

The background of the cover features a dark blue color with white silhouettes. On the left, there are stylized, wavy lines representing the stripes of an American flag. In the center and right, there are silhouettes of human figures in dynamic, expressive poses. One figure in the foreground is standing with arms raised, while another figure behind it is seated or crouching, also with arms raised. The overall style is reminiscent of African American modernist art.

THE ART OF AARON DOUGLAS

Family Gallery Guide

AARON DOUGLAS:
AFRICAN AMERICAN MODERNIST

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist

This activity will help you look closely at the works of art in the *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* exhibition. Follow the directions and look closely at the works of art. Talk to your family and friends about what you see and about your answers to the questions. Please be careful not to touch the works of art.

Aaron Douglas is one of the most important and influential artists of his time. Born in 1899 in Topeka, Kansas, Douglas grew up during a time when African Americans were still expected to work as servants or laborers. Even though his parents worked as laborers, Douglas joined in the growing African American artistic community in Topeka. This intellectual and creative community provided Douglas with role models who supported him as a social leader and as an artist. Douglas continued his artistic training by earning a fine arts degree at the University of Nebraska. After graduation he taught art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, for two years before deciding to move to Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City where other black artists and writers of the time were creating important works.

Douglas moved to Harlem not only to pursue his career as an artist, but also to forge a place for African American culture in the New York art world. Some of Douglas's most influential works are his illustrations for written works about African American life, labor, and freedom. Also impressive and well-known are his large murals that depict similar themes, painted in his signature style.

1

Find the series of prints from *Opportunity Art Folio*.



- Look closely at the figures in the illustrations. Are the figures flat or three-dimensional? Do you notice any shading or many details?
- How does Douglas create deep space even while using flat figures?
- Would you describe these illustrations as still and inactive or lively and energetic?



Inspired by Egyptian wall paintings and other traditional African art forms, Aaron Douglas developed his own unique style. Douglas used sharp lines and flat color to create dramatic silhouetted forms. The illustrations in *Opportunity Art Folio* are Douglas's visual expressions of poems written by his friend and fellow Kansan Langston Hughes, who grew up in Lawrence.

SILHOUETTE: A flat-looking view of a figure or scene, consisting of the outline and a dark, featureless interior.

Take a moment to read the poem titled *Misery*. Then look closely at the illustration *Play da Blues*.

- What words to you are associated with jazz music?
- How does Douglas create rhythm in his illustrations?
- Where do you see music in the illustration for this poem?

Be sure to look for similar symbols of music throughout the exhibition.

2

Next, find the painting titled
The Founding of Chicago.

- Although the figures in this painting are flat silhouettes, would you describe them as formal and stiff-looking or expressive and lifelike?



- Find the haze of circles that look like rays of light. How do these “rays” help move your eye through the painting? (Hint: think of a theater spotlight that follows the most important figure on the stage.)
- Notice how the artist has layered figures on top of each other. Does the artist use details or color to help us recognize the shapes?

This work is a study, or a practice painting for one of the many mural projects Aaron Douglas painted throughout his career. A mural is a large painting typically painted directly onto a wall. Like his mass-produced illustrations for books and magazines, public murals provided Douglas opportunities to express the experiences and dreams of African Americans to a large audience. Try and imagine what this painting would look like if it were stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Look for examples of full-size murals throughout this exhibition. (Note: Aaron Douglas painted many of his murals on large panels so they could be moved to different locations.)

3

Now, look for the mural *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery through Reconstruction*.

- How does this painting differ from *The Founding of Chicago* mural study?
- Where do you see warm colors in this mural?



- Does this scene seem noisy and chaotic or quiet and peaceful?

This mural is one of four in a series that Douglas called *Aspects of Negro Life*. In these paintings, Douglas tells the story of how Africans were brought to America through the slave trade and struggled for their freedom.

Try to pick out figures representing the historical progress of the African American.

- What is the overall mood of these murals? Is it proud and strong or sad and weak?
- What other words would you use to describe the mood of this mural?

4

Finally, find Aaron Douglas's *Self Portrait*.



Notice the dramatically different style and medium Douglas uses for his self portrait compared to his illustrations and mural paintings.

SELF PORTRAIT: a person's image painted, drawn, or expressed by him or herself.

MEDIUM: the materials the artist chooses to use.

STYLE: an artist's or work of art's distinct visual features.

- Is Douglas's drawing style rough and sketchy or clean and carefully drawn?
- Compare and contrast the shapes and textures Douglas uses for his *Self Portrait* to those he chose for the *Aspects of Negro Life* mural. Which work is more realistic?
- How would you describe Aaron Douglas's personality by looking at this drawing? How do you think Aaron



Aaron Douglas was an extremely talented and well-trained artist whose talents allowed him to work in many different mediums, including illustrations, mural paintings, portraits, metalwork, and even crayon drawings. His efforts as an artist and a teacher continue to influence artists today. Don't forget to look at the works of contemporary artists—people who are living and working today—and see if you can find styles and themes inspired by Aaron Douglas.

Aaron Douglas was truly an important artist, teacher, and leader during the Harlem Renaissance. His powerful murals, illustrations, and portraits you looked at today are examples of his legacy and his lasting influence on art history and African American culture.

Prepared by Lauren Kernes, Spencer Museum of Art; Education Department, Fall 2007



Sponsors: The National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, and the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency.

KU SPENCER
MUSEUM OF ART
The University of Kansas

www.spencersart.ku.edu
www.aarondouglas.ku.edu