



AARON DOUGLAS

AFRICAN AMERICAN MODERNIST

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Born to laborer parents in Topeka, Kansas, Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) overcame many obstacles to pursue his passion for art and ideas. He was 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. After

earning a B.F.A. degree in 1922 from the University of Nebraska and teaching at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, he migrated to New York in 1925 to join in the cultural flourishing that has variously been called the New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance. He later taught art for three decades at historically black Fisk University in Nashville.

The crowd of young artists, writers, musicians, and playwrights Douglas met in 1920s Harlem believed that art and creative expression could help bridge the chasm between the African American and white worlds. These pioneers helped make real the notion of a self-determined “New Negro” who possessed an appreciation for African heritage, a strong sense of race consciousness, and a deeply felt racial pride.

TIMELINE

1899

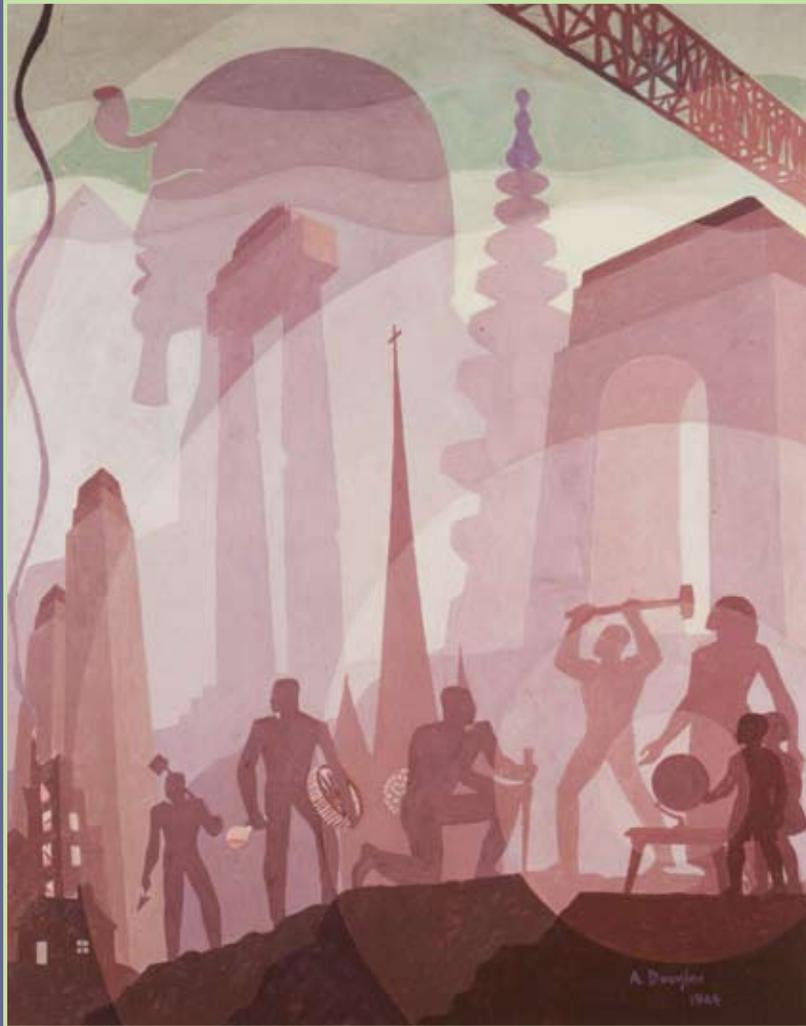
Douglas born in Topeka, Kansas

1909

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded

1919

Race riots erupt in more than 20 cities



cover: Aaron Douglas, *The Founding of Chicago*, circa 1933-40, gouache on paperboard, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas. Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Fund, 2006.0027

above: Aaron Douglas, *Building More Stately Mansions*, 1944, oil on canvas, Fisk University Galleries, Nashville

opposite: Aaron Douglas, *Self-portrait*, 1954, charcoal and conté drawing on paper, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas. Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1995.0042

Douglas was inspired by philosophical thinking and political ideals that were part of this efflorescence, including the “back-to-Africa” argument of Marcus Garvey, which suggested to Douglas that he mine African art for potent images and forms. This fiery young artist from Kansas soon became what artist and scholar David C. Driskell has called the “tastemaker” of the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem’s avante garde culture of the 1920s was inseparable from modernism, and no one else captured this powerful pairing, emblematic of the Jazz Age, with the rigor and strength that Aaron Douglas did. At a time when racism still ruled the day in America, Douglas provided a dignified voice of opposition, insight, and aspiration through his powerful and distinctive imagery. He illustrated articles on topics including segregation, lynching, and human rights for *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, magazines founded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, respectively. His bold new vision spread further when he collaborated with writers to illustrate their novels and poems. Deeply influenced by the sounds of Negro spirituals and what he called their “starkness,” this ground-breaking artist combined modernist forms and African motifs to portray the history of African Americans, evoking both harsh realities and hopes for a better future.

This exhibition is the first nationally touring retrospective to celebrate the art and legacy of Douglas, now considered the foremost visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. With nearly 100 works of art by Douglas plus several by his contemporaries and students, the exhibition focuses on the artist’s career from the 1920s through the 1940s and is organized both chronologically and thematically. The exhibition argues that Douglas’s bold work opened doors for many and forged a dialogue with American and international modernism that put African artistic influences and African American life, labor, and freedom at its center.



Detail: Aaron Douglas, *Opportunity Art Folio*, 1926, relief print, Museum purchase: The Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, the Office of the Chancellor, and the Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund, 2003.0012.04

1920

Editor of *The Crisis* W. E. B. Du Bois writes of a pending “renaissance of American Negro literature”

1921

Shuffle Along, the first musical review written and performed by African Americans, opens in New York

1922

Douglas earns B.F.A. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Senate defeats anti-lynching legislation

1923-1925

Douglas teaches art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri

1925

Survey Graphic publishes a special issue dedicated to “Harlem: The Mecca of the New Negro”

1925

Douglas moves to Harlem and studies with modernist artist Winold Reiss; contributes illustrations to black journals *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and to Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*

ILLUSTRATIONS & BOOK JACKETS

Douglas collaborated with many important Harlem Renaissance writers, including Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. His dust jackets for books vividly captured the spirit of the time and disseminated his signature style of flat, silhouetted figures combined with fractured space and a monochrome palette. Very rare today, these dust jackets are brought together here for the first time. His best-known collaboration was his eight paintings for James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), a poetic interpretation of popular folk sermons. His cover for the historic and inflammatory *FIRE!!* (1926) and his complex illustrations for Paul Morand's *Black Magic* (1929), including *Charleston*, are central to his work.

Aaron Douglas, *Charleston*, circa 1928, gouache and pencil on paperboard, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest) and the State of North Carolina, by exchange



1926

Douglas co-founds the short-lived journal *Fire!!*
"Father of the Blues" W. C. Handy publishes *Blues: An Anthology*

1927

Douglas illustrates James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* and paints a mural for Club Ebony in Harlem

1928

Douglas receives a Barnes Foundation fellowship to study African art and modern European art

MURALS

Some of Douglas's most important works are large-scale murals that portray subjects from African American history and contemporary life in epic allegories. In the late 1920s Douglas created murals in Harlem for private residences and Club Ebony, a vibrant new nightclub. In 1930 he painted murals for Fisk University that narrated a history of African American life and for the Sherman Hotel in Chicago that portrayed the *Birth O' the Blues*. His best-known portable murals are *Harriet Tubman* at Bennett College for Women and the four magisterial *Aspects of Negro Life* panels created in 1934 for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Using a modernist style, Douglas portrayed subjects such as slavery, emancipation, the power of education, and the contributions of African Americans to the broader United States economy and culture. To achieve this, Douglas utilized his knowledge of Egyptian wall painting and Ivory Coast sculpture to devise graphically incisive motifs. All of his major mural projects are represented in this exhibition. Included are mural-like paintings, studies for various mural projects, and an artist-made video by Madison Davis Lacy commissioned for this exhibition that represents the Fisk and Harlem YMCA murals.

1929

The stock market crashes

1933

Douglas's first solo exhibition, at Caz Delbo Gallery in New York

1935

Douglas becomes first president of the Harlem Artists Guild

1936

Douglas paints murals for the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas and participates in an artists' summit against fascism



Aaron Douglas,
Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction, 1934
oil on canvas, Art & Artifacts Division,
Schomburg Center
for Research in Black Culture, The New York
Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden
Foundations

A detail from this
work also appears in
the background of the
front and back cover.

FISK & NASHVILLE

Douglas's first major mural commission came in 1930 for the new Cravath Library at Fisk University in Nashville. Several years later Douglas founded the art department at Fisk and became an assistant professor there, inspiring many Fisk students not only through his teaching but also through the example of his murals and his belief in black pride and leadership. His style continued to develop and he painted works such as *Building*

More Stately Mansions (1944). He traveled throughout the South and also abroad, journeying to Paris in 1931 and later to Haiti, Europe, and Africa. He painted watercolors on these trips, as well as during his stays in Nashville and New York. His portraits of peers and various luminaries convey the power of his vision in a realistic mode, different from the flat and abstracted approach that he used for his illustrations and murals.

1937

Douglas receives Julius Rosenwald Foundation fellowship for travel to Haiti

1938

Douglas accepts a teaching position at Fisk University

1944

Douglas earns M.A. at Columbia University in New York

1950

Gwendolyn Brooks from Topeka, Kansas, receives Pulitzer Prize, the first African American to receive this honor

1952

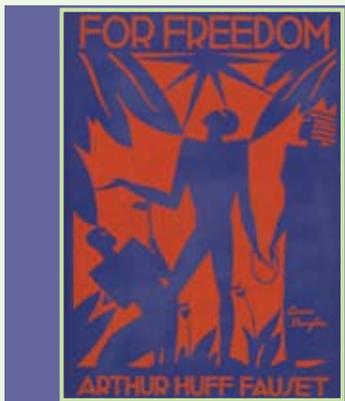
Ralph Ellison publishes *Invisible Man*

1954

In *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules segregation in schools to be unconstitutional

LEGACY

Both in his day and afterward, Douglas had an important impact on many artists. Among these are well-known figures such as Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Jeff Donaldson and other AfriCOBRA artists, and Terry Adkins.



Aaron Douglas, Cover for Arthur Huff Fauset, *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro, 1927*, Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

He also inspired many artists who knew him in New York or at Fisk, including Richard Bruce Nugent, Viola Burley Leak, Gregory Ridley, and John Simmons, as well as contemporary community muralists such as David Loewenstein. His message of freedom and of the importance of African American history, labor, music, and education remains relevant today and reverberates strongly.

As Fisk president Walter J. Leonard stated at his memorial service in 1979, "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."

1966

Douglas retires from Fisk University

1973

Douglas receives honorary doctorate from Fisk

1979

Douglas dies in Nashville

EXHIBITION ORGANIZED by Susan Earle, Ph.D., and coordinated by Stephanie Fox Knappe at the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas

Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence
September 8-December 2, 2007

Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville
January 19-April 13, 2008

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
May 9-August 3, 2008

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York
August 30-November 30, 2008

MAJOR FUNDING for the touring exhibition *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* and the accompanying book has been generously provided by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. Additional funding for the touring exhibition has been provided by Capitol Federal Foundation; the Office of the Chancellor of the University of Kansas; and the Judith Rothschild Foundation.

The Spencer Museum of Art gratefully acknowledges the relatives and friends of Aaron Douglas.

THIS EXHIBITION'S ACCOMPANYING BOOK, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, contains essays by Renée Ater, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, David C. Driskell, Susan Earle, Amy Helene Kirschke, Richard J. Powell, and Cheryl R. Ragar, plus a foreword by Robert Hemenway and a chronology by Stephanie Fox Knappe (272 pages, 189 illus., co-published with Yale University Press, 2007).

THIS BROCHURE is made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

This brochure was produced by the Spencer Museum of Art and written by Susan Earle, Curator of European & American Art at the Spencer.
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