BEYOND AFRO-CUBISM:

AARON DOUGLAS'S IMPRESSIONIST LANDSCAPES

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my son Charles. His dealing with serious adversity in a positive and present manner continues to be an inspiration to me. It encouraged me to stay to the task at hand, regardless of the personal sacrifices life and graduate school asked of me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There is a lacuna of secondary source data in which to support my claim. Therefore, I have combed the archives at Fisk in Nashville and the Schomberg Center in Harlem for letters, exhibition guides, art curriculum, speeches, and fellowship applications that provide insight for my understanding of Aaron Douglas's work. I am grateful to the administrators and staff of both institutions for their kindness and support of my research efforts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

Black Impressionist Artists 7
Private Easel Works 14
Douglas's Consistent Service to the Movement 15
Outline of Sections 17

2. A NEW STYLE IDENTIFIES THE NEW NEGRO 24

Labor and Spirituality 32
Role of White Patronage 35
Role of Private Collectors 38
Aaron Douglas: Gallerist 39

3. DOUGLAS ENCOUNTERS THE ASHCAN SCHOOL 49

Introduction 49
Exhibition 64

4. HAITIAN LANDSCAPES 76

What Haiti Represented to African Americans 76
Influence of William E. Scott's Haitian Works 79
Douglas's Haitian Landscapes 82
Douglas's Philosophy of Art 85
Importance of Subject Matter 88

5. WATERCOLORS 99

A Message Hidden in Plain Sight 99

6. CONCLUSION 120

Consistent Message, Diverse Style 122
Douglas's Relevance Today 127

ARCHIVAL SOURCES 131

REFERENCES CITED 131

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Figure 1 *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, Henry O. Tanner, 1899 20
2. Figure 2 *The Dancing Lesson*, Thomas Eakins, 1878 21
3. Figure 3 *Two Disciples at the Tomb*, Henry O. Tanner, 1907 22
4. Figure 4 *The Crisis, Flight into Egypt*, William E. Scott, 1914 23
5. Figure 5 *Opportunity Cover Illustration, 1926* 42
6. Figure 6 *The Crucifixion*, 1927 43
7. Figure 7 *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Titian, 1505 44
8. Figure 8 *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934 45
9. Figure 9 *America Today*, Thomas Hart Benton, 1930 46
10. Figure 10 *The Crisis*, cover, May 1928 47
11. Figure 11 *Radiator Building*, Georgia O'Keefe, 1927 48
12. Figure 12 *Paris Street Scene*, 1931 70
13. Figure 13 *Power Plant in Harlem*, 1934 71
14. Figure 14 *A View of Harlem (Harlem Rooftops),* n.d. 72
15. Figure 15 *Building More Stately Mansions*,1944 73
16. Figure 16 *Triborough Bridge*, 1936 74
17. Figure 17 *Window Cleaning*, 1935 75
18. Figure 18 *Emperor Jones*, woodcut, 1926 90
19. Figure 19 *Attack and Take of the Crête-À-Pierrot*, by August Raffet, engraving by Hèbert, 1839 91

LIST OF FIQURES CONTINUED

20. Figure 20 *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami*, Robert S. Duncanson, 1851 92

21. Figure 21 *Toussaint Leads the Slaves to Victory,* William E. Scott, 1931 93

22. Figure 22 *Haitian Street Scene,* 1938 94

23. Figure 23 *Haitian Landscape (Haitian Cathedral Scene),* 1938.....95

24. Figure 24 Photograph of Cathedral in Port-au-Prince, 1938 96

25. Figure 25 *Untitled Landscape (Waterfront Park)*, 1938.....97

26. Figure 26 *Haitian Landscape*, 1938 98

27. Figure 27 *Adobe House*, 1940 111

28. Figure 28 *Trees,* 1948 112

29. Figure 29 *Trees I*, 1950.....113

30. Figure 30 *Backyard*, 1948.....114

31. Figure 31 *Ebbets Field*, 1950 115

32. Figure 32 *Oak Bluffs (Vineyard Haven),* 1955, etching and aquatint 116

33. Figure 33 *Pier at Sausalito,* 1952 117

34. Figure 34 *House in Accra (Ghana)*, 1955 118

35. Figure 35 *Lagos, Nigeria*, 1956.....119

36. Figure 36 *Dancer,* Barkley L Hendricks, 1977.....130

ABSTRACT

Aaron Douglas often opted for styles, other than his signature afro-cubism, in his personal, private works. Like his more public works, these also served his lifelong socio-political agenda. Art historian, Amy Kirschke opined in *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (1994) that the paintings Douglas produced in the last forty years of his life were "less original" and implicitly less political.[1] Through a rigorous analysis of motifs common to Douglas's works, the author argues that Douglas is stylistically agnostic but consistently political, regardless of which style he was using. To understand the political content of his later works, one must understand the significance of locales he depicted, reading of his letters and lectures closely.

Douglas was consistent in his use of visual narrative, especially themes of : a proud ancient African past; a recognition of the unequal treatment from white America; African Americans' contribution to modern economic life; and a vision for a more hopeful future assured by Judeo-Christian narratives of escape from bondage.

While Douglas most closely associated with his signature afro-cubist style, developed in his illustrations and murals, these were largely commissioned projects. They were also more graphic in nature as opposed to naturalistic. Douglas, throughout his life, and often concurrent with his illustrations and murals, painted impressionist landscapes as well as portraits that were more academic in their rendering.

This thesis argues that the fact that this is not recognized by the art historical community owes to the fact that Douglas's private works were not purchased by mainstream museums or shown in major galleries, and they were rarely collected by individuals other than those within his community. Hence, his easel works have not enjoyed the visibility of his murals and illustrations, and therefore were rarely the subject of scholarly analysis, public discussion nor preservation.

[1] Amy Helene Kirschke, Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, 1994

INTRODUCTION

The iconographical symbols Douglas consistently placed in all his works, provide a visual narrative that rarely strayed from the theme of a proud ancient past, a recognition of the unequal treatment from white America, despite African American's contribution to modern economic life, and a vision for a more hopeful future assured by the promises imbedded within the Judeo-Christian doctrine of salvation from bondage familiar to most Black Christians. To arrive at that conclusion required a rigorous analysis of the semiotic significance of forms found in many of Douglas's works, including the significance of locales he depicted as well as a close reading of his letters and lectures. Douglas's form, iconography and broader significations present a consistent visual support of African American dignity throughout his life. I will refute the assertion that Douglas's later aesthetic production was less strong, less meaningful than his afro-cubist works in overcoming what W.E.B. DuBois called the double consciousness of being a Negro and an American. Further, this position rejects the requirement for a new artistic style so as to produce a uniquely Black aesthetic that would more powerfully promote social justice for all African Americans.

Douglas's signature afro-cubist style, which depict geometric designs and symbolic forms including African masks and Egyptian architecture on a flat two-dimensional plane, was reserved for his illustrations and murals. These compositions were unique in that they were commissioned projects, more related to his graphic artwork than his more naturalistic easel works. Douglas may have recognized that white perception from contemporary exhibitions of African sculpture as art, including the Whitney's presentation of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, alongside African masks in 1923, served to continue the "otherness' of his race.

I argue that Douglas's embrace of impressionism and the picturesque was, therefore, a form of resistance to the commodification of the pan-African style by white artists, patrons, and audiences, as well as a nod to his artistic forebearer Henry Tanner.

I further argue that, for Douglas, the history of western art and the history of black art, were inseparable, negating the need for a distinctly racial aesthetic. The cooption of African influence on modern art during the 1920-30's, I contend, served, for Douglas, to make primitive his race. In a long speech to his fraternal order, Sigma Pi Phi, the oldest African American fraternity for middle career professionals, Douglas painstakingly traces the history of art from the first known human beings in Central Africa, to Franco-Cantabrian cave paintings, through the Darian people of Persia, through the influence that culture had on Greek culture, and on to the Roman art that was appropriated and embellished from the Greeks.

It is thusly that Douglas claims the African American should challenge the prevailing erasure of their direct influence on all Western art, not just a lineage to Egypt that is the theme in his afro-cubist works. He goes further to lay claim that Coptic Christians out of Black Africa established the monastic orders with the resultant scholasticism that "kept alive the art and civilization of the ancient world…through the dark centuries of the Medieval period."[2] Therefore, Western art survived and flourished to the present time because of the efforts of the Black race.

Douglas notes that while later western aesthetics would neglect the depiction of Black figures, they were included in early illustrated manuscripts as being gods or demi-gods as well as

[2] Aaron Douglas, Speech, *Observations on the Background and Development of Afro-American Art*, Box 4, Folder 16, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

being portrayed in sympathetically in early Western art such as, *The Black Madonna* from perhaps as early as 350 C.E., as well as *Saint Maurice*, by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1520) and, *Adoration of the Magi* (1504) by Albrecht Durer.

Douglas concludes this long speech by placing the mantle of this proud aesthetic inheritance on the contemporary artists of the Harlem Renaissance, including their adoption of impressionism as fitting to the "rights and privileges to a recognition of his deep need for creative self-expression and finally a right to freely participate in our national task of creating an art that is truly representative…worthy of the struggles, the triumphs and the defeats of all Americans..."[3]

Many have noted that Douglas concentrated his efforts on teaching after 1940, with less emphasis on developing an authentically Black aesthetic and more emphasis on teaching. Ragar (2007) writes,

> "…he increasingly took on the mantle of black public leadership in his later years there (Harlem) and into his many years at Fisk University…By the late 1930's Douglas had given up any attempts to make a living full-time as an artist…Douglas traded a singular pursuit of artistic success for the goal of teaching black youth."[4]

By the late 1930's the Depression era government works projects had wound down, the Movement itself had lost its significance, being remembered as a "historical fiction" that ended in 1938-39; thus, diminishing any work from illustrations. Douglas also faced discrimination that precluded his work receiving exposure in the predominately white art establishments in New York. Douglas would join many other African American artists in securing teaching positions at

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[3] Ibid. 33

[4] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Aaron Douglas: Influences and Impact of the Early Years* in Susan Elizabeth Earle, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 83-84.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Nonetheless, Douglas's work as an art educator, while certainly influenced by his desire to mentor and train his students, was also political, as demonstrated by the moving conclusion to a talk he gave at Fisk toward the end of his career, "…we must press forward with pride and all confidence and struggle eternally for a just share of life, labor and love…"[5] Douglas's focus on education also informed his development of various artistic styles that differed from his signature afro-cubist works. Douglas recalled the ego deflating criticism white philanthropist, Alfred Barnes leveled at one of his earlier commissioned murals for Club Ebony in Harlem; Barnes had said, "You have painted the mural, now do it in color." Douglas took this comment to mean that Barnes thought his mural, "lacked the depth, richness and plastic quality one finds in a…Titian or Tintoretto painting."[6] His thoughts immediately went to the old masters from the Renaissance for direction and inspiration to make his art better. This is consistent with Douglas's practice, which drew inspiration not only from Egyptian art but also from a lineage of Black influence on Greek, Roman and Medieval art.

Douglas, throughout his life, often concurrent to his afro-cubist illustrations and murals, painted impressionist landscapes, that were more academic in their rendering. Despite the stylistic differences, a common thread of symbolic similarities existed among all these works, linking them contextually if not stylistically. As an art student at Nebraska and subsequently an art professor at Fisk University, Douglas wrote often on the stylistic characteristics of historic aesthetic movements. In a letter describing an exhibition of French painting in the late nineteenth century, he wrote that Impressionism was "the most dramatic transformation in the language of

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[5] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Harlem Renaissance*, Box 3, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, 17
[6] Ibid. 14

visual arts since the time of Giotto."[7] Douglas felt that impressionism as a style "…captures the truth of the moment and to render accurately the effects of light and its reflections."[8] He would find that this 'capture the truth of the moment' characteristic of impressionism would be effective in depicting the world he experienced in Harlem in 1926.

Kirshke's dismissal of Douglas's later works as less original and less political aligns with Alain Locke's 1939 review of Douglas's Haitian Landscapes exhibited at the American Contemporary Art Gallery in New York City. Locke criticized Douglas's works as a "retreat from his bold earlier style to mild local color impressionism."[9] Much as Douglas did not recognize the inherent racial message in Duncanson's bucolic *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami*, as it appeared to be a typical Hudson River School painting yet was a stop along the underground railroad; Locke didn't recognize Douglas's erasure of the dire Haitian situation as propaganda. It was clear from both Locke, as well as the writings of W.E.B. Dubois that the goal of art was to draw attention to the plight of African Americans, largely through the inclusion of African motifs in a modern style. On closer reading, the writings of DuBois and Locke had less to do with criticizing any given aesthetic style and more to do with subject matter; the African American. In fact, Locke encouraged aesthetically beautiful art but also recognized it could contain a universal message of equality and justice for all people. Five years later, Locke, writing in *The Negro Artist Comes of Age* (1945)[10],an essay written as part of an all-Negro

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[7] Aaron Douglas, Exhibitions, Box 7, Folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[8] Ibid.
[9] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Plunging into the Very Depths of the Souls of Our People: The Life and Art of Aaron Douglas,* (Ph.D., 2008).
[10] Alain Locke, *"Up till Now," The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, January 3, 1945, iii–vii.

exhibition catalogue at the Albany Institute of History and Art, criticized the duality of African American artists who separate the aesthetic from the racial. In the same essay, he also suggested that landscapes, and still life painting were a form of escapism in that they were used by prominent Black artists to avoid being labeled as such. However, Locke was less concerned with the stylistic rendering of the subject as realistic or symbolic, and more interested in the expression of social injustice and the portrayal of African American subjects in a sympathetic manner. In Locke's introduction to the exhibition, he was more critical of the avoidance of Negro subject matter by artists than being stylistically concerned with a "more objective and effective self-portrayal."[11] Nothing in Locke's later essay would suggest a criticism of a particular style. Rather he focused on subject matter, in fact, only one of the three paintings in Douglas's 1939 exhibition were in the Afro-cubist style, *The Negro Through the Ages*, from Fiske. The other two were portraits, including urban themed settings, *Edwin E. Embree* (n.d.) and *Siesta* (1944). Edwin Embree was the president of the Rosenwald Fund, which was a major philanthropic organization supporting African American institutions, including Douglas and other artists. *Siesta* is a full-length painting of an unnamed African American woman gazing out an apartment window in an urban setting. In both of these works, Douglas recognizes the African American subject in an impressionist style that represented on the one hand an important white patron of Douglas and on the other, a domestic scene in a Harlem residence; both subject matters are of racial significance for Douglas.

Siesta compositionally drew inspiration from an early window themed painting of Edward Hopper, *East Side Interior*, 1922, which was in the Rosenwald Collection and may have

[11] Locke, 1945, vii.

been known to Douglas. Hopper's work, is of a white residential setting, a woman is sitting at a window, and her loosened blouse suggests summer, gazing out the window, now on to a predominantly white East Side of Manhattan.[12] For Douglas, this would inform a universal integration of the races from the particularity of residential life in New York.

During the waning years of the Harlem Renaissance, artists began to embrace social realism in order to address the increasing socio-economic hardships of the people. Locke recognized the change toward social realism when he wrote: "…too many are...seeking forced growth according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public…Negro things may reasonably be a fad for others; for us they must be religion."[13] Locke here is positioning African American art away from what was currently popular within white aesthetic circles, in favor of an art which uplifted the Black group consciousness.

Black Impressionist Artists

In a speech entitled *Review of the Negro in American Art,* delivered before the Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Douglas recited a history of African American artists that began with Robert S. Duncanson. He didn't express any appreciation for Duncanson's artistic ability other than recognizing him as an early participant in the art of America. Douglas mentioned Edmonia Lewis as a sculptor who secured her education in Italy. He, again, appreciates Lewis's role as a female sculptor of note, but he disparages her Neo-classical style as "hardly more than an antiquarian

[12] Hopper created etchings of these popular compositions to sell to buyers of modest means, an important consideration for Douglas, as well.
[13] Alain Locke, *Art or Propaganda*, in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* New York U.S: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995.

interest."[14] Douglas recognized African American artistic pioneers who went before him, but does not acknowledge any aesthetic influence. This is chiefly due to Douglas's primary concern that African American's be depicted in a realistic, sympathetic, and dignified manner; the anglicized depiction in the woman in Lewis's *Forever Free* would be an anathema to Douglas.

Douglas was, however, influenced by Henry O. Tanner from an early age after his mother gave him a print of Tanner's *Nicodemus* (1899) (Figure 1). This work resonated with Douglas because it depicted Nicodemus and Christ meeting on a rooftop in the evening, both figures are dark-skinned, lending a spiritual and hence societal legitimacy to people of color. In 1879, Tanner had studied under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, the realist American painter of African American subject matter. Most notable was *Negro Boy Dancing* (1878) (Figure 2), which Locke recognized as a work that made legitimate Black subject matter in Euro-American art. Frank K. Polk wrote about the work: "…Eakins takes up the theme of the dancing, banjo-playing African American, yet presents it in a way that differs significantly from earlier works… the moment (of) concern is learning a skill, passing on knowledge from one generation to the next."[15] *Negro Boy Dancing* allowed for impressionistic social realism, to depict an African American family passing on the joy of music and dance between three generations of male members of a family.

Douglas received his training during high school and college in a traditional academic curriculum, focusing on honing his draftsmanship techniques, especially the rendering of the

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[14] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, Review of Negro in American Art, Box 3, Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

[15] Alan C. Braddock, *Eakins, Race, and Ethnographic Ambivalence,* Winterthur Portfolio 33, no. 2/3 (July 1998): 135–61, https://doi.org/10.1086/496743.

human form.[16] Douglas practiced his drawing techniques using plaster casts as models, the University of Nebraska prohibited live models. As the first African American admitted to the Art Department, he was immersed in white, mainstream aesthetics. Douglas's talent was evident in his winning first prize at Nebraska for drawing in his first semester. During this period in Lincoln, Douglas wrote Alta: "I am beginning my work in oil and by the end of the year my work should get me much attention."[17] Another letter to Alta during this period gave a first person account of his preference in artistic style:" I am an admirer of Leonardo's (da Vinci) style of drawing…you should continue to acquaint yourself with pictures and their painters, it would be the greatest possible help to me."[18]

Douglas studied Tanner's works that were on exhibition in Chicago, The Met, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. He was especially drawn to *The Prophets at the Tomb (Two Disciples at the Tomb)* (1906) (Figure 3). [19]He mentioned to Romare Bearden that he greatly regretted not spending more time with Tanner in his Paris studio but does recall being impressed with the works he was then working on.[20] Cedric Dover in his essay, *American Negro Art* (1961) wrote that Tanner brought "the journeyman stage of American Negro art to, in Alain Locke's phrase, its peak…It gave American Negroes a new view of life: a proud…history and people with transforming understanding." [21] Dover rejected the assumption that Tanner's impressionist

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[16] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Influences and Impacts of the Early Years*, in Susan Earle, *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist*, 2008, 80
[17] Aaron Douglas Papers, letter, Box 1, Folder 1, Letter 1, Schomburg Center
[18] Aaron Douglas Papers, letter, Box 1, Folder 7, Letter 68, Schomburg Center
[19] Aaron Douglas, speech, *Review of Negro in American Art*, Box 3, Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[20] Aaron Douglas, correspondence, Box 1, Folder 4, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[21] Cedric Dover, "American Negro Art," *The American Review* 1, no. 3 (1961): 9

style was “escapism” from the recognition of race and aligns this style with the New Negro Movement’s objective to transform the view of African Americans in the eyes of white America.

Douglas recognized William E. Scott, as did Alain Locke, for his contribution to an African American aesthetic that portrayed their subjects in a manner that transcended the trivial, minstrelsy genre of the recent past. Scott, who studied under Tanner, served to bridge the gap between Tanner and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance through his dignified depiction of African American labor, not mere subservient figures. Douglas was particularly impressed, in a similar fashion to his admiration of *Nicodemus*, when he saw *Flight into Egypt* (Figure 4) by Scott for the cover of the 1914 issue of *Crisis*. The faces were represented as noticeably Negro rather than Caucasian. Douglas exclaimed, viewing it was the answer to the dream of a child who had never seen anything except the likeness of detractors.[22] He goes on to say:” …we must give credit for an outstanding idea, that is, that art should serve the legitimate living ideals, aspirations, hopes of a particular people.”[23] Scott would travel on a Rosenwald grant to paint in Haiti ten years prior to Douglas and his application derived influence from that of Scott’s.

It was the respectful figurative depiction of Winold Reiss’s portraits, rather than his use of cubism, that influenced Douglas to move to Harlem in 1925. He writes as much to Alta:” I have seen Reiss’s drawings for the New Negro they are marvelous…it takes a lot of training or a tremendous effort to down the idea that thin lips, straight thin nose is the apogee of beauty…Our pleasure in pictures is seldom derived from that disinterested contemplation which is the essence of the aesthetic. Imperfection is the manifestation of life.”[24]

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[22] Aaron Douglas, speech, *Review of Negro in American Art*, Box 3, Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[23] Ibid.
[24] Aaron Douglas, correspondence, Box 1, Folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

While Douglas was in Paris during 1931-32, he met and visited Henry O. Tanner's studio. Romare Bearden noted during research on a biography, that Tanner was willing to take time to visit with Douglas. Douglas describes a 1931 meeting with Tanner in his Paris studio when Tanner was 73; he found Tanner in good health and was able to view a few of his unfinished works, which he declared were all sold and for prices well in the four figures.[25] He went on to recount that he was relieved that Tanner "harbored no illusions about race or nationality and nurtured no grudges or bitterness against his countrymen for their years of neglect…He generously offered to show Palmer Hayden and me certain techniques and discoveries relative to various colors and color combinations, which he had created over the years.[26]

Tanner even invited Douglas to study with him, he did not, a decision which Douglas later greatly regretted.[27] Douglas placed Henry O. Tanner as the greatest name in African American art and expressed his continuing delight in viewing Tanner's works often with a special mention of *The Two Disciples at the Tomb* (1907) (Figure 3), which he viewed at the Art Institute of Chicago. In this work, Tanner, using light, and shadow juxtaposed with different physical attributes of the disciples, depicts the duality of the death of Christ on the one hand and his divine presence on the other. For Douglas, this would link African American Christians with the resurrection as a reminder of his people's potential deliverance from present hardship. Tanner's exhibitions in major museums around the world were important to Douglas as a testament to the recognition of African American artistic talent, long ignored.

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Aaron Douglas, Speech, Observation on the Background and Development of Afro-American Art, Box 4, Folder 16, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[27] Letter from John Peck, June 25, 1970, Box 1, Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

Douglas, in what amounted to an anthology of African American artists of the prior century, mentioned Edward M. Bannister, the noted New England landscape artist and a founder of the Rhode Island School of Design. Douglas was drawn not specifically to Bannister's artistic style, but for his being accepted by the American art world; notably his winning the first prize in the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition with the now lost landscape, *Under the Oaks*.

The *Review of Negro Art* speech went on to connect these early African American artists who gained recognition despite their race, with William E. Scott, a near contemporary of Douglas and a forerunner to the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas was moved by Scott's 1918 cover design for *Crisis* magazine, *Flight into Egypt*, (Figure 4) that depicted Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as African American. This work accompanied a short story by W.E.B. Dubois that includes the biblical account of the Holy Family being advised to go to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod. DuBois equates the family with the plight of African American families who are also, "…poor, humble, ignorant people—albeit the blood of kings ran in their veins…Stealthily they arose by night and took the old lantern and walked and ran till they crossed the river…their faces set to the North—that the fairy tale might come true."[30] Douglas recognized the difference between Scott's artistic style and his own iconic oeuvre but related that Scott's art satisfied a criteria that art be inspirational and aspirational to the hopes of African Americans, through the integration of familiar biblical themes into the composition.[31] Douglas's recognition of the importance of this link to the Holy Family would inform the spiritual themes in many of his future work.

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[30] The Crisis, Volumes 15-18, November 1917-October 1919, New York.
[31] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, Review of Negro in American Art, Lecture, Box 3. Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

While his use of religious allegory derived from his journeys to Europe, Douglas's stylistic education came in the form of an American collection. During the early period of Douglas's innovative afro-cubism artworks, he was, in 1928, awarded a fellowship to study at the Barnes Collection in Merion, PA. Most scholarship presumed that Douglas went there to study the African mask collection, however there was no record of such a specific program of study. In fact, Douglas expressed reluctance to incorporate African motifs in his art: "Actually, I was a little hesitant about this blackness, so Winold forced me…to use this African material,"[32]. During this fellowship, Douglas would have been exposed not only to African masks but also the intermingled collection of Renoir, Matisse as well as an impressive collection of Cezanne's paintings, grounding Douglas in the works of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists.[33] Alain Locke would recognize this influence on Douglas's easel paintings as, "quite more academic style than the very decorative broad effects of his murals…it is largely the result of the…Barnes Foundation fellowship…"[34] The choice of impressionism was, to Douglas, not inconsistent with his desire to further the African American cause for universal acceptance through the use of the particularity of place and human activity. Not faddish nor minstrelsy, Douglas built on the messages that had been presented stylistically by Tanner and Scott.

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[32] Aaron Douglas, transcript of taped conversation, 1970, Box 3, Folder 20, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[33] Sharif Bey, *Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: African American Art Education, Gallery Work, and Expanded Pedagogy*, Studies in Art Education 52, no. 2 (January 2011): 112–126,
[34] Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936; repr., Eastford, Ct: Martino Fine Books, 2020), 68

Private Easel Works

Most of Douglas's easel works could be considered "private art" as suggested by the title of a 2003 exhibition at Frist Art Museum in Nashville: *Aaron Douglas: A Private View*. This was from a Nashville family's private collection of Douglas's work, and while it included some of Douglas's afro-cubist illustrations, it consisted mainly of landscapes, portraits and still-life done in an impressionist style. Many of his impressionist works ended up in private collections. contributing to the erasure of certain styles from Douglas's story. His turn to more private collections reflected the lack of opportunity afforded black artists after the Public Works of Art program shut down in the late 1930's. Douglas and other black artists had little choice but to teach at HBCU's, in his case, at Fisk University in Nashville.

Lacking access to mainstream galleries and museums, Douglas's numerous exhibitions of landscapes and portraits languished in the obscurity of Fisk's gallery and student center. A 1948 show of 27 easel paintings largely produced during the Rosenwald Fellowship to the American South and Haiti included some of his New York urban landscapes as well as portraiture. Subsequent exhibitions at Fisk during the 1950's were almost entirely dedicated to landscapes, both oil and watercolors, done during his travels to New England on a Carnegie Grant as well as from subsequent trips to California and a 1956 trip to Africa. These more recent exhibits included the watercolors: *Pier at Sausalito* (1952) (Figure 33) and *House in Accra* (Figure 34) from 1956.

Douglas's impressionist works were not always hidden from public view. In addition to *The Negro Artist Comes of Age* (1945) exhibition noted above, there have been many retrospective exhibitions of Douglas's work that include his Impressionist and Ashcan style

paintings. The most impressive of these shows was compiled by Susan Earl of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in 2008. The show traveled to Frist Center in Nashville, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Schomburg Center in Harlem. I spoke with the assistant curator at Frist who worked on this exhibition, she offered that this non-typical art style for Douglas was of a private nature as opposed to the murals and illustrations that were of a public nature; a closer examination of Douglas's works may suggest they were more than just that. [35]

Douglas's Consistent Service to the Movement

Most existing scholarship analyzes Douglas's afro-cubist illustrations and murals as visual narratives supporting the intellectual and cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. In the comprehensive exhibition guide edited by Susan Earl *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist,* a scant two paragraphs recognized Douglas's naturalistic style in his other works.

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[35] The Spencer exhibition included *Power Plant in Harlem* (1934) (Figure 13) that has the loose brushstrokes of Impressionism and features industrial New York with sharp, geometric forms reminiscent of his afro-cubist works. *Triborough Bridge* (1936) (Figure 16) continues this ash can, industrial sublime style, in fact, both of these works were included in a 2013 exhibition *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers: 1900-1940* at the Hudson River Museum.

The Spencer exhibit also featured a window scene in an urban setting, *Window Cleaning* (1935) (Figure 17), a theme he would frequently revisit as we have seen in *Siesta*, and in a work completed nine years later. That work, retitled *Portrait of Grace Goens* (1944), an African American patron of Douglas, is also featured in this show, as well as a very stylistically Impressionist landscape at the Goens residence: *Back Yard Garden* (1944). In addition to several portraits by Douglas, a favored subject matter for the artist, there are watercolors of landscapes from his time studying in Paris from 1931 as well as later watercolors done during various trips in the Western U.S. and a 1956 visit to Africa, the location of the plein air work featured in this exhibit: *Lagos, Nigeria* (Figure 35).

As the later attests, little scholarship looked at the broader scope of his artistic output, other than quoting exhibition guides or critical reviews of those exhibitions. I contend that regardless of style, Douglas achieved the aesthetic goal set for African American artists by Langston Hughes, "to catch a glimmer of their own beauty."[36] His artistic work was always in service to his race and especially to his students at Fisk. In a letter from Cedric Dover, the author of *American Negro Art* (1970) to African American artist Romare Bearden, who himself was influenced by Aaron Douglas, writes: "There is room in this job for all kinds of artists, no imposition on style and personal compulsion is suggested, providing the range of kinship is there." [37]

Dover had an expansive view of allowable artistic styles that may still be in service to African American pride. During 1934, Douglas put on a small show of his easel paintings from his time in Europe, and garnered sympathetic reviews in the New York Times. That same year he completed his afro-cubist masterwork *Aspects of Negro Life* murals in Harlem, and he painted a small landscape of the lower east side of New York for the residence of the American Minister to Liberia.[38] Douglas felt comfortable using both Afro-cubist and Impressionist styles that fit the particular setting or subject matter. Similarly, Cedric Dover, quoting Philip Hampton, echoed this concern for the statement rather than the style: "A work of art is a visual philosophy, a non-verbal communication…Therefore, if an artist is to produce a work of art, he must be acutely

[36] Langston Hughes, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, 1926
[37] Aaron Douglas, general correspondence, Box 1, Folder 4, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[38] Susan Earle, et al, *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist*, New Haven, Yale University Press, Lawrence, 2007, 215-216.

sensitive to the totality."[39] Douglas was first and foremost interested in dignifying the image of the African American, not only through his illustrations and murals but also through landscapes as well as portraiture that depict meaningful visual themes of belonging and thriving.

Outline of Sections

In the first section of this thesis, I examine Douglas's Afro-cubist style in the context of his public works, including his illustrations and murals. This style developed during his apprenticeship with German artist Winold Reiss in 1925. Reiss himself employed several different artistic styles as he navigated between more academic easel works and commercial graphic designs. The inclusion by Douglas of portraiture and landscapes, along with afro-cubist works, would be consistent with Reiss's mentorship. It is during this time as a graphic artist that Douglas would visually link African motifs with the contribution of African American labor to the industrialization of America. This recognition of labor's role to American prosperity would remain a distinct theme of Douglas's work, regardless of style. Douglas was encouraged by Reiss to create a distinctive African American aesthetic and was encouraged by the leading philosophers of the Harlem Renaissance. I will examine the often-contradictory writings of these elite thinkers to suggest that their writings did not necessarily support one style over another. Further, I will explore the importance and significance of white patronage in the commissioning of Douglas's afro-cubist works.

In the second section, I will examine his urban landscapes, utilizing the gritty, dark, quick brushstrokes of the Ashcan style. While different stylistically from his illustrations, Douglas

[39] Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art,* The American Review 1, no. 3 (1961): 1–20.

continued to stress, thematically, the importance of African American labor in the creation of the modern U.S. economy. Douglas also included geometric architectonic forms that may evoke an Egyptian past, which are also present in his murals. While some landscapes produced by Douglas did not overtly suggest African American labor, nor an African past, he creates a visual narrative of life in Harlem, which still serves to depict sympathetic racial dignity.

The third section will deal with the landscapes he painted while on a Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship which allowed Douglas to spend a year at several historically black colleges in the South as well as two months in Haiti. His grant application clearly stated his emphasis… "that such a project would be an important contribution to Negro Art in America. I am sure that a sympathetic and realistic portrayal would go far to raise the self-esteem and self-respect of our people."[41] The application also credited Winold Reiss's portraiture of important figures from the Harlem Renaissance in the March 1925 issue of Survey Graphic with inspiring him to "augment and update the visual facts that Reiss portraits and landscapes produced as evidence of the dignity and complexity of African Americans…"[42] The visit to Haiti would follow on an earlier visit by William E Scott, who had exhibited impressionistic landscapes of Haiti in the early 1930's, these paintings would have been familiar to Douglas. Haiti was important to African American artists; it was the first self-directed slave revolution that not only gained freedom but defeated the French colonial power. By the time Douglas went to paint in Haiti under the Rosenwald Fellowship, Haiti was no longer occupied by U.S. forces (1915-1934)

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[41] Aaron Douglas, *Plan of Work*, March 1, 1937, Rosenwald Archives, box 408, folder 13 Aaron Douglas, Fisk

[42] Lindsay Jean Twa, *Troubling Island: The Imagining and Imaging of Haiti by African American Artists, 1915-1940,* PhD, 2006).

but was economically administered by American diplomats, which would influence the style and content of Douglas's art works.

Finally, I will examine some of his later works, produced during other Fellowships and travels through the US and Africa. In 1948, aided by a grant from the Carnegie Foundation, Douglas paints landscapes meant to capture the aesthetic potential of "less popular views" in California.[43] A Carnegie grant-in-aid under the Improvement of Teaching Project, enables Douglas to paint in New England during the summer of 1951. In 1952, Douglas returns to California on a second Improvement of Teaching Project. The result of these coast-to-coast paintings and watercolors were displayed at Fisk to good reviews. During the summer of 1956, in the company of his wife and his patrons, Dr. W.W. and Mrs. Grace Goens, Douglas travels to Europe and African port cities, the later not in search of "face types or jungle scenes to paint". Rather his interest was in "seeing something of African urban life, its colorful people, markets, houses and streets." [44]Throughout these later years, Douglas remained very political and was invited in 1963 by President Kennedy to attend the ceremonies honoring the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. In a speech delivered in March of 1971, Douglas proclaimed: "Then as now, the Negro had become acutely aware of the possibilities for a new life better than he had known."[45]His life's work was centered on promoting the possibility of a better existence for his people.

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[43] Susan Earle, et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 219

[44] Susan Earle, et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 221

[45] Douglas, Lecture, The Harlem Renaissance, Box 3, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University



Figure 1 *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1899



Figure 2 *The Dancing Lesson*, Thomas Eakins, 1878



Figure 3 *Two Disciples at the Tomb*, Henry O. Tanner, 1907

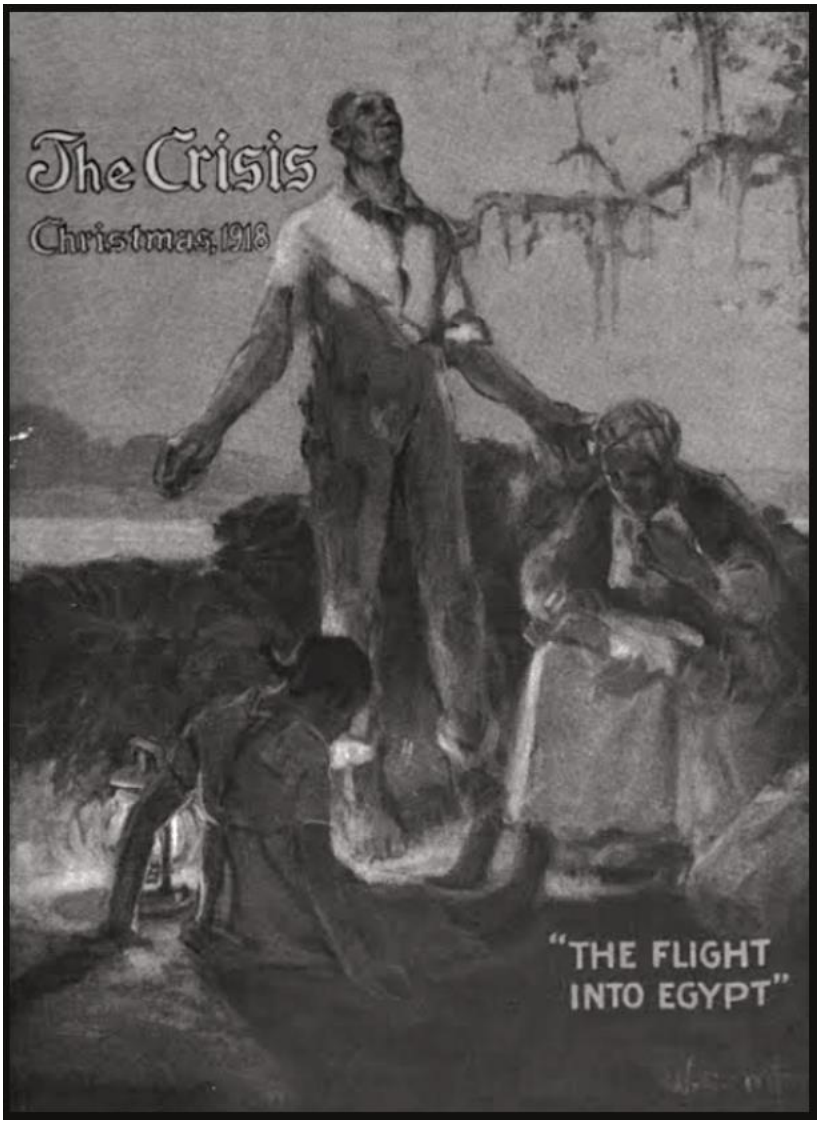


Figure 4 *The Crisis, Flight into Egypt*, William E. Scott, 1914

A NEW STYLE IDENTIFIES THE NEW NEGRO

Aaron Douglas's signature afro-cubist style cannot be fully appreciated outside the intellectual and social paradigm that is the New Negro Movement (NNM). This movement was born out of the experience of African American soldiers in World War I, a war that not only allowed these men to experience the more equal treatment afforded by Europeans, but also highlighted their disillusionment of fighting for the high ideals of America while facing racism every day at home. This forever changed the way African Americans would conceive of themselves as part of a modern world, released from the oppression of the dominant white culture: this is the New Negro.[46] Despite Douglas's association with the NNM through his afro-cubism, he never limited himself to a particular style nor medium, his artistic service to the Movement was deeper and more complex than his mural and illustrations would suggest.

Alain Locke, a recognized leader of NNM along with W.E.B. Du Bois, essentially kicked off the renaissance with his seminal work, *The New Negro* (1926), a work that contained illustrations by Aaron Douglas and forever associated him with the NNM.[47] The NNM's limitations were recognized early on; it was not for everyman but limited to the "Talented Tenth." Langston Hughes recounted in his autobiography, "I don't know what made any Negroes think (that the movement would solve race problems)—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro (Harlem) Renaissance."[48]

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[46] Gerald Early, *The New Negro Era and the Great African American Transformation*, American Studies 49, no. 1-2 (2010): 13

[47] Gerald Early, *The New Negro Era and the Great African American Transformation*, American Studies 49, no. 1-2 (2010): 18

[48] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea an Autobiography.* (1940; repr., Paw Prints, 2008).

The limited Black audience for the Movement was offset by an expansion beyond the purely artistic. The intellectual underpinning of the NNM was rooted in the poetry and essays on the Great Migration from the rural, agrarian South to the urban, industrial centers in the North. Thus, socio-economic upheaval influenced the output of musical, literary, and visual artists to address the challenges of the African American populous, albeit limited to the intellectual elites of their society.

There is no consensus as to the meaning or boundaries of NNM; Huggins (2017) suggested the movement was a "historical fiction" [49], while Mary Schmidt Campbell wrote that these artists were falsely saddled with an aesthetic that, now deemed obsolete, relegates the Movement to a brief period in history. [50]As we examine the extended oeuvre of Douglas's work beyond 1939, it may be helpful to remember that Early (2008) also relegated the Movement to a finite brief period that ended in 1938-39 when Joe Louis became the heavy weight boxing champion, admired by both white and black fans and Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* became a universally successful protest song.[51] Douglas's aesthetic service to the Movement continued into the 1960's, though it departed from the formal inventions of the 1930s which developed under the influence of Winold Reiss.

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[49] Nathan Irving Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, Updated Edition (1971; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171–72.
[50] Mary Schmidt Campbell in The Studio Museum in Harlem, *Harlem Renaissance* (Abradale Press, 1994), 50
[51] Gerald Early, *The New Negro Era and the Great African American Transformation*, American Studies 49, no. 1-2 (2010): 19

Douglas arrived in Harlem in 1925, already familiar with the Movement's publications and is said to have been particularly influenced by a special issue of *Survey Graphics,* published earlier that year, featuring Winold Reiss's portraits of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas wrote that,

> "The most cogent single factor that eventually turned my face to New York was the publication of the spectacular *Survey Graphic* magazine in 1924 with the splendid portrait of a black man on the cover drawn by Fritz Winold Reiss."[52] Douglas continued that this is "a clarion call that seemed to go out to the world…lifting of voices of man's ancient song…facing forward the creator and sustainer of all…"[53]

Butcher in her book, *The Negro in American Culture* (1956), made a distinction that in the early 1920's, while Europeans are discovering African Art, Americans are rediscovering the Negro.[54] The book examines Reiss, not in terms of his graphic illustrations that were to influence Douglas, but his progressive depictions of African American subjects. This focus on realism in African American subject matter was not without some criticism by conservative Black people who favored less apparent facial features, seeking to erase their differences from that of white features. [55]

Alain Locke introduced Douglas to Reiss upon Douglas's arrival in Harlem, resulting in his studying in the artist's studio as well as Reiss guiding Douglas's work on the illustrations for Locke's book "The New Negro" (1926). This work included many of the portraits found in the *Survey Graphic* (1925) issue Douglas found so appealing but also included jarring, geometric

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[52] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Harlem Renaissance*, Box 3, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, 6
[53] Ibid., 6
[54] Margret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture: Based on Materials Left by Alain Locke* (1956; repr., New York: Knopf, 1956), 207–40.
[55] Ibid., 231

illustrations that could be analogous to the disrupting power of jazz.[56] Reiss encouraged Douglas to study African masks at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. These visits occasioned Douglas to write later: "I clearly recall Reiss's impatience as he sought to urge me beyond my doubts and fears that seemed to loom so large in the presence of the terrifying specters moving beneath the surface of every African masque and fetish…"[57] Most of Douglas's illustrations reflected a student's work, with little training in this geometric stye of painting. In fact, during this period Douglas recalled that: "I was a little reluctant, I was hesitant. I didn't want to…I wanted to do something else. Actually, I was a little hesitant about this blackness, so Winold forced me…to use this African material."[58] Douglas appreciated that these early works from 1925-1926 were "hardly masterful", however one of the illustrations, initially titled *From the New World* did depict the now iconic afro-cubist style that would define Douglas's visual language on behalf of the movement.

The cover that Douglas designed for *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* in February 1926 (Figure 5), would forever link Douglas as a chronicler of African American labor. Specifically, he documented Black workers as a collective force in creating U.S. economic power. During an oral history recording done at Fisk, Douglas would say: "Labor of African Americans…(is) one of the most important aspects of our development. We should be proud of it. That part of it has gone into the building of America, not only of ourselves."[61] In this

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[56] Richard J Powell, *The Aaron Douglas Effect,* in *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Elizabeth Earle (Yale University Press, 2007), 55

[57] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, "The Harlem Renaissance", March 18, 1973, Box 3, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

[58] Aaron Douglas, transcript of taped conversation, 1970, Box 3, Folder 20, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

[61] Samantha A Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 37

illustration, abstract, geometric designs fill the skies above the foregrounded workers. The workers are clearly African American, borrowing from Egyptian motifs of silhouetted profile faces depicted with what would become Douglas's ubiquitous slit eye. Powell (2007) offers, "Douglas's slit eye, rather than representing unmediated, lucid vision, appears veiled: almost closed, squinting and under the influence of a shadowy but not dour ambiance."[62]I believe the slit eye served as a signifier of the lack of socio-economic agency for African American labor. The eye is not yet open , but Douglas's image implies that it would be, as the laboring classes embraced their power; Douglas would become a Marxist soon after returning to New York after his study in Europe.

In this illustration, the workers' angular bodies are engaged in vigorous labor as they raise a hammer overhead to strike the molten metal held above the anvil. The anvil bears a lightning bolt, a common feature in Douglas's later works. In this case, the geometric form is rising out of the anvil into a tree like design, evincing both the laborer's effort toward economic growth, as well as a spiritual link to the biblical *Tree of Life*. At the left-hand corner of the low horizon is a small pyramid with a sunbeam coming into the picture plane; at this earliest stage of his afro-cubist style, Douglas is already including pyramidal designs. To the right of the pyramid is another trope of Douglas's future works, factory buildings with smoke rising from the stacks.

The February 1926 *Opportunity* cover illustration presages the works that Douglas would produce in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance; specifically, illustrations Douglas did for John Weldon Johnson's volume of poetry titled, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in*

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[62] Richard J Powell, *The Aaron Douglas Effect*, in *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Elizabeth Earle (Yale University Press, 2007), 57

Verse (1927), which would cement his reputation as the Movement's preeminent artist. Douglas worked on these illustrations during the later stage of his apprenticeship with Reiss, as he states the intentionality of the Afro-cubist style: "In the design for this book I devised a style which I have since used in all my book illustrations and mural designs until the present time."[63]

The Crucifixion (1927) (Figure 6) is an excellent example of this now recognizable style of Douglas's commissioned works which served as a visual narrative for the stanza of the poem, "They put the cross on Simon and Simon bore the cross". This poem refers to the biblical account of Jesus's crucifixion beginning at the garden of Gethsemane and culminating with Christ dying on the cross. This stanza recounts the biblical event when Jesus is too weak to carry the cross and a Cyrene named Simon is compelled to carry the cross for Him.

The work is a geometric intersection of the body of Simon, the spears and the cross. The scene is threatening, and the role Simon plays more heroic as the foregrounded Roman soldiers are pointing large spears at Simon and not Christ. Douglas depicted the North African as a dominant figure of the composition with the now familiar slit eye, Mende mask-like, profile, carrying an oversized cross, gazing intently to the heavens. Titian's composition of the same biblical account, *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1565) (Figure 7) foregrounds the figures of Christ and Simon with Christ looking mournfully into the eyes of the viewer. Instead of Simon being a Black North African, in Titian's painting, Simon is a depiction of the wealthy white patron of the work. Douglas's illustration and the accompanying poetry by Johnson delivered a message to African Americans that Jesus's suffering and subsequent resurrection is not only symbolic of the

[63] Aaron Douglas, Correspondence, General, 1958-1973, Box 1, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

Black experience to date but also their singular role of aiding Jesus's salvific mission through labor thus ensuring their collective hope for a better future.[64] Douglas carried the Christian symbolism he so admired in Tanner's *Nicodemus* as well as Scott's illustration of the *Flight from Egypt* into his early afro-cubist illustrations.

The stylistic choice of afro-cubism would be translated into his variously commissioned murals. The best-known of Douglas's mural works are those commissioned by the WPA for the 135th Street Public Library in Harlem. The four-panel series is titled *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) depicts a history of African Americans from Africa in *The Negro in an African Setting,* to slavery, musicality and lynching in *An Idyll in the Deep South*, to the hopeful reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, juxtaposed with the specter of Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan in *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* and finally the plight of modern African Americans in *Song of the Towers* (Figure 8). I will examine the composition of this latter mural; a work so important to Douglas he would reproduce the composition many years later for a commission to place the work in the Governor of Wisconsin's office.

Douglas described song as the most powerful medium of the African American creative expression, whether it be spirituals, blues, or jazz. Douglas emphasized this creativity with the dominant slit eye profile of the central figure, less angular than we had seen in the illustrations, raising a saxophone above his head, his other hand upraised as if in praise. The figure on the viewers right is more angular, suggesting the movement of migration to the North for employment, the silhouetted figure is struggling not to be caught in the cogwheel of industrial America. The architectonic inclusion of the billowing smokestacks on the right, used to depict

[64] Ibid., 182

the strong economic conditions prior to the depression, while the diminished output on the left represents the depression. The hardship wrought on African Americans during the depression is depicted by the dark silhouetted figure on the left who is unable to escape the grasp of poverty.[65]

The use of architecture by Douglas would be replicated in future works, not only in his murals but also in his Ashcan style urban landscapes. The entire composition of *Song of the Towers* is held together by the now familiar aesthetic device of concentric circles, drawing one's attention to the small Statue of Liberty in the background, suggesting the elusive equality for black citizens.

Douglas's palette for these murals consisted of muted colors, in *Song of the Towers* a terracotta dominates the center of the canvas. This color is moderated into differing shades through the influence of the concentric circles that range from small and light at the center to larger and darker at the periphery.[66] The wisps of light green representing the hand of inequality that besets African American workers, joins the green of the elusive Statute of Liberty as well as the horizontal wisps representing the waters that carry his people continuously through the cosmos. Douglas's goal was "…to interpret the appearance and meaning of his (African Americans) limited environment and outlook…to the inner life of a particular people…"[67]

The use of cubism in conjunction with African art, while of interest to Douglas, did not result in the rote copying of African ancestral forms in his artistic production that were promoted by Locke and Du Bois. Instead, as David Driskell wrote in a forward for a retrospective of

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[65] Aaron Douglas, letter, Box 3, Folder 4, Aaron Douglas Papers, addendum, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[66] Aaron Douglas, Paper, Box 4, Folder 12, Aaron Douglas Papers, addendum, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[67] Ibid., Douglas

Douglas's work at Fisk in 1971: "Each work that he created became a lesson in the heritage of the Black man culturally admonishing him to reject the falsifications of the previous order.[68] Douglas's consistent message is indicative of Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois's emphasis on subject matter and content, such that "…all art is propaganda and ever must be…I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda."[69] In this spirit, Douglas's murals are distinctly racially focused, as opposed to Thomas Hart Benton's ten panel mural created at approximately at the same time, *America Today* (1930) (Figure 9), which conveyed no 'rejection of the previous order', rather it is a celebration of American labor, and its economic contribution to America's success, while limiting the depiction of African American's role in this success. Douglas focused his attention on the African American experience in a white America, both from a viewpoint of the recognition of hardships, an acknowledgement of accomplishments and an identification with Judeo-Christian beliefs of redemption.

Labor and Spirituality

Two themes reappear in both Douglas's cubist and non-cubist work as paths to self-determination: Black labor and Black spirituality. Douglas also drew inspiration from the African American labor that built America, as W.E.B. DuBois wrote: "The Negro must prove his necessity to the labor movement that it is disastrous to leave him out of the foundation of the new industrial state."[76] Another favorite visual trope of Douglas's illustrations and murals was urban

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[68] Aaron Douglas, Exhibition, Box 3, Folder 20, Aaron Douglas Papers, addendum, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[69] W.E.B. DuBois, *Criteria of Negro Art,* January 1, 1926, 60–68.
[76] Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance: W.E.B Dubois, A Negro Nation within a Nation,* (New York U.A.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 386

architecture, using these forms as an expression of modernity, human strivings, and economic progress.[77]

Douglas continued to take inspiration from literary sources throughout these early years in Harlem, true to his role as a visual narrator of the Movement. The cover of the May 1928 issue of *Crisis* (Figure 10) is an illustration that juxtaposes the architectonic nature of solid Egyptian pyramids with the askew New York skyscrapers to evoke a proud African past with an uncertain urban world. The window patterns of the buildings were similar to Georgia O'Keefe's *Radiator Building* (1927) (Figure 11) which would be donated to Fisk University some ten years later. The composition features his iconic angular slit eye profiled figures gazing to the distant Egyptian past emphasized by concentric circles guided by a ray of light that remains within the picture plane.

David Driskell, Douglas's successor in the Fisk Art Department after his retirement, noted that Douglas acknowledged this reliance on African iconography to promote, "African identity, black dignity, self-pride and an African inspired setting".[78] Douglas thus remains true to the artistic legacy of Locke's "ancestral arts," eschewing the minstrelsy black stereotypes of most America figural art. However, he did not do so to the exclusion of other styles.

This evoked another of Douglas's themes, in addition to celebrating Black labor, that of the spiritual side African American life. Douglas noted that the various color gradations of light and shadow in his works were informed by the call-response of black congregation's worship

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[77] Richard J. Powell*, Paint That Thing! Aaron Douglas's Call to Modernism*, American Studies 49, no. 1-2 (2010): 114

[78] Susan Earle, et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 90

service he had observed in the South. [79] Art historian Leslie King-Hammond recognized, as did Douglas, that there exists a connection between spirituality of African Americans and their artistic creativity. This led African American artists to "reinvent traditional Western styles and engage in a quest for identity…which they could challenge Western canons of traditional artistic expression…"[80]

This emphasis on spiritual identity through artistic style, was influenced by Douglas's study, in his early years in New York, with Gurdjieffian philosophy[81]. During the period of 1925 to 1927, Douglas explored the relationship of art and consciousness inherent in the discussion at Gurdejieffian meetings in New York City. This philosophy was a recognition that one's lot could be awakened from a state of sleepwalking through life to a fourth, higher state of consciousness. Douglas was especially drawn to its precepts regarding the cosmos, that may have informed his use of abstract symbolism, such as concentric circles and beams of light. However, he is said to have soon lost interest in this philosophy, largely because of its negation that racial identity could be a path to the achievement of one's true self.

Regardless, cosmological schema is evident in Douglas's works from this period that would rely on the power inherent in the light of stars and the sun. Douglas also employed a celestial harmony of the Law of Seven[82], which assigns musical notes to aspects of the cosmos.

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[79] Susan Earle, et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 91

[80] Damon A. Powell, *The Crucifixion, Black American Religious Aesthetics and the Painting of Aaron Douglas,* Black Theology 12, no. 2 (August 2014): 178

[81] Nathan Irving Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, Updated Edition (1971; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171–72.

[82] The law of seven can be observed everywhere in the natural world and in everything we do internally and externally. If we understood the law of octaves, we could see more clearly how the

Douglas use of this symbolism is evident in *Crucifixion* as the viewers' attention is directed by the now familiar trope of a ray of light from the heavens to the diminutive Christ with the traditional halo. The focus is on the action supporting Jesus, identified by the use of concentric circles which, Vincenti (2007) suggested, depicts the musical harmony of the Law of Seven. [83]

Douglas, in a 1948 speech, "The Negro Too in American Art*,"* given at Le Moyne College, confirms his emphasis on spirituality when he said: "…the great thrill and pride in our past as well as great hopes for the future…art embodies our desire to make concrete our spiritual, our extra material experiences…longing for immortality and self-preservation." [84]

Role of White Patrons

An understudied aspect of Douglas's career is the role of white patronage in his public works. Douglas's murals were commissioned largely by predominantly white institutions and the Afro-cubist style itself was inspired at the direction of Winold Reiss, a German-American artist and graphic designer. His relationship with Reiss was often strained by racial difference, as when Douglas wrote to his wife, Alta: "…while everything is going nicely, one must not forget to be careful. One must be careful to keep their acquaintances separate and in line. My tactics are

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universe unfolds, or how a tree grows, or how learning requires special efforts at certain, very specific, points. *The law of octaves explains many phenomena in our lives which are incomprehensible.* ~ Gurdjieff

[83] Marissa Vincenti, *A Matter of Spirit: Aaron Douglas, Gurdjieffian Thought, and the Expressions of 'Conscious Art,'* International Review of African American Art*,* Vol.21, no. 3 (2007): 11–15.

[84] Aaron Douglas, Speech, Box 4, folder 6, Aaron Douglas Papers, Addendum, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

these, smile…say as little as possible. No one knows better than a Negro the real power of a smile."[90]

Douglas recognized the support he and other African American artists received from white philanthropic institutions; he was especially grateful to the Harmon Foundation for their support through exhibitions and cash prizes to the artists.[92] The Harmon Foundation, however, drew the criticism of Romare Bearden for dictating the choice of work it favored that "…allowed the Negro artist to accept standards that are both artificial and corrupt." [93] Douglas would also recognize the assistance from Fellowship grants of the Rosenwald and Guggenheim Foundations and later in his career was the recipient of Carnegie Grants to travel and paint in the U.S. As early as 1928, shortly after arriving in New York, Douglas received a one-year Fellowship to study modernist paintings and African art at the Barnes Collections in Marion, Pennsylvania. Albert Barnes was condescending in his encouragement of African American artists to become an integral part of American aesthetic tradition, not through academic training but because it is derived from: "…a primitive nature upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed."[94]

Not surprisingly, these relationships were often strained. Cedric Dover, writer, and social activist described the influence of white sponsors of all-Negro exhibitions as well as public

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[90] Letter to Alta Douglas, Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, letter 57, n.d., Schomberg Center for Research for Research in Black Culture, The NYPL

[92] Aaron Douglas, Lectures, *The Development of Negro Art in American Life*, Box 3, Folder 6, Fisk University

[93] Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1973), 92

[94]Albert C. Barnes, *Negro Art in America* in David Levering Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader.* (Paw Prints, 2008),129

commissions of African American artistic output as "do gooders who feel superior". [95] Sharif Bey (2011) suggested that the obsession of white patrons with African fetishes and the fascination with "primitivism" prompted Douglas to develop two distinct styles, one for his murals and illustrations and the other for his more academic landscapes and portraiture.[97] Douglas was so conflicted by his reliance on white patronage that he wrote they were: "Awful. Miserable. Stinking. But we can't get along without them so we must put up with them."[98]

Adding to the patronage of white philanthropists was the government WPA program which is credited with giving African American artists a financial benefit during the Depression. Douglas would monetarily and professionally benefit from a commission for a four-mural work at the 135th Street Public Library in New York. The argument that Douglas's afro-cubist works were all commissioned by white patrons is to counter that his illustrations for *Crisis* and *Opportunity* were African American publications, however, these publications were themselves often supported by white philanthropists. Douglas was wary of other publication that he had occasion to submit drawings to, specifically *Vanity Fair*, as he was only offered work that he found demeaning, vowing to only submit drawing to *Crisis* and *Opportunity* in the future.[101] Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked that all of Douglas's afro-cubist illustrations and murals were on commission, compensation from which was derived from patrons who dictated the style

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[95] Aaron Douglas, Letter to Romare Bearden, June 1959, Box 1, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

[97] Sharif Bey, "Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: African American Art Education, Gallery Work, and Expanded Pedagogy," *Studies in Art Education* 52, no. 2 (January 2011): 116

[98] Letter to Alta Douglas, Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, letter 12, n.d., Schomberg Center for Research for Research in Black Culture, The NYPL

[101] Letter to Alta Douglas, Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, letter 13, n.d., Schomberg Center for Research for Research in Black Culture, The NYPL

and medium to be used. Douglas acknowledged as much when he wrote to Alta: "As soon as I get money enough, I shall begin my work in sculpture."[102]

Locke and DuBois's support of Douglas's afro-cubist style seemed to contradict those who note the negative influence of whites on his signature style, however, those leading African American cultural leaders also sought and developed support from white patrons.[103] Later, Locke would distance himself from Afro-cubism, which he now saw as a Eurocentric style, when he wrote: "The commitment to racial materials and 'race expression' should be neither that of fashionable and profitable fad nor of a condescending and missionary duty…"[104] The shifting racial meanings of Afro-cubism are worth our attention since they help to dispel the notion that the style was innately Black, and therefore was the only appropriate visual language for Black political or personal expression in interwar America.

Role of Private Collectors

Outside of Fisk and a few other HBCU's, very few of Douglas's easel works were evidenced in private collections. One family in Nashville, the Daniels had many of Douglas's surviving works in their collection. These would include paintings of the Fisk chapel and a Fisk neighborhood which depicted the same subject matter as *Backyard*. They also collected *Trees I* and *Ebbets Field* as well as a watercolor from Douglas's 1952 return trip to California, perhaps similar to *Pier at Sausalito*; they also owned *Lagos, Nigeria*. That this one family would have

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[102] Letter to Alta Douglas, Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, letter 15, n.d., Schomberg Center for Research for Research in Black Culture, The NYPL

[103] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Influences and Impacts of the Early Years* in Susan Earle, et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007),84

[104] Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance: Alain Locke, Spiritual Truancy,* (New York U.S.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 406

collected so many of Douglas's surviving watercolors highlights the important role these private Black collectors, as well as the role HBCU's played in preserving the aesthetic legacy of African American artists in the face of continued, restricted access to mainstream galleries and museums.

It is emblematic of this inequity that much of Douglas's public work, his murals, and illustrations, would survive, while very little of his private easel works have been analyzed, discussed, nor preserved. These surviving works serve to spotlight the creative richness of art produced by Douglas as a rebuttal to the prevailing inattention by the dominant cultural gatekeepers. Douglas enumerated his intentions in the following excerpt from a speech, "The Development of Negro Art in America", a lecture given at the Fisk Festival of Music and Art in 1953, "…the achievements of the Negro in American art are not made with a desire to exalt the past over the present but to assist young people to see their lives in proper perspectives and thus be prepared to choose worthwhile goals and objectives." [105]

Even in his casual Fisk neighborhoods and backyard landscapes, Douglas employed art as a specific means to enrich the private lives of African Americans, it is never merely 'purely pleasurable' artistic output.

Aaron Douglas: Gallerist

Douglas honed his aesthetic heritage through his role as the director of the Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk, not merely by displaying works by African American artists, but also through the inclusion of the Stieglitz Collection. This major gift by Georgia O'Keefe would bring a richly diverse collection of major art works including paintings from Picasso, Renoir, and Cezanne.

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[105] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Development of Negro Art in America*, Box 3, Folder 6, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

His contacts with important white philanthropists, instead of being a source of income from commission work, now provided opportunities for Fisk to host important traveling exhibitions, including several from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fisk would be a center for artistic education not only for Fisk students but for the entire Nashville community. The gallery became an avenue for Douglas's students to develop ties to White Americans "to afford his students more diverse and enriching opportunities through gallery programing."[106]

Douglas did not become less political nor less bold in his later years at Fisk, he used different artistic and educational modes, including lectures, as well as stylistic changes that were dictated by the unique situations he encountered. His curatorial efforts served to uplift all African Americans by emphasizing their unique role in the creation of western art that assures an inheritance of a proud past and the hope of a more just future. For Douglas, art served as a visual statement, first, to reassure his people of their inherent worth, a worth that transcended their present circumstances, that was inexorably linked to a lineage of cultural accomplishment, as well as to be united with eternal spirituality of the cosmos.

Secondly, it provided a clear message to white society that their hypocrisy is exposed for all to see and will no longer be tolerated. It was important to Douglas that this message required an unambiguous style that would convey a clear meaning to the viewer and as such Douglas increasingly grew concerned that abstraction would result in a dilution of the intended narrative.

Douglas would abandon his iconic afro-cubist style, except for a few later commissions, in favor of an impressionistic style that was intended to capture the chaotic movement of modern life and African Americans role in that life. Whether as an artist, a teacher, a lecturer, or a

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[106] Sharif Bey, *Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: African American Art Education, Gallery Work, and Expanded Pedagogy,* Studies in Art Education 52, no. 2 (January 2011): 121

gallerist, Aaron Douglas never wavered in his lifelong dedication to the plight of African Americans in an unjust America that denied opportunity to himself, his peers, and his students.



Figure 5 *Opportunity*, Cover Illustration, 1926



Figure 6 *The Crucifixion*, 1927

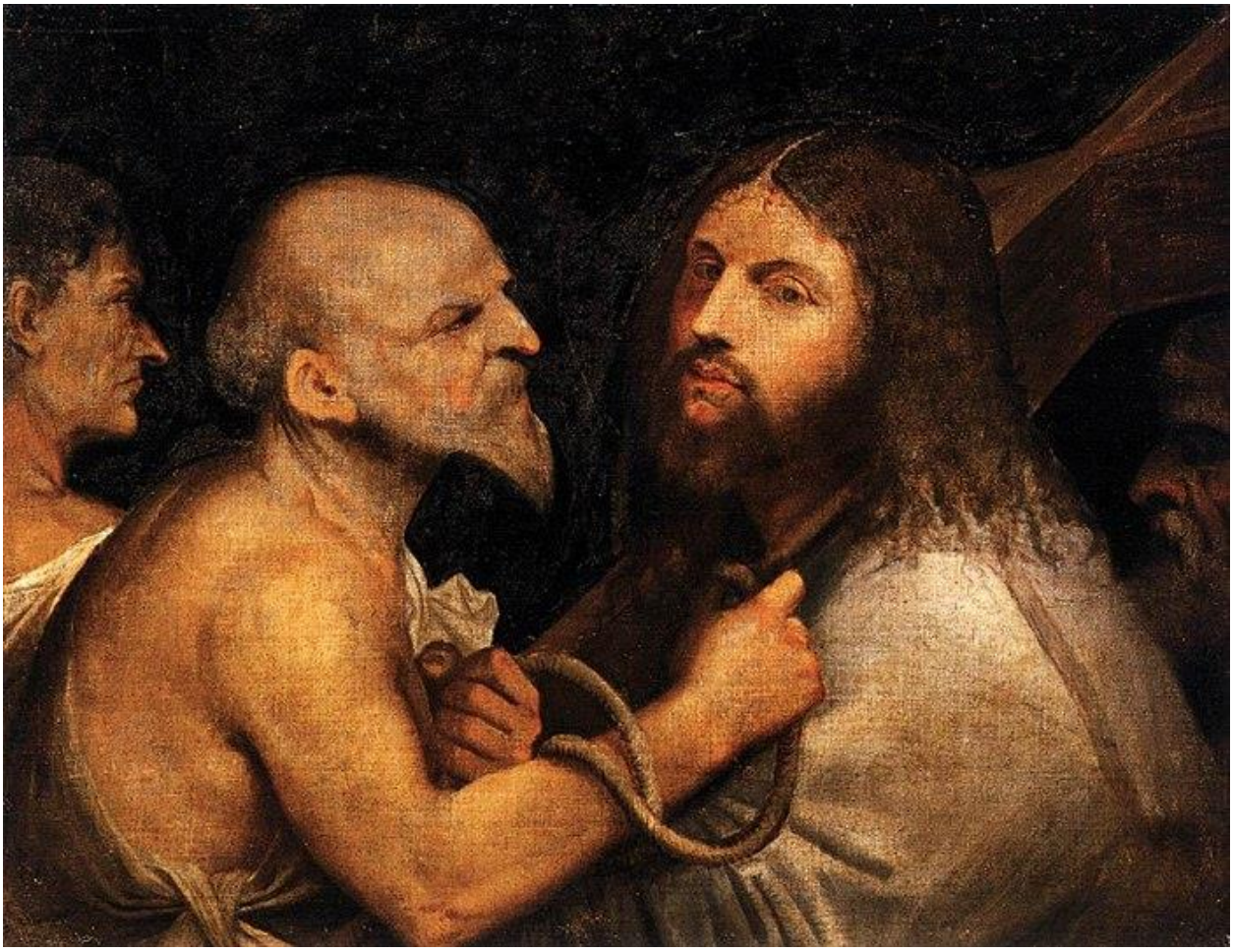


Figure 7 *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Titian, 1505

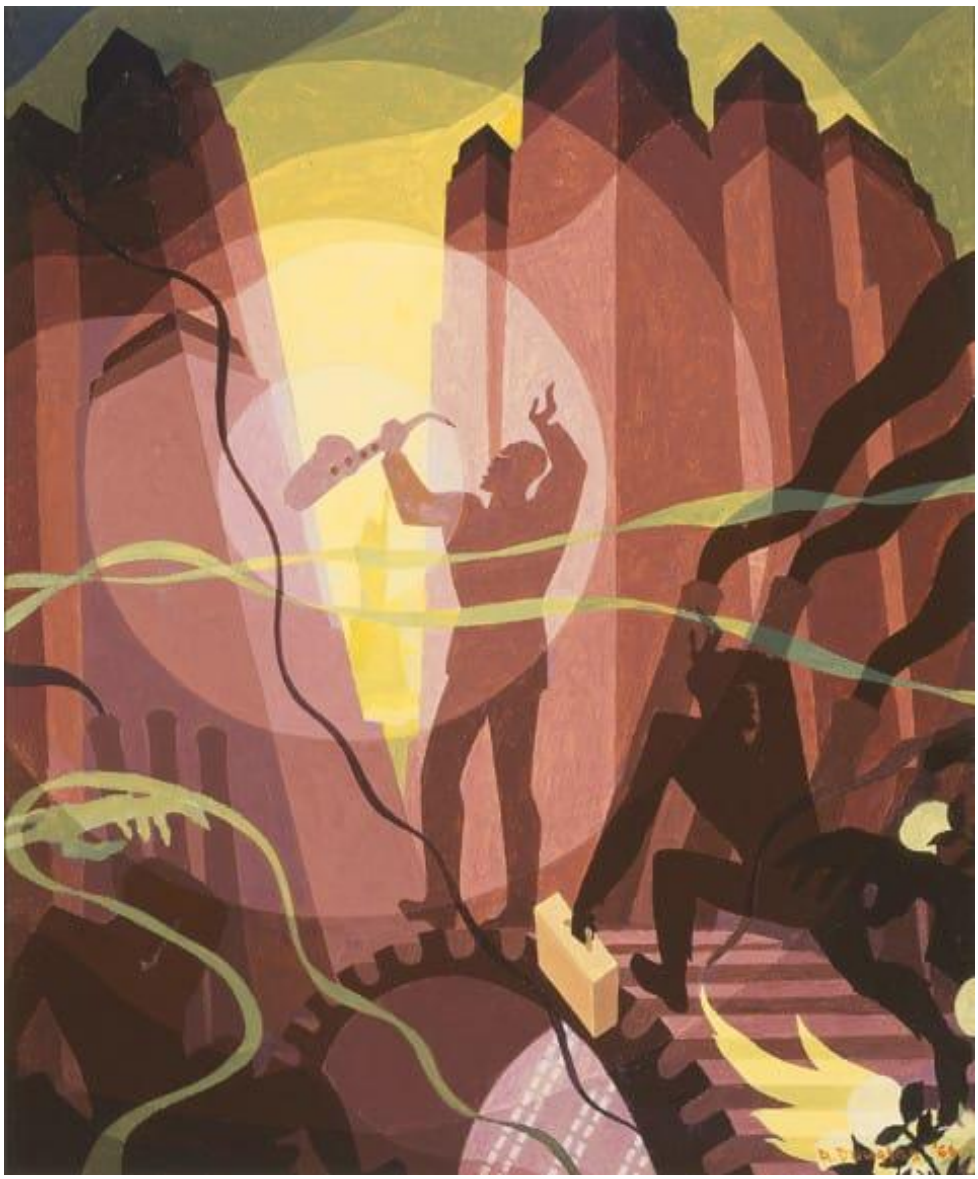


Figure 8 *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934



Figure 9 *America Today*, Thomas Hart Benton, 1930



Figure 10 *The Crisis*, cover, May 1928

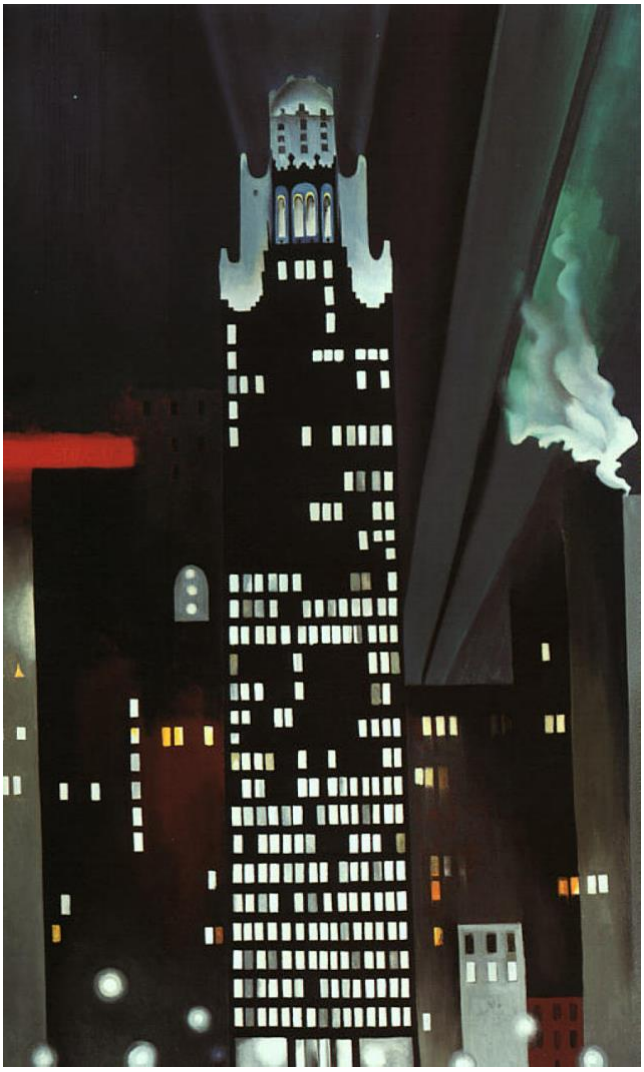


Figure 11 *Radiator Building*, Georgia O'Keefe, 1927

DOUGLAS ENCOUNTERS THE ASHCAN SCHOOL

Introduction

As an art student and subsequently, an art professor at Fisk University, Douglas was drawn to Impressionism as an important style in the canon of Western art. In a letter describing an exhibition of French painting in the late nineteenth century, he wrote that Impressionism was "the most dramatic transformation in the language of visual arts since the time of Giotto."[109] Douglas felt that impressionism as a style "…captures the truth of the moment and to render accurately the effects of light and its reflections."[110]

Teaching art at Fisk enabled Douglas's students to relate culturally with the artist-teacher. Douglas used art as a vehicle to improve the lives of his students at Fisk, both from his signature style afro-cubist murals in the Cravath Library, as well as through his frequent exhibitions of his easel paintings and watercolors. In Douglas's own words: "Art at Fisk, however, in its primary function fittingly serves the educational process as a motivation and as concrete evidence of creativeness in building greater aesthetic appreciation…to come to grips with man's…universal drive to abundant living." [111]

Douglas's role over many decades at Fisk would, in addition to teaching studio arts, involved lectures and speeches that served to document and interpret Black life through visual

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[109] Aaron Douglas, Exhibitions, Box 7, Folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[110] Ibid.
[111] Aaron Douglas, Writings, Box 3, Folder 20, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

language in order to develop a positive understanding of African American art and artists.[112] This would inform all of Douglas's later easel works.

Douglas arrived at Fisk as a part-time art professor in 1939 and was added to the faculty in a full-time capacity in 1944. As one of his students, Gregory Ridley recalled: "Aaron Douglas was a one-man department for a long time. He liked portraits and still life and had a strong interest in design…he made use of pattern and designs that could easily be printed in magazine and book illustrations. Reiss did the same thing in his work, and he was also an outstanding portrait artist as Douglas was."[113] Ridley would continue that he took eight or nine classes with Douglas and that he placed much emphasis on the plight of Blacks in America as well as the attitude of whites toward African Americans.[114] This emphasis on socio-economic inequality showed again that Douglas was a political advocate for his race, regardless of aesthetic style or artistic role.

Douglas was a strict academician, building on his own academic training while a student at Nebraska; he admired the Greeks and their civilization, he had great respect for the Renaissance artists, speaking of styles sequentially from an historical perspective. As evident in his personal, private aesthetic style, he admired the impressionists and post-impressionists but criticized the art of abstract expressionism, including other African American abstract artists, as being aesthetically unintelligible. He painted along with his students but didn't require them to paint as realistically as he did, encouraging them to study African masks in the Fisk collection as

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[112] Harold G. Cureau, *The Historic Roles of Black American Artists: A Profile of Struggle*, The Black Scholar 9, no. 3 (November 1977): 9-10
[113] Donald F. Davis, *Aaron Douglas of Fisk: Molder of Black Artists*, The Journal of Negro History 69, no. 2 (April 1984): 98
[114] Ibid. 98

well as his murals in the Cravath Library to glean knowledge of their African past.[115] Douglas would demonstrate the breadth of his artistic talent, when he put together a show of impressionistic landscapes from his travels to France such as *Paris Street Scene* (1931) (Figure 12), completed the afro-cubist mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life,* which included *Song of the Towers* (Figure 8), finished a small landscape of the lower eastside of New York for the Minister to Liberia, in addition to completing *Power Plant in Harlem*. (Figure 13)[116]

Douglas wrote an anthology of artworks on display at Fisk. Students were exposed to a wide variety of art that served the pedagogical function, not only of an African past, but also to witness the universal need for creative expression that various artistic styles afforded. Various early donations, including from Dr. and Mrs. Charles S. Johnson as well as Mrs. John D. Rockefeller to the University, were dominated by watercolor and gouache landscapes as well as by several oil paintings from William E. Scott, still life and an oil landscape, *Farm in Winter* by Dorothy Varian. Three of Douglas's eight oil paintings from his illustrations in *God's Trombones* were donated to the school by the Rosenwald Fund in 1948; these were juxtaposed with other Douglas works, executed in different styles. One is a large oil of an old man, a dog in front of a shack done for the university president in 1937 and the other a pastel abstract of his earlier work, *The Seamstress*.

Solidifying the relationship between Fisk University, Douglas and Scott are a series of eleven murals that were commissioned for the gymnasium and student union portraying sporting scenes and portraits.

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[115] Ibid. 98

[116] Aaron Douglas, correspondence, Box 1, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives.

Douglas further noted that a significant teaching aid was a set of reproductions of famous paintings sent to Fisk in 1945 by the Carnegie Corporation. Fisk is also home to the Baldridge Collection, 280 drawings of African types and native life, done in connection with the Baldrige's book: *White Africans and Black*. Douglas, in addition to exhibiting his and other artworks from artists at Fisk, he arranged to have exhibitions of diverse works from notable museums for Fisk's annual Festival of Art and Music. These would include works of 17th century Dutch masters from The Metropolitan Museum in New York, watercolors from the Brooklyn Museum and a collection of works by Henry O. Tanner contributed by the Grand Central Art Gallery in New York. Accompanying these exhibitions were lectures, many given by Douglas and are included in other parts of this essay. Douglas said his focus in these lectures was to emphasize "…artist-masterpiece rather than masterpiece-observer…places creativeness within the appropriate framework of man's historical, educational, religious, cultural and economic development."[117]

This affirmed the view that Douglas was more concerned with the message he wanted to convey on behalf of African Americans than to any aesthetic style. In fact, the eclectic array of artworks on the Fisk Campus added to the messaging of the importance Douglas placed on a wide variety of artistic styles, beyond that of his own murals and illustrations. Later acquisitions would add to the validity of this observation, in 1949, Georgia O'Keefe would donate more than 100 items of the Stieglitz Collection including works by Cezanne, Renoir, Picasso, Demuth and O'Keefe; as well as photographs by Stieglitz and five West African sculptures. O'Keefe, in the

[117] Aaron Douglas, Programs, Box 7, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

presentation of the Collection, affirms the variety of aesthetic styles and states she wishes: "that it may show that there are many ways of seeing and thinking…"[118]

In 1951, the addition of the Reiss Collection, comprised of the portraits of important figures of the Harlem Renaissance from the 1925 *Survey Graphic* special issue that so influenced Douglas, brought full circle the importance Douglas held in the figurative depiction of African Americans in a dignified manner. The wall placard in the gallery states that: "He (Reiss) believed that by showing honor, beauty and dignity of all peoples his art would breakdown racial prejudice…this particular group of portraits was given to Fisk University…in honor of his former pupil, Aaron Douglas and in the belief that through diversity we can find unity and that through art we can change the world."[119]

The synthesis of art with the development of racial identity and an inclusive worldview, as evidenced by the art collections and courses at Fisk, was accomplished at the direction of Charles S. Johnson, the first African American president of the university. Johnson had been the editor of *Opportunity* where he was to come into contact with all the major literary and artistic figures of the Harlem Renaissance, including Douglas. He was instrumental in hiring Douglas to establish the art department at Fisk; later, Douglas wrote that Johnson "…was the most important influence affecting the development of interracial matters on the cultural front in America…"[120]

Johnson, like Douglas, was influenced by John Dewey, the progressive philosopher who he met through a mutual acquaintance, Dewey wrote that art made possible the "expansion of

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[118] Ibid. 15
[119] Wall placard, Fisk University Library
[120] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *Review of Negro in American Art*, Box 3, Folder 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

sympathies, imagination and sense…Barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices to melt away…".[121]Johnson articulated this vision of Dewey thusly:" Implicit in the process of acculturation is the solidarity of society." [122]This was especially true for Johnson in this present time of abrupt change for African Americans. Johnson, like other luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, including Douglas, needed the patronage of white philanthropists such as Carl Van Vechten, who was instrumental in securing the Stieglitz Collection and is the namesake of the gallery housing the collection. The dichotomy of being an African American institution serving African Americans with the help of white philanthropists is a tension rarely calmed in Douglas's world.

Fisk was grounded in intellectual and cultural elitism, as evidenced by the quality of the permanent collections as well as the traveling exhibitions mentioned above; as a consequence, it was, in the words of a former student, a place where the intellectual community of Nashville could gather without racial concerns. Johnson's emphasis on visual arts in Fisk student academic experience, including attendance at gallery events, allowed Fisk to become a place where society as a whole recognizes its artificial boundaries and celebrate its cultural inclusiveness.[123]

Art, artist, and social activism in service to the plight of African Americans was grounded in intellectual discourses as well as visual statements toward a more equal future. The letters and speeches of Douglas, the foundational underpinning of Fisk under Johnson, along with the eclectic nature of Douglas's complete oeuvre, show that any particular style did not influence the

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[121] Marybeth Gasman and Edward Epstein, *Modern Art in the Old South: The Role of the Arts in Fisk University's Campus Curriculum*, Educational Researc*her* 31, no. 2 (March 2002): 14
[122] Ibid. 14
[123] Ibid. 19

viewers interpretation of the "masterpiece" buy instead reflected the contextual intent of the artist; for Douglas this was the portrayal of African Americans in a sympathetic yet empowering manner, regardless of style.

Impressionism would allow Douglas to capture the momentary and the opticality he observed upon arriving in New York. Douglas, recognized the vibrance of the city when he recalled his first impression of Harlem:

> "Here life moves across a vast stage without halt from morning until night…Here one found a kaleidoscope of rapidly changing colors, sounds, movements…And yet beneath the surface of this chaotic incoherent activity one sensed an inner harmony, one felt the presence of a mysterious hand fitting all these disparate elements into a whole…to be understood only in time and from great distance."[124]

Georgia O'Keefe, an acquaintance of Douglas's, lends credence to his observation when she wrote: "Today the city is something bigger, grander, more complex than ever before in history. There is a meaning in its strong warm grip we are all trying to grasp."[125]

Douglas would adopt some of O'Keefe's architectonic rendering in his work but the similarity of these artist's aesthetic perception of New York would end there. Douglas would depict the complexity of industrialization, through the use of gritty, rapid brush strokes of architectural and industrial aspects of life on the Harlem River. Israel-Pelletier (2012) linked the works of European Impressionist painters to making sense of the modernity they found in Haussmann's Paris, prompting these artists to use techniques that would capture the growth of the city and its "rhythmic, vast, and varied motion…"[126] This jarring nature of modernity would

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[124] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Harlem Renaissance*, Box 3, Folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

[125] Preface: *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers, 1900-1940*, 2013, Hudson River Museum, vi

[126] Aimee Israel-Pelletier, *Vision, Visuality and Affect*, in *Rimbaud's Impressionist Poetics: Vision and Visuality* (University of Wales Press, 2012).

appear decades later in 1930's New York, especially for African Americans ,who, at the end of World War I, pushed back against the inequality of Jim Crow laws in the South and migrated to the North. The rapid change from their Antebellum Agrarian world to Postbellum industrialization, required a new aesthetic technique, the Ashcan style, which would capture this change in their daily existence.

In the exhibition catalog for *Industrial Sublime*, Michael Botwinick argued that, if the pastoral landscapes of the Hudson River School were a celebration of the antebellum, the agrarian and the Manifest Destiny of America; then the Industrial Sublime would capture the motion and structure of the city with its challenges of the present and its promise of a future. [127] Despite their resemblance to work by the New York Realists (or Ashcan School), I argue that Douglas's landscapes are more politically loaded than they first appear because they evince the role of black labor, the architectural industrialization of Harlem and the sublimity of the hopelessness of the African American's present economic plight in much the same way as his illustrations and murals.

Douglas was always interested in how styles allowed him to tell stories about African American experience. In his treatment of urban landscapes, Douglas's use of an ash can style, with its rapid brushstrokes, best captured the chaotic movement of urban life encountered by African Americans during the Great Migration. Robert Henri, a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, where Tanner had also studied, became the leader of the Ashcan School in the early 20th century. Henri would offer that "A work of art is not a copy of things. It is inspired

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[127] Michael Botwinick *Crux of Change, New York and its Waters* in *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers, 1900-1940*, 2013, Hudson River Museum, xi

by nature…You have to make a statement of what is essential to you –an innate reality not a surface reality."[137] In a letter to his parents, Henri would defend the Ashcan style against its critics as: "…the idea is what is intended to be presented and the thing is but the material used for its expression."[138] Douglas, would echo this aesthetic assessment in 1952, at the dedication of the Reiss Collection at Fisk University, when he emphasized what he learned from his apprenticeship with Reiss: "These pictures clearly demonstrate the nature of art as a universal language of human expression…They say finally and above all that the plastic and graphic arts in the hands of a true artist can speak for the lowly and the humble as well as the powerful and favored."[139]

These writings of Douglas agreed with Locke's aesthetic proscription, that "Whether treating his theme realistically or symbolically, the artist is…keenly alive and sensitive to social documentation…both social sympathy and social protest."[140]contrary to the often-mentioned admonition for African American artists to create a uniquely African art. Mason (1979) posits that Locke saw no contradiction in art that was socially useful and artistically beautiful; Locke linked Humanism with aesthetic realism in such a way that the emphasis should be on the portrayal of African Americans and not the artist.[141] Douglas would have the occasion to meet the progressive John Dewey while studying at the Barnes Collection and may have been influenced by Dewey's belief that: "the moral function of art…is to remove

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[137] David E Shi, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 255
[138] Ibid., 257
[139] Aaron Douglas, Box 3, Folder 22, Addendum, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[140] Alain Locke, "Up till Now," *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, January 3, 1945, vi
[141] Earnest Douglas Mason, *Alain Locke and Social Realism*, Obsidian 5, no. 3 (1979): 27

prejudice…"[142]Douglas calls for realism in painting during a speech, "The Art in Painting*"* when he decried the "…growing distaste for the representation of objects in realistic and recognizable forms. We seem to shy at an art form that might mirror our confused chaotic and sometimes unhappy surroundings."[143] The dark impressionist style was meant to allow the viewer to sympathetically feel for the disenfranchised and not merely to create a naturalistic depiction of a place. Douglas's use of this style enabled him to both express his Marxist commitment to the Movement while at the same time eschewing the abstract expressionist style as being incapable of providing an understandable visual message. Douglas would stay with the impressionist style throughout his life. One is private art, pedagogical but meant to be contemplated in the home, the other was public, displayed on walls or as book illustrations, the latter always for a commission; both are art in service to the plight of African American's living in a modern urban setting.

If we compare the surviving Ashcan urban landscapes to Douglas's afro-cubist murals, one can discern a commonality in messaging. For example, *Power Plant in Harlem* (1934) (Figure 13) demonstrates the concurrent production of both afro-cubist and ash can works of art. *Power Plant* incorporated many of the visual themes of Douglas's mural's - the architectural modern buildings, the role of African American labor in creating this modern landscape and the muted tones of light and shadow depicting the chaotic nature of urban living.

This naturalistic painting incorporates rapid brushstrokes that explore the geometric patterns of the industrial structure that dominates the composition, evocative of the intentional

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[142] John Dewey, *Art as Experienc*e in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953. Volume 10, 1935*, ed. Jo Ann Boylston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985).
[143] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *Art in Painting*, Box 3, Folder 4, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives.

pyramidal structures found in his mural works, such as *Song of the Towers* (Figure 8) Where Douglas used concentric circles and directed beams of light to connote a spirituality to his subject matter, he derives the same effect by not including any people in *Power Plant*. Douglas displays an inhospitable techno-urban landscape in which we are visually returned to the wilderness of the Old Testament.[145]

In contrast to the predominant color theme of muted browns and greys of the power plant, Douglas includes some smaller ancillary structures in light colors that are mirrored in the foregrounded Harlem River, adding a shimmering almost cosmological element to the water. This sense of movement is also found in *Song of the Towers* where wavelike patterns of light pulse horizontally through the composition, linking the present to an eternal lineage of his people.

The necessity of electric power to the residents of Harlem is depicted by the smoke-filled sky above the four stacks of this operational plant. Douglas also uses smoke billowing from four stacks in *Song of the Towers* to denote economic activity and its effect on African Americans. The high, smoke-filled horizon in *Power Plant* nearly obscures the residential buildings on the far hillside, emphasizing the sublimity of urban life for African Americans living in Harlem, not too dissimilar a message of inequality derived from the diminutive Statue of Liberty in *Song of the Towers*.

Regardless of style, Douglas was always a political artist, in a speech *The Negro in American Culture* that he gave in 1936 he stated: "Our chief concern has been to establish and

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[145] Katherine E. Manthorne, *Introduction: A Woman's Perspective on the Industrial Sublime* in *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers, 1900-1940*, 2013, Hudson River Museum, xi

maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality."[146]

Douglas continued the Ashcan landscape style in the undated *Harlem Rooftops* (Figure 14) composition; again, returning to the theme of urban architecture, with industrial imagery as an expression of modernity and the essential contribution of African American labor to economic growth. Douglas, regardless of style, forged a metaphorical link between architecture and progress, past and present.[147] Alain Locke had stated that traditional African American landscape artists avoided race in their work as an escapist strategy and as late as 1945, still called for the African American artist to embrace the racial over the universal in art.[148]

Douglas accomplished this in these urban Harlem-centered landscapes. They aligned with Locke's statement that, "Whether treating his theme realistically or symbolically, the artist is obviously keenly aware and sensitive to social sympathy and social protest…they also have drawn on the emotional depths of their racial experience…"[149] The subject matter is preeminent over any particular style for Locke; as he writes in the essay *Spiritual Truancy* (1937): "The task confronting the present younger generation of Negro writers and artists is to approach the home scene and the folk with high seriousness, deep loyalty, racial reverence of the unspectacular…"[150] In keeping with this call for accurate representation of the present condition,

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[146] Glenn Jordan, *Re-Membering the African American Past*, Cultural Studies 25, no. 6 (September 14, 2011): 878
[147] Richard J. Powell, *Paint That Thing! Aaron Douglas's Call to Modernism*, American Studies 49, no. 1-2 (2010): 115
[148] Alain Locke, *Up Till Now*, in *The Negro Artist Comes of Age: A National Survey of Contemporary American Artists*, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY.
[149] Ibid., vi
[150] Alain Locke, *Spiritual Truancy*, in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York U.S.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).404

Douglas depicts, realistically, the foregrounded view of a derrick used to construct the New York City subway, keeping African American labor as an essential aspect for American industrialization. A similar geometric shape rises in the center of the mural, *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944) (Figure 15), a commission by the Harmon Foundation for the International Student Center at Fisk, although in that composition it represents a church spire.

The colors used in *Harlem Rooftops* are muted and dark aside from a whisp of smoke coming from the chimney of the adjacent building, a trope for Douglas of industrialization rather than hearth and home. In Douglas's afro-cubist mural for Fisk, labor is represented in the lower part of the composition as college graduates on the viewers right, moving left toward industrial laborers, similar to the depiction in the 1926 *Crisis* issue, to a musician, and to a farmer on the far left. The high horizon of *Building More Stately Mansions* is dominated by Egyptian motifs, while the residential apartment buildings in *Harlem Rooftops* are intended to be Edgecombe Avenue in Harlem where the "talented tenth" of the Harlem Renaissance lived, suggesting the ancestral lineage to Egypt for the intellectual elite.

While each work is stylistically very different, they each provide the viewer with a multitude of perspectives, each guided by alternative possibilities from a proud past, a difficult present, and a more hopeful future.

The similarities in these works by Douglas, removed the validity of the 'minstrelsy' comment of Douglas's afro-cubist work by Porter; as well as the 'less original' comment by Locke of Douglas's landscape work. Both styles of Douglas's art circumvent the problem of the

unspecific universal in art by coopting that concept to include the "historic particularity of the black experience".[151]

Triborough Bridge (1936) (Figure 16) is another Ashcan painting done in a lighter tone than the other works discussed but still having a sense of foreboding with dark clouds covering the bridge, elevated train tracks and small park. This painting includes people depicted in the foreground that are diminutive and restricted by the structure of the bridge, the street and the horse drawn subway/streetcar. The 4, 5, 6 subway line would have been close to being completed and would soon end the use of horses. The inclusion may be to recognize the inconvenience of past technology in favor of a better future. The arches and geometric treatment of the bridge's super structure are present but are far in the background, forming the horizon. This differs significantly from the foregrounded structures of his other urban landscapes that emphasize geometric features, allowing less clear comparison to Douglas's afro-cubist modernism.

Douglas examined here, the effects of urban improvements like the Triborough Bridge, on Harlem's residents. The exhibition guide to Industrial Sublime posited: "His (Douglas) urban scene demonstrates how the bridge approach not only obscures what might once have been a view of the river but also how it encloses city dwellers into a rather bleak park, carved from the urban landscape."[152]

This work, finished as the bridge was completed, includes a sign announcing the opening and features just one car on the bridge ramp, also signifying its newness. Contrary to a 'bleak'

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[151] Audrey Thompson, *Great Plains Pragmatist: Aaron Douglas and the Art of Social Protest*, Great Plains Quarterly, January 1, 2000, 19.
[152] Ellen E. Roberts, *Contested Waterfront: Environmental and Modernist Paintings of New York* in *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers, 1900-1940*, 2013, 58.

setting, the lighter tonal quality combined with the inclusion of people recreating reflects a more hopeful future for residents as the bridge connects Harlem with the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn and the wider world that would provide more economic opportunity.

Douglas combined his focus on the urban architecture of Harlem with his love of portraiture in several paintings that not only sympathetically depict African American's but do so in a modern setting. One has been featured in several retrospectives of Douglas's work, *Window Cleaning* (1935) (Figure 17). In this intimate composition, a young, muscular male is in the process of cleaning his window. The view from the window is of a densely constructed Harlem neighborhood, continuing Douglas's interest in architectural forms. This geometric architectonic rigidity is tempered by the sympathetic depiction of the resident, who despite in the process of cleaning his apartment is tidy and well dressed.

This particular composition of a working-class African American at work was a familiar theme in Douglas's afro-cubist, as well as ash can paintings. It was also the topic of an oral history he recorded while at Fisk: "…here is the essence of this Negro thing, here among these people. So, I tried to keep it there with simple devices…giving the clothing…ragged edges…to keep the thing realistic."[153] Douglas portraits the subject's back with a muscular definition of a laborer that is seen through the thin, white tee shirt, tucked into brown slacks. A white cleaning towel for drying is slung over his right shoulder, while on the table, a round bowl and washing towel is draped from the bowl, spilling over the table edge.

[153] Leslie Collins, *Aaron Douglas Chats about the Harlem Renaissance* in David Levering Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader.* (Paw Prints, 2008), 123

Douglas demonstrated his talent of using light and shadow, as the sunlight is reflected from the urban surroundings to have a diffused affect highlighting the man's left side and the right wall soffit, that produces dark shadow in the corner but allows for the painting on the wall to be illuminated. That painting is a landscape set in a tropical setting, reminding the resident of an African or Caribbean heritage, a familiar trope of Douglas's murals.

Douglas would comment on the value for interior spaces to have affordable art placed on the wall. In the speech, "Art in Life*,"* Douglas recognized that: "A pictureless house for a civilized man was so potentially absurd that steps were taken to restore the picture…filling empty wall space…to a sympathetic picture or reproduction."[154] Toward that end, Douglas would give away his paintings to friends, despite the fact that he was not wealthy, in fact bemoaning his lack of money in many letters to his wife, Alta. The private nature of Douglas's easel works remained politically and socially loaded by including the particularities of the African American experience.

Exhibitions

Douglas's Ashcan paintings were shown in exhibitions but were largely exhibited in small gallery spaces or all Black shows that limited exposure to the broader mainstream art world. I include them here to show that the works were recognized as being well rendered and should have been afforded wider acceptance by national galleries and museums.

Douglas had some exhibitions of his works that were contemporaneous to their production. For example, in March 1936, Douglas contributes *Window Cleaning* along with a

[154] Aaron Douglas, speech, *Art in Life*, box 3, folder 3, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archive

now lost urban landscape *Eighth Avenue Market* in Harlem to the 46th Annual Exhibition of Paintings at his alma mater, University of Nebraska. In June 1937, Douglas was chosen as the only African American Artist out of 31 artists represented to show at an exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at the Findley Gallery in New York; he exhibited *Power Plant in Harlem.* In January 1939 *Power Plant in Harlem* along with another, now lost work, *Harlem River* are shown in Contemporary Negro Art, curated by Alain Locke for the Baltimore Museum of Art, In fact, I note that perhaps as a continued sign of tacit approval of Douglas expanded oeuvre, Locke included one Haitian work together with *Power Plant in Harlem* in his 1940 book, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and the Negro Theme in Art.*[155] In January 1945, Douglas exhibited works in *The Negro Artist Comes of Age* at the Albany Institute of History and Art. In the introduction, the director, John Davis Hatch, Jr., described Douglas's works as being worthy of inclusion in larger national art shows and deserving of national attention, an attention he rarely enjoyed despite his recognition by scholars and curators at HBCU's. Locke in the accompanying essay, "Up Till Now*"* wrote "…has freed the Negro artist alike from the limiting avoidance of Negro subject matter and later led him to more objective and self-portrayal."[156] The show included three works by Douglas, including two portraits, one being *Siesta (Lady at the Window or Portrait of Grace Goens)* (1944) that is evocative of Edward Hopper ash can paintings of windows in a urban apartment setting.

In 1948, Douglas had his first solo show at Fisk, *Aaron Douglas: Exhibition of Paintings* featuring works of Harlem and New York as well as other works from his trip to the South and

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[155] Susan Elizabeth Earle, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007), 218.
[156] Alain Locke, "Up till Now," *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, January 3, 1945, vii

Haiti. *Harlem Rooftops* and *The East Bronx* (now lost), two urban landscapes, are included in the 27-work show that is dominated by portraits. The exhibition guide noted that this show had been scheduled to open at the predominantly white managed Nashville Museum of Art and the Watkins Institute but was cancelled without explanation. Further, the guide identified Douglas as a specialist in landscapes and portraits. This exhibit had first been shown at the People's Art Center in Saint Louis, an interracial institution that gave African American artists opportunities to exhibit. The review of that show was exuberant, especially for his urban landscapes. "An impressionistic regard for atmosphere and light is shown in *Harlem Rooftops* and *The East Bronx*, where a blue haze shimmers in the distance." The writer also notes passages from Alain Locke's, Negro Art: Past and Present (1936) that he finds Douglas's easel paintings more nearly academic than his murals but "notably individual".[157]

In December 1948, Los Angeles's Allied Arts League arranged a show of Douglas's work at the Chabot Gallery, with good reviews noted in the Los Angeles Times. Dorothy Vena-Johnson, founder, and president of the League, was a longtime friend of Douglas. She wrote to him as the show was closing saying she wanted to buy *Harlem Rooftops*; she is known to have lived on Edgecomb Avenue, as did Douglas, and perhaps has an affinity for the painting's location. She further wrote that he should ask more for his works of art. She also noted that the works need cleaning and varnishing; suggesting that it "would be doing one of the greatest services to their race and posterity" to help in the effort but cannot afford to. The gallerist at

[157] Saint Louis Post Dispatch, n.d., clippings, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archive.

Chabot said that it is a "crime and shame that Douglas hasn't had exhibits all over the country."[158]

In November 1970, Douglas's emphasized the importance of his first major retrospective set to open at Mulvane Art Center on Washburn University's campus in Topeka, Kansas. Douglas noted "For a solid year I worked on the task of preparing for (this exhibition). This show is my most ambitious effort so far…I put myself into the task wholeheartedly because it was the first time a recognized art establishment asked me in a proper way to exhibit my paintings…"[159]The exhibit guide noted: "The work in this exhibition shows very well the range of Douglas's artistic interests and expressions."[160] The exhibit included *Power Plant in Harlem* and *Harlem from Mt Morris Park (Domes and Towers of Harlem)* an urban landscape executed in 1941 that is now lost. This large exhibition of his works featured 43 of Douglas's works, with only 3 works depicting his afro-cubist style. That exhibition guide further noted: "The portraits especially merit our study and admiration. Each is a strong, solid image, thoughtful, quiet, and believable. The watercolors are brilliant and fresh, as only such can be when executed with sensitive care and expert craftsmanship."[161] The depiction of his subject matter, African Americans, as well as their environment, in a respectful and empathetic manner was every bit as powerful to Douglas as the cultivation of the uniquely African American aesthetic of afro-cubism.

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[158] Dorothy Vena-Johnson, correspondence, Box 1, Folder 13, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives.
[159] Aaron Douglas to William Dawson, 1970, Box 1, Folder 16, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[160] Exhibition Guide, The Mulvane Art Center, Box 3, Folder 21, Aaron Douglas Papers, Addendum, Fisk Archives
[161] Exhibition Guide, Mulvane Art Center, Aaron Douglas Papers, Addendum, Box 3, Folder 21, Fisk Archives, Fisk University

In April 1971 Douglas is honored with a retrospective at Fisk, that is slightly larger than the Mulvane exhibition and included the same urban landscapes. In the retrospective exhibition catalog David Driskell, Douglas's successor as dean of the Art Department wrote: "…Each work he created became a lesson in the heritage of the Black man, culturally admonishing him to reject the falsities of the previous (white) order…it was Tanner who influenced him the most while studying (in Paris)."[162] Gregory Dudley, a former student of Douglas, remarked in the catalog: "In his portraits, landscapes, still life and murals, every element plays its part well and the sense of movement in his compositions, sometimes poised, reposeful, yet active and full of vigor. All come through to the aesthetic fulfillment to be found only in the work of a man blessed with an empathetic response to his African heritage."[163]

Following on Douglas's "then as now" concept of the African American artist's role in fostering a better life, he exhibited in *Black Artists: Two Generations* in May 1971, which includes *Triborough Bridge*.

Many of his urban landscapes were shown in various exhibitions retrospectively , including the seminal exhibit of his works: *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist* in 2007 at the Spencer Museum of Art and the University of Kansas featuring 80 paintings from the artist. This exhibition featured many of the selected works I have analyzed, *Power Plant in Harlem*, *Triborough Bridge* and *Window Cleaning.* The exhibition catalog edited by Susan Earle paid scant attention to these more academic works other than drawing parallels to his murals through the inclusion of urban architecture and labor. A 2013 exhibition at the Harlem River

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[162] David Driskell, Aaron Douglas Retrospective Exhibit Guide, Box 3 Folder 20, Aaron Douglas Papers Addendum, Fisk Archives
[163] Ibid.

Museum: *Industrial Sublime: Modernism and the Transformation of New York's Rivers, 1900-1940* featured *Power Plant in Harlem* and *Triborough Bridge.* Uniquely, this catalog ignores Douglas's afro-cubist background, including them along with 73 other scenes from New York's waterways that were done in a similar, Ashcan style.

The recognition these works achieved from exhibitions during a period from 1936 to 2013, albeit to a limited audience, attested to the importance of this impressionist urban style in achieving Douglas's goal of highlighting the role African American labor played in the building of modern urban landscapes.



Figure 12 *Paris Street Scene*, 1931

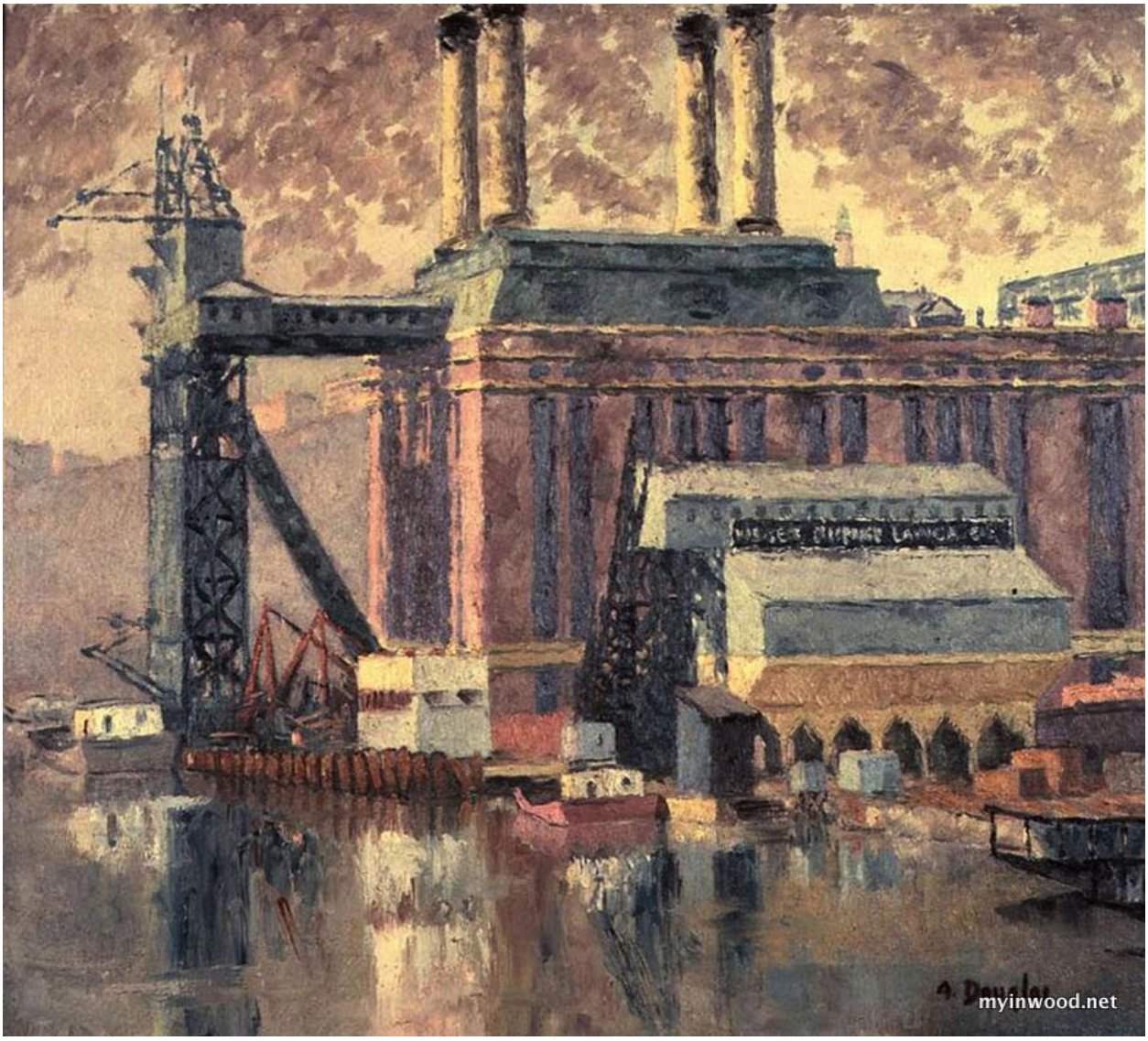


Figure 13 *Power Plant in Harlem*, 1934

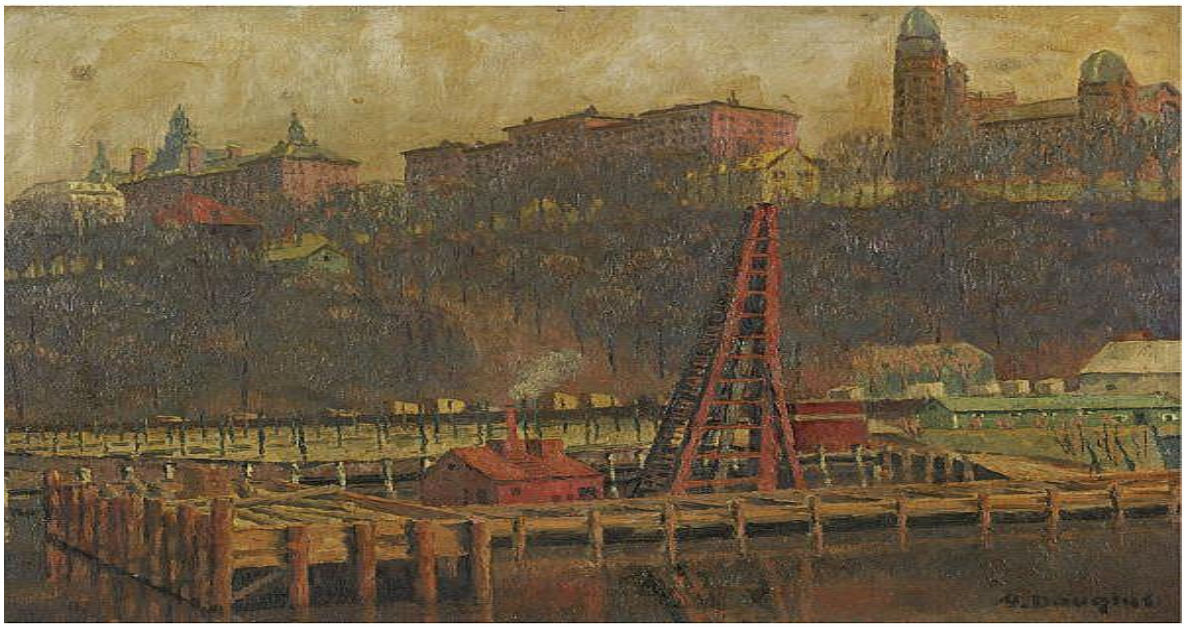


Figure 14 *A View of Harlem (Harlem Rooftops),* n.d.



Figure 15 *Building More Stately Mansions*,1944



Figure 16 *Triborough Bridge*, 1936



Figure 18 *Window Cleaning*, 1935

HAITIAN LANDSCAPES

What Haiti Represented to African Americans

Douglas's interest in impressionism would influence his 1938 images of Haiti, not by realistically depicting the actual circumstances of Haitian sovereignty, but by producing arcadian landscapes. In 1915, the U.S. government invaded and occupied Haiti to strong opposition from African Americans led by Du Bois, culminating in literary and performative expressions that kept the occupation in the forefront of American audiences. The "Bloody Summer" of racial conflict, in 1918-1919, only served to embolden the opposition to the intervention. Eugene O'Neil's, *Emperor Jones*, with its all-black cast was an indirect reference to the American occupation, after the assassination of the despotic President Sam in 1915. Sam's demise was the culmination of five tumultuous years that centered on factional opposition to Haiti's growing commercial ties to the United States, leading US troops to seize the capital; controlling Haiti for 19 years.

Douglas would be commissioned by *Theater Arts Monthly* to create a series of woodblock prints for the publication's coverage of the play in 1926 (Figure 18). These illustrations are done in Douglas's signature afro-cubist style, often associated with his commissioned work. He portrays Emperor Jones with his head in profile, the eyes in the familiar slit and the mouth rendered with exaggeratedly full lips. The torso is facing the viewer in a geometric, chaotic background that shows the precariousness of his rule. Alain Locke would comment on the political statement embedded in these illustrations: "…the dynamic quality of that tragedy of terror. There is an arbitrary contrast of Black masses and white spaces; and the

clash of broken line becomes highly expressive in suggesting the proximate collapse of the emperor's throne…"[187]

Reflections on the Haitian Revolution would continue to serve as an inspiration for African Americans working toward a more just future. Haiti was the location of the most successful self-directed slave revolution, resulting in the overthrow of the French colonizers in an armed conflict that subsequently freed all those enslaved.

The revolution began in 1791 and concluded in 1804, leading to Haiti becoming an independent nation and the first independent Black nation outside Africa. As such, Haiti tangibly represented the ideal of Pan-Africanism, aligning with W.E.B. DuBois's belief that only through the intentional integration of all diasporic African people could the oppression of hegemonic colonial forces be countered.[188] 19th century paintings of the Haitian Revolution are historic battle scenes, such as *Attack and Take of the Crête-À-Pierrot*, by August Raffet, engraving by Hèbert, 1839 (Figure 19).

In this work, the Haitian revolutionaries, some in uniforms of the French army, are depicted in a chaotic battle, staging fierce resistance to the strong, opposing French forces, including their superior artillery.[189] This ultimately emboldened Haitian forces to confidently pursue the enemy despite the arrest and death of their leader, General Toussaint. The ultimate victory of the Haitian forces became a beacon of hope to African Americans, as well as

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[187] Samantha A Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 53
[188] Krista A. Thompson, *Preoccupied with Haiti: The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915-1942,* American Art 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 76
[189] Digital Exhibition*, Three Portraits of the Haitian Revolution*, www.europeana.eu, n.d.

abolitionists, who were not unaware of the contradiction of slavery and the foundational American belief in self-representation and freedom.

The visual narrative in support of independence and later opposition to U.S. military occupation would serve to align African American interests with the plight of Haitians, both people now being dominated by a white ruling elite. While there is some scholarship that suggests the later impressionist landscape works of William E. Scott and Aaron Douglas, reject the vision of Pan-Africanism, these naturalistically depicted works brought the idea of Africa and African types to the forefront of American viewers attention.

Noël (2021) acknowledges the important connection of the land to African Americans, as depicted through landscapes, that is a connection that is always in conflict with the hegemonic powers. This connection defines the people and its violent history of conflict and enslavement and creates opportunity for landscapes to be an effective way to tell this story. [190]

Douglas's use of landscape to hide an accurate depiction of local events would ironically suffer from a lack of understanding coincident with Douglas's own lack of understanding of the implicit messaging in Robert S. Duncanson's, *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River* (1851) (Figure 20) which had featured a uniquely African American locale.

In this work, the pristine grandeur of the bucolic setting is interrupted by racially unidentifiable people in the foreground fishing and perhaps engaged in felling some of the timber in the adjacent forest. Civilization has encroached on the setting, but not just any setting, as this was on the route for fugitive slaves seeking asylum in anti-slavery Ohio. The imagery of the

[190] Samantha A Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 58

landscape is recast from the idealized norm of the Hudson River School to the practical domain of the fugitives, who despite their freedom have no access to rights of land ownership.

Duncanson recognized place as relevant to the African American experience, highlighted their hardships and offered a hope for a better future of sharing in America's Manifest Destiny, similar to Douglas's consistent aesthetic themes.

William E. Scott's Haitian Works

William E. Scott trained in Paris under Henry O. Tanner during several European trips between 1908 and 1914. He seemingly grew tired of the strict academic training he was receiving and felt compelled to turn his attention to contemporary Black political subject matter. In his application to the Rosenwald Foundation, Scott wanted to document Haiti's "types and historic settings" which "would be a source of inspiration and encouragement to the race, particularly our youth, as well as a better understanding of race…" [191]

Scott's goal of portraying his own people as a 'source of inspiration' rather than mimicking white art, is echoed by Douglas in a letter to Alta in 1926: "Most of us feel we have reached the heights when we have depicted their chalky faces and disgusting sentimentality or filled yards of canvas wi'th feeble imitations of their second rate 'little masters'"[192]Douglas recognized Scott's attention to the careful depiction of his race when he wrote: "…we must give

[191] Lindsay Jean Twa, *Troubling Island: The Imagining and Imaging of Haiti by African American Artists, 1915-1940*, (PhD, 2006).197, footnote 360.
[192] Aaron Douglas letter to Alta, 1926, Box 1, Folder 2, Letter 13, Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center

him credit for an outstanding idea: that is, that art should serve the legitimate living ideals, aspirations, hopes of a particular group to which the artist belongs."[193]

Scott was also influenced by Winold Reiss's portraits in the March, 1925 of *Survey Graphic*, however, instead of painting the elite, Scott focused on working class people and had very little interest in depicting anything about the Haitian Revolution other than an oil painting, *Toussaint Leads the Slaves to Victory*,1931 (Figure 21). Differing from the dark chaotic depiction of the uprising in the Hèbert engraving after the Auguste Raffe painting, Scott shows the slaves in a light tropical setting. The impressionistic work is dominated by the determined advance of Toussaint at the center of the composition. The use of atmospheric perspective, blurring the figures in the background, gives the illusion that this is a large force, perhaps a nod to Haiti's heroic past in the wake of the continued US occupation. Only two of the 144 works Scott completed in Haiti were concerned with a depiction of the revolution and none of the works were markedly different from his academic, impressionist style honed under his apprenticeship with Tanner, except for the subject matter.

The influence of Scott's work as well as the shared influence on both he and Douglas by Tanner and Reiss, would counter any claims that Douglas's Haitian landscapes and portraits of "Negro types" as "giving little distinctly new". Instead, Douglas's Haitian landscapes elicit solidarity with an empowered African diaspora as clearly as found in the artists earlier afro-cubist works.

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[193] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Negro, Too in American Art*, 1948, Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 3, Folder 8, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

In the twelve years since creating the *Emperor Jones* woodcut series for *Theater Arts Monthly*, Douglas did not, as Locke would write, "…retreat from his earlier bold style to mild local color impressionism…" but rather his art was in recognition of the Haiti he encountered when he arrived on a Rosenwald Fellowship in September 1938.

During 1937-38, Jacob Lawrence would create a series of twenty expressionistic representations that tell the story of the Haitian Revolution, from Columbus's arrival to the independence. Lawrence's commentary on this series was illustrative of African Americans thinking about Haiti, he is quoted in Thompson (2007) as saying: "I didn't do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe these things tie up with the Negro today. We don't have physical slavery but an economic slavery. If these people, who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer slavery, we certainly can do the same thing."[194] Douglas would be similarly interested in presenting the Haitian experience as an inspiration for African Americans and thus he felt he could not depict realistically what he witnessed.

Haiti in 1938 was in a state of general economic deprivation and social upheaval, unlike the relative calm during the U.S. occupation that Scott would have encountered in 1930-31. Haitians had been forced to seek work on sugar plantations in Santo Domingo. This was viewed as taking jobs from local residents and prompted the despotic dictator, Trujillo to order thousands of Haitian migrant workers massacred in October of 1937, one year prior to Douglas's arrival in the country.[195]It is in this environment that Douglas felt compelled to depict what wasn't there in order to protect the prevailing narrative of a successful revolution from the taint

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[194] Krista A. Thompson, *Preoccupied with Haiti: The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915-1942,* American Art 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 79

[195] Faustin E. Wirkus, *If America Intervenes in Haiti*, Liberty Magazine, February 5, 1938.

of failed Haitian governance. Douglas's application for the Rosenwald Fellowship, explained that he wanted to "record on canvas…people of all classes with an eye to revealing racial, social and economic patterns; and pictures of scenes and landmarks, old and new."[196]Other than a few individual portraits, very little of his landscape production satisfies this goal. I believe that rather than being "escapist' landscape paintings of no service to racial identity, these landscapes, by virtue of what they do not show, were done to preserve a semblance of a dignified past for the Haitian people.

Douglas's Haitian Landscapes

Haitian Street Scene (1938) (Figure 22) depicts two women in the right foreground walking with baskets on their heads, perhaps coming back from the market. A third woman at the center of the composition is on a donkey, also traveling across the scene, while a man on the far left, emerges onto the street from an alley. While all the figures are foregrounded, they are relatively diminutive versus the backgrounded buildings. This is not a result of a lack of skill to depict figures in a landscape on the part of Douglas, as *Window Cleaning* (1935) attested. Rather it is to depict the serenity and beauty of the street scene which would be out of context in crowded Port-au-Prince with 2.5 million inhabitants in a territory half the size of New Jersey. The viewer's eye is directed from the woman in a blue dress and yellow hat on the donkey to the steep roofed blue building in the background. The tree, a favorite compositional element of

[196] Krista A. Thompson, *Preoccupied with Haiti: The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915-1942,* American Art 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 90

Douglas's landscapes, casts dappled shadows on the roof and roadbed, as well as the taller yellow building to the left; it is a pastural scene devoid of the economic chaos of 1938 Haiti.

Douglas's *Haitian Landscape (Haitian Cathedral Scene)* (1938) (Figure 23), despite the poor quality of the reproduction, again offered an idealized view of Port-au-Prince. Douglas's pastoral depictions of Haiti would further serve to preserve James Weldon Johnson's 1920 contention that Haiti's peasant population enhanced the landscape in an "more justifiable (way) than the great slums of civilization centers—London or New York which were totally without aesthetic redemption."[199] The area immediately in front of the Cathedral would be crowded as the 1938 photograph attests (Figure 24), Douglas chose to not include any people in his composition, with the exception of a very small female figure walking on the left hand green, wearing a skirt and balancing a bundle on her head. The obscurity of the figure hardly satisfies Douglas's grant application to depict Haitians in a realistic and sympathetic manner. The cathedral itself is unrealistically hidden by a canopy of trees and palm leaves obscuring the gothic style building, including the rose window, except for the spires, which are themselves dominated by the mountains in the background. Instead of, as Twa (2006) suggests, "the blockade of trees emphasizes the inaccessibility of Haiti at the time when Haiti had presumably been tamed enough for the removal of U.S. marines…"[200]I contend that the invisibility of the Cathedral and the crowds that would have surrounded it are to not only mask the instability of

[199] James Weldon Johnson, *Self-Determining Haiti,* The Nation, August 28,1920
[200] Lindsay Jean Twa, *Troubling Island: The Imagining and Imaging of Haiti by African American Artists, 1915-1940*, (PhD, 2006),199.

Haiti at this time but also to minimize any attention monumental European architecture would have afforded Port-au-Prince's stature at the expense of the tropical African past.

Allusion to an African past is again portrayed in *Untitled Landscape (Waterfront Park)* (1938) (Figure 25) as this cityscape, leading to the waterfront, is devoid of people and obscured again by a canopy of trees. In muted tones, the red and yellow roofed buildings suggest the presence of activity but aside from the small blue vehicle in the foreground, no economic activity is included in the composition. The wharf and the blue waters of the harbor end in the high horizon which contains a steamship coming into view, suggesting to the continued trade that Haiti enjoys with the United States. The economic stability evident under U.S. occupation, by 1938, had worsened in line with a decline in exports during the time Douglas was in Port-au-Prince.[202]

Douglas thus distanced himself from the realities of Haiti, the poverty and class tensions between mulatto elites and the common people, to focus on tranquil tropical landscapes. Twa (2006) points out that Douglas had expressed disillusionment with Haiti in his frequent letters to his wife, Alta who had suggested he temper his impressions to only include those favorable to Haiti for their friends in Harlem.[203] For her part, Alta encouraged him to paint more portraits and watercolors when she writes: "Horace Bond (of Fisk) says he would like to have you do some Haitian children. Have you done any watercolors?"[204]

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[202] Giles A. Hubert, *War and the Trade Orientation of Haiti*, Southern Economic *Journal* 13, no. 3 (January 1947): 276.
[203]Lindsay Jean Twa, *Troubling Island: The Imagining and Imaging of Haiti by African American Artists, 1915-1940*, (PhD, 2006),202.
[204] Alta Douglas to Aaron Douglas, November 14, 1938, Box 1, Folder 14, Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg

Haitian Landscape (1938) (Figure 26), to an even greater degree, suggests an African past devoid of the taint of modernity. Douglas continued in an impressionist style using muted greens, yellow and varied shades of blue that highlight the atmospheric perspective of distance to the far horizon. The foreground is also devoid of people but instead of depicting a cityscape, shows two thatched roof shacks dominated by two large deciduous trees serving to frame the larger shack. The trees in the foreground are of similar depiction to the larger trees, suggesting maturity and have the scale of the adjacent buildings but are diminutive to the overall composition. It is the two large trees that capture the viewers' attention, everything else serving as background to the arcadian composition, perhaps suggesting the tranquility of Haiti before colonialization and the importation of enslaved Africans.

Douglas's Haitian landscapes turned the concept of realism on its head, being every bit a symbolic narrative as his modernist murals. As Thompson (2007) aptly described Douglas's problem to objectively depict what he saw in Haiti versus what he felt would serve the African American idealization of Haiti. This forced him to: "testify to the problem of the visual in practice of diaspora: the difficulty of dreaming with both eyes wide open."[205]Douglas would not allow the reality he witnessed in Haiti from detracting from his view of the heroic past of this people, using what is not shown to ensure the dignity of the Haitian people.

Douglas's Philosophy of Art

As the foregoing section concluded, Douglas used landscapes in furtherance of the call for Pan-African solidarity by pointedly not depicting the difficulty Haitians were having with

[205] Krista A. Thompson, *Preoccupied with Haiti: The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915-1942*, American Art 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 95

self-governance. As I have argued throughout this paper, Douglas's aesthetic philosophy allowed for multiple styles, not just his signature afro-cubist style, to legitimatize his artistic portrayal of African Americans. While he had many modern styles available to him in the 1930s, he chose to work in the impressionist style as a marker of the realism and immediacy of his subject matter. Douglas bemoaned the fact that economic problems, as well as continued racial inequality in the 1930's forced artists away from pursuing "truly creative art" in favor of commissioned art works, such as his illustrations, which in turn informed his murals. [206] Upon returning to the States, Douglas exhibited his Haitian works at the A.C.A. gallery in New York. A critic from the New York Times called the paintings "…frankly picturesque work, with one or two portraits of Haitian types. The work, in many ways conventional is yet sensitive and light effects are well managed."[207] Alain Locke, wrote a review in *Opportunity* is critical of the work calling them "a retreat from Douglas's bold earlier style to a mild local color impressionism."[208]Despite his rather negative comments, Locke does include one of Douglas's Haitian portraits, *The Urchin* in a forthcoming book, *The Negro in Art* (1940), as a sympathetic depiction of a Pan African people.

To rebut Locke's review of Douglas's Haitian works is to refute that his use of afro-cubism is the only style that aligns with Locke's "ancestral arts". Tanner in some ways was a more deserving inheritor of the "ancestral arts" than Douglas who appropriated African sculpture and integrated them with modernism in much the same way as the European artists did earlier in

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[206] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, November 1, 1948, *The Negro, Too, in American Art*, Aaron Douglas papers, Box 3, Folder 8, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk
[207] Among the Other Shows, New York Times, April 9, 1939, clippings, Box 8, Folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives.
[208] Alain Locke, *Advances on the Art Front*, Opportunity 17, no.5, (1939)

the century. Douglas, at this point had never been to Africa and was unfamiliar with the significance of these masks and reliquaries. Furthermore, the use of African masks for the primitivism they convey would not serve to uplift the perspective of whites toward African Americans. Contemporary exhibitions of African sculpture as art, including the Whitney's presentation of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, alongside African masks in 1923, served to continue the "otherness' of his race. I argue that Douglas's embrace of impressionism and the picturesque was, therefore, a form of resistance to the commodification of the pan-African style by white audiences, as well as a nod to his artistic forebearer Henry Tanner.

In his *The Legacy of Ancestral Arts* (1937), Locke recognizes the influence African art has had on modern art, especially French and German modernist art. Locke calls for the development of a school of Negro art that would take inspiration from these works of European artists toward a new style that integrates the African sculpture into a distinct racial art.[209] However, Locke's call for a racially representational tradition is often contradictory; in *Spiritual Truancy,* also written in 1937, Locke admonished artists to treat "folk" with reverence and loyalty; he goes on to write: "The one great flaw of the first decade of the Negro Renaissance was its exhibitionist flair. It should have addressed itself more to the people themselves and less to the gallery of faddist Negrophiles." [210]The latter group would have included many of the prevailing white patrons of Douglas's murals, including Julius Rosenwald, William Harmon, and Alfred Barnes, thus Locke

[209] Alain Locke; *The Legacy of Ancestral Arts* in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance :*(New York U.A.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 141

[210] Alain Locke; *Spiritual Legacy* in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance,* (New York U.A.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 406.

distanced himself from this aesthetic, which would be an important consideration for the analysis of Douglas's later works.

The Importance of Subject Matter

Douglas emphasized that it is precisely the need for art to produce affection towards a people, who are largely invisible to the dominant white culture, that the artist is inspired to paint. He called for African American artists to create: "…this total picture of a people…He alone has sufficient interest, sufficient understanding to do the job well…in book illustrations, in easel paintings, in mural decorations, it is the Negro artist who must tell the story of our existence in this land…"[212]

These social and cultural concerns created an aesthetic raison d'etre that defined the Harlem Renaissance as an answer to the "cleverly devised chain of falsehoods…to bind black men forever to the lowest strata of human existence…thereby insure an unscrupulous master class an endless supply of free labor…"[214] It is thus the creation of a visual language, within the limits of any particular style, that allowed the artist to "…express their individual and group visions and ambitions."[215] For Douglas, the role of art was to visually tell a story that would depict African Americans in a dignified manner to not only reassure his people of their inherent worth, but to lay bare the hypocrisy of white society's unequal treatment of his race. Douglas was concerned with an effective composition that would allow the viewer to understand in a

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[212] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, November 1, 1948, *The Negro, Too, in American Art*, Aaron Douglas papers, Box 3, Folder 8, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

[214] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *Forward to the Harlem Renaissance* given at Dillard, Box 4, Folder 9, Aaron Douglas Papers, Addendum, Fisk Archives

[215] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *Pictorial Arts or the Techniques of Pictorial Arts,* Box 4, Folder 10, Aaron Douglas Papers Addendum, Fisk Archives

cohesive fashion the "impression of a single unit or the whole."[216] He extolled the importance of subject matter in the same speech and notes that the emphasis on subject demonstrated in Impressionist works has morphed into:" …our present-day abstract painters (where) we see the complete dissolution of subject as a meaningful part of the painters art."[217] Douglas believed that impressionism was a style that would serve to convey the artists intent to spiritually and emotionally uplift all African Americans in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Art critic, Amber Lunt (2022) recently argued that the current revival of Social Realism in contemporary black art is the recognition that this style 'encapsulates the spectrum of experiences with society such as hardship and the daily grind, alongside the hope and joy in forming a sense of community. [218] In what could be a paraphrase from one of Douglas's lectures, Lunt writes of African American social realism: "Black art demonstrates how the art world goes above and beyond being a luxury, whereby it has always been closely linked with social and cultural movements and has a political objective that cultivates insight and uplifts Black people…"[219] Impressionist painting served, for Douglas, as the clearest way to be consciously political in an aesthetically beautiful style; a style historically connected to Black art.

[216] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Art in Painting*, Box 3, Folder 4, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives
[217] Ibid. 6
[218] Amber Lunt, *Black Social Realist Art*, CasildART, January 6, 2022.
[219] Ibid.



Figure 18 *Emperor Jones*, woodcut, 1926



Figure 20 *Attack and Take of the Crête-À-Pierrot*, by August Raffet, engraving by Hèbert, 1839



Figure 20 *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami*, Robert S. Duncanson, 1851

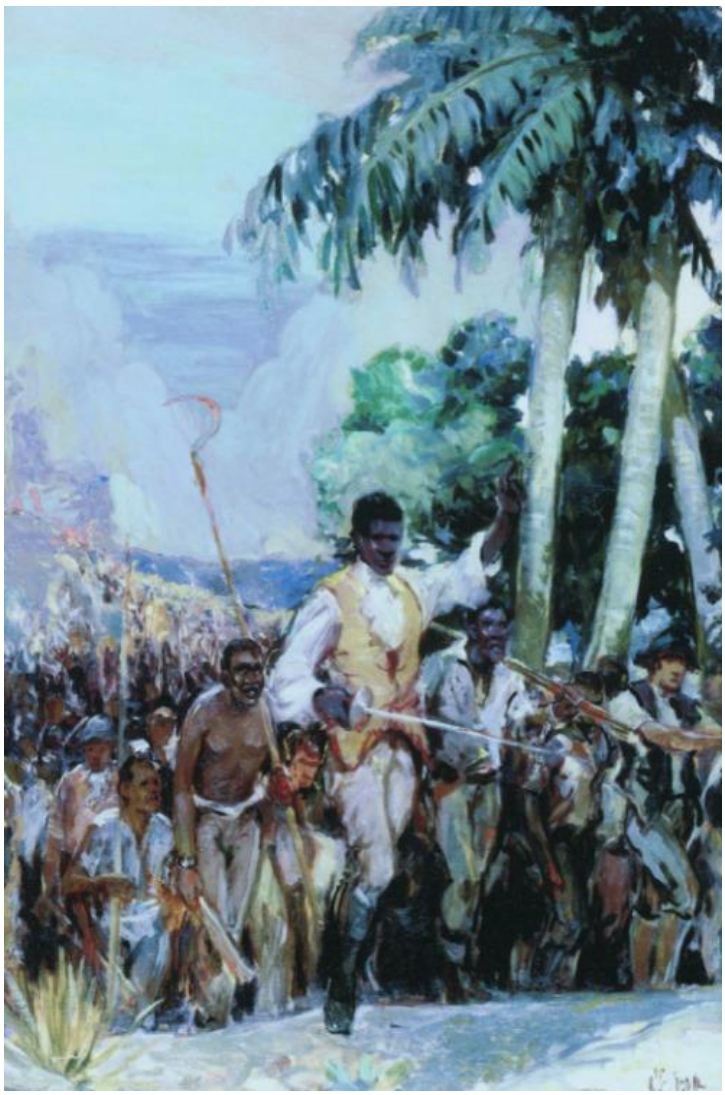


Figure 21 *Toussaint Leads the Slaves to Victory*, William E. Scott, 1931



Figure 22 *Haitian Street Scene,* 1938

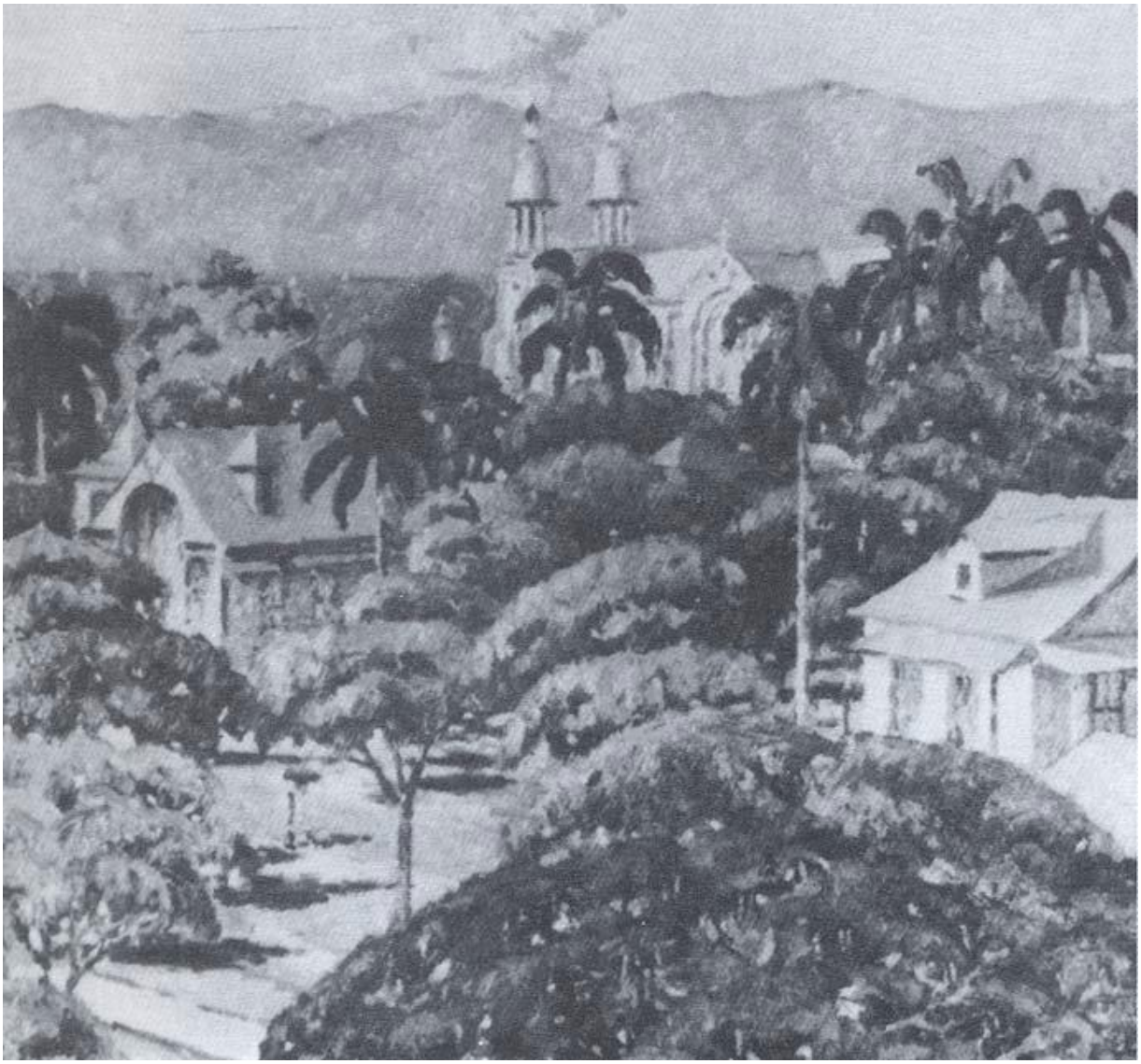
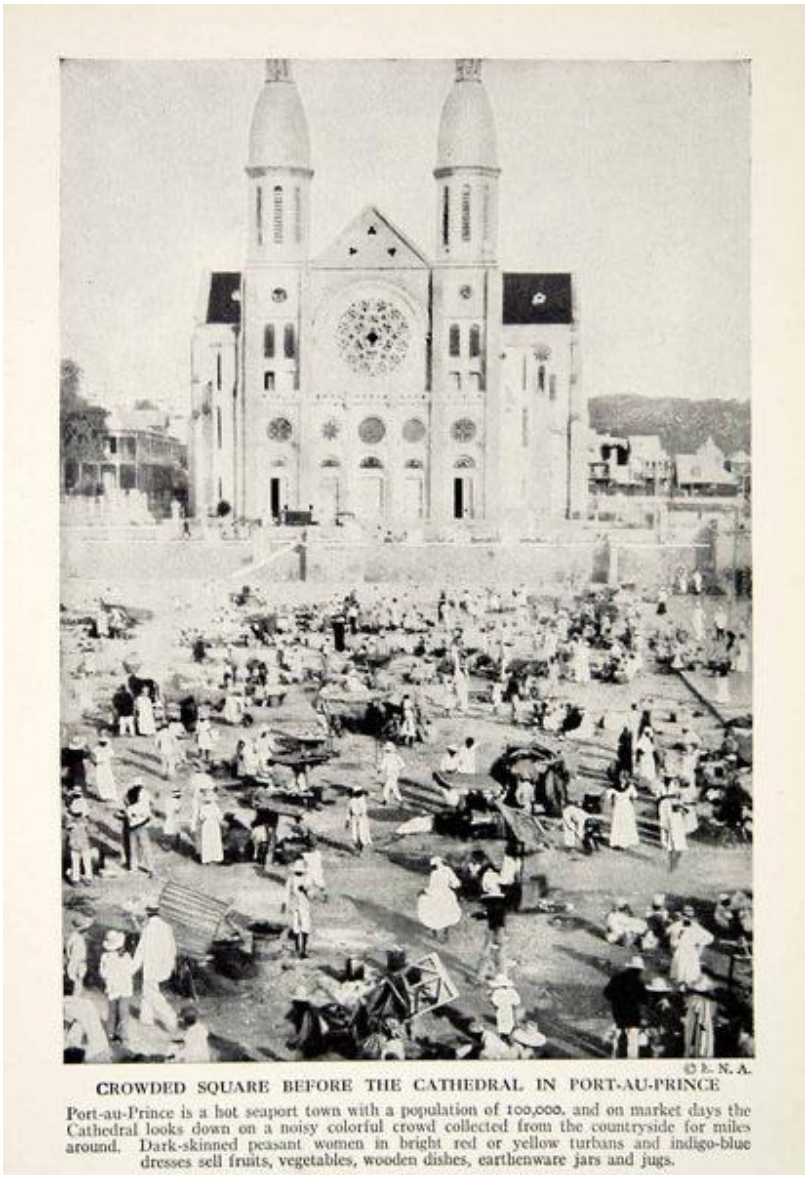


Figure 23 *Haitian Landscape (Haitian Cathedral Scene)*, 1938



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CROWDED SQUARE BEFORE THE CATHEDRAL IN PORT-AU-PRINCE

Port-au-Prince is a hot seaport town with a population of 100,000, and on market days the Cathedral looks down on a noisy colorful crowd collected from the countryside for miles around. Dark-skinned peasant women in bright red or yellow turbans and indigo-blue dresses sell fruits, vegetables, wooden dishes, earthenware jars and jugs.

Figure 24 Photograph of Cathedral in Port-Au-Prince, 1938



Figure 25 *Untitled Landscape (Waterfront Park),* 1938



Figure 26 *Haitian Landscape*, 1938

WATERCOLORS

A Message Hidden in Plain Sight

Douglas's later career was marked by his attempts to reclaim not only modernist styles but also conventionally European mediums such as watercolor for use by people of color. Much of Douglas's later works beginning in 1947 were done *en plein air* in watercolor. In a recent exhibition at the Harvard Art Museum entitled *American Watercolors, 1880-1990*, the editor of the exhibition catalog, Joachim Homann cited critic John Ruskin's belief that art serves the need for "close looking and continuous learning." [227] Often executed on the artists' journeys, they were made at a moment when knowledge of unfamiliar places is obtained by painting that place.

Douglas's application for a Carnegie Foundation grant, mentioned that he wanted to reveal the aesthetic potential of less popularly depicted views. Similarly, Edward Hopper's watercolors from his summer home on Cape Cod, did not so much emphasize the realism of the scene but rather offered the viewer the visceral impact of the composition's totality.[228] The use of watercolor is said to be an ancient artistic method that originated in China as early as 4000 BCE and during the early era in North America, was utilized to embellish works by Native American artists. The reclaiming of watercolor for the African diaspora via other Non-European cultures was important to Douglas, much as it was for his reclamation of Impressionism.[229]

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[227] Joachim Homann, Margaret Morgan Grasselli, and Miriam Stewart, *American Watercolors, 1880-1990* (Harvard Art Museums, 2023).16
[228] Ibid. 17
[229] Horace D. Ballard, *Wet-Into-Wet* in Joachim Homann, Margaret Morgan Grasselli, and Miriam Stewart, *American Watercolors, 1880-1990* (Harvard Art Museums, 2023).24-25

In addition to researching the cultural origins of various mediums Douglas also used subject matter to reclaim European tools for use by Black artists. Art historian, Kinasha Holman Conwill, writing in the Frist Museum exhibition guide for a showing of 14 works from a private collector, noted that Douglas's watercolors are examples of his "pure pleasure of his artistic pursuits despite the societal challenges he faced."[230] Douglas certainly wanted to develop his skills as an artist but chose his landscapes, for the most part, to depict locales that were meaningful to African Americans.

For example, he painted *Adobe House* (Figure 27) during his five-week trip to Mexico in 1940, Douglas commented to a reporter from Kansas City Call that the trip was free of racial prejudice until they crossed the border back into the United States. Similarly, Douglas's works from the 1948 trip to California, including *Trees* (Figure 28) and *Backyard* (Figure 30) were in an exhibition at Fisk in mid-November 1948, many other of his watercolors shown in that exhibition have not survived. I examine these works in depth later in the chapter.

While many of the watercolor works are now lost, the titles in the exhibition guide served to illustrate more clearly what Douglas meant by 'less popularly depicted views', which were his rational in the application for his Fellowship grants to California and New England. *Beach at Santa Monica* (now lost) as a locale is significant to African Americans because, despite the removal of restrictions on non-white bathers, the Bay Street beach section of Santa Monica became a place of safety and community in an otherwise hostile environment.

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[230] Kinasha Holman Conwill, exhibition catalog, *Aaron Douglas: A Private View, Selections from the Daniels Collection*, *Frist Center for Visual Arts* Nashville, Tennessee (2013).

Even when not traveling, his watercolors would contain local meaning for African American viewers. His *Ebbets Field* (1950) (Figure 31) is such an example. In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League Baseball when he stepped on the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Despite Robinson's success as an athlete, he faced racial discrimination throughout his career, including Jim Crow laws relegating him to stay and eat in segregated establishments when playing in the South. Ebbets Field and Jackie Robinson are emblematic of racial success in the face of injustice. Douglas used architecture and location to symbolically emphasize the plight of African American's, even successful ones, with thematic structures consistent with those in his illustrations and murals.

During the summers of 1951 and 1952, Douglas was awarded two Carnegie grants-in-aid through the Improvement in Teaching Project to paint scenes of "pictorial interest". Douglas does not further define that term but virtually all these scenes would be significant to African Americans, although not evident to critics. Watercolors from the 1948 trip to California and the 1951 trip to New England were included in an exhibition at the People's Art Center in St. Louis in November 1951. The reviewer claimed, "Economy of means and direct painting distinguish most of the landscapes, all representational in style, though scarcely documentary in intention."[231] The critic is implying that the works had no underlying meaning, merely paintings of a scene. One could interpret Douglas's 'documentary intention' as demonstrated by his choice of locales, such as the now lost *Beach at Santa Monica*. The Oak Bluffs section of Martha's Vineyard was the east coast version of the "Inkwell" beach of Santa Monica, meaning that it was

[231] Aaron Douglas, clippings, *Aaron Douglas Art Exhibit Opens Here*, St Louis Post-Dispatch, November 12, 1951, Box 8. Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

a place for Black leisure when swimming was a strictly segregated activity. Douglas's now destroyed *Beach at Edgartown* would both acknowledge the segregation of Martha's Vineyard as well as the limited acceptance of the Black elite who gathered for summers in Oak Bluff.

Douglas would revisit this strategy of hiding politics in the landscape after he finished taking a course in printmaking during the summer of 1955 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School. *Oak Bluffs (Vineyard Haven)* 1955 (Figure 32), is an etching and aquatint after one of the paintings he did in 1951. *The Nashville Banner*, a prominent local newspaper, called the five prints Douglas exhibited upon his return to Fisk in the fall of 1955: "…a new strength and added scope for the artist's already impeccable ability to draw."[232]

Upon his return from the second Carnegie grant-in-aid in 1952, Douglas would again exhibit watercolors to rave reviews. The Nashville Times noted in March 1953, this is a show not to be missed, continuing, "Aaron Douglas looks objectively at the scene nature offers finds himself unburdened by message or the import of feelings."[233] Included in this exhibit, in addition to the works previously noted would be *Pier at Sausalito* (1952) (Figure 33); Sausalito was an African American enclave during this time. African American's migrated north to Marin City, a housing development for shipyard workers, during World War II in search of employment and opportunity. After the war, segregation and redlining forced African Americans out, relegating them to a small community north of Sausalito.

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[232] Susan Elizabeth Earle, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Lawrence, 2007).221

[233] Nashville Times, March 27, 1953, clippings, Box 3, Folder 6, Aaron Douglas Papers Addendum, Fisk

Douglas work in this show is “not unburdened by message”; his message was clearly imbedded in his art; his race was used in the industrialization of wartime America and thrown aside when not needed. The message may be hidden but it is hiding in plain sight. *Adobe House* (1940) (Figure 27) for example, depicts a scene Douglas’s finished during a trip to Mexico with his wife. The blue green wash in the sky interacts with the white paper to add a sense of an imminent change in the weather. He uses a tan wash in the foreground, softened by the white reserve, making the home more inviting; strangely he doesn’t finish a small figure walking into the picture frame from the left.

Douglas returns to the compositional trope of having a tree dominate the center of the landscape, as was used in his Haitian works. The tree serves to draw attention, not to the adobe structures, but to the entire scene, partially obscuring the larger structure at the center left of the composition. A solitary tree as depicted in Casper David Friedrich’s *The Lonely Tree* (1822), suggests to art historian Jens Christian Jensen a link between the past and the present, as well as an evocation to the *Tree of Life*, a common theme in many of Douglas’s other work. During the late 1930’s Douglas was reading Barnes’s *Art of Painting* and perhaps knew of this work and the accompanying interpretation. In any case, Douglas included this symbolic form intentionally in many of his works and would have seen midwestern farms that were cleared with the exception of a single tree, also linking this agrarian present endeavor with an ancient eternal past.

The pastel color wash applied to the white structures interact with the dense dark green foliage of the trees, making the structures appear almost as an afterthought to the landscape. Details are scant with the exception of the flowers on the covered porch and entry wall; coupled with the unfinished figure in the foreground, these may denote the invisibility of African

Americans, as well as Mexicans, in a white hegemonic world that Douglas' encountered on their re-entry to the U.S.

Douglas returned to this theme in the next two paintings, *Trees* (1948) (Figure 28) and *Trees I* (1950) (Figure 29). *Trees* was definitively done on his trip to California while on his Carnegie Fellowship; *Trees I*, appears to be a western landscape with the high mountains, and may be misdated, perhaps from his second Carnegie grant in 1952. *Trees* has three tree trunks dominating the composition which visually form one tree canopy, which may suggest the Trinity in Christian doctrine, three persons in one God. It is painted with more opacity than the central tree in *Adobe House,* appearing more skillfully rendered as well. The low horizon depicts a mountain in the background and the shallow foreground has a similarly tranquil tan wash as *Adobe*. The trees that make up the middle ground are depicted in a light wash that reflects a subtle light source, as does the light blue wash of the sky on the right of the composition. The entire scene is one of nature's linkage to the eternal, the semiotic form for the Christian trinity and the exclusion of a race from the benefits of his country's bounty.

Trees I also depicts the religious nod of three tree trunks that form a solitary canopy dominating the center of the work. The opaque watercolors form more distinctive foliage through the skillful utilization of reserve. The sky and mountains in the high horizon are washed out and suggest atmospheric perspective of a distance landscape. Various interactions of opacity and translucence create the forested midground to define different species of trees. Douglas's inclusion of a grey automobile on the left foreground, serves to denote modernity. The small pastel structure nestled under the trees, in an otherwise primeval setting, may evoke the diminished economic opportunities afforded African Americans. Douglas's use of these

iconographical features conveyed his themes of a proud ancient past, a recognition of their exclusion from modern American achievement and African American belief in the Divine.

Backyard (1948) (Figure 30) is a watercolor of Douglas's yard in Nashville that was exhibited in the artists first solo show at Fisk, which featured, in addition to scenes from Fisk and Nashville, urban landscapes from Harlem, portraits, still life and subjects from his Southern U.S. and Haiti trip under the Rosenwald Fellowship. Douglas uses muted tan, brown and grey translucent wash, while outlining the features in carefully and sparingly applied opaque dark brown. The scene must be from winter, as the now familiar lone tree dominating the center of the picture frame is defoliated. Lawn chairs sit empty and askew, suggesting idled use in the offseason. His backyard is separated from his neighbors in the middle ground with a neat picket fence, leaving the clear impression that this is a residential neighborhood. The horizon consists of the towers of Cravath Hall and the Fisk Memorial Chapel as well as some other buildings of the Fisk campus, each of which is partially obscured by the barren tree branches, suggesting he couldn't see campus in the summer when the leaves would hide this view.

As Conwill (2013) states, these locations on and around Fisk were important to the Douglas' and would connect them to the pastural nature of the campus, that, to this day, has a calming influence in an otherwise chaotic Nashville vibe. As I explored earlier, life at Fisk would not only inform Douglas's artistic style for his later works but also was a platform to apply for and receive Fellowships in order to continue to travel and paint scenes that were important to African Americans.

Ebbets Field (Figure 31) sees a return to the architectonic compositions of urban landscapes, except, rather than in his hard-edged Ashcan style, the work was done in a soft green

and grey transparent watercolor wash. There is a lone baseball player on the field, suggesting the singular nature of Jackie Robinson, the first and for a time only African American player in Major League Baseball. He is standing in the vicinity of a second baseman, his usual position, facing the home plate. From this vantage, you would not be able to see the neighboring trees nor apartment building, but it is a trope of Douglas to include both the ancient spiritual nature of trees with the modernity of the present represented by the skyscraper. The viewer is directed not at the singular figure nor of the stadium in which he played but to the partially obscured large building on the left of the composition; suggesting African Americans continued exclusion from modern American life, despite their accomplishments.

The building is a dull olive brow, except for the sun reflecting on the exposed wall on upper left. The sunlit canopies of the neighboring trees are muted enough to draw recognition but not to compete with the modern structure; the sky is slightly overcast, with Douglas using various shades of blue against the white reserve of the paper. The stadium is full, the spectators suggested by greyish dots occupying the two decked stadium, a shadow is cast by the structural overhangs in such a way as to suggest it is early afternoon. Ebbets Field by 1950 represented a proud African American present in the face of continued discrimination.

Douglas returns frequently to sites with significance to modern Black audiences that are not immediately apparent in the painting. *Pier at Sausalito* (1952) (Figure 33) is an excellent example of Douglas's growing proficiency as a watercolorist, this work being completed during his second Carnegie Improvement in Teaching grant. Douglas utilized the mediums' ability to record one's impression of a moment with the aid of atmospheric perspective as well as its ability to capture movement in nature through the effects of light and shadow. The waters of San

Francisco Bay shimmer as the wind causes a gentle chop to cause the waves to dance toward shore. The interplay of light and waves is formed by the delineation of the darker face versus the lighter trough between waves. The lone piling does not cast a shadow, suggesting a cosmological origin, similar to the lone tree in other of Douglas's works.

The pier itself does cast a shadow, as the sea is a darker green than the more translucent green of the bay. The pier has four small sailboats being stored on cradles, a typical storage method for small boats on the San Francisco Bay. The brown wooden masts reflect care and storage versus the weathered brown of the pier and its support pilings. The hull colors are burnt orange and distinguish it from the area seen above the water line which are yellow, white, and green. Three figures are seen indistinctively on the right of the composition and seem to be at work rather than sailing. The marina extends impressionistically off the canvas to the right, drawing one's eye to the distant bluish/grey skyline of San Francisco; again, suggesting the laborer's exclusion from the modernity of the city. The Golden Gate Bridge is similarly painted in the same shades, with considerable liberty taken in its depiction but the viewers imagination will suffice to recognize the structure and surmise Douglas's need to acknowledge the significance of the view while filling the space across the far horizon.

Art critics of his watercolor exhibition upon his return to Fisk would note: "Many of the visitors were experiencing their introduction to Douglas in the field of watercolors, as he is best known for his oils…critics commented on 'the tranquility of tone' and 'composure of design' that mark the watercolors."[235] The Nashville Times wrote: "…one will find Douglas skillful in

[235] Aaron Douglas, clippings*, New Yorker's Paintings Win Rave Reviews at Fisk U*. N.Y. Amsterdam News, May 23, 1955, Box 8, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

realistic recording of landscape detail…He makes no attempt in this medium to follow any current trends toward abstraction or expressionism."[236] *Pier at Sausalito* is an excellent surviving example of this body of work as Douglas is certainly honing his craft but is also including subject matter that is sympathetic to African American life in America.

Oak Bluffs (1955) (Figure 32) is an etching and aquatint after a watercolor Douglas would have done in 1951 while on his first Carnegie Improvement in Teaching Project grant-in aid. The three trees that dominate the foreground are stylized West Chop pitch pine, which is said to be extremely resilient, resisting burning and if killed will sprout a new tree from the stump of the original. The tree grows to upward of 50 feet and is clear of branches on the bottom two-thirds of the trunk; they are said to be over 100 years old. In addition to being resilient, it is very useful for many industrial uses such as docks and boardwalks as it resists rot. The three trees may be indicating the three persons of the Christian trinity, making this simple etching a complete example of Douglas's thematic focus on his race: resilient in the face of adversity, a long history of accomplishment, including building modern America as well as being inheritors of the promise of salvation found in Judeo-Christian texts.

In 1956, accompanied by his wife and patrons, Dr. and Mrs. Goens, Douglas spent two months in Europe and Africa. He would comment that rather than having an ethnographic focus of painting as he did on the Rosenwald grant to the Southern U.S. and Haiti, he would focus on "…its colorful people, markets, houses and streets;"[237] Douglas stayed true to this goal in *House*

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[236] Aaron Douglas, clippings, *Douglas Show Opens Sunday at Fisk*, Nashville Times, March 30, 1953, Box 8, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives

[237] Chronology in *Aaron Douglas, African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Elizabeth Earle (Yale University Press, 2007). 221

in Accra, 1955 (Figure 34). This watercolor depicts a simple residential structure, with laundry drying on a clothesline partially obscuring two women sitting on the ground holding a baby. Instead of the surrounding landscape creating the pictures narrative, here it is merely suggested by the green foliage that center the home and serve to soften the light purple skies. Colors proliferate in this composition as the pink roof is accented by the dark green of the gables and blends into the brown outer wall of the ground floor which in turn is accented by the dark grey baseline. The effect of climate on the structure is cleverly achieved with leaving reserve to the left side of the larger gable as well as on the roof and walls. The pole of the clothesline is candy striped and invites the viewer to the front door and the colored cloth above the door of the same color. The items on the line depict small articles of clothing, perhaps belonging to the child as well as what appear to be bedding, all of a variety of greens, reds, purple, grey and yellows. Reserve serves to create the body of the figures on the tan foreground, the woman on the right is in a purple kaftan, while the woman holding the baby is wearing a simple orange dress, the baby is suggested by a head and the curvature of the woman's arm. There is no overtly political message of this composition but may document the new reality that Ghana was gaining its independence, allowing a more pastural depiction of this African country, a visual cue Douglas had employed previously in his Haitian landscapes.

Lagos, Nigeria, 1956 (Figure 35) is a more crisply drawn residential view of an urban neighborhood; it is also more muted in its coloration. Douglas's drawing skills are evidenced by the geometric details of the gate at the center of the composition. The location is tropical, even without the title as the palm tree rising above the gate attests. The turbaned men are idle and seem to be seeking relief from the heat of the afternoon, with the exception of the man in the

background who appears to be tending the chickens in the yard. The male in the truck to the left foreground is about to drive away, the sun is reflecting off the black vehicle, evidenced by the reserve on the roof and truck bed. A modern architectonic structure in the background together with the geometric gate and its pyramidal post cap are returns to Douglas's trope of linking an Egyptian past to modernity through African labor, which are themselves excluded from economic benefit. Nigeria was a colony of Britain until 1960, this fact may be a reason Douglas returns to these visual tropes in this composition. It is a strategy that he frequently used to depict what he saw as a repressed but proud people

Many of Douglas's watercolors would continue to emphasize the inherent worth of his people. He does this by returning to visual cues found in his afro-cubist and ash can works, as well as through his intentional choice of locales. Mrs. Daniels, a local private collector of Douglas's works would remark, "One of the most joyful things I have done in my life is collecting Mr. Douglas's work. It was a labor of love, and I was always thrilled to acquire a new work."[238]

[238] Kinasha Holman Conwill, exhibition catalog, *Aaron Douglas: A Private View, Selections from the Daniels Collection*, *Frist Center for Visual Arts* Nashville, Tennessee (2013).



Figure 27 *Adobe House*, 1940

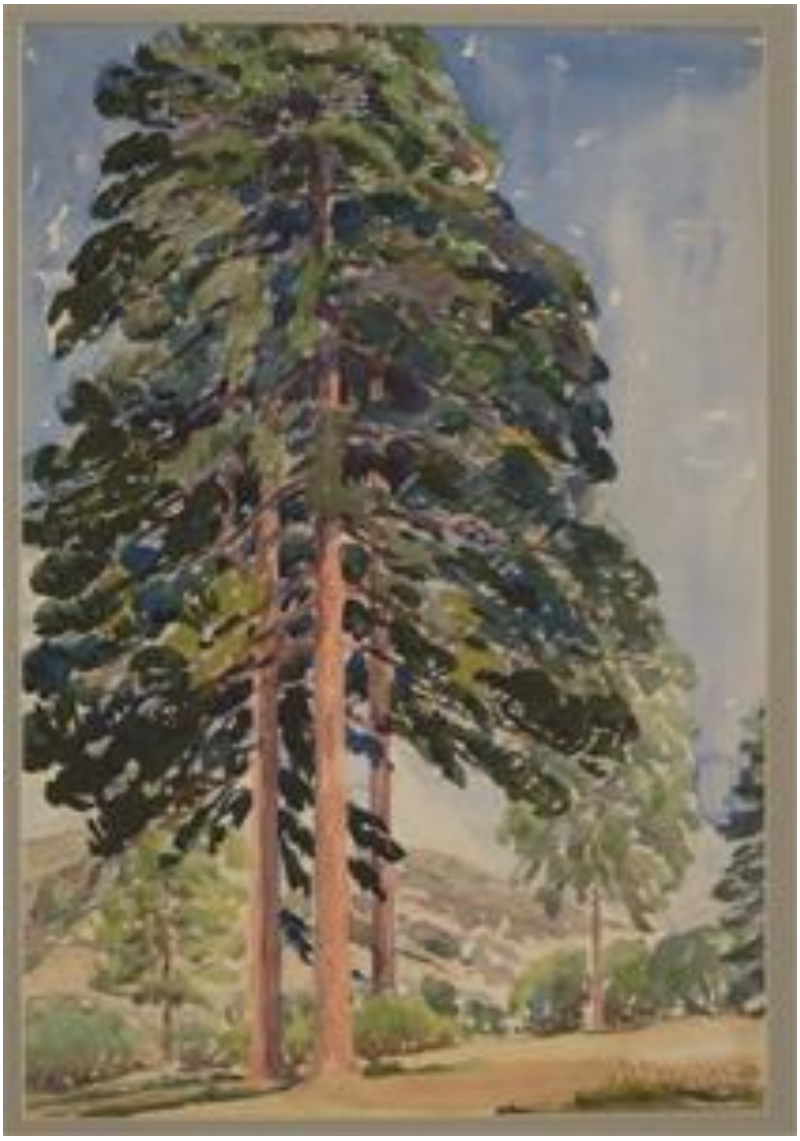


Figure 28 *Trees*, 1948

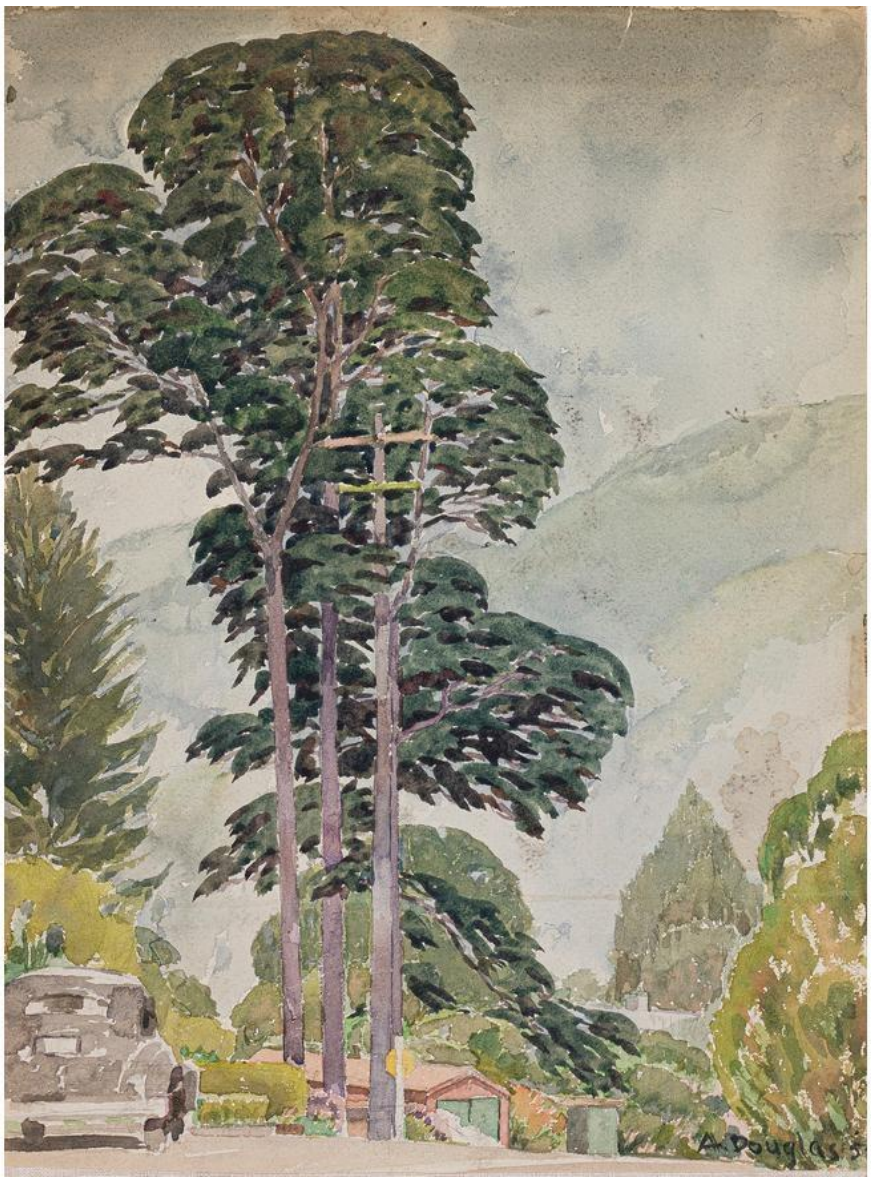


Figure 29 *Trees I,* 1950

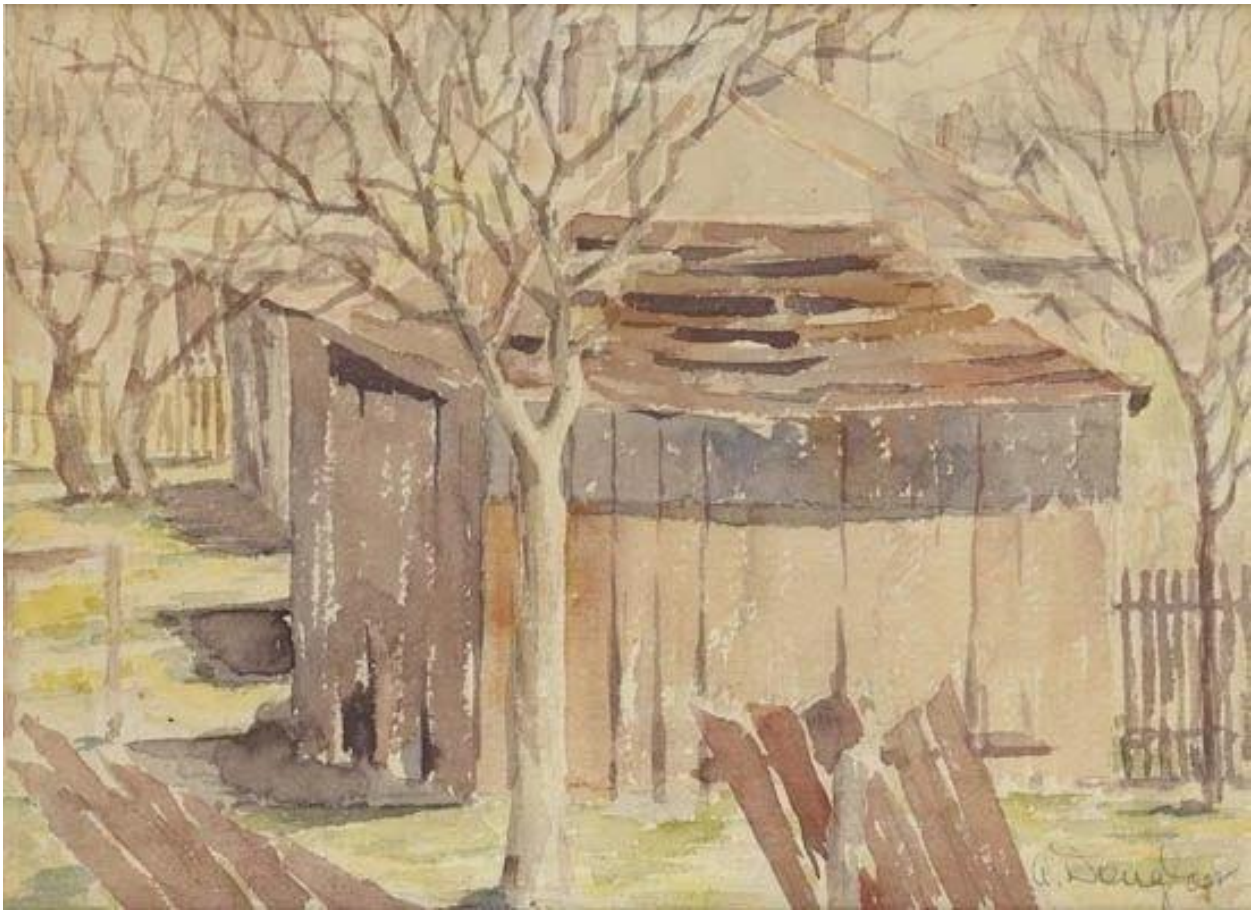


Figure 30 *Backyard*, 1948

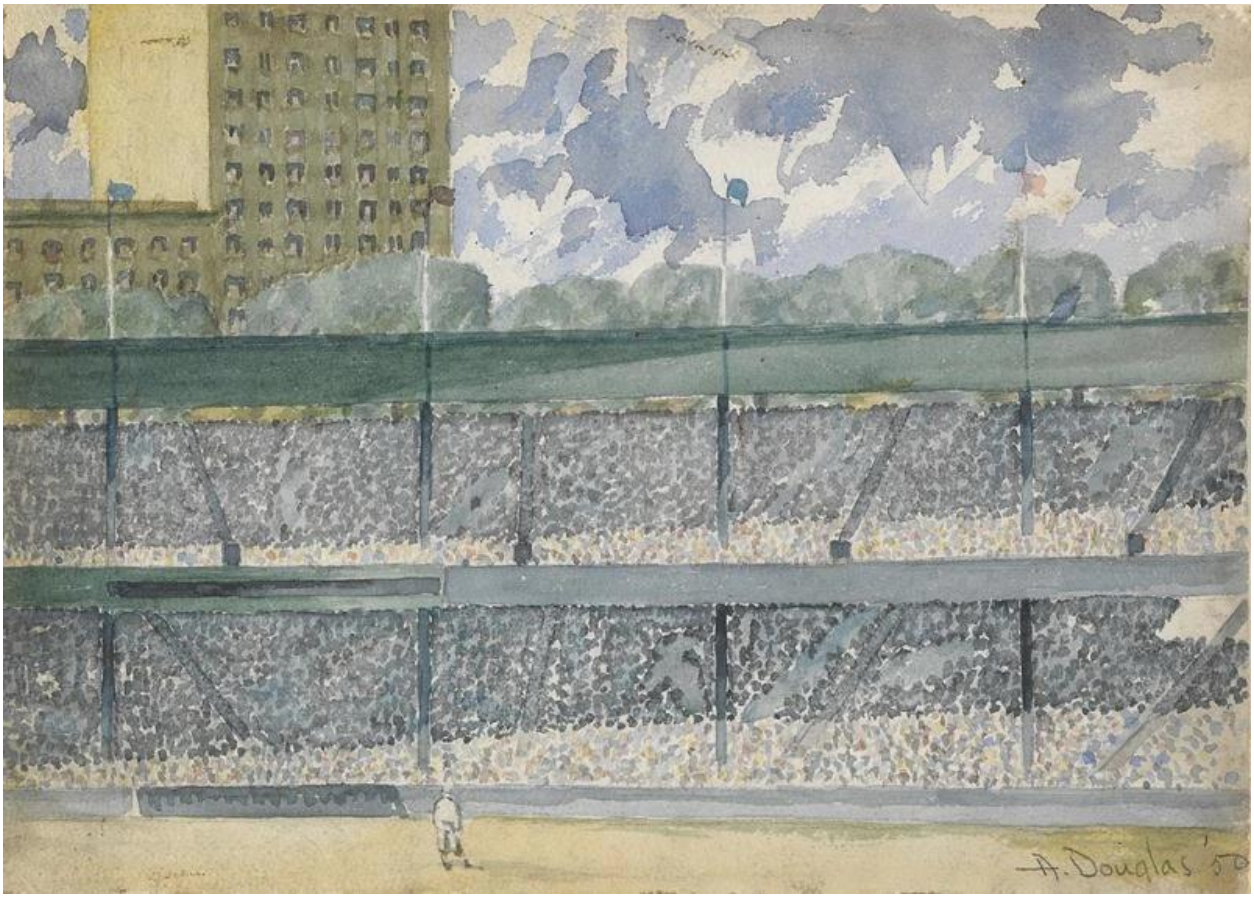


Figure 31 *Ebbets Field*, 1950



Figure 32 *Oak Bluffs (Vineyard Haven),* 1955, etching and aquatint.



Figure 33 *Pier at Sausalito*, 1952



Figure 34 *House in Accra (Ghana),* 1955



Figure 35 *Lagos, Nigeria*, 1956

CONCLUSION

Despite the apparent heterogeneity of his work, Aaron Douglas stayed loyal to his lifelong mission of creating a visual narrative that encouraged African Americans to recognize their shared ancestral heritage, to acknowledge past and present injustices, especially economic privation, and to offer hope for a more equitable future. In Douglas's own words during a speech at Le Moyne College in 1948, he exhorted African American artists: "In children's books, in book illustrations, in easel paintings, in mural decorations it is the Negro artist who must tell the story of our existence in this land, beautiful when beautiful, ugly when ugly, exalted when exalted."[241]

These themes were directed not only at his own people but also on behalf of them, to confront the hypocrisy of the predominantly white culture of America. He was unwavering in his political stance but agnostic as to the style or medium he chose to convey this message. Ragar (2008) acknowledged this when she quotes a student of Douglas, Arthur Berry, who commented during the presentation of the Douglas Collection to the Fisk Library in 1975: "Little by little we began to see that he had chosen a style and selected techniques that allowed him to speak in clear and concise terms of Black men and the empires they had built aeons ago, and capable of speaking succinctly in the present about the Black man's involvement at the cutting edge of here and now."[242]

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[241] Aaron Douglas, Lecture, *The Negro, Too, in American Art*, Box 4, folder 6, Aaron Douglas Papers, Addendum, Fisk Archives.

[242] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Plunging into the Very Depths of the Souls of Our People: The Life and Art of Aaron Douglas*, (Ph.D., 2008), 187

He rejected the contemporary trend toward abstract expressionism, feeling that, that style was incapable of telling the story of his people in a clear manner. The interest of AbEx painters in the primitivism of their European forebears burdened his own references to African art with unwanted colonial subtexts. Instead, he called for a return to realism so as to depict the lives of African Americans accurately and sympathetically. His belated use of an Impressionist style, aside from being a rejection of gestural abstraction, was a recognized historical style for depicting urban modernity. As Israel-Pelletier (2012) noted, the works of European Impressionist painters were a means of making sense of modern urban life, prompting artists to use techniques that would capture the growth of the city and its "rhythmic, vast, and varied motion…"[244] This jarring nature of modernity would appear decades later in 1930's New York, especially for African Americans. However, many of Douglas's works also borrow on impressionism's capacity to capture transitory beauty in the flow of city life.

Douglas's Ashcan style, urban landscapes, continued to evince the role of Black labor in creating the architectural industrialization of Harlem as well as the sublimity in the hopelessness of the African American's present economic plight in much the same way as his murals. Yet, as Cedric Drover had noted in his *American Negro Art,* Douglas was seen more as an art professor and gallerist than an artist in his later years.[245] Ragar (2008) went so far as to scan all issues of *Black Art* from 1950 till his death in 1979 and found no mention of Douglas, interpreting that absence as evidence that he had fallen out of favor with African Americans.[246]

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[244] Aimee Israel-Pelletier, *Vision, Visuality and Affect*, in *Rimbaud's Impressionist Poetics: Vision and Visuality* (University of Wales Press, 2012).
[245] Cedric Dover*, American Negro Art*, The American Review 1, no. 3 (1961): 1–20.
[246] Cheryl R. Ragar, *Plunging into the Very Depths of the Souls of Our People: The Life and Art of Aaron Douglas,* (Ph.D., 2008), 203

Douglas's invisibility to historians of urban landscapes was not due to a lack of skillful artistic output nor to an abandonment of his commitment as a visual spokesman for African Americans but rather was due to the lack of exposure for African American artists, especially those that were not exhibiting their work in major galleries and museums. Meanwhile, his graphic afro-cubist work was distributed more readily in the form of publications and public murals. The dearth of collectors of African American art during the 1940's through the 1970's resulted in many works of Douglas's to be lost or damaged, the poor condition of his works being mentioned by the gallerist from the Chabot Gallery in Los Angeles in 1948.[247] It would not be until the Spencer Museum of Art's major retrospective of Douglas's works in 2007 that his diverse oeuvre would get the attention it rightly deserved.

Consistent Message, Diverse Styles

Regardless of style or medium, Douglas kept three messages at the forefront of his artistic output: the proud ancient lineage of his people, the role of African American labor in building modern American society and a spiritual legacy that extends legitimacy to all of his race. Through the use of visual tropes, Douglas was able to convey this message, whether it be in afro-cubist murals, ashcan style oil paintings or landscape watercolors.

Two of his works, *Power Plant in Harlem* (1934) (Figure 13) and *Song of the Tower* (1934) (Figure 8) were done contemporaneously, allowing for a comparison of the semiotic features of the compositions that tell a similar story. The architecture of both works depict a

[247] Dorothy Vena-Johnson, correspondence, Box 1, Folder 13, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives.

modern world that is economically vibrant as evidenced by the power plant itself and the skyscrapers rising in the background of *Song of the Tower*. The addition of smokestacks present in both works is used to denote economic activity, in the case of *Song of the Tower*, the differing volume of smoke rising from the stacks indicates pre- and post-depression era, and while no smoke is visible in the stacks in *Power Plant in Harlem*, the atmosphere appears smoke filled from the output of the plant.

To varying degrees, the figures in *Song of the Tower* are captive to the cog of labor that is controlled by others, the only liberated individual is the jazz musician. Douglas chooses to not have any figural representation in *Power Plant in Harlem*, the omission of which highlights the lack of participation African Americans have in the American Dream; this point is emphasized in *Song of the Tower* through the diminutive Statue of Liberty. Both works share the symbolic power of water, which has spiritual contexts for Christians but also can symbolize the continuity of the present to the beginnings of the world. In *Song of the Tower*, the horizontal wavy yellow lines symbolize waters continuity to the eternal while the reflection of the plant in the waters of the Harlem River link present inhabitants with the eternal flow of the river.

Similarities in Douglas's semiotics, despite stylistic differences, can also be seen in the visual components found in *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944) (Figure 15) and *A View of Harlem (Harlem Rooftops)* (n.d.) (Figure 14). These works both foreground a tall pyramidal structure looming above the industrial environment represented by the smoke rising into the atmosphere. *A View of Harlem,* the smoke rises above the small vermillion colored building on the dock, in *Building More Stately Mansions* smoke rises subtly above the structure on the lower left foreground. While the structure in the latter work is clearly a church steeple soaring above a

rose window, the structure in *A View of Harlem* may evoke a church steeple but it is thought to be a derrick used to build the subway.

In both works, Douglas continued to link Black labor with a commonly shared spirituality to legitimatize African Americans' place in American history. Both works continue the use of architectonic structures to connote modernity, while the visual emphasis on a proud ancestral heritage is represented in *Building More Stately Mansions* by a sphinx and pyramid on the horizon; the horizon of *A View of Harlem* is occupied by the residential structures of Edgecombe Avenue, the home to many of Harlem's elite who represent the direct lineage from the ancestral past.

Stylistically, these works are very different, *A View of Harlem* is an Ashcan industrial landscape rendered in dark tones with the exception of the dock and associated buildings. *Building More Stately Mansions* is in Douglas's signature afro-cubist style, depicting monochromatic figures and structures in various shades of pink, with the exception of the dark land in the foreground and the light blue and white in the sky. Despite these aesthetic differences, Douglas's message was consistent; the origin of Christian spirituality in Africa, African American labor's role in building modern America, and a direct lineage to a proud ancestral past.

Even in his landscapes, Douglas doesn't abandon this thematic underpinning. *Trees I* (ca. 1950) (Figure 29) appears as an innocuous watercolor of a western scene, however several of Douglas's visual tropes become discernable, beginning with the dominant tree in the foreground that forms one canopy from three trunks. This is a visual cue of the trinitarian nature of the Christian God and is spatially similar to the tall structures found in *A View of Harlem* as well as *Building More Stately Mansions* both of which also evoked the spiritual. Modernity in *Trees I* is

represented by the light grey automobile on the left of the composition, while the exclusion of African Americans from enjoying the fruits of modernity is represented by the lack of people in the composition as well as the subliminal domination of the small rose-colored residential structure by the towering mountains in the distant background.

His watercolors done during a trip to Africa highlight the use of these visual cues to distinguish an African country that has gained its freedom from English rule, Ghana, *House in Accra* (Figure 34) from the street scene in occupied Nigeria, *Lagos, Nigeria* (Figure 35). *House in Accra* is situated in a bucolic rural setting that features a weather worn residential structure dominating the composition. It features the peaceful depiction of women engaged in discussions after finishing laundry, including the care of an infant. This is consistent with how Douglas depicted independent Haiti in an arcadian setting. In *Lagos,* Douglas returned to several visual tropes used in his murals, intentional as a recognition that Lagos is a colony of Great Britain. The pyramidal gate cap is reminiscent of the proud ancestral lineage to Egypt, while the palm tree at the center of the composition evokes the spirituality and eternal continuity of these people. Modernity is represented by the foregrounded pick-up truck and the residential structure rising into the horizon; among the geometric cluster of buildings, men sit idle, excluded from any benefit of the distant modern city.

Douglas's diverse use of style and medium served a consistent message of a proud lineage of achievement and a hope for a more just future. It also resolved the tension between Locke's desire for a unique African American art form, Porter's wish to have art that portrays the normal and plausible life of this unique subject and Du Bois's dilemma of double consciousness.

In fact, Locke's treatise on *Spiritual Truancy* (1937) tasks African American writers and artists to depict their race with reverence, even in the unspectacular[248]. Douglas accomplished this directive, even without an analysis of the visual tropes he incorporates into his works, by virtue of the subject matter and unique locations he chooses to depict. Whether it be scenes from Harlem, or Oak Bluff, or Santa Monica, or Sausalito, or Fisk University, the locale chosen for his landscapes are not random depictions of America, they are depictions of African American's claim to America. Even in the unrealistically bucolic figuration of his Haitian landscapes, Douglas sought to depict an idealized Haiti rather than to depict the poverty, and class tensions that would taint African Americans perception of the first independent Black nation outside of Africa. As Thompson (2000) said of Douglas, he portrayed in his art the "historic particularity of the black experience."[249]

This is in keeping with Douglas's aesthetic philosophy that placed the creative process within the artists particular framework of humanistic development and not within the particular bias the viewer brings to the work. Further, the role of white philanthropists on Douglas's afro-cubist illustrations and murals are well documented, as is Douglas's ambivalence toward these patrons as being economically important but aesthetically focused on a presumption of African American artist's primitivism rather than having a universally recognized skill. Even Locke would say in another section of *Spiritual Truancy* that Harlem Renaissance artists should have

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[248] Alain Locke, *Spiritual Truancy*, in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York U.S.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).404

[249] Audrey Thompson, *Great Plains Pragmatist: Aaron Douglas and the Art of Social Protest,* Great Plains Quarterly, January 1, 2000.

focused more on the people themselves than the "gallery of faddist Negrophiles"[250]. Douglas would associate afro-cubism with the mediums of illustrations and murals saying, "In the design for this book [illustration], I devised a style which I have since used in all my book illustrations and mural designs until the present time."[251]

Douglas's Relevance Today

I have argued that Douglas remained visible to African Americans throughout his life, especially to his students and those who would see his exhibitions at HBCU's in the American South. Douglas's experience with patrons as well as his chosen representational style remains relevant even today for African American artists and scholars. The philosopher Táìwò, theorizes idea of "elite capture" in which he shares Douglas's ambivalence for white patrons stating, "…political, social and economic elites (are) in service to their own interests, rather than in the service of the vulnerable people they often claim to represent."[252] Likewise, Contemporary art critic, Amber Lunt (2022) argues that the current revival of Social Realism in contemporary Black art is the recognition that this style 'encapsulates the spectrum of experiences with society such as hardship and the daily grind, alongside the hope and joy in forming a sense of community".[253] Lunt profiles several contemporary African American artists such as Barkley Hendricks, for his work that negates the cooption of the Black aesthetic by white pop culture

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[250] Alain Locke, *Spiritual Truancy*, in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York U.S.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).404
[251] Aaron Douglas, Correspondence, General, 1958-1973, Box 1, Folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk Archives, Fisk University
[252] Mi O Táìwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*, Pluto Press, 2022
[253] Amber Lunt, *Black Social Realist Art*, CasildART, January 6, 2022.

through the depiction of African Americans at work. His portraiture of African Americans draws on his desire to represent his subjects with dignity and elegance, much as Douglas was drawn by the dignified portraits by Winold Reese in the 1925 *Survey Graphic*. *Dancer* (Figure 36) is very stylistically similar to Reese's, and later Douglas's portrait work (Figure 37) of African Americans.

Interestingly, Lunt recognizes the art historical notion that Social Realism was a short-lived aesthetic movement but posits that the lack of recognition of this style in favor of more modern art may have been a political tactic to dismiss the Black Power Movement. [254] In what could be a paraphrase from one of Douglas's lectures, Lunt writes of African American social realism: "Black art demonstrates how the art world goes above and beyond being a luxury, whereby it has always been closely linked with social and cultural movements and has a political objective that cultivates insight and uplifts Black people…"[255] It is in this context that reliance on a close visual analysis of Douglas's works, along with what Douglas writes in letters and lectures about the influence his philosophy has had on his artistic output, preempts the content found in critical reviews or exhibition guides from the 1930-40's. For Douglas, art served as a visual statement, first, to reassure his people of their inherent worth that transcends the present circumstances, a worth that is inexorably linked to a lineage of cultural accomplishment, as well as to the eternal spirituality of the cosmos.

Secondly, for Douglas, art must provide a clear message to white society that their hypocrisy is exposed for all to see and will no longer be tolerated. It was important to Douglas

[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid.

that this message required an unambiguous style that would be conveyed in a clear, meaningful way to the viewer and as such Douglas increasing grew concerned that abstraction would result in a dilution of the intended narrative.

Douglas would abandon the iconic afro-cubist style, except for a few later commissions, in favor of an impressionistic style that was intended to capture the chaotic movement of modern life and African Americans role in that life. The art critic, Michael Kimmelman, in a 1988 review of a retrospective Harlem Renaissance exhibition, concluded that what emerges from the exhibitions is "not so much a singular-minded brand of art but a range of stylistic approaches that reflects a wide span of social and cultural concerns."[256] This message was further built on by Lunt's 2022 comments calling for art that serves a "…a political objective that cultivates insight and uplifts Black people…"[257] Through the conscious use of an impressionist style, Douglas connects the canon of Black art with all Western art, allowing that the legacy of "ancestral art" is not limited to Africa but is also derived from Tanner and Scott, as well.

Whether as an artist, a teacher, a lecturer, or a gallerist, Aaron Douglas never wavered in his lifelong dedication to the plight of African Americans in an unjust America that denied opportunity to himself, his peers, and his students.

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[256] Michael Kimmelman*, A Show by Black Artists Rekindles an Old Debate*, New York Times, August 7, 1988.
[257] Ibid.

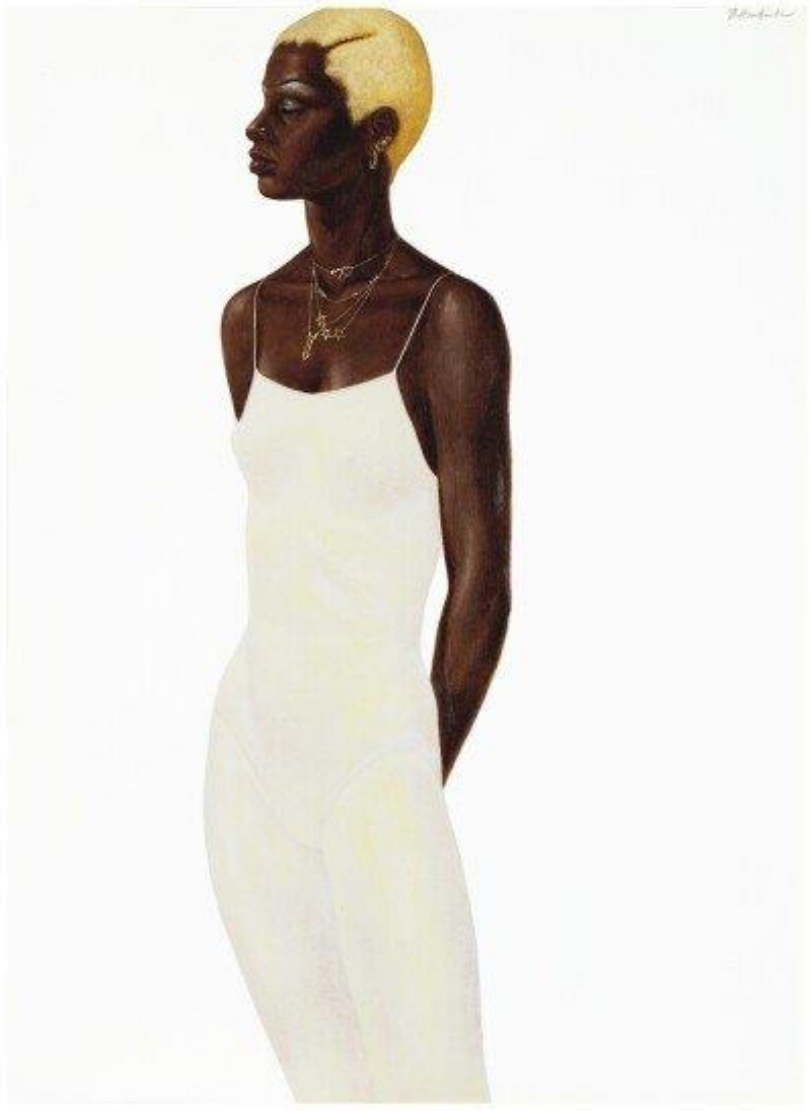


Figure 36 *Dancer,* Barkley L Hendricks, 1977

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