through* Lawrence—a collectivity.

The series is notable for the language it does *not* use. Lawrence was not a propagandist. Considering the violence and pathos of so much of his subject matter—prisons, deserted villages, city slums, race riots, labor camps—his images are restrained, and all the more piercing for their lack of bombast. **When he painted a lynching, for instance (panel 15 of the *Migration* series, below),** he left out the dangling body and the jeering crowd: there is only bare earth, a branch, an empty noose, and the huddled lump of a grieving woman.



Lawrence wasn't painting murals, but images closer in size to single pages, no more than eighteen inches by twelve. Nevertheless, he imagined the paintings as integrally connected—a single work of art, no less unified than a mural, but portable. *Migration* is a visual ballad, each image a stanza—compressed, like the blues, to the minimum needs of narration.

Panel Number 10

of the series "*They were very poor*" (right), pares the elements of a black-sharecropper's life down to the least common denominator: a man and a woman staring at empty bowls on a bare brown plane, an empty basket hung on the wall by an enormous nail—the sort of nail you imagine in a crucifixion. There isn't a trace of sentimentality.



The debts to [European modernist painting] in Lawrence's work are obvious [to those familiar with early 20th century Western art], but some aspects of his visual style, such as his approach to the use of color, came, as Lawrence acknowledged, more from his experience in Harlem than from other art. Recalling the visual influence of the Harlem neighborhoods that influenced him, Lawrence later recalled:



In order to add something to their lives, [black families] decorated their tenements and their homes in all of these colors. I've been asked, is anyone in my family artistically inclined? I've always felt ashamed of my response—I always said no, not realizing that my artistic sensibility came from this ambiance. . . . It's only in retrospect that I realized I was surrounded by art. You'd walk Seventh Avenue and look in the windows and you'd see all these colors in the depths of the depression. All these colors.

Lawrence's memory of those colors is plain in panel Number 57, "*The female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South*" (above), with its single figure of a laundress in a white smock, stirring a vat of fabrics—blue, black, yellow, pink—

with her pole: a dense and well-locked composition, suggesting the permanence and resistance which is one of the underlying themes of Lawrence's series as a whole.

Lawrence had met the older artist Aaron Douglas soon after arriving in Harlem in the mid-1930s. The angularity and rhythmic repetition of forms that Douglas introduced is evident in many of Lawrence's paintings for the *Migration* series.

Angularity and rhythmic repetition of forms is also reflected in his illustration of three girls writing on a chalkboard at school. Lawrence gave this panel from the series the caption *In the North, the Negro had better educational facilities (right)*.



Here the intellectual growth of the girls, as each reaches higher on the board, is presented as a musical crescendo in a syncopated¹¹, 4-beat, rhythmic form where the first beat, as it were, is silent and unplayed. Lawrence dresses the girls in the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue, thus emphasizing the fundamental nature of primary education.



Above all, what the art of both Douglas and Lawrence makes clear is **the connectedness of literature, music, and visual image in African-American experience**. Such connections would continue to inform African-American culture for the rest of the century. In the panel *They also found discrimination in the North although it was much different from that which they had known in the South (panel 49, left)*, Lawrence depicted a blatantly segregated dining room with a barrier running down the room's center separating the whites on the left from the African Americans on the right.

In panel 50 of the series, *Race Riots were very Numerous all over the North, right*, Lawrence depicted several club and knife-wielding rioters in flattened, distorted patterns of violence directed against unseen victims beyond the picture frame. Although his abstract, simplified style recalls American folk art, Lawrence had assimilated Cubist painting techniques and admired Aaron Douglas's fusion of realism and Modernist abstraction. Images like these reflect the fact that the conditions African Americans found in the North were often as difficult and discriminatory as those they had left behind in the South. Lawrence believed that the story of the Great Migration, like every subject he painted during his long career, had important lessons to teach viewers.



¹¹ **syncopated:** in music, the term "syncopation" refers to the accenting of a note at an unexpected time, as between two beats or on a weak beat