

SLIDE FOUR



AARON DOUGLAS

American, 1899-1979

Study for *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934

Gouache on Whatman artist's board (14 1/8 x 16 in.)

Estate of Solomon Byron

Smith; Margaret Fisher Fund,

1990.416



“The day of the ... ‘Mammies’ is done. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on,” declared Harlem Renaissance spokesman **Alain Locke*** in his watershed book entitled *The New Negro* (1925). There, Locke urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expressions. Testimony to this were the lyrical silhouetted black figures that illustrated Locke’s landmark book. Their creator, Aaron Douglas, would become a leading member of the **Harlem Renaissance**, and these fluid figures in motion were the first examples of what would be his signature style, clearly visible in *Study for Aspects of a Negro Life*, 1934. [See slide 4] Although such seminal modernists as Pablo Picasso had found the art of Africa a vital source, Douglas was the first African American to consciously use as inspiration what Locke considered the black artist’s birthright: African imagery, culture, and history. Of his breakthrough rhythmic images, Douglas merely said: “I tried to paint the sounds from hymns, chants, lullabies, and work songs.”

Douglas and Locke were part of the **Harlem Renaissance**, or **New Negro Movement**, the creative outburst of literature, music, dance, and art that flourished during the 1920s. [See map page 23] The movement drew its name from the narrow strip of upper Manhattan called Harlem, whose black population had more than tripled between 1910 and 1930, as a result of the **Great Migration**, in which large numbers of blacks moved from the South to urban centers in the North. In Harlem, no longer isolated in rural southern communities, blacks experienced a rebirth—a reawakening—of their African cultural roots. It was almost as if segregation had served as a retaining wall, holding back centuries of a vital tradition of storytelling, craft, music, and dance—an undiluted legacy that refused to be extinguished despite the **diaspora**, or forced dispersal of blacks from their ancestral homeland in Africa.

Black nationalist leader **Marcus Garvey*** spoke out, as did scholars like Locke and **W.E.B. DuBois***. African rhythms of jazz filled the streets of Harlem while authors such as **Langston Hughes*** captured the black experience in words. Although Harlem was dubbed “the cultural capital of black America,” this rich outpouring proved contagious, spreading to other cities as well, such as Chicago’s **Bronzeville** district. [See map page 45] “Nothing is more galvanizing to a people,” Locke declared, “than a sense of their cultural past.”

From the moment of Douglas’s arrival in New York around 1924, the Kansas native became part of renaissance activities. In addition to his illustrations for Locke’s *New American Negro*, Douglas’s flattened, highly stylized images appeared in DuBois’s **N.A.A.C.P.** magazine *Crisis* in 1925. He also illustrated poetry books by Langston Hughes. In 1927, he completed his first mural; his dancing figures adorned walls of the popular Harlem nightspot, Club **Ebony**, which is now destroyed. Rhythmic images of joyful

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary

AARON DOUGLAS



blacks decorated two more murals begun in 1929, one for Chicago's Sherman Hotel (now destroyed) and the other still surviving for Fisk University, the African American college founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee.

The golden era of the Harlem Renaissance dimmed with the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which plunged the nation into the **Great Depression** (1929-1939). To aid the paralyzed economy, Franklin Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, initiated a series of federally sponsored social programs beginning in 1933, among them the 1935 **Federal Arts Project (FAP)** under the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)**. The WPA/FAP not only helped create community art centers throughout the country, but employed more than five thousand artists, both black and white, by the time the program ended in 1943 in the middle of World War II (1939-1945). For many black artists, the WPA/FAP provided the first opportunity to work professionally with other artists. As artist Elizabeth Catlett later said [see pages 64-66]:

Figure 4
Aaron Douglas.
*Aspects of Negro Life:
The Negro in an
African Setting*, 1934.
Oil on canvas, (72 x 78½).
Photo: Manu Sassoonian.
Schomburg Center for
Research in Black Culture, Art
& Artifacts Division, The New
York Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden
Foundations.

“There have been two great periods in the development of Negro artists in the United States. The first was the Negro Renaissance when white patronage gave an opportunity for development to Negro artists. The second surge forward was during the Depression, during the days when Negro as well as white artists were employed and thus eligible for a job creating with the Government acting as patron of the arts.”

Douglas completed a number of murals under WPA sponsorship, but no work is more singled out to symbolize the renaissance’s celebration of blacks’s cultural roots than Douglas’s 1934 series of four murals entitled *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934). [See figure 4] They decorate the walls of what is now the renowned **Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture** at the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library at 135th Street, which was then the cultural epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance. The murals illustrate the emergence of an African American identity, detailing black history from African life through slavery and Reconstruction to the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance and the difficulties of the Depression.

The Art Institute’s rare sketch is a study for the first mural, entitled *The Negro in an African Setting*, which Douglas has described as representing “the African cultural background of American Negroes. Dominant in it are the strongly rhythmic arts of music ... dance and sculpture—and so the drummers, the dancers, and the carved *fetish* represent the exhilaration and rhythmic pulsation of life in Africa.” Using his characteristic silhouetted forms, with their lively stylization, Douglas portrays here a kind of paradise, where music, dance, art, and religion are all fused. In the center, a man and woman dance to the beat of the drums, while noble, spear-holding figures encircle them. At their feet are leaves of a palm forest. A shadowy deity figure in the upper middle of the picture seems to emanate one of Douglas’s characteristic motifs—ever-widening concentric circles that here suggest throbbing heat and the rhythm of the drums.

This highly finished sketch, with its African setting, gives vision to Locke’s notion that, through study, one can create a new, ancestrally inspired art for black America. Douglas’s wide-ranging background included a B.F.A. from the University of Nebraska, study abroad, and a Barnes Foundation Fellowship to examine outstanding examples of African tribal art and modern masters at the **Barnes Collection** in Merion, Pennsylvania. He also earned an M.A. from Columbia University’s Teaching College in 1944.

Douglas here created a unique synthesis of African art with ancient art and the modernist aesthetic. Its subject matter is, of course, African, and its stylized figures recall tribal sculpture. The rhythmic silhouettes suggest Greek vase painting and the profiled heads, Egyptian reliefs. The painting’s sleek lines and muted colors reflect the contemporary **Art Deco** style.

That these murals were placed above the heads of readers who had come to study and learn at the New York Public Library suggests Douglas's other contribution to the celebration of black art by black artists. In 1937, Douglas founded the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, teaching there until 1966, when he retired as Professor Emeritus. While he was there, his 1929 murals entitled *Symbolic Negro History*, installed in the university's administration building, taught students daily about visual expression as well as about their African American roots. Called a "pioneering Africanist" by Alain Locke, Douglas also established in 1949 what is now known as the Aaron Douglas Gallery of African Art. The genesis of this superb teaching collection was a major gift to Fisk by American artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) of works, including African sculpture, acquired by her late husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946). In 1973, Fisk University awarded Douglas an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts. He died in Nashville in 1979.

Throughout his long, illustrious career, Douglas, as artist and professor, served as a prime role model for future African American artists. Both his art and his life sought to answer the question asked during the Harlem Renaissance's heyday in 1926 by Harlem poet Countee Cullen*, for whom the library containing Douglas's *Aspects of Negro Life* series is named:

*What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree
What is Africa to me?*

Slide Four: Aaron Douglas

1. Of Douglas's rhythmic images, the artist said "I tried to paint the sounds from hymns, change, lullabies, and work songs." In this study, what sounds do students imagine? How did Douglas evoke them? Ask students to compare these sounds with those that Archibald J. Motley, Jr.'s *Nightlife* evokes.
2. Harlem Renaissance spokesperson Alain Locke declared that "nothing is more galvanizing to a people than a sense of their cultural past." Have students investigate their own cultural past and the struggles, triumphs, and traditions that have impacted their lives today. Have students design studies for a mural on some aspect of their heritage.
3. Douglas is said to be the first African American artist that consciously used African imagery, culture, and history as inspiration for his work. Using the Art Institute collection of African art and related teaching manuals, explore with students this rich influence and its evidence in Douglas's art.
4. Douglas was one of many artists who completed murals under WPA sponsorship. Have the students investigate WPA murals in their community—in schools, post offices, or other buildings that serve the public. How do these murals compare with Study for *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting* in subject matter and style? What relevance did/do they have to the community?
5. Read the Langston Hughes poem below and discuss it in relation to Douglas's study. How do the words and composition create the same image and rhythm as the painting?

African Dance

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
 Low...slow
 Slow...low –
Stirs your blood.

Dance!

A night-veiled girl
 Whirls softly into a
 Circle of light.
 Whirls softly...slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire –
 And the tom-toms beat,
 And the tom-toms beat,
And the low beating of the tom-toms
 Stirs your blood.