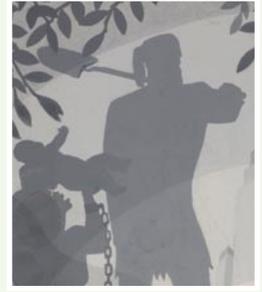
The background features a solid blue color with white silhouettes of figures and a flag. On the left, a flag with wavy stripes is shown. In the center and right, there are silhouettes of human figures in various poses, some with arms raised, suggesting a dynamic or athletic scene.

AARON DOUGLAS:

TEACHER RESOURCE



Aaron Douglas Teacher Resource

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

PRE-VISIT GUIDE

- Exhibition overview
- A brief history of Harlem Renaissance
 - Map
 - Major figures of the Harlem Renaissance
- A brief biography of Aaron Douglas
- Timeline
- The Art of Aaron Douglas
 - Illustrations & book jackets
 - Murals
 - Fisk and Nashville

EXHIBITION VISIT GUIDE

- Tour script
- Discussion Starters

POST-VISIT GUIDE

- Post-visit activities
- Post-visit reflection

HELPFUL INFORMATION

- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Internet resources

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

These materials have been compiled as a resource for teachers and museum educators to help inform audiences about the exhibition *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*. Although the information, lesson ideas, and discussion topics are written to accommodate upper-elementary-school students, all materials may be easily adapted for any grade level. We hope teachers find this a valuable tool, and encourage them to use this resource for pre-visit lessons that will familiarize students with Douglas's art and themes before they tour the exhibition. We also hope teachers will find the detailed exhibition guide and post-visit reflection activities helpful in providing a meaningful experience for their students.

Questions? Comments? Please contact the Spencer Museum of Art's Education Department at 785.864.0137 or kemitch@ku.edu.

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This resource was adapted in part from exhibition texts created for Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist, organized by Susan Earle, Ph.D., coordinated by Stephanie Fox Knappe, and produced by the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas; and the accompanying exhibition catalogue, written by Susan Earle, produced by the Spencer Museum of Art, and co-published with Yale University Press.

Exhibition Overview

A Kansas native born in Topeka, Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) vividly captured the spirit of his time and established a new African American aesthetic and an optimistic vision. As the leading visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance, he combined angular Cubist rhythms and captivating Art Deco dynamism with traditional African and African American imagery, developing a radically new visual vocabulary that evoked both current realities and hopes for a better future. His forceful ideas and their distinctive artistic form produced the most powerful legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and had a lasting impact on the history of art.

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist presents a retrospective of the work of Aaron Douglas. This exhibition questions the boundaries of American modernism in order to assess the important but often neglected role of the Harlem Renaissance and one of its most important artists. The exhibition also assesses Douglas's achievements and enduring significance through an investigation of his work in New York and his subsequent teaching legacy at historically black Fisk University in Nashville.

A Brief History of the Harlem Renaissance

Remembering his initial impressions of Harlem, Aaron Douglas said: "There are *so many* things that I had seen for the first time, so many impressions I was getting. One was that of seeing a big city that was entirely black, from beginning to end you were impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things and here was a black city and here was a situation that was eventually to be the center for the great in American Culture."

—Douglas in a July 16, 1971 interview
with Leslie M. Collins, professor of English.
Black Oral Histories, Fisk University Library.

Throughout the 1920s, visual artists such as Aaron Douglas, as well as authors, playwrights, philosophers, and musicians, flocked to a roughly two-square mile section of upper Manhattan known as Harlem. Stretching from 114th Street north to 156th Street, this part of New York flourished as a cultural gathering spot for African Americans. This artistic renaissance, or rebirth, marked the first time that African American writers and artists were taken seriously by critics and the greater public.

View a map of Harlem during the Renaissance

World War I had stimulated the industrial economy of the North and created employment prospects that enticed hundreds of thousands of African American migrants from the rural South to the urban North. The pursuit of opportunities in the North, in places like Harlem, promoted the emergence of the self-determined “New Negro” who possessed an appreciation for African heritage, a strong sense of race consciousness, and a deeply-felt racial pride.

Intellectuals W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke shaped and nurtured the cultural outpouring known as the “New Negro Movement” or “Harlem Renaissance.” Both Du Bois and Locke believed that through art and creative expression, the gap between African American and white worlds might be bridged.

Although the literature, visual, and performing arts of this time vary stylistically, the artists were all committed to the artistic expression of the unique African American experience. Artists and writers were eager to experiment with new ways to express themes of racial pride, African roots, the American south, social and political equality; however the impressive diversity of the artistic production makes it hard to characterize one common style of the Harlem Renaissance.

Major Figures of the Harlem Renaissance

- Countee Cullen
- W.E.B. Du Bois
- Langston Hughes
- Zora Neale Hurston
- James Weldon Johnson
- Charles S. Johnson
- Alain Locke
- Claude McKay
- Winold Reiss

A Brief Biography of Aaron Douglas

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 pursuit of justice through his paintbrush continues to influence artists today. After earning a BFA degree in 1922 from the University of Nebraska and teaching at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Douglas migrated to New York in 1925 to join in the cultural flourishing known as the “New Negro Movement” or “Harlem Renaissance.”

The crowd of young artists, writers, musicians, and playwrights in Harlem believed art and creative expression could help bridge the gap between the African American and white worlds. At a time when racism still clearly 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 political topics including segregation, lynching, and human rights for *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, founded by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the Urban League. Douglas also collaborated with many writers to illustrate their novels and poems. He was deeply influenced by traditional African art forms and by modern art and design. He combined **modernist** forms and African **motifs** with powerful portrayals of African American life, labor, and history, evoking both the harsh realities of the day and hopes for a better future in several large-scale, impressive public **murals**.

Douglas was impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things in Harlem and he knew that great things were in store. In many ways, Harlem and **modernism** were synonymous, and no one captured this powerful pairing, emblematic of the **Jazz Age**, with the rigor and strength that Aaron Douglas did.

Douglas also fervently believed in the power of education as a vehicle for positive change in African American life. In 1938, he began teaching at historically black Fisk University in Nashville, where he founded the art department. He continued on the Fisk faculty for nearly 30 years, training several new generations of African American artists.

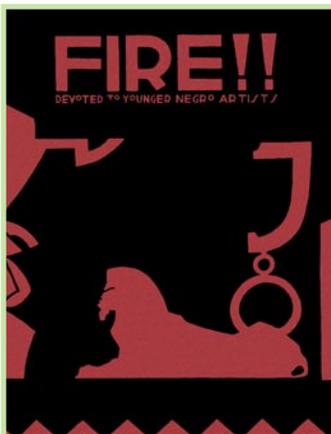
Aaron Douglas is now considered the foremost visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. Although the exhibition is a retrospective of his life's work, most of the art in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* focuses on his career from the 1920s through the 1940s, a prolific period for Douglas. His ideas have influenced generations of artists ever since.

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 |
| 1920 | Editor of <i>The Crisis</i> W. E. B. Du Bois writes of a pending “renaissance of American Negro literature” |
| 1921 | <i>Shuffle Along</i> , 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 |
| 1922 | The Senate defeats anti-lynching legislation |
| 1923-25 | Douglas teaches art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri |
| 1925 | <i>Survey Graphic</i> 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 <i>The Crisis</i> and <i>Opportunity</i> , and to Alain Locke’s <i>The New Negro</i> |
| 1926 | Douglas co-founds the short-lived journal <i>Fire!!</i> |
| 1926 | “Father of the Blues” W. C. Handy publishes <i>Blues: An Anthology</i> |
| 1927 | Douglas illustrates James Weldon Johnson’s <i>God’s Trombones</i> and paints a mural for Club Ebony in Harlem |
| 1928 | Douglas receives a Barnes Foundation fellowship to study African art and modern European art |
| 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 |
| 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 <i>Invisible Man</i> |
| 1954 | In <i>Brown vs. the Board of Education</i> , the U.S. Supreme Court rules segregation in schools to be unconstitutional |
| 1966 | Douglas retires from Fisk University |
| 1973 | Douglas receives honorary doctorate from Fisk |
| 1979 | Douglas dies in Nashville |

The Art of Aaron Douglas



Aaron Douglas, Cover for *FIRE!!*
A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists, November 1926,
 Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

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 spread his signature style of flat, **silhouetted** figures combined with fractured space and a **monochromatic** palette. Many of these dust jackets are shown together for the first time in this exhibition. Douglas's best-known collaboration was for James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), for which he created seven paintings, brought back together for this exhibition. Be sure to take special note of the striking image of *Noah's Ark*. The cover produced for the historic publication *FIRE!* and his complex illustrations for Paul Morand's *Black Magic* (1928), including *Charleston*, all demonstrate the strength of Douglas's vision. Douglas's illustrations also frequently appeared in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* another outlet for black artistic expression during the Harlem Renaissance.

Murals

Douglas's most important works are large-scale **murals**—some of them portable and some painted directly onto walls—that portray subjects from African American history and contemporary life. In the late 1920s he created murals in Harlem for private residences and public buildings. Douglas's murals go beyond the traditional definition of large-scale paintings on walls. The wide-reaching, public art form also provided a unique vehicle for social commentary. His best-known portable murals are *Harriet Tubman* at Bennett College for Women, and the four renowned *Aspects of Negro Life* panels created in 1934 for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Portraying subjects such as slavery, emancipation, the Great Migration, and the contributions of African Americans to the growth of cities, the economy, and culture, Douglas utilized his knowledge of Egyptian wall painting and Ivory Coast sculpture to make these murals. All his major mural projects are represented in this exhibition in the form of **studies**, portable murals (on canvases and not adhered to walls), and a contemporary video by filmmaker Madison Davis Lacy that depicts the murals at Fisk University and the Harlem YMCA, which are painted directly onto walls and thus cannot be moved.

Fisk and Nashville

Douglas's first major mural commission was for the new Cravath Library at Fisk University in 1930. Several years later Douglas founded the art department at Fisk and became an assistant professor there. Returning to teaching was another way to convey his vision. His style continued to develop and he painted works such as *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944), still a part of the Fisk Collection. 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 local scenes of Nashville and New York. In later years he also painted a number of portraits. These images of his peers and various public figures of the time convey the power of his vision in a realistic mode, employing a different method from the flat and abstracted approach that he used for his illustrations and murals.



Aaron Douglas, *Study for Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*, 1934, Tempera on paper, Collection of David C. and Thelma Driskell

Tour Script

This tour script provides questions and background information for Aaron Douglas's work; *Opportunity Art Folio*, *The Emperor Jones Series*, *The Founding of Chicago*, *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery through Reconstruction*, and his charcoal *Self Portrait*. Please use in combination with the additional biographical and historical information found in this resource.

- *Opportunity Art Folio*, 1926

Opportunity was established in 1923 as a monthly magazine to give African American writers a way to express their voices and vision and inspire African Americans to improve their economic and social standing. The National Urban League founded the journal and scholar Charles S. Johnson was the editor.

For an issue of *Opportunity* in 1926, Aaron Douglas illustrated several poems by Langston Hughes, who had spent part of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas. Both worked to combine images and poetry to convey the blues, which were an important influence for them and their contemporaries. Their collaborations were so popular with readers that the magazine eventually issued a special collector's package—the *Opportunity Art Folio*—that brought together all the illustrations and poems.

Look at the following works from the *Opportunity Art Folio*:

Weary as I can Be, 1926, relief print

On De No'thern Road, 1926, relief print

Ma Bad Luck Card, 1926, relief print

Play De Blues, 1926, relief print

I Needs a Dime for Beer, 1926, relief print



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

What kinds of shapes do you see? Are they geometric or organic?

How would you describe the lines in these works?

How many different colors do you see? Do you see any shadows or shading?

Does the lack of shading create flat or three-dimensional looking figures?

Notice the figures in the illustrations. Are the figures flat or three-dimensional?

Where does Douglas include details? How does Douglas create deep space even while using flat figures?

Inspired by Egyptian wall paintings and other traditional African art forms, Aaron Douglas developed his own unique style. By using sharp lines and flat color, Douglas created dramatic, silhouetted forms to illustrate poems by fellow Kansan Langston Hughes.

Douglas makes strategic artistic choices when creating illustrations for texts. Think about how the style complements the written work. How would this relationship be different if the illustrations included intricate details and many colors?

Would you describe these illustrations as still and static or lively and energetic?

Looking specifically at the poem *Misery*, think about words you associate with blues music. Notice how Douglas creates rhythm in his illustrations. Where do you see music in the illustration for this poem?

Find some other symbols Douglas incorporates into his illustrations to complement the words of Langston Hughes. How do these symbols and words represent African American culture during the Harlem Renaissance?

What importance does the medium (printmaking) play in these works? What are the advantages of printmaking over painting when addressing a public audience? (Prints can be easily reproduced and are thus more affordable and more widely distributed).

- *Emperor Jones Series, 1926, woodblock prints on paper*

What is visually distinctive and unique about these images? In what respects are they similar to or different from the prints included the *Opportunity Art Folio*?

What do you notice about the block used to print one of the images? What techniques do you think Aaron Douglas used to create images from this stamp-like block?



- *The Founding of Chicago, circa 1933-40, gouache on paperboard*

Douglas famously employed murals to convey his vision for African Americans. These large-scale pieces use a modernist style not unlike his illustrations for books, poetry, and other writings. In *The Founding of Chicago*, the artist shows his keen awareness of the important role African Americans played in labor and, ultimately, the U.S. economy. For this piece, Douglas turns his eye to urban America as he portrays the founder of Chicago, Jean-Baptiste Pointe du

Aaron Douglas,

The Founding of Chicago, circa 1933, Gouache on paperboard, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas. Museum purchase: R. Charles & Mary Margaret Clevenger Fund, 2006.0027

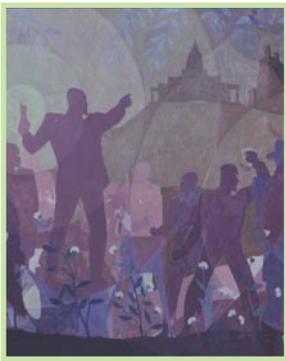
Sable, who was Haitian and a fur trader. Douglas presents Pointe du Sable as an allegorical figure for the African Americans who helped build America, and by extension as a symbol of hope and aspiration. Douglas creates a utopian vision through his composition and monochromatic color scheme. The painting seems to sing with the rhythms of jazz and spirituals, and offers African Americans hope for a bright future, represented by the city in the distance.

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

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 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 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, or onto canvas that is then affixed to a wall. Douglas’s interpretation of the mural genre also defines the mural as a means to express social issues to the public. Try to 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. (Please note that Aaron Douglas painted many of his murals on large panels so they would be portable rather than permanently affixed to a wall.)



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

Influenced by Egyptian wall paintings and other African forms, Douglas frequently incorporated the frieze format into his murals. In a frieze, the figures, buildings, trees, and other visual elements are presented in a linear fashion across the picture plane. Also in keeping with the frieze format, Douglas stylized his figures in silhouetted forms.

- *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery through Reconstruction*, 1934, oil on canvas

How does this mural differ from the study for *The Founding of Chicago*?

Where do you see warm colors in this mural?

Does this scene seem busy and chaotic or quiet and peaceful?

The title of this mural series is *Aspects of Negro Life*. Through this cycle of paintings, Aaron 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 different stages of African American life. What is the overall mood of these murals? Is it proud and strong or sad and weak?

- *Self-portrait, 1954*, charcoal and conté drawing on paper

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

Compare and contrast the lines Douglas uses in this portrait to the lines he chose for the *Aspects of Negro Life* mural project. Which work is more lifelike or realistic?

Would you describe the lines as sketchy or carefully drawn? What is the mood of this drawing? What words do you think Aaron Douglas would use to describe himself?

How does this drawing add to our understanding of Douglas's artistic abilities? Why did he choose to paint his murals in his signature flat style versus the expressive, detailed drawn styles he was also capable of rendering?

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 a few examples of his legacy and his lasting influence on art history and American culture.

Visual examples of Aaron Douglas's legacy are seen in the works of several contemporary artists—artists living and working today—and are included in this exhibition. Look closely at these works and you will find similarities to Aaron Douglas's style and social purpose.



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

Discussion Starters

Douglas makes strategic artistic choices when creating illustrations for texts. Think about how the style complements the written work. How would this relationship be different if the illustrations included intricate detail and many colors? Think about visual symbols you could use to illustrate your favorite book, poem, or song.

One of the most important art forms that Douglas used to convey his vision about African Americans was the public mural. Why were murals an essential art form for Aaron Douglas? Think about public art found in your community. Do these works serve a purpose of social commentary, civic pride, or perhaps historical record? Do you think public art is important? Or, is it better to view art in more private settings like homes, galleries, and museums?



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

POST-VISIT GUIDE

Post-visit activities

- Help students brainstorm a list of art elements or other adjectives that describe Aaron Douglas's signature style. A few examples include: gradation, repetition, flat, and monochromatic. With this list in mind, spend time researching work by contemporary African American artists, paying close attention to stylistic or conceptual similarities to the works of Aaron Douglas.
- Use an Aaron Douglas mural to serve as inspiration to create a hypothetical mural project in the classroom. What is the theme of the mural? Brainstorm a list of visual symbols that would represent various class, school, community, and/or cultural identities. Have each student prepare a study of the mural, keeping in mind a public location for the finished mural and how that setting might influence the art and potential viewers.

Contemporary African Artist Resources

- [Michael Ray Charles](#)
- [Kerry James Marshall](#)
- [Faith Ringgold](#)
- [Kara Walker](#)

Post-visit reflection

- Discuss the idea of legacy using the work of Aaron Douglas as an example. Ask your class to reflect on their experience during their museum visit by writing a letter to a living family member of Aaron Douglas, explaining what they found compelling in his works and addressing the legacy of his creative efforts. Ask the students to include any questions they would ask Aaron Douglas if he were still alive. Ask them to say what they found most memorable about his life.

Curriculum connections

- Studio Art
- Social Studies
- Art History
- Humanities
- Language Arts

HELPFUL INFORMATION

Glossary

- gradation:** The changing of one tint or shade of color to another by very small degrees.
- The Great Migration:** The relocation of nearly 1.5 million African Americans from the rural south to the urban north; they moved from agriculture-based small towns to big cities with hopes of finding opportunities to better their economic and social standing in the new, industrialized, wartime America.
- The Jazz Age:** The period from approximately 1918 to 1929, between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression. The period takes its name from novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald and jazz music, both of which enjoyed great popularity in many segments of society.
- layering:** The overlapping of objects or figures to demonstrate their relative locations in a composition.
- medium:** The materials an artist uses to create a work.
- modernism:** The departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression that distinguish many styles in the arts and literature of the 20th century.
- monochromatic:** Having tones of only one color.
- motif:** A recurring theme or element in an artistic work.
- mural:** A large picture, often a painting, typically but not always applied directly to a wall.
- “New Negro”:** The transition of the status of African Americans from the ex-slave and intellectually inferior stereotype into a more socially and racially equal in society.
- perspective:** The use of a series of compositional devices to make the flat plane of a picture seem to recede into space.
- self-portrait:** A portrait of an artist created by the artist.
- silhouette:** The two-dimensional representation of the outline of a subject.
- style:** The set of visual characteristics of a work of art that makes it distinctive.
- subject matter:** The topics or focus addressed in a work of art.
- study:** A small model or practice for an artistic project.

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- http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761566483/Harlem_Renaissance.html
- <http://www.fatherryan.org/harlemrenaissance/>
- <http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/resources/links.shtml>