Eldzier Cortor lived in Chicago and attended the School of the Art Institute. While drawn to abstraction, he felt that it was not an effective tool for conveying serious social and political concerns. In this painting, the artist exposed the impoverished living conditions of many African Americans on Chicago's South Side through a brilliant use of line and color, reinvigorating the idiom of social realism.

“Here, Cortor emphasized pattern and texture, particularly the shapes and brilliant colors of the bed linens, floorboards, and wallpaper. His deliberately decorative vocabulary recasts the scene’s bleak circumstances into a dynamic, luminous composition.”

Sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett focused her career on representing African American subjects. She carved this bust in the early 1940s when, influenced by her study of African art, she began experimenting with abstraction. Though the figure is simplified and modernist, Catlett has carefully carved asymmetries into his features, creating a sense of individuality and vitality in smooth planes of limestone.

“This sculpture demonstrates Catlett's confident abstraction of the human form. Incorporating aesthetics of simplification, planarity, and exaggeration, Catlett established her own approach to depicting African American subjects.”
Musician and Dancer
Augusta Savage
Gallery 263

In this dynamic rendering of a musical partnership, Augusta Savage celebrated everyday people in her local community of Harlem. The two sculptures aesthetically respond to one another: the musician twists at the waist, throwing back his shoulders and head and lifting his wind instrument high in the air, while the dancer likewise leans off his vertical axis, his arms bent close to his body, full of kinetic energy.

Savage moved to New York in 1921 and studied at the Cooper Union. Two years later she won a scholarship to train in France—an offer later rescinded because she was Black. Savage would later found her own school and lead the Harlem Community Art Center.

Train Station
Walter Ellison
Gallery 263

Born in Georgia, Walter Ellison moved to Chicago in the 1920s, one of more than six million African Americans who left the South for the promise of a better life. After studying at the School of the Art Institute, the artist began exhibiting his paintings depicting scenes of Black Americans during the Great Migration, like this one of a segregated train station.

“On the left side of this painting, Ellison depicts white travelers, assisted by Black porters, boarding trains to southern vacation destinations. On the right side, Black passengers carrying their own bags head to northern cities in search of work.”

Cabin in the Cotton
Horace Pippin
Gallery 263

A celebrated African American artist of the mid-20th century, self-taught painter Horace Pippin began painting as therapy, hoping to regain mobility in his right arm, which was injured during WWI. While this work hung in a Philadelphia shoe repair shop, it caught the attention of artists, critics, and gallerists. It is considered an exemplar of the artist’s vivid, saturated palette and feeling for intense pattern.

“The Wedding
Jacob Lawrence
Gallery 263

Known for his depictions of Black American life, Jacob Lawrence composed this vibrant marriage scene. Positioning the bride and groom with their backs to us, Lawrence invites us as guests to the couple’s special day. The brightly colored flowers and boldly patterned stained glass give the scene movement and energy, adding to the joyful spirit of the painting.

“Pippin’s interpretation of cotton fields drew upon a visit to South Carolina with his regiment in 1917. Popular culture also may have informed this work: ‘Cabin in the Cotton’ was the title of both a song and a film in the 1930s.”

“Raised in Harlem, Lawrence studied at various community cultural centers and art workshops where his talent was quickly recognized. His unique style centered on narrative cycles devoted to African American history, leaders, and life.”