

Aspects of a Negro Life by Melissa Burlovich



The 1920s and 1930s brought drastic changes to the lives of many African Americans. Geographically, they migrated toward the urban, industrialized North, not only to escape racial prejudices and economic hardships, but also to attain higher social and economic status. This “Great Migration” transformed the streets of Harlem, New York, and gave rise to cultural changes of the New Negro movement. As this movement gradually gained popularity, it became known as the Harlem Renaissance, an era that dramatically increased the awareness of Black art and culture (Stokstad and Cateforis 1112). The Harlem Renaissance was founded on the ideals of racial pride, social power, and the importance of African culture. African Americans were encouraged to revisit their racial heritage, resulting in African American history and culture being represented and celebrated through the arts. The entire movement “challenged the existing debased and caricatured representations of Blacks in art” (*Harlem*).

Many great artists contributed to the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on American culture. Specifically, Aaron Douglas was politically active through the Harlem Artist Guild. As the organizations’ first president, he worked with developing artists to help them attain employment. Douglas was also the first modern Black artist to use traditional African roots in his works, as opposed to mimicking the artistic ideas of white Americans and Europeans. In his mural *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction* (1934), Douglas dramatically stimulated the Negro movement by depicting the role of African Americans. Through his political activism and artwork, Douglas was able to reveal the ideas and values exemplified during the Harlem Renaissance, despite significant criticism of his style.

With this rebirth of traditional African culture, the number of African American artists rapidly increased. It became difficult for these artists to gain employment, even with the assistance of government work-relief programs, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Set up by President Roosevelt as part of his New Deal program, the WPA offered jobs to thousands of unemployed artists, in an attempt to boost the nation’s morale, as well as stimulate the depressed economy. Despite its good intentions, the government program was unable to pay decent wages and

failed to provide employment for nearly five million artists ("Works"). In response to this failure, the Harlem Artist Guild, founded in 1928, aggressively began to work alongside the WPA to ensure the success of African American artists. Led by its first president, Aaron Douglas, the activist organization played an influential role in helping artists attain the recognition necessary to qualify them for the WPA work projects (Bearden and Henderson 131). With the assistance of Douglas, the Harlem Artist Guild, and the WPA, millions of African American artists succeeded in gaining employment despite the hard times of the 1930s ("Artnoir's").

In his own works, Aaron Douglas used a strong, personal style to portray the history of Black Americans as seen through the eyes of a Black man. Similar to Cubist artists, he used sharp, elongated angularity to simplify his figures into basic shapes of circles, triangles, and squares. This primitive style is reflected in Douglas' painting *Aspects of Negro Life* through his famous silhouettes and technique of encircling objects to emphasize their significance in African American history (Bearden and Henderson 128). Douglas attempted to overcome the differences that separated Blacks and Whites by using these universal symbols and figures to express features of both groups (Bearden and Henderson 134).

Aspects of Negro Life is a panel series of four murals that Douglas completed in 1934. The four panels revealed the emergence of Black America, beginning with life in Africa and tracing the history of African Americans through slavery, emancipation, and the rebirth of African traditions. A closer analysis of the second panel of this series, entitled *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*, helps the modern viewer to better understand Douglas' artistic style, as well as the effects of this painting on the entire New Negro movement. It is intended to identify African Americans' role in history, specifically from slavery through Reconstruction, as the title suggests.

The panel, viewed from right to left, is divided into three sections. The far right section is comprised of silhouettes symbolizing the doubt and uncertainty of African American slaves. The trumpet-playing silhouette depicts the transformation of doubt into the exultation felt after the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. In this section, Douglas encircled a piece of paper, which represents the Proclamation and dramatically emphasizes its importance, as it is this piece of paper that freed the slaves (Stokstad and Cateforis 1113).

The second section embodies the strength of the Black leaders of the time. The figure standing in the middle is holding a document and pointing to the Capitol off in the distance. All of the other black silhouettes in this section are crouched below, gazing upon the leader, who is undoubtedly urging the free Blacks to cast their ballots rather than to continue picking cotton like primitive slaves. Similar to the first section, Douglas highlights the ballot with circles to display its significance in upholding the rights of African Americans and the importance of voting itself (Stokstad and Cateforis 1113).

The third section, located on the left of the panel, characterizes the withdrawal of the Union soldiers from the South and the rise of white supremacist groups (Bearden and Henderson 131). In the background, Douglas uses dull colors to depict the silhouettes of departing Union soldiers. The small size of the soldiers compared to the larger white-hooded figures on horseback signifies the emergence of white supremacist groups, most notably the Ku Klux Klan. Despite their negative impact on African American history, Douglas draws attention to the white supremacists; however,

he is careful not to let the white-hooded figures overshadow the positive power of the central figure holding the ballot. This juxtaposition of negative and positive figures is intended to inspire others by encouraging them to “continue the struggle to improve the lot of African Americans” (Stokstad and Cateforis1113).

The great elements of nature – the sun, the land, the foliage, and even human beings – are a common theme seen throughout most of Douglas’ artwork, including *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction* (Bearden and Henderson 134). In his mural, the concentric circles used to highlight important documents, such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the ballot, appear to represent the sun, which is one of the most important elements of life. Thus, Douglas is implying that these are some of the most important documents of African American life. Along the bottom of his mural, Douglas paints cotton growing from the land, which parallels the element of foliage that plays a prominent role in African American slavery. The final element of nature, human beings, appears throughout the mural as black and white silhouettes that represent the African Americans and white supremacists, respectively.

The glorification of African heritage during the Harlem Renaissance faced great opposition due to its alleged portrayal of blacks as inferior to whites. The most outspoken critic was James A. Porter, who ridiculed Harlem Renaissance artists for their expression of racial heritage and their artistic inferiority. Porter specifically attacked Douglas for his “flat and arid angularities” and “exoticism” (Campbell et al. 50). He also claimed that Douglas failed to integrate themes from traditional African art with the current status of African Americans.

In his book *Modern Negro Art*, Porter attacked Douglas’s work as that of an artist who took literally the advice of racial apologists and, without a clear conception of African decoration, attempted to imitate in stilted fashion the surface patterns and geometric shapes of African sculpture. The early paintings and drawings and book illustrations of Aaron Douglas exemplify this weakness. (qtd. in Bearden and Henderson 133)

Porter’s outburst against Douglas and other Harlem Renaissance Black artists reflected the common reaction that many African American critics held about the representation of Black people as offspring of traditional Africans. To such critics, this portrayal of Blacks diminished their status in America by emphasizing their primitive ancestry. Porter, along with many others, believed that Douglas’ artistic representation of Black history negated any progress of African Americans. Instead, these critics wanted to see Blacks portrayed as well-dressed, honest citizens, an image that would promote an upward shift in the social and economic status of African Americans.

Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, it was rare for artists to turn toward traditional African artwork for inspiration; however, Douglas took a chance by straying away from the typical European style. Although early critics dismissed Douglas’ art as grotesque, even the most outspoken critics, including Porter, eventually came to appreciate the aesthetic value of Douglas’ work. Douglas’ incorporation of traditional African art forms into modern works resulted in a unique style never before achieved by Black American artists. Despite the negativity of some critics during the New Negro movement, images like Douglas’ *Aspects of Negro Life* reflect the urgent search for African

American identity that was prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance. In reality, Douglas' use of African themes expedited recognition of African American art.

Through his political activism and his artwork, Douglas dramatically changed the way other artists viewed African Americans. Politically, he helped found and served as president for the activist organization that drastically assisted with employing thousands of artists. Artistically, Douglas was the first Black American artist consciously to include African imagery in his works, as seen in his mural *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*. His unique use of positive images in African American history, such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the ballot, contributed to the growth of the Harlem Renaissance by conveying its ideals of racial pride and social power. "It was Douglas who effected the crucial move toward affirming the validity of the Black experience and thereby made one of America's more worthy contributions to art" (Campbell et al. 131). Even since his death in 1979, Douglas is still recognized as the one who enabled Black artists to express their own experiences as African Americans.

Works Cited

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