

“The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African-American Arts”

Westbury Arts Celebrates

Dr. Alain LeRoy Locke

(1885 - 1954)



Photo taken by Gordon Parks/The Gordon Parks Foundation

***“Nothing is more galvanizing than the sense of a cultural past”* Alain Locke**

Alain LeRoy Locke is considered the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance.”

Locke was a leading intellectual during the early twentieth century and is best known as a theorist, critic, and interpreter of African American literature and art. His essays, books and magazine articles called attention to the development of Harlem, the neighborhood in New York City, which became a black cultural mecca in the early 20th Century, and he chronicled the social and artistic revolution that resulted there. Lasting from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the period is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifested in literature, music, stage performance and art.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1885, Locke was an only child and his father, Pliny Ismael Locke, despite having a law degree, worked as a mail clerk. His father died when Locke was 6 years old, but his mother, Mary Hawkins Locke who worked as a teacher, attempted to provide a middle-class life for Alain and raised her son, from the time he was 6, to play the aristocrat. Locke grew up determined to demonstrate his worth by cultivating a reverence for the arts. He was educated among wealthy students at one of the city's finest public high schools and enrolled at Harvard at 19.



In his lifetime, Locke had many important accomplishments. He earned his bachelor's degree from Harvard University completing a four-year philosophy degree in only three years and graduating magna cum laude. While at Harvard, Locke was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, a highly distinguished honor society, and won the prestigious Bowdoin Prize, which recognizes essays of originality and high literary merit. In 1907, he became the first African American Rhodes Scholar, as well as the first known gay Rhodes Scholar, studying abroad at Oxford University in England. Sadly, it was not until 1963 that another African American was selected for this honor. Locke's triumph made national headlines and turned him into a celebrity in the Black community. It also, despite his intellect and clear talent, provoked racist opposition from Rhodes Scholars from the southern states, who saw Locke's inclusion in their ranks as a shocking breach of the rules of white supremacy. For the first time in his

academic career, he was faced with overt racism.

Returning to the United States, Locke became a professor of Philosophy at Howard University and, in 1918, returned to Harvard to earn his PhD in Philosophy. By 1921 he was the Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Howard, a position he held until retiring in 1953.

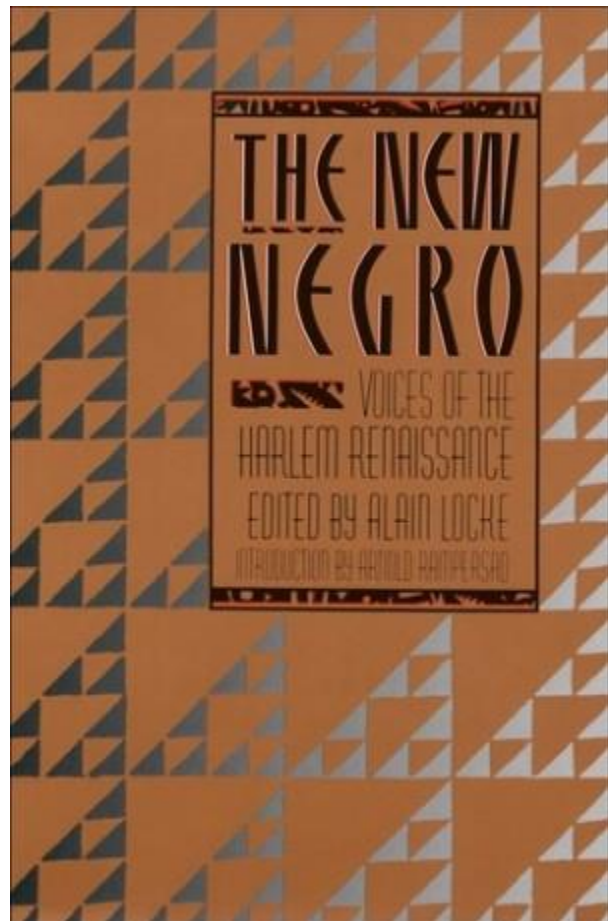
Throughout his academic career, Locke extensively studied African culture and traced its influences on western civilization. Through his writing, Locke established close relationships with many of the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston.

The Harlem Renaissance, in Locke's view, was an expression of the modernist spirit, a revolution in society as well as in art. For Black America, it took the form of an intellectual liberation that, he believed, would be a precursor to social change. Locke announced:

"The younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses." Rather than being the object of others' discourse, African Americans—and particularly, for Locke, African American artists, and intellectuals—were insisting on the right to be the recorders of their own history. "By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem," Locke wrote, "we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation...the decade that found us with a problem has left us with only a task."

Locke encouraged African American painters, sculptors, musicians, and other artists to utilize African sources for inspiration in their work. Specifically, Locke encouraged artists to reference African sources to better understand African and African American identity and discover African-based materials and techniques to create and express different art forms. In literature, Locke pressed African American authors and writers to explore subjects in African and African American life and to set high artistic standards for themselves.

In 1924 with the publication of his landmark book, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, Locke positioned himself as the philosopher and strategist of a movement. "New Negro" is a term popularized during the Harlem Renaissance implying a more outspoken advocacy of dignity and a refusal to submit quietly to the practices and laws of Jim Crow racial segregation.



The "New Negro" was an anthology that planted some of the most important black writers of the nineteen-twenties—Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston—squarely in the public eye. Locke's book launched the movement and marked the birth of a modern style: the swank, gritty, fractious style of blackness streaking through the modern world.

Adam Kirsch, in his essay titled, "Art and Activism - Rediscovering Alain Locke and the project of black self-realization" published in 2018, wrote:

"... like all the most important thinkers, complex and provocative, Alain Locke was a figure to inspire and to argue with. At first sight, Locke's focus on culture and the arts as a realm of African American self-making may seem to be less than urgent. When we are still struggling as a country to accept the basic principle that Black Lives Matter, do we really need to read Locke's reflections on painting and sculpture, music, and poetry? This was the very critique he faced from many in his own time—militant activists like W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom Locke's perception was a distraction or a luxury. "But Locke strongly rejected such a division between art and activism. Working at a time when the prospects for progress in civil rights seemed remote, Locke looked to the arts as a crucial realm of black self-realization. Art cannot completely accomplish this," he acknowledged, "but I believe it can lead the way."



After suffering from heart problems for some time, Alain Leroy Locke died in New York City on June 9, 1954 and was laid to rest in Congressional Cemetery in Washington DC. A simplified reproduction of a bookplate created by Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas (pictured to the left) sits at the center of one side of his headstone. The emblem portrays a dramatic art-deco depiction of an African woman's face set against a sunburst. The words "Teneo te, Africa" translate to "I hold you, my Africa." The other side of the tombstone reads Alain LeRoy Locke

"Philosopher - Educator - Cosmopolitan - Herald of the Harlem Renaissance - Exponent of Cultural Pluralism - Philosophy Chair Howard University - First African American Rhodes Scholar."

Locke's legacy has endured. Howard University's Arts and Sciences building is named for him, as well as schools in several cities, including Philadelphia. In 1973, Harvard hosted a scholarly symposium on his accomplishments, and since 1993 has awarded the Alain Locke Prize to the most outstanding student of African American studies.



This mural was created by a London-based artist Ben Slow and was paid for and supported by Mural Arts Philadelphia. A tribute to Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954), the mural is located at Juniper and Cypress streets, Philadelphia.

“Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice, and caricature have overlaid”

Alain Locke

Compiled by Stanley Turetsky

To Learn More

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3. THE New Negro - The Life of Alain Locke by Jeffrey C. Stewart
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<https://link.usps.com/2020/05/19/arts-advocate/>
5. "London-based Artist Paints Mural to Alain LeRoy Locke in The Gayborhood APRIL
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