

# **The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African American Arts”**

## **Westbury Arts Remembers**

**Aaron Douglas**

**1899 - 1979**

**Painter, Illustrator, Arts Educator**



Portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Harmon Foundation  
© Peter Edward Fayard

Aaron Douglas has been called the “father of African American art.”

Douglas’ work helped to create a new “visual vocabulary” which paid respect to a distinctive African heritage. Combining African and African American imagery with Art Deco’s geometric and angular shapes and Art Nouveau’s linear tempo, his work was powerful and its imagery distinctive in its use of flat forms, hard edges, and repetitive

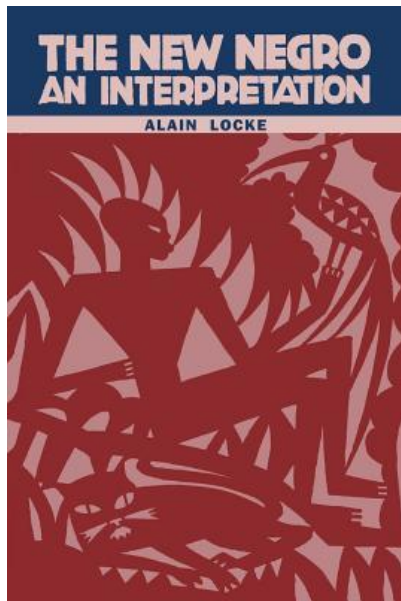


geometric shapes. His style would influence generations of African American artists who would use it to present their culture and identity on their own terms and to combat popular, racist depictions of African Americans. Art history professor David C. Driskell said that it was Douglas, "...who actually took the iconography of African art and gave it a perspective which was readily accepted into black American culture. His theory was that the ancestral arts of Africa were relevant, meaningful and above all a part of our heritage, and we should use them to project ourselves."

Aaron Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899. His father, Aaron Douglas, Sr., was a baker and his mother, Elizabeth Douglas, enjoyed drawing and painting, a pastime she shared with her son. His parents emphasized the importance of education and instilled a sense of optimism and self-confidence in their son, even though they did not have much money. Early in his life, Douglas knew that he wanted to become an artist. However, the road to a successful career in art, then as now, was difficult. As a young man he worked at many different jobs, including at a plant nursery, a railroad materials yard, a glass factory, a steel foundry, the Cadillac plant in Detroit, and as a waiter in order to achieve his goals.

After graduating from Topeka High School in 1917, Douglas wanted to attend university, but was unable to afford the tuition. After working to save money, he attended the University of Nebraska, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1922. After graduation, Douglas spent two years (1922-1923) at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri where he taught classes in drawing, painting, stenciling, and batik. He also served as a mentor to the Art Club and was one of only two black teachers in the school. Realizing the need to be free from the indignity of color restrictions, Douglas said, "I've got to go, even if I have to sweep floors for a living." He resigned his teaching job in June 1925 and fulfilled his dream of moving to New York City. Douglas was hired by W. E. B. Du Bois for a job in the mailroom at the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*. Douglas quickly became immersed in the thriving art and culture scene that was the Harlem Renaissance.





Douglas won a scholarship, shortly after his arrival in NY, to study with German-born artist/illustrator Winold Reiss who was known for his romanticized portraits of Native Americans. Reiss encouraged Douglas to turn to his African heritage for artistic inspiration. Characterized by elegant, rhythmic silhouettes, Douglas' work created strong images of the struggles of marginalized people and began to appear as illustrations for the Urban League's magazine, *The Crisis*, and the NAACP's magazine *Opportunity*. He was then commissioned to illustrate the influential book, *The New Negro* (1925), by Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain LeRoy Locke. In recognition of his powerful imagery other Harlem Renaissance authors commissioned his illustrations. Douglas' art appears in books by James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen to name just a few.

As his career gained momentum, Douglas recognized his responsibility to encourage and promote young African American artists, with special focus on work that would improve public understanding of issues faced by the African American community, including racism, unemployment, and poverty. Along with Augusta Savage, he became a founding member the Harlem Artist Guild, as well as its first President. The Guild's mission was to improve socioeconomic opportunities for African Americans artists, as well as combat stereotypical racist representations of the past. Douglas also was a co-founder of *Fire!! A Quarterly Journal Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. The goal of the magazine was,

"to express ourselves freely and independently - without interference from old heads, white or Negro," and "to burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past ... into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists and provide us with an outlet for publication."



*Fire!!* was important because its contributors were some of the most talented and creative African Americans artists and writers of their generation, including Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes. *Fire!!* addressed controversial issues and was not viewed favorably by many within the Harlem Renaissance for promoting stereotypes by its use of vernacular language. With poor reviews by both Black and white audiences, *Fire!!* only published one edition.

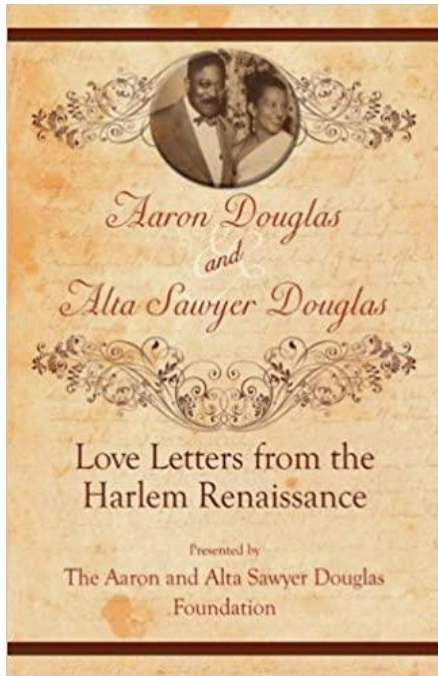
In 1927, Douglas was commissioned to create his first mural at Club Ebony one of the Harlem's most important African American nightclubs. His murals, like his paintings and illustrations, celebrated the African American experience and at the same time called attention to racism and segregation. You can find some of Douglas' murals at the Cravath Memorial Library at Fisk University in Nashville, The Sherman Hotel in Chicago, the Harlem YMCA, and at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library which is shown below.



*Aspects of Negro Life*

His powerful murals when viewed today serve as examples of his legacy and lasting influence on American art history and African American culture.

During the 1930s Douglas returned occasionally to Fisk University where he worked as an assistant professor in the art department. He accepted a full-time position in 1940. Although teaching in Nashville, Douglas kept his apartment in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem, in a red brick building at 409 Edgecombe, which also was home to Thurgood Marshall and W. E. B. DuBois. In 1944 Douglas completed a Master of Arts degree at Teachers College, Columbia University. At Fisk he became chair of the art department, where he inspired and mentored several generations of young artists before retiring in 1966.



Douglas married Alta Sawyer, who he had met years before while they were both in high school and, although she had married another man soon after graduating, they continued to write to each other. Alta divorced her first husband in 1926 and married Douglas. Their personal letters, published in 2008, provide background for the era and the relationships that that make up the Harlem Renaissance family. Published in 2008 Titled *Aaron Douglas and Alta Sawyer Douglas Love Letters from the Harlem Renaissance*, the letters describe the love and dedication that spurred Douglas' artistic expressions and personal connections, beginning in the 1920s and lasting throughout his adult life. They also reveal their concern about identity and drive which helps explain how Aaron Douglas gained prominence. Altha died suddenly in 1958 and a heartbroken Douglas, described her as "...the most dynamic force in my life, my inspiration, my

encouragement."

During his lifetime Douglas received numerous honors. In 1963, President John Kennedy invited him to the White House to celebrate the centennial of the "Emancipation Proclamation." He also earned an honorary doctorate from Fisk University in 1973, seven years after his retirement from the school. He remained an active painter and lecturer until the end of his life. Douglas died in a Nashville hospital at the age of 79 on February 2, 1979 from a pulmonary embolism.

A memorial service was held for Douglas at Fisk University, where he had taught for 30 years. Walter J. Leonard, the university's president at the time, in remembering Douglas said, "Aaron Douglas was one of the most accomplished of the interpreters of our institutions and cultural values. He captured the strength and quickness of the young; he translated the memories of the old; and he projected the determination of the inspired and courageous." He should always be remembered as one of the first African American artists to portray racial themes within the context of modern art, and his ambitious pursuit of justice through his paintbrush continues to influence artists today.

*"...Just a son of Africa, and paint for what inspires me."*



*Aaron Douglas*

## TO LEARN MORE

1. "Aaron Douglas." Kansapedia- The Encyclopedia of the Kansas Historical Society. June 12, 0003. <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/aaron-douglas/12039>.
2. Ragar, C. R. (2010). *The Douglas Legacy*. *American Studies*, 49(1/2), 131–145. Retrieved from <https://journals.ku.edu/amsj/article/view/3948>
3. Untapped New York, "A Forgotten Harlem Renaissance Mural Inside the Harlem YMCA" by Benjamin Waldman. February 29, 2016  
<https://untappedcities.com/2016/02/29/a-forgotten-harlem-renaissance-mural-inside-the-harlem-ymca/>
4. "Negotiating the Racial Mountain: The Depression Era Murals of Aaron Douglas," by Shelley Staples, American Studies Program, University of Virginia. Spring 2003  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/douglas/intro.html>  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/douglas/race.html>  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/douglas/usable.html>  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/douglas/timeline.html>  
Roll over the name of a mural to see a small image on the right.  
Click the name of a mural to see a larger image and more information.
5. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist Exhibition Brochure*, written by Susan Earle, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas  
<http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/exhibition/brochure.pdf>
6. WikiArt, Visual Art Encyclopedia  
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/aaron-douglas>
7. Biography, Aaron Douglas. Biography.com Editors, Updated: Jan. 19, 2021  
<https://www.biography.com/artist/aaron-douglas>
8. The Art Story, "Aaron Douglas Artworks,"  
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/douglas-aaron/artworks/>
9. The National Gallery of Art, "Aaron Douglas - American, 1899 – 1979"  
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.38654.html>