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Painted Art of the Harlem Renaissance
Introduction

Between 1919 and 1934 – although discussions of it often cut off the last five years – Harlem became the physical and ideological epicenter for a substantial and fascinating period of art development. While the Harlem Renaissance was not contained to New York City – its practitioners could be found in Chicago, the Caribbean, and Europe – the district and the art complimented each other. The image of Harlem as America’s premier ethnic neighborhood began here, as artists and intellectuals became both inadvertently and deliberately more involved in the production and distribution of art; this became a great new opportunity for black artists. While black art had been developing for years beforehand, it was only around 1919 that it had become understood as financially and critically viable.

While other periods of artistic or cultural energy have been tied to locations (Paris) or cultural changes both sudden (Dada) and long-term (Realism), what makes the Harlem Renaissance distinct is the degree of deliberation involved. While black migrants to northern cities started producing art and cultural products when given greater public and financial freedom, black intellectual leaders like Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois became increasingly interested in the political potential of tapping into this new energy, and they attempted to direct the work of its artists toward specific political designs. This turned an otherwise fairly apolitical if dynamic burst of artistic development into an increasingly tense, aggressive social movement.¹ However, this did not last, and by the

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¹ While the Harlem Renaissance was not a political movement in the traditional sense, a substantial number of its members treated it as such, seeing value in its ability to
time of the Stock Market Crash in 1929, most members of the Harlem Renaissance had left either out of personal frustration or financial troubles, with only a few hardliners under the collective moniker of the “Niggerati” to continue producing art for the next five years.

Despite the general (if vague and undefined) place in American culture as an idea, the Harlem Renaissance is frequently reduced in its image to ignore the contributions and works of visual artists; painters, photographers, and sculptors are largely relegated in favor of a small number of poets and writers. While there was no deliberate reason for this, there are a few explanations for why this is the case. Art lacks the easy distribution methods of prose or poetry books, and it generally also lacks the narrative structure that made the poems and novels of the Harlem Renaissance so compelling. Additionally, much of the art of this period lost support from contemporary intellectuals who criticized its visual artists for their failure to make direct political statements they proposed the art should be making. Additionally, recent scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance, almost all of it produced by literary scholars and historians, focuses upon its literary production and music with little concern for the visual arts. This has led the art to become less accessible to the vast majority of the population and to more scholarly audiences. As a result, the visual productions of Harlem artists are rarely discussed in depth, if at all, and the artists themselves are marginalized to this important twentieth century movement. It is somewhat disappointing that this has occurred, as the works of its artists are both very good technically and are powerful representations of themes central to both the Harlem

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propagate art, ideas, and elements of black identity. Whenever it is described as a “movement”, it specifically refers to the period’s political arm.
Renaissance and the twentieth century as a whole. Aaron Douglas’ frequent monochrome book illustrations and stylized paintings, for example, are powerful examples of how notions of identity and society were evolving for both black artists and a large portion of the world’s population. Archibald Motley’s *Saturday Night* presented a new, urban black nightlife culture that was still developing at the time, but in a style all of its own. While many Harlem books and poems were about escaping an old identity or culture, whether spatial or ideological (*Diary of an Ex-Colored Man* being a particularly direct example), these paintings were able to convey the hopes and concerns of the period in a way distinct and powerful, with a multiplicity of styles that shows the malleability and diversity of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole.
Chapter 1 – Origins of the Harlem Renaissance

To understand the art produced during the Harlem Renaissance, we have to look at the social and cultural context in which the movement itself was conceived, developed, and ultimately slowed down and ended. In the period following World War I, large numbers of black immigrants from the rural South began immigrating to northern urban industrial centers increasingly to escape discrimination and persecution. Very quickly, New York City’s Harlem District became noted as a particular “black space” more hospitable toward blacks with artistic aspirations.

However decades before these changes even occurred, black artists had difficulty maintaining their careers for several interconnected reasons: they were unable to find a large enough clientele interested in the works of black artists, poor education and support throughout most of the country discouraged blacks from attempting more serious artistic training, and the lack of a larger cultural base forced many of them to define their work by white American art, against which their work would inevitably be seen as a pale imitator. In this time, there only a single major and commercially successful black artist who inadvertently helped develop 19th century racial stereotypes and against whose work the artists of the Harlem Renaissance would be pitted. Henry Ossawa Tanner’s art is important not only as early black art, but as a counterpoint to the later pieces of the Harlem Renaissance.
Henry Tanner and early Black Art

At the tail end of the 19th century, Henry Ossawa Tanner became the first, and for a long time, only, black American artist to gain support in the white world. Drawing and painting for most of his life since his birth in Pittsburgh, 1859, he was sponsored by a missionary couple to study in France in 1891—foreconomic, health, and family reasons, he returned to the States a year later. Going to North Carolina, he became interested in painting the lives of dignified black peasants.\(^2\) As a black man born into the last generation in slavery, and as an artist most prolific during the Reconstruction Era, one of the most violent periods of American race relations, his financial and critical success is remarkable. His most popular and successful work was Realist, an art style that had become extremely popular in late 1800s America, focusing on detailed, naturalistic portrayals of subjects, often in rural and agrarian environments.\(^3\) Tanner’s pieces often portray hardworking rural, southern blacks. His most famous work, 1893’s *the Banjo Lesson*, is an excellent example of the themes and designs he used, as well as the themes present in many American pieces of the 19th century. In the image, an elderly black man is teaching a young boy, likely his grandson, how to play the banjo in a sparse room. His mop is propped in the corner. This image, beyond being deceptively simple in its form, shows the man as a worker, entertainer, and family man. Far from the stereotypical banjo player, Tanner portrays a man of has integrity, agency, and talent.

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However, while Tanner gained acclaim as an artist for this and other pieces, he had become very controversial among members of the black intellectual community. While they recognized his talent, they disliked the prominence of the kind of imagery he used in American culture. His art largely portrayed its black subjects as rural, moralist, hardworking laborers who they saw as devoid of agency or self, which did little to counter the clichés of blacks in contemporary mass culture. By and large, the blacks in American art and entertainment were presented as either monstrous caricatures or romanticized noble laborers, and while Tanner’s figures rarely descended to being the latter, he did trade in the same images. This opinion on him lasted decades afterwards; in the biography *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist*, Romare Bearden, a painter inspired by Harlem Renaissance art, criticized Tanner as having “divorced himself from the task of developing a statement which reflected the crucial social problems of his time.”

Tanner returned to France at the end of the 19th century, never to return. His work never presented race or protest themes, and he resented both being seen as the model for black artists and the criticism for his lack of interest in “black themes.” While he continued to paint, he spent the rest of his life teaching aspiring art students. However, he invited and aided many black artists who spent time in France, many of whom became leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Until black art became more in vogue among whites during the Renaissance and 1930s, he was by far the dominant black artist in

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5 Ibid; 54 – 57
American history. In Benjamin Brawley’s 1930 book on black artists and writers, a discussion of Tanner’s work takes up the majority of the space, as if no African American picked up a paintbrush after time. At the same time, Brawley fails to acknowledge the earlier concerns about his presentation of blacks. At the time, though, while Tanner spent the rest of his life in self-exile, a rise of black intellectuals in the first two decades of the 20th century helped make the States more palatable for its black artists.


After World War I, there was a greater hope for potential empowerment and achievement within the black community, and new black leaders came to the forefront in greater numbers than ever before. The Great Migration was underway, as thousands of dissatisfied blacks left the rural South for northern cities and industrial centers looking for work. Black immigrants started forming communities in the enclaves that local Housing departments had not banned them from. These districts soon took on distinct cultural mores. However, these newer, freer physical spaces and greater employment opportunities came a new set of questions on how to best achieve a full and legitimate place in American life. Black participation in American culture was dramatically reduced beyond the realms of music and dance, where their innovations towards both had been quickly perceived by whites as connected to inherent “savage” qualities in contrast to European logic. It became clear to these leaders that to achieve full citizenship, black Americans had to participate in all areas of American culture while preserving idioms

6 Benjamin Brawley, the Negro in Literature and Art (New York: Duffield & Company, 1930), 141 – 148
and motifs of the newly developing idea of a specific “black experience” of American history, distinct from a white equivalent.\textsuperscript{7}

One of these leaders was Dr. Alain Locke, whose attempts to help create an idea of a black identity led to him helping fund and promote the Renaissance. An assistant English professor at Howard and the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, he called for the “School of Negro Art” to create a sphere to encourage racial pride through art and more objective criticism for black art\textsuperscript{8}. In the late ‘10s and early ‘20s, he became invested in the notion of what he called the “new Negro”, a black American no longer defined or controlled by outdated but still present racial stereotypes. Throughout \textit{The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance}, originally published in 1925, he states that the black population is, through migration and intellectual autonomy from white condescension or definition, becoming more empowered and self-actualized. In his original forward, Locke wrote:

Of all the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is \textit{about} the Negro rather than of him, so that it is the Negro problem rather than the Negro that is known and mooted in the general mind. We turn there fore in the other direction to the elements of truest social portraiture, and discover in the artistic self-expression of the Negro to-day [sic] a new figure on the national canvas an a new force in the foreground of affairs. Whoever wishes to see the Negro in his essential traits, in the full perspective of his achievement and possibilities, must seek the enlightenment

\textsuperscript{7} Two Centuries of Black American Art; 57
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 54
of that self—portraiture which the present developments of Negro culture are offering.\(^9\)

In addition, he presents Harlem as an epicenter for a black culture and identity created and defined by black artists. However, when discussing the importance of art, he presents a more condescending and stereotypical view of black culture and art.

The most important element to be considered is the psychological complexion of the Negro as he inherited it from his primitive ancestors and which he maintains to this day. The outstanding characteristics are his tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression. He has in superlative measure that fire and light which, coming from within, bathes his whole world, colors his images and impels him to expression. The Negro is a poet by birth.\(^10\)

As much as Locke wants to get away from African-Americans as defined by white pejorative attitudes, he still has similar attitudes of his own. Also, one Harlemite living there at the time, however, referred to him as a “carpetbagger in Harlem” decades after the fact due to his frequent entrance into and attempt to direct the energies of the space.\(^11\) That being said, his attitudes toward blacks’ artistic capabilities were common among many black artists and leaders, as well as liberal and sympathetic whites. His acceptance of these attributed black characteristics did not preclude his desire for a greater participation of blacks in critical and intellectual spheres. During the Renaissance itself, Locke was something of a supporter for incoming artists. He financially supported

\(^10\) *The New Negro*, 19
\(^11\) Fleming, G. James, “Voices From the Renaissance” Collection, Schomburg Center, June 1976, Baltimore, Folder A – M, p. 2
many artists immigrating to and working in Harlem, and had a “fabulous” collection of African and black American art, later given to Howard University.\footnote{Interview with Owen Dodson, “David Levering Lewis Collection, “Voices From the Renaissance” transcripts, Schomburg Center, March 5, 1975, Folder A – M, p. 1}

In January 1926, the year after the publication of \textit{the New Negro}, the William E. Harmon Foundation publicly and overtly decided to shift the focus of its philanthropy, which had been much more focused on students and aid to the blind to providing awards, funding, and publicity to black artists. By contrast, Harmon started dramatically awarding black artists, often with less regard than for their ability.\footnote{David Levering Lewis, \textit{W.E.B. Du Bois: a Biography} (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), 479} The foundation financially supported virtually all of the Harlem artists; some of them owed their careers to that funding. The eponymous founder Harmon seemed to not have seen himself as a “generous patron of a down-trodden race”, but a man who “saw clearly the inextricable and vital part that Negroes have in our total economic structure.”\footnote{Harmon Foundation (no noted author or editor beyond), \textit{Negro Artists: an Illustrated Review of Their Achievements} (Delphic Studios, 1935, reproduction by Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, 1971), 4} A catalogue made in 1935, right after the end of the Renaissance, provides brief information in a directory on over 100 black artists at the time, many of whom are so minor that they have minute representation in any other contemporary or modern publications.\footnote{Ibid} For example, while Charles Sebree was part of Harlem culture at the time and was in frequent and direct communication with other artists, his art is largely excised from even works about Harlem Renaissance artists.
If Alain Locke’s position stressed a sort of natural evolution for black artists and culture, then W.E.B. Du Bois embodied its propagandist and specific social designs. The famous black intellectual was involved in a myriad of black intellectual organizations and spaces, one of which, Crisis magazine, offered a space for young black artists and thinkers. However, Du Bois’ designs for the Renaissance implied a sort of hierarchy in this cultural development that favored an academic and financial elite that included him.

In a 1903 essay that many observers have since charged reveals a pompous elitism on Du Bois’ part, he argued that the race’s salvation would depend on its investment in the “Talented Tenth.” In his vision, the community’s best and brightest must first be groomed for professional and intellectual work. Through their success, they could then to take the lead in breaking society open for the masses of black people – who would, in the meantime, toil on in the “industrial slavery” he implied Washington promoted. His central point, however, was simple, and based in his lack of confidence in the white educational system’s willingness, and ability, to educate blacks: higher education, beyond vocational schools, needed to open up to blacks and train teachers that could in turn educate everyone else. Without black teachers, he concluded, there could be no black education.

This somewhat elitist thought process defined the contradictory aspects of the Harlem Renaissance – it was a movement partially defined by ideas from a culture it wanted to escape, and the acceptability of its methods differed individually with its leaders – but it quickly got Du Bois in conflict with many members of the New Negro Movement, and an increasing antagonism to the work of its artists would be one of the major causes of its demise.

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16 Kai Wright, the African-American Archive: the History of the Black Experience in Documents (United States: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2001), 450
17 Ibid, 443
Ideological Interests

Despite its fame, the Renaissance only lasted around fifteen years, during which time it went through three major stages. The first part lasted from 1919 to 1923, as New York City became widely known as a space open to blacks; this initiating period ended with the publication of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, whose popularity caused a substantial portion of the white population, particularly among writers and artists, to became fascinated with the lives of black people and attempted to give them (often token) support. The second period ran from 1924 to ’26, as the National Urban League, NAACP, and magazines like *Crisis* and *Opportunity* promoted specific artists and writers, effectively leading it. While only two years, this period saw the publication of *the New Negro*, and New York became identified among blacks as not only a black space, but a center of black art and culture. This image cemented the public image of the Harlem Renaissance. The final stage went from ’26 to ’34, in which it became “increasingly dominated by African American artists themselves – the so-called “Niggerati”* 18, less a specific order or organization than a loose collaboration of writers, artists, and thinkers like Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and artist Aaron Douglas. However, their interests in creating and promoting black art became increasingly insular as interest in black art waned – partially due to the Depression, partially from its end as a fad.

On a fundamental level, Locke and Du Bois’ designs for cultural and racial empowerment were somewhat narrow in scope, with very specific goals for art pieces

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(Symbolically “African” or racial for the former, aggressively contrasting stereotypical images in the latter). It also coincided with the blossoming notion of “Negritude”, an attitude most prominent in the 1920s that encouraged racial pride and an interest in the cultures and history of Black Africa. The idea of art that emulating Africa as an idealized space became important for some artists, and Locke encouraged some of them to emphasize the position of African symbols in black life. He also recognized the importance of African art in modernist artists like Picasso.19 However, a clear political statement was difficult to take from Harlem art, as forms and content were vastly different for each artist. Despite Locke’s championing black artists and Du Bois calling for a more concrete black intellectual organization, there was no singular patron who guided the movement of the Renaissance, which made it “rather directionless”. The closest equivalent was “A’Lelia Walker, a member of the black bourgeoisie20 (and whose mother was one of the first black millionaires in the United States) and a frequent patron of the arts who organized and supported many black artists.

A major concern among both contemporary thinkers and historians studying the Renaissance after the fact is the prominence of white patrons and clients in a movement meant to be controlled by black directors. After World War I, blacks had “moved to the center of mainstream imagination”. Artists, particularly European and white, presented a disdain for capitalism and the old European order, which appeared to be breaking down21,

19 Two Centuries of Black American Art, 59
21 Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3, 1203 – 04
and they often contrasted it with the beauty of the “uncivilized world.”^22 While many black intellectuals were concerned with the conflation of postwar dramatic themes (including Freudian notions of sexuality, a breakdown of order, and a fetishization of Africa) and stereotypical ideas of black culture, some black intellectuals saw it as an opportunity to alter or demolish black stereotypes. In *the New Negro*, Lock stated that:

> The intelligent Negro of to-day is resolved not to make discrimination an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance, individual or collective; he is trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts. For this he must know himself and be known for precisely what he is, and for that reason he welcomes the new scientific rather than the old sentimental interest. Sentimental interest in the Negro has ebbed. We used to lament this as the falling off of our friends; now we rejoice and pray to be delivered both from self-pity and condescension.^23

Previously, black artists were essentially at the mercy of white supporters for their careers to be financially viable, which made them dependent on white tastes While Tanner was a good artist, his success was entirely based on how sympathetic white patrons were to black artists. The New Negro movement was meant to sidestep this by having more financially solvent black artists. Despite his claims, however, sympathetic whites inadvertently influenced a substantial amount of the movement, most prominent among them Carl van Vechten^24, an artist and writer popular with some of the younger Harlem writers. His controversial art (largely literary, although also photographic) was made to

^22 Ibid, 1205. “The consummate satirist of the renaissance, George Schuyler, denounced the insistent white portrayal of the African American in which ‘it is only necessary to beat a tom tom or wave a rabbit’s foot and he is ready to strip off his Hart, Schaffner & Marx suit, grab a spear and ride off wild-eyed on the back of a crocodile’”

^23 *New Negro*, 8

^24 *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 25
confront black stereotypes but was often too deliberately confusing or off-putting to audiences to make itself clear.\textsuperscript{25} The visibility of white patrons financially helped many of the artists while gutting political viability of the Harlem Renaissance years down the road. In \textit{Crisis of the Negro Intellectual}, a 1967 book that staunchly criticizes the failures of the movement, Harold Cruse argues that this dependency (for lack of a better word) was there from the start:

Harlem became what the historian, James Weldon Johnson, called ‘the intellectual and artistic capital of the Negro world’ for a very good reason – because New York City was the intellectual and cultural capital of the white world in America\textsuperscript{26}

Despite this, the New Negro Movement effectively defined Harlem as a “black space.” While Harlem was never more than 60\% black during the 1930s, it became distinctively black in perception.\textsuperscript{27} To a certain extent, resulted from the quick and vast increase in black immigration to New York City – the black NYC population changed from 60,534 in 1910 to 183,428 in 1923 – but while only a small number were engaged by the Renaissance directly – there were likely several dozen artists that were more directly active, under the approximately hundred or so counted in the Harmon Foundation’s records, many took notice of the intense artistic development going on there.

\textsuperscript{25} The African-American Archive: the History of the Black Experience in Documents, 497. Du Bois referred to van Vechten’s 1926 novel \textit{Nigger Heaven} as “the worst kind of slander, and bad art at that.”
\textsuperscript{26} Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 21
\textsuperscript{27} Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3, 1199
Dissolution

The tensions and difficulties behind the published work itself portended the demise of the movement. While these leaders, particularly Du Bois, saw artistic production as only one part of a direct effort to change the culture, they still drastically overestimated the immediate political power that it held. In his criticism of Hollywood, post-Harlem Renaissance writer Ralph Ellison noted that “to direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality,”28 implying that changing art was useless on its own, because the art is a reflection of society as a whole. While art can carry tremendous political power, it cannot lead to the immediate changes that the Harlem Renaissance’s leaders hoped for. Additionally, it is partially dependent on how its audience reacts to it, and the black art was never seen as an equivalent to white. The political demands helped lead to the dissolution of the movement, but even from the beginning it had limits in what it could do.

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While a history of the period can provide an idea about the black intellectuals interested and involved in it, the members of the Harlem Renaissance were a very eclectic and diverse in their interests, lives, and styles. While there are a variety of threads that connected them – a desire to create art tempered by intense racial barriers, a study of European art that was simultaneously accepted and rejected in the search for a superior way to portray the common man, and a particular interest in capturing life “as it were” – their ways of expressing and understanding these concepts were especially distinct. These differences show the diversity in the period and the variety of ways in which it could be understood, as well how they contrasted, whether deliberately or not, with Tanner’s works.

Early Life and Professional Careers

Aaron Douglas (1899 – 1979) is the most important and famous of the Harlem artists, and his iconic style is easily connected to the intellectual, symbolic, and self-conscious elements of the movement. He is also the visual artist most closely identified with the Renaissance itself. However, compared to his contemporaries, his early life was less eventful. He was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899, and after drawing and painting as an amateur since early childhood, he received a Fine Arts bachelor degree from the
University of Nebraska in 1922. While he experimented with “black motifs” while painting in Kansas City, he discovered that they were of far greater interest to prospective clients in New York City, and moved there at the outset of the Harlem Renaissance. His popularity and fame during the Renaissance itself came from his frequent illustrations of various works by black authors; he provided illustrations for the New Negro and James Weldon Johnson’s God’s Trombones, as well as the magazines Crisis and Opportunity. In 1939, became a faculty member at Fisk, where he founded and co-chaired the department of art until 1966. Despite his ubiquity within the world of black culture, his first national tour and exhibit came with 2007’s Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist, decades after his death.

If Douglas became the poster child for the New Negro movement’s interests in symbolism and visual motifs, then Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891 – 1981) represented the less overtly political work that often came from it, as well as the greater public success its artists could potentially attain. Motley was born in New Orleans in 1891; eighteen months later, white competitors to their small family business forced his family to move to Chicago, the future center of his career. Later, his father was able to use a connection in his job as a porter for a Pullman train to get Motley funding for a year at the Art Institute of Chicago. After working a variety of odd jobs, he got a job as a porter,

29 “Artist Shows black as ‘proud, majestic’”, Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition), Feb. 24, 1973, p. 6
30 Interview with Aaron Douglas, David Levering Lewis Collection, “Voices From the Renaissance” transcripts (July 24, 1974), 1 Box, 87-15, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library
31 Edited by Susan Earle, Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007)
travelling across the country and sketching in between stops. Some of his best work was painted on old railroad laundry bags, a material he used because canvas was unaffordable to him. Despite serious opposition to these kinds of subjects, which many black critics and intellectuals saw as perpetuating stereotypes of aggressive black sexuality in night life and jazz, others (both black and white) praised Motley’s works after he became more confident and began selling pieces to various art shows. He was the first artist of any race to be the subject of a front page *New York Times* article advertising his exhibit at Madison Avenue’s New Gallery’s opening on February 25, 1928; this meant that he was also the first black artist to have a one-man show in a New York art gallery. Today, he is understood as the first “nationally recognized” black artist to portray “black subject matter almost exclusively.”

While all of the New Negro artists had to struggle through adversity, Palmer Hayden’s (1890 – 1973) life matched the sentimentality of his work: like the heroic rural blacks in his portraits, he was the self-taught artist whose success came from his life’s struggles. He was born “Peyton Cole Hedgeman” in Virginia, 1890; his army recruiter recorded his name incorrectly when he enlisted into the army, and he kept it to avoid the financial loss from being potentially discharged. He and his nine siblings were the first generation of his family out of slavery, and he had only a compulsory primary education.

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33 Ibid, 149 – 150
He started working a variety of odd jobs at 17, while repeatedly trying to get work as an artist. During his multiple military enlistments, he painted other soldiers and landscapes. He worked in both the Buffalo Bill and Ringling Brothers’ Circuses as a “roughneck” (a general worker), and made money off of art commissions, largely from upper-middle class whites. During the Depression and tail end of the Renaissance, he joined the Federal Arts Project of the WPA. During this time, he became extremely interested in John Henry as not only a real person who became a mythical figure, but also as a symbol of black American history, culture, and identity. He discovered that Henry, whose story he thought was just a folk tale, was a real person, and from that point onward, he became far more interested in portraying the labor and communal life of rural, southern black farmers.

William Henry Johnson (1901 – 1970) is distinct among his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries more for his work and career than his early life; his childhood and entry into the art world was similar to what black artists of his generation had to overcome. After his stepfather was disabled, Johnson helped take care of his three siblings while his mother worked multiple jobs. Some time after realizing that he had a talent in drawing, he headed to New York with his uncle while still in his teens, to make money for the family and hopefully improve his art. In 1921, he enrolled into the National Academy of Design, figuring that he would need to enter a school that would teach him more aggressively to avoid the greater level of scrutiny leveled at a black artist. Johnson also moved to France in 1926 for a time after attending the Cape Cod School of Art, after

37 A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present, 186
becoming inspired to create art professionally after seeing editorial cartoons in his hometown of Florence, South Carolina. After returning to New York, he met Alain Locke and Langston Hughes right around the time when the Harlem Renaissance was starting.

European Influences

One of the recurring themes within the Harlem Renaissance is how its members deliberately moved away from European artistic traditions while still being familiar with (or, more cynically, being defined by) them. Many of the works eschewed naturalism, which at the time was being increasingly seen as a product of European ideals, only to move closer to Cubist or Expressionist art that many European artists were developing concurrently. Many of the artists show this influence in their works, although some of them actually went to Europe for their studies. However, all of them show some influence from European art.

During the Renaissance itself, Douglas enrolled as a scholarship student in the Winold Reiss Art School, where Reiss, a German immigrant and artist who had work published in *the New Negro*, inspired him to paint the black experience. He and Alain Locke additionally suggested that Douglas look to African art and imagery for inspiration. However, while Reiss may have not suggested it, Douglas’ most famous

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38 *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*, 110
39 *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, 183
monochromatic works are very similar to Cubist paintings, a European style inspired by African art that avoids more static details and conventional spatial relationships. According to the Harmon Foundation, he also “studied art…also in Paris under [painter, sculptor, and cartoonist Henry] de Waroquier and [sculptor Charles] Despiau”, although the influences he actually took away from them are not clear.

In 1926, Hayden won the gold medal in 1926 Harmon Foundation for a waterfront scene. Along with the prize, he received $3,000 to go to Paris, where he studied under Henry Tanner. Tanner’s generally positive (and occasionally clichéd) portrayal of African Americans would end up being very similar to the apolitical images of rural, southern blacks of Hayden’s later work. Due to his financial difficulties in selling his paintings via the Harmon Foundation back in the United States, however, he left five years later in 1932. Throughout the rest of his career, his greatest inspiration by far would be American folk culture.

As previously mentioned, Johnson spent some time in France. However, before his return, he claims that he found European art “too complicated”, and became increasingly interested in “primitivist” modern art (art that saw early art like cave paintings as closer to the ideal for man-made artwork, often described with the term “ naïve”). He spent further time in rural villages in Denmark and North Africa, attempting

42 *Negro Artists: an Illustrated Review of Their Achievements*, 46
43 *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3*, 1241
44 *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, 161
to get inspiration from living among people he lived with, who both he and others of the
time saw as less “civilized”. His interest in their “primitive life-style” inspired
experimentation in his painting, and he deliberately moved away from the trained style he
had been taught. His new style was very much akin to the newer European style of
Expressionism (which, among other things, opposed naturalism and advocated
foregrounding a work’s symbols and motifs), and it changed even further after the
Renaissance ended. While he rarely used overt symbols of African culture, he became
increasingly interested in creating “primitive” art of urban black culture that eschewed
naturalist (appearing as they do in the real world) portrayals of its subjects. As much as
this was an active attempt to avoid direct European influences, the frequent changes in
the style of his pieces also show a constant desire for artistic change.

Recurring Themes

One of the elements of the Harlem Renaissance that makes it so interesting is that
despite the centrality of politics and political concerns in its origin, its artists often had
vastly distinct, often contradictory themes, styles, and content. While there are a group of
basic themes that repeatedly came up in paintings – often clichéd icons and symbols of
Africa (often relegated to forestry, savagery, voodoo, or the works of ancient Egypt),
black nightlife, and financially or psychologically empowered black subjects – these
could be and were used in ways particular to their artists. Outside of its members being
black artists capable of more public artistic expression than ever before, this lack of
consensus makes the period interesting, as it shows the variety of ways in which people

original: New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987)
were able to respond to a political concept, something that had become increasingly possible after the last century with the rise of distinct political parties and philosophies.

Something interesting about painted Harlem art as compared to poetry collections or novels was that while its production costs were higher and the payoff was lower, the lack of a required narrative allowed a certain freedom in their works. While a novel like George Schuyler’s *Black No More* was able to use its narrative premise of a drug that turns black people white into a commentary on an internalized racism (a theme difficult to state visually without potentially just presenting it without commentary), the fixed state of art allows for themes or motifs to be presented more subtly.

Douglas is almost definitely the “iconic” artist of the Harlem Renaissance, and aside from his prolific and well-published work, it is easy to see why through his content. His signature style reduces objects to their basic shape, although despite his interests in both European art movements and symbols of African culture, his work was most inspired by the black silhouettes on classical Greek vases. In his murals, he would arrange a series of concentric rings expanding from a single fixed point that create an illusion of movement, and then superimpose figures over them. He then painted them in flat silhouettes. This makes it easier to view the mural, as the eye is more comfortable looking at “cleaner”, less detailed images that emphasize basic repeated patterns. Additionally, the figures’ silhouetted styles are more energized and distinct, and they work with the pattern of the circles to create rhythm and motion. The paintings were effectively devoid of plot, with the exception of multiple-part pieces; Douglas was

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46 *History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, 133
47 Ibid, 130 – 133
heavily interested in symbols and their value as both tools of art and the expression of black culture, and had effectively minimal engagement in narrative.\textsuperscript{48}

Out of the various painters of the Renaissance, Douglas’ work is the most overtly connected to African imagery as well. His pieces frequently either are about or background (sometimes clichéd) African iconography – images of forestry or ancient Egypt are very frequent. He claimed to be inspired by “Egyptian form”, in which “the head was in perspective in a profile flat view, the body, shoulders drawn to the waist turned half way.”\textsuperscript{49} However, Douglas also admitted that he used specific sources for his “Africanisms” instead of conducting large-scale research, and did not see his work as being particularly connected to African art.\textsuperscript{50} However, this actually inadvertently helped to deliver his intentions; just as he reduces his people to often-faceless caricature, he reduces the continent to how his contemporaries see it. Aside from that, he was inspired by seeing New York as, “[A] big city that was entirely black, from beginning to end you were impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things” that led to his interest in portraying proletariat Harlem life – although Motley would later claim that Douglas “didn’t understand” the idealized “man on the street.”\textsuperscript{51}

While Motley’s interest in black urban nightlife and culture increased throughout the Renaissance\textsuperscript{52}, a 1978 interview with the Smithsonian reveals that he had a far more critical view of the period from his contemporaries. He was second generation out of

\textsuperscript{48} History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present, 134
\textsuperscript{49} Collins, L. M., “Interview with Aaron Douglas”, 16 July 1971, transcript, Fisk University, Franklin Library Special Collections, 13
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 32
\textsuperscript{51} Collins, L. M., “Interview with Aaron Douglas”, 16 July 1971, transcript, Fisk University, Franklin Library Special Collections, 3 – 4
\textsuperscript{52} Two Centuries of Black American Art, 62
slavery, but his understanding of the institution came primarily from his grandmother, who lived as a slave in abnormally good conditions. From her (whose likeness he would later recreate in *Mending Sock*) he saw slavery as less an intractable burden that had to be actively negated than a mark of history that his contemporaries should have gotten over, and he believed that the idea of an intellectual surge for American black artists was absurd. His interests were never political; he wanted to “paint my people just the way they were.” However, while he was largely apolitical during the Renaissance, and his statements were made at the end of his life, his unfinished *The First One Hundred Years*, a mural about the failures of the Civil Rights movement showing a lynched Martin Luther King, Jr. and John and Robert Kennedy attempted between 1963 and 1972, is an extremely political piece, far more than most of the art of the Harlem Renaissance.

Motley’s work was energetic and sexual, but his figures’ humanity caused them to avoid becoming stereotypes. Part of this is due to the energy and warmth he gives to his settings, but his work has a fairly relaxed, apolitical feel that makes it engaging. Beyond the many paintings of nightlife and black culture, Motley also drew many portraits of black women: *the Octoroon Girl* (1925), *Aline, An Octoroon* (1926), *Octoroon (Portrait of an Octoroon)* (1922), *the Mulatress* (1928), and *Brown Girl After the Bath*, (1931) are some of the better ones. Despite his deliberately apolitical approach to his art, these portraits have inadvertently political subtext in the way that they portray black femininity. Some of these portraits are of light-skinned black women “passing” for

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53 Dennis Barrie, “Archibald J. Motley, Jr.” transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1
54 Ibid, 20. Specifically, he said that there was “no Renaissance”
white\textsuperscript{55}, and many of them have similarities to the often-problematic depiction of mixed-race women in Harlem art and novels. However, some are more confrontational to various stereotypes.\textsuperscript{56} All of these, both in design and interpretation, show Motley as an artist more concerned with images, figures, and meanings than his dismissal of black political art implies.

Along with his interest in John Henry as a cornerstone American myth, Hayden’s work often was made in a semi-naïve style that supplanted naturalism and overly stylistic flourishes in favor of narrative and clarity of the information. This focus led itself to his work having a distinct juxtaposition of reality and fantasy. While his figures are often stiff, resembling the work of less trained artists, they are always integral to the composition of each piece. Additionally, his work is very deliberate and proficient, and each painting is very clear in form and content. Like other artists of the time, he wanted to make art whose lack of naturalism in its figures made it more legitimate as a portrayal of its subjects, which paradoxically made them more natural. At no point in his career was he interested in African history or culture, and he had minimal focus on urban black culture or modern life\textsuperscript{57}. The lack of interest led some of his work to be criticized, as black intellectuals saw his work as almost exclusively “depict[ing] black folk culture in a celebratory, caricature-like manner.”\textsuperscript{58} Despite these criticisms, he was financially far


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 41 – 42.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present}, 164 – 165.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3}, 1241.
more successful than many other contemporary black artists, as particularly white artists found his paintings emotionally resonant and powerful.

Like Hayden, Johnson believed in using a “naïve” style that avoided the trained styles he had been taught in during his time in New York and Paris, in favor of a cruder style inspired by his time in Denmark and Africa. This style was akin to the popular (and controversial) European style of Expressionism in both its deliberate avoidance of European tradition and subsequent preference for a style aping “primitive” art, and it changed even more dramatically after the Renaissance ended. While he rarely used overt symbols of African culture in his works, he became increasingly interested with making “primitive” art of urban black culture. His various works used this deliberately “naïve” style to celebrate black identity, and works like 1930’s *Girl in a Green Dress* has an undercurrent of anxiety over his concerns about stereotypes. However, as much as his work exists as a deliberate avoidance of American and European artistic styles, his work has much of the same overt disinterest in their traditional work that contemporary American and European artists had. While his work is very good and striking, it is very representative of how despite existing as a counteragent for stereotypes and cultural “ghettoization”, the Harlem Renaissance often inadvertently led its own work to perpetuate these stereotypes. Additionally, it shows the difficulty that black artists had in supplanting traditions they had been taught in.

While these artists all struggled through adversity in a racially intolerant America, their interpretations of this environment were all very different. This is central not only to the Harlem Renaissance, in which artists responded to their environment differently, but

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59 *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America,*
how political action was understood. Motley and Johnson both tried to escape their environments, but not only for vastly different reasons, but to an extent failing to do so. These differences highlight the tensions that many black Americans, artists or not, felt, and the various ways in which they interpreted and responded to them.
Chapter 3: Common Themes and Motifs of Harlem Art

The position of the Harlem Renaissance and the diversity of its members’ outlooks led to a similar diversity in the form and content of their art. Questions of race, gender, culture, and identity were all there, and many works were formed from a similar philosophical point, but the way that their artists expressed them speak to the diversity of ideas and styles that the Harlem Renaissance produced.

Style

The New Negro artists often took their desires for greater expression and social mobility and extrapolated them in very different ways. Many of these pieces have nothing in common other than their focus on black subjects or identity, and their frequent attempts to move away from European conventions. Often, they had similarities to contemporary artistic movements or continuities.

Aaron Douglas’ extreme stylization is the most visually striking of most Harlem art at the time, and like its content, can be seen as representative of the Renaissance’s themes itself: images of rural Africanness and urban Harlem, entirely in motion while being a static painting, with no concern for narrative over vaguely-presented themes. *The Spirit of Africa*, one of the illustrations for Locke’s *The New Negro*, presents this well.60 The piece has no overt or implicit narrative, instead featuring primarily a person, likely a

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60 Included in *The New Negro*, Aaron Douglas, 228
Douglas, *the Spirit of Africa*

Johnson, *Self Portrait*
man, kneeling in front of what appears to be a kettle or drum. The man is raising his right hand in jubilation as his head looks up to the sky. In his left hand he holds a sort of drumstick. The environment is entirely natural beyond it, with large plants, palm trees, and a tide rolling into the beach. The perspective is greatly skewed, appearing closer to the active avoidance of perspective in cave paintings or ancient Egyptian art. The title, *the Spirit of Africa* (underline added) directly implies that this position of euphoria is how Douglas wants us to view the continent: a world in which culture and music are not only the sole constructed parts, but parts constructed for religious and spiritual purposes. This is not the only way in which Douglas would present Africa (nor the only way he presented black culture or identity), but he is clearly interested in the relation of black culture to art (especially music) and nature.

Another example of Harlem art that shows a vastly different group of influences was William Johnson’s 1929 *Self-Portrait*.61 His earlier *Self-Portrait*, circa 1923 – 26, was a very conventional self-portrait, using a naturalistic style.62 By contrast, his three to six years later he shows no interest in naturalism of any kind. Johnson’s face, torso, and the entire background have not only no sharpness, but no strict definition of any kind; it is as if he exists within a massive cloud of steam. Lines of color for what is likely the back wall seem to define the shape of his face in parts, going against all known conventions of both physics and the purpose of recreating a likeness. The style indicates that Johnson sees himself as being defined by his environment, and increasingly

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61 Included in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, p. 47
62 *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*, 112
disinterested in or uncomfortable with the environment around him. This reading would go very well with the rest of Johnson’s work of the period, which featured less interest in European conventions, an inclination that became greater throughout his career.

Palmer Hayden’s *the Janitor Who Paints* (1936) is emblematic of the deliberate political element that infused many products of the Harlem Renaissance, although not in the way that many of its members were hoping for or wanting; an earlier version of the work was criticized as “caricaturing blacks.”63 The main figure, to which the eye is drawn, is the painter working on an easel in a small apartment. His hand leads the eye left, towards a woman and infant, presumably his wife and child. Small details tell the audience substantially about this man: the space is cramped (he works next to a trash can), poorly-furnished (a cat sleeps on wooden floors, exposed pipes and light bulbs) but clearly familial and comforting, and he works as a janitor (tools are hung up right behind him, possibly to symbolize their status above him, the clock in the painting represents the repetition of his work). The picture was based on one of Hayden’s artist friends, Cloyd L. Boykin, an artist who was largely ignored by his peers as a janitor, and the painting was meant to dignify his artistic ambitions. The intent of the painting is fairly clear, but it is explained very well in Celeste-Marie Bernier’s *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present*:

[Palmer] Hayden replaced the mythic African of Jones’ *Ascent of Ethiopia* and the black genteel life of Motley’s *Mending Socks* with an unflinching portrayal of African American working-class poverty. He documented the struggles of art in adversity but dramatizing a black janitor-

63 Included in *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*, 160
painter at ‘work’ painting the portrait of a lighter-skinned African American mother and child. Despite the janitor-turned-artist’s obvious destitution, Hayden juxtaposes the garbage can with his palette and the bare light bulb, mop, and broom with his paint brush and easel to celebrate the achievements of the working man as an artist.\textsuperscript{64}

As much as Hayden avoided a more active political intent in his work, the optimistic implications of his work – that art could be and is being made in unexpected places, often by people ignored by the larger society – gives his work an additional energy and bite. The style is very similar to Hayden’s other work; the figures and space deliberately avoid naturalist style to appear clearer by contrast, with subject that veers very close to stereotype but with a legitimacy and dignity behind it. It is also functionally an art piece directly about art, both in its creation and definition. This kind of overt interest in art in relation to other art was not a stated goal of the New Negro movement, but its actors were clearly aware of an artistic continuity and history to which they were responding to.

Gender

The portrayal of gender and sex in this period was even more complicated, being deeply connected to not only gender and racial mores of the time, but specific concerns held by leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. Because of this, images of women in New Negro art is useful for understanding how race and gender were viewed in conjunction in this artistic and historical context.

\textsuperscript{64} Celeste-Marie Bernier, \textit{African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 88
Hayden, *the Janitor Who Paints* 

Motley, *an Octoroon* (1922)
In her introduction to *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson directly states that many of the portrayals of women in Harlem Renaissance art are deeply connected to notions of race and gender that ran through the movement. Many of the portraits she analyzes in the book are portraits of biracial women, and collectively they reveal certain anxieties held by New Negro artists. Her conclusion is that:

During that era, the mulatta was the key figure for a variety of sometimes competing and paradoxical discourses. Elitist and colorist rhetorics of uplift deployed the mulatta as a signifier of African American propriety, domesticity, and civilization, all central aspects of the New Negro movement, which attempted to claim a modern subjectivity for African Americans. Yet the mulatta was also the object of sensationalist and sexualized desire, the very embodiment of miscegenation as well as other transgressive sexualities such as incest, sadism, and rape. These sensationalist images responded both to the rise of consumerism and to the market considerations that constrained writers and artists of the time, but their roots were mired in the violent histories of chattel slavery. That the figure of the mulatta was remarkably able to represent such a variety of contradictory meanings was tied to her ability to ‘pass’ and thus transgress racial, class, and gender boundaries.\(^{65}\)

One of her strongest examples is from the series of portraits by Archibald Motley, whose names are indicative of her conclusions: *the Octoroon Girl* (1925), *Aline, An Octoroon*, 1926, and *Octoroon (Portrait of an Octoroon)* (1922). The first uses clothing to delineate her as middle-class, a social group largely uninvolved in the Renaissance. It

\(^{65}\) *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*, XVI
is often used as the cover for art collections or books involving “passing.” The third is almost certainly capable of “passing”; beyond her obvious wealth, he delineates that she has a “delicate one-eighth strain of Negro blood”. In his attempt to make a response to Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, he essentially creates its own, a fetishized mixed-race woman with a fetish for delineating specific skin color.

Assuming that this analysis is correct (and I see minimal reason for doubting it), it clearly implies a series of paradoxical interests in Harlem leaders. While the movement was constructed deliberately for propagandist purposes, a substantial amount of the art produced went outside those purposes, either to present a more complicated portrayal of racial identity or to avoid the propagandist intent. Additionally, much of the collective work implies a level of discomfort or anxiety about race relations and female sexuality. There was a general implication in Harlem periodicals and literature that women could only engage in the antiracist work of the period if they fit the class and racial standards of respectability. Alternatively, many images used mixed-race women as an example of temptation or as a transgressor of the color line. Many of the portraits, by extension, are (whether deliberately or not, most likely the former) visually representing these anxieties and interests in crossing social lines. These interests were very much part of the culture of the movement; the Harlem Renaissance had a proto-“sexual revolution” decades before the 1960s and ‘70s, and at least some of this art can be seen as an extrapolation of the simultaneous desire to and trepidation towards crossing these social barriers. It should

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66 Portraits of the New Negro Woman, 21 – 22
67 Ibid, 11
68 the African-American Archive, 489 – 90. In this pre-sexual revolution, several members (including Locke, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay) were openly homosexual or bisexual
also be noted that both the portrayal of women and the contributions of the large number of women artists in the Renaissance such as painter Lois Malibou Jones or sculptor Augusta Savage has often been downplayed in retroactive discussions.

However, many pieces of women were less seemingly based on the sexual neuroses of black intellectuals, and William Johnson’s *Nude* is a powerful, direct counterpoint to them.\(^6^9\) An image of a large, nude black woman, it combines Johnson’s antipathy towards European stylizations with an explicit celebration of black female beauty.\(^7^0\) The deliberately crude lines for the limbs evoke African sculpture, as do the bright colors on the vertical lines. While the woman does not meet the male gaze towards her, she is secure and content in the space, a direct contrast to the far more formalist female figures in other portraits. While it avoids many of the overt visual goals that New Negro leaders had (a curbing of overt sexuality and certain stereotypes), it responds better to the ideological needs of the movement by presenting a powerful black woman who does not fall into European visual cliché (or any specific cultural equivalent, giving her a sort of universality). She is also the only part of the image that captures the eye, giving her some power in relation to the audience.

**Culture**

In general, images of black urban culture were largely considered taboo in the Harlem Renaissance due to their focus on black sexuality and “low culture”. However, some artists, Archibald Motley in particular, made several paintings of Afro-American culture and entertainment to his financial and critical success.

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\(^6^9\) Included in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, 145
\(^7^0\) *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, 124
Motley’s Night Life, made in 1935, is an energetic and exciting representation of black (although not Harlem – he work largely in Chicago) nightlife, aided greatly by its artist’s art style. The painting, showing blacks dancing and drinking in a posh nightclub, seems inoffensive today, but it was notable for presenting blacks enjoying entertainments that inspired stereotypes without falling into mimicking them. The decidedly unnatural spatial dynamics (curving floors, chairs and tables pointing in different directions) along with the soft shading and lines gives the whole a relaxed and continuous feel. The figures, notably the dancing woman in the middle and the waiter above her, form a series of curved lines that lead into each other. This creates a rhythm that implies a level of movement and energy that is functionally impossible, due to the static nature of the piece. There is no apparent subtext or ideological argument being made, just a happy (if not euphoric) portrayal of entertainment and community. It isn’t interested in showing a view of what black America should be, but what one part of it – certainly a part Motley knew and enjoyed – was, and why it was so popular.

71 Included in A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present, 150
Johnson, *Nude*

Motley, *Nightlife* (Below)
Many artists of the New Negro movement saw “Africa” as central to their ideas about black history and culture, although to an Africa used less as in a historical context and much more as a symbolic space. Many images of Africa in these works are deliberately dark, natural, and filled with creatures of nature. Even in art that showed no images of New York City or urbanity of any kind, it stood in contrast to the urban populations that their artists were most familiar with.

An extreme example of Harlem Renaissance art is Archibald Motley’s *Kikuyu God of Fire* (1927), a fantastical painting about an indigenous Kenyan religious subject that is a showcase for his skills. He stages a group of soldiers in the bottom middle, surrounded not only by the woods to either side, but the massive fire god that steps toward them. His flames, coming up from where the two sides’ trails connect, provides a massive, burning light in contrast to the dark, very detailed forests to each side. This cuts the space in half, but directs our attention from the top middle to bottom, causing the audience to either gaze up in awe at the deity or down in horror as they see its victims. However, despite the implication of immediate future violence, the painting is itself surprisingly serene. As he did in many of his paintings, Motley uses soft shading and lines, inferring a more calm relationship of his subjects. Even the delineation between fire and forest is soft, causing the fire to take on an ethereal quality. Any subtext in this is tied directly to these formalist elements, showing incredible religious power along with the beauty of the world to which it presents itself.

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72 Included in *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*, p. 151
While it still references Africa as a somewhat idealized space, Aaron Douglas’ *Building More Stately Mansions* uses Africa more overtly as a comparison to modern urbanity, as he has both together in the same image. A group of black figures stand on a hill, each carrying different instruments of humanity. One man holds a giant nail for another’s hammer to knock it into the ground, while a man with gardening tools stand in the back. At the far right, two children look at a globe. As was the case with *Kikuyu*, these people are dwarfed by a group of gargantuan caricatures in a laundry list of the great creations of man: a skyscraper girder, an African mosque, a European cathedral, Paris’ Arc de Triomphe, a one-story house, an office building, and Greek pillars. Above them all stand the silhouettes of the Sphinx and a pyramid, implying their dominance or greatness above the others. Even more interesting, though, is how Douglas’ signature pattern of concentric rings emanates from the globe in the corner. By connecting the globe to the rings – and by extension everything in the portrait directly – it connects the labor and intelligence of Africans to the great monuments to human ingenuity.

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73 Included in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, p. 125
Motley, *Kikuyu God of Fire*

Douglas, *Building More Stately Mansions* (Below)
All of these works are distinct, even many from the same artist. They present a wide variety of design styles, both in form and content, and show the extreme diversity that the Harlem Renaissance (whether deliberately or not) produced. While most of these paintings are distinctly about “black themes” – Africa as a symbol of home and identity, urban America as a new home for black culture – they also function as a representation of several early 20th century concerns: an overt move from the European canon, a fetishization and anxiety about female sexuality, and an interest in finding continuities in more abstract concepts. At the same time, the context of the Harlem Renaissance provided a distinct specificity in the form and content of these pieces, giving them a strength that distinguishes them from much of their contemporary pieces from other artistic movements of the time.
Chapter 4 – Contemporary Popular and Critical Response

As much as the Harlem Renaissance was a movement centered on creating a response within the black community, it was in large measure defined by White America; it saw itself as a response or opposition to white portrayals of black America and identity. While there were multiple responses to the artwork of the movement, they were neither as frequent nor as supportive as need for the political goals of the movement, and the tepidity of this response and lack of critical engagement with it inadvertently led to the “ghettoization” of Harlem art. The discrepancy between the responses from white and black critics or Renaissance artists is significant.

Whites, Newspapers, and Popular Opinion

Generally, white-run newspapers were supportive, if condescending, to the Harlem artists and their output. A 1928 *New York Times* piece on Archibald Motley’s exhibition at Madison Avenue’s New Gallery, for example, states in the subtitle that his “vivid paintings are weirdly influenced by racial tradition”, and later that he “has already contributed eloquently to the artistic accomplishments of his race.”\(^7^4\) The latter comment is repeatedly echoed in spirit throughout the rest of the article, as well as a myriad of contemporary counterparts. While most Harlem artists wanted to create art that was distinctively black – culturally and ideologically – they were interested in it on their own terms, and they became pigeonholed as artists whose only quality of note was their race. Writer Edward Allen Jewel at no point discusses the artistic talent involved in creating, to use his examples, *Waganda Charm-Makers* or *Syncopation*, and implies that his greatest

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\(^7^4\) Edward Allen Jewel, “a Negro Artist Plumbs the Negro Soul”, *the New York Times*, Mar. 25, 1928, p. 88
effort in creating it come from some subconscious “blackness” that “flows in his veins” and that he can call upon for inspiration. In addition, the article discusses the difficulty Motley had in making his painting career sustainable, but again ignoring the actual intelligence on display in his work. To the writer’s credit, Motley’s comment about “work[ing] 100 per cent, harder to realize my ambition” does not discourage this, and he should have been (and continue to be) commended for producing art in an environment that discouraged the artistic participation of blacks. However, focusing so much on this without discussing his product turns him into something of a tokenized black artist, being defined by his race (as opposed to him choosing to define himself by the same), and it implies a gulf between an interest in black artists and that of their art.

The discrepancy between the skill in Motley’s work and the lack of subsequent interest in that skill was distressing and Motley wrote about it in a 1918 Chicago Defender article Motley wrote on the necessity of artistic training and skill.75 In “the Negro in Art”, a single page essay, he discusses the importance of composition and the presentation of content fairly extensively for a single page article, and while he focuses extensively on notions of “feeling” the art or artist’s intent, he is adamant about the need for a deliberate control of the work’s form and content. In an article less than half the size of his New York Times profile, he shows an extensive level of stylistic control and artistic engagement that Jewell’s article seems to ignore in favor of some quasi-racist notions of naturally expressing African rhythm.

Similar sentiments are highlighted in other newspaper articles. Another 1928 New York Times article, “Negro Artists are Developing True Racial Art”, in hindsight makes a

75 Archibald Motley, “the Negro in Art”, Chicago Defender, Jul. 6, 1918, p. 16
somewhat surprising claim that black artists could use visual artistic fields such as portraiture in ways that their counterpart writers could not. The article implies that the Harlem Renaissance has become seen as an almost exclusively literary medium; it is an interesting (and disturbing) look at how black artists were seen as legitimate exclusively from a racial position (due to the implication that narrative and deliberate story structure were beyond them, and that their visual skills came from some genetic or biological quality exclusive to them).

This kind of portrayal of understanding was an expression of the phenomenon of black artists and thinkers becoming something of tokens or even fetish objects to whites after World War I. Blacks had “moved to the center of mainstream imagination”; clichés of heroic African naturalists became a more “ideal” form of human being that artists could portray as a reaction to the increasing disdain for capitalism and the old European order, which appeared to be breaking down. However, this led to another problem: while black culture had become of great interest to whites, the latter were uncomfortable with portraying them. Some whites thought that their cultural position made them unable to reflect the “truth” of a society, or that their European traditions on either a cultural or genetic level prevented them from understanding the world the way it “really was”, so tokenized black culture became central to American entertainment and thought as a purportedly “real” culture separate from the conventions of European identity.

Stereotypical mores of African and African-American culture became extremely popular after World War I for several reasons: it was a space most overtly and negatively

76 Worth Tuttle, “Negro Artists are Developing True Racial Art”, the New York Times, Sept. 9, 1928, p. 120
77 Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3, 1203 – 1204
affected by European imperialism, it was distinct (and often contradictory) from western artistic and academic traditions, and it was easily reduced to notions of “rhythm” and an incorrectly perceived opposition to rationality. These were all ideal in a post-World War I American culture that found itself more critical of dominant cultural idioms and distrustful of European notions of rationality and logic. The artwork of the Harlem Renaissance did not dispute those claims, and the artwork of Douglas, Motley, and the other artists and writers of the movement could easily be and were diminished to fit this paradigm.

This kind of cultural interest often found itself most extensively in the interests of progressive, white artists and thinkers living in Harlem who found the Renaissance exciting. However, their support compromised the movement too extensively and too early on. Greenwich Village salon patroness Mabel Dodge, one of the most outspoken white supporters, “wanted an American cultural renaissance, but shrank from the implications of a black American renaissance as a socially-necessary, historically-determined, parallel movement.”78 In particular, critic and art patron Carl Van Vechten’s becoming the leading white patron of Negro art during the 1920s ad made this especially problematic for the increasingly splitting members of the Renaissance, particularly after he published his immediately notorious 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*.79 He was popular with several younger members of the Renaissance like James Weldon Johnson and Aaron Douglas who made up the “Niggerati”, a body of Harlem thinkers who continued the

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78 *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 32
79 Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 25
movement\textsuperscript{80}, who wanted the optimistic energy of the Renaissance without the specific political demands of Locke and Du Bois\textsuperscript{81}; one of them, writer Wallace Thurman, gave his notorious novel Nigger Heaven a mixed but somewhat positive review.\textsuperscript{82} However, the majority of black intellectuals felt betrayed by how the book portrayed Harlem as a sleazy, hyper sexualized underworld, albeit one with an attempt at a more legitimate definition.\textsuperscript{83} This would be difficult for writers, but especially so for artists who frequently painted pieces of black nightlife. It could be a major reason for Archibald Motley’s movement away from the political sphere, as the major focus of his work was on urban black culture.

Another more overt expression of kind of “ghettoization” of Harlem artists would be Benjamin Brawley’s the Negro in Literature and Art, a 1930 book that attempts to discuss the works of black American artists but largely exists only to espouse outdated racial theorizing.\textsuperscript{84} His focus on contemporary black artists is very small, focusing the vast majority of his chapter on art on the career of Henry Ossawa Tanner, probably because his work was more established but causing a dearth of continuity of black art. He mentions how “painting has long been a medium through which the spirit of the race

\textsuperscript{80} The “Niggerati” had been coalescing since the mid-Twenties as more artists moved into New York City, but it became the only remaining part of the group after most of the other Harlem artists moved on, lasting until 1934
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Aaron Douglas, David Levering Lewis Collection, “Voices From the Renaissance” transcripts (July 24, 1974), 1 Box, 87-15, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Floor, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library, 5
\textsuperscript{82} Wallace Thurman, “a Stranger at the Gate: a Review of Nigger Heaven, by Carl van Vechten”, the Messenger (Messenger Publishing Company, New York, 1926)
\textsuperscript{84} The Negro in Literature and Art
yearned to find expression,”“ and he gives only cursory description to contemporary black artists the extent of the discussion of Douglas is only that he is, “more modern in tone than most of the others and has had drawings in ‘The New Negro’ and numerous other publications.” His discussion of the art itself is largely cursory, and reduces it to “African jungle life” and exaggerated presentations of black culture. While many paintings represented both subjects, almost all of them had a greater layer of depth and complexity than a reductive reading like Brawley’s suggests. This form of “criticism” was the norm for black artists at the time, and more legitimate criticism was virtually unknown in white-led art and academic journals.

Black Criticism of the Harlem Renaissance

Before the Harlem Renaissance, black artists were largely unknown to Americans, but especially within the black community. Du Bois recognized the value of prominent black artists to the culture, and he championed the prominence of artists in civil rights magazines like Crisis and Opportunity. Additionally, the majority of the content in the New Negro consisted of contributions from black writers and poets, but it also included several pictures of classic African art, modern sculpture, and Aaron Douglas paintings.

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85 Ibid, 138
86 the Negro in Literature and Art, 141
87 Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance, XV
88 Very few contemporary articles were discussing Harlem art, or black artists in general, and even fewer to a serious degree. Serious academic interest in the Harlem Renaissance came retroactively, as is seen in Chapter 5.
89 A History of African-American Artists: from 1792 to the Present, 117
90 Alain Locke, the New Negro. I’m not going to provide page numbers, as the entire book is essentially a compilation.
Locke wrote several other articles and papers that extended his theories about future black art, most of which were based on pseudo-scientific racial theorizing.\textsuperscript{91}

However, many of the greatest critics of Harlem art were other black Americans, who criticized many artists and works with a variety of different reasons and arguments. A \textit{Chicago Defender} article on Motley’s New Gallery exhibition appeared on page one is only a small blurb; some of its only flourish of depth is describing six of the pieces as “unimaginative portrayals of voodooism.”\textsuperscript{92} While a contemporary white critic presented this as a major achievement, albeit with a kind of progressive condescension, a black counterpart presents it as disinteresting and not worthwhile. Another article written a year earlier directly opposes the idea of the “New Negro”, instead suggesting that economic and political changes in the post-World War I United States are inevitably and slowly changing race relations.\textsuperscript{93} For his part, Motley largely ignored or was disinterested by criticism by other blacks; he claimed that they were his greatest intellectual critics, despite his additional claim that “they knew less about art than anybody else.”\textsuperscript{94}

One interesting critique of the movement actually came from inside it: Thurman’s not really “tell-all” short story \textit{Infants of the Spring}. A drama revolving around a cast of black intellectuals clearly directly based on the remaining Harlem artists, the denizens of

\textsuperscript{91} Alain Locke, “the Negro’s Contribution to American Art”, \textit{Journal of Negro Education} Vol. 8 No. 3, the Present and Future Position of the Negro in the American Social Order (Jul. 1939), p. 521 – 529
\textsuperscript{92} “Chicagoan has “One-Man Show” in Art Gallery”, \textit{Chicago Defender (National Edition)}, Mar. 3, 1928, p. 1
\textsuperscript{93} W.S. Turner, “Writer Says There is No Such Thing as ‘New Negro’, \textit{the Chicago Defender (National Edition)}, Apr. 30, 1927
\textsuperscript{94} Dennis Barrie, “Archibald J. Motley, Jr.” transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 16
“Niggerati Manor” spend their time making longwinded speeches about race, politics, and culture. While the characters’ arguments are never shown as false or morally wrong, Thurman is clearly mocking their pretensions and ineffectuality. His characters often have difficulty coming to terms with issues of gender and sexuality, and there is a running theme of anxiety about whites invading and co-opting black spaces. Of the two painters in this group, one is a “servile” man operating under an alias, was a self-taught artist only discounted by Stephen, a sympathetic white character. The other is only described as having “bizarre and erotic” subject matter, showing both a concern about the aid of sympathetic whites and the untraditional subject matter of much of its work. The book has a cursory plot involving a possible crime, and its effect on the denizens of the manor, but for the most part, this plot is largely secondary to what appears to interest Thurman the most: using surrogates to explain his complex feelings toward this then-flailing movement.

While the vast majority of historians discussing the period have some agreement that the Harlem Renaissance was flawed in how it’s artistic sphere was developed and supported, there is rarely such an intense antagonism towards the work involved. Bearden, who settled in Harlem after World War I, spent much of his time among Harlem artists and intellectuals, and became one of the first major post-Renaissance black artists, would later retract his views somewhat, remaining critical of the movement while much more positive towards many of the art and artists. James A. Porter’s Modern

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95 Wallace Thurman, Infants of the Spring (New York: the Macaulay Company, 1932), 40
96 Ibid, 37
97 Ibid, 51 – 52
98 Ibid, 125
99 Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History Volume 3, 295
Negro Art criticized the intense angular stylization of Aaron Douglas’ most popular work, leading to a conclusion that its extreme stylistic specificity had a distinct negative affect on the appreciation of black art.  

The response from Du Bois, however, was the most overtly antagonistic to the movement he helped energize. He described Fire!!, the magazine set up by Harlem artists, as “self-indulgent”, and limited its publication to a single issue. Around the time van Vechten produced Nigger Heaven, Du Bois had written an essay in Crisis claiming that art was irrelevant without a political purpose. Additionally, he consistently “reacted negatively” to the work of Aaron Douglas (even beyond his inclusion in the “Niggerati”); he disliked the exaggeration in the work and believed that whites “would think that this was what Negro life was essentially and completely.” In the 1926 meeting of the NAACP in Chicago, he denounced the apolitical art of the Renaissance, claiming, “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (his idea of artists uninterested in the political ramifications of their art). Some time after seeing Nigger Heaven and Fire!! debut in 1926, the former of which he described as “a blow to the face”, he finally decided to withdraw Crisis from the Renaissance and provided a greatly diminished patronage of black art and literature.

For the most part, black interest in the Harlem Renaissance was fairly limited beyond these kinds of critiques; the black middle class, for example, had virtually no

100 James A. Porter, Modern Negro Art
101 the African-American Archive: the History of the Black Experience in Documents, 490
102 Collins, L. M., “Interview with Aaron Douglas”, 16 July 1971, transcript, Fisk University, Franklin Library Special Collections, 19
103 W.E.B. Du Bois: a Biography, 481
104 Ibid, 485
This disinterest cannot be explained through an immediate answer, but the concerns of black intellectuals can provide some clue. Middle class blacks may have been concerned at the overt racial clichés involved in much of the art, perhaps they felt more indebted to European culture than a theoretical version of Africa they did not know, had difficulty seeing black art (coming from both the difficulty in moving particularly black art exhibitions and travelling to other cities and states to view art) or were less inclined to art that moved so far from accepted tastes. Whatever the case (most likely a combination of all of these), the ideological revolution that Harlem artists saw was mostly ignored.

While some artists, like Douglas, Motley, or Hayden, achieved a measure of popular success, there was very little public interest in Locke’s New Negro or his theoretical paintings. Most interest in the Harlem Renaissance came from not painted art, but poetry, short stories, and plays. In addition, there was little to no recognition of the similarities between the Harlem Renaissance and its interests and those of white America, despite both deliberately trying to escape European artistic and cultural idioms through new art styles and content. While there is definitely propagandist value in the production of art, it still is constrained by its form, content, and availability to the public. The value of art for this purpose, however, is entirely dependent on the response of the public. In the context of race relations in the 1920s, sympathetic whites fetishized the work of black artists with only a tacit acknowledgement of their abilities. In contrast, black intellectuals were torn between moving toward a cultural goal, actively avoiding stereotyping in the art they wanted to promote, and the increasingly distant and insular

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105 Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 38
106 Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 22
work of its artists, and they never provided a positive consensus upon which the movement was dependent on.
Chapter 5: Retrospective and Modern Critiques of the Renaissance

The less than ideal reception to the Harlem Renaissance, as well as its art, has only become exacerbated in the decades since, and while the movement has become more famous up until today, recognition of its content and history have been largely relegated to members like Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson. While there is discussion and debate among academics about the interpretations and implications of the movement’s history – a far greater scholarly interest in the art than during its outset – a general consensus among scholars is that the Renaissance was to an extent a political failure of confusing and misinterpreted ideas that worked against each other. However, various arguments have been made that differ greatly on what the movement ultimately means (and for the purposes of its painted art, what it collectively symbolizes in microcosm). In both popular and academic discussion the art of the movement remains largely tangential, but its malleability is often used to make distinct arguments.

Huggins as Retroactive Supporter of the Movement

Nathan Irvin Huggin’s *Harlem Renaissance* is the dominant text on the eponymous movement, and his examination presents it as sort of grand but failed experiment that manifested many of the central themes and concerns in black culture, and to a broader extent American culture entirely.

Many of our generation, alienated by what are thought to be corrupt, middle-class values, may be impatient with the unquestioned bourgeois assumptions of these men,
especially because they were black men. This, too, is more our problem than theirs. The people from affluent homes (white and black) who have come to maturity in the 1950s and 1960s have been disillusioned by the spiritual emptiness at the top of the upward-mobility escalator. And we have all been a bit inclined to romanticize the honesty and the relevancy of the man at the bottom. Again, we must remember, however, for Afro-Americans in the 1920s individual achievement connoted more than personal comfort and ease. The future of the race seemed to depend on men and women making it in America. Doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, poets, writers, and actors were essential, in their achievement, because they showed that it could be one, and they leveled barriers for others – so it was thought. So, what may appear to us to be attitudes of bourgeois naïveté were very often highly race-conscious and aggressive.  

While he brings up the political failings or apparent short-sightedness of the leaders and artists of the Renaissance, he is more concerned with the importance and difficulty in creating this kind of movement at all with any form of energy, and the symbolic worth of this group of artists working deliberately for a (admittedly tenuous and vague) political goal. Other contemporary writers like Harold Cruse (about more on whom later) were extremely critical of what they saw as (and essentially what was) a classist movement with little long-range concerns, but Huggins argues successfully that its failure was less important than its output or attempt.

One element of the Renaissance that Huggins focuses on is the inherent difficulty, if not impossibility, of the kind of sociological empowerment that the leaders of the Renaissance wanted.

Every act of a Negro that came to public attention had emotive connotations far beyond the significance of the act.
itself. The Negro intellectual, the leader, was image-conscious...But it is also within this context of image-consciousness that one must understand the promotion of Negro artists, poets, and novelists during this decade. But what is really remarkable is that these black yea-sayers, in their struggle to uphold the American virtues of progressivism, individualism, and self-reliance, were obligated by circumstances to be group-conscious and collective. The American Dream of open-ended possibility for the individual was for them another paradox. ¹⁰⁸

However, Huggins also repeatedly mentions the ironies of the overt thematic interests of the Renaissance in opposition to “[their] despised European civilization”. He mentions (and mocks) the dissonance between “Africa” as an idyllic environment with no demand for rationality and the actual social and political structures inherent in actual African nations and tribes. ¹⁰⁹ He writes more critically of this aspect of the Renaissance, probably because it is the most ideologically flawed. Africa became “Africa” to the Harlem artists, and while it had symbolic power it did so falsely.

Throughout the book, Huggins largely ignores the contributions of visual artists, largely relegating the art of Aaron Douglas to discussing representations of Africa. ¹¹⁰ Additionally, in his discussion of Douglas he ignores the influences from Cubism and Expressionism, instead focusing on the (as mentioned earlier, slightly exaggerated) African influences entirely. At most, other painters are given a footnote. However, his highlighting of the contradictions in the interests, goals, and products of the Harlem Renaissance are fairly equivocal to the movement’s paintings. Many of the paintings present a variety of social concerns, and their form (particularly that of Douglas and

¹⁰⁸ Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 141
¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 188
¹¹⁰ Ibid, 169 – 172
Johnson) struggle to be both political and apolitical, a microcosm of a major struggle of the Renaissance itself.

The popularity of Huggins’ work likely is due to its clarity and construction; it is written in a style that can be read by less scholarly audiences, it structures it as a narrative about artists attempting to create art, even its title is simple and easy. In addition, its general optimism works well when discussing an earlier period of black history. When *Harlem Renaissance* was released in 1971, Huggins (who was born in 1927) had seen the Civil Rights movement gain and lose support, and his multiple contributed articles to the *New York Times* often presented historical race relations with a tragic, fatalistic air that implied their repeated regressions into violence (“…what appear to be decisions casually made foredoomed disaster. The decisions would be repeated again and again, not just to exploit black people for profit but to despoil other human resources…”). To him, the Harlem Renaissance could be something of a preamble to his contemporary Black Power movement, in which black artists made a space they could call their own and work within it, and its political failures aside, it was and is valuable for black history.

Cruse as Retroactive Opposition to the Movement

One of the greatest critics of the Renaissance, and likely the one whose argument is most central to modern discussion, was Harold Cruse, whose 1967 *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* was written partially as a polemic in response to the optimism and perceived cultural uplift that both the movement and contemporary Civil Rights leaders purported.

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The book is considered one of the most important and insightful analyses of the history of black political thought, even though it functions primarily as a condemnation of the movement’s defining elements. While his focus is on Harlem plays and the works of James Weldon Johnson, his concerns are also directed toward the other branches of the movement’s art – paintings and portraiture, even though he largely neglects them. He presents the Renaissance as an unmitigated failure, one that sprung from inadequate understanding of how to further black empowerment and crippled itself with excessive white influence and bourgeois attitudes toward art and identity. To him, the only success for the Harlem Renaissance would have been a movement that survived without outside compromise, something improbable at the time.

The primary argument that Cruse makes, and the one that furthers his judgment the most, is that the Harlem Renaissance was crippled from the start by the extent of influence by white patrons. He (correctly) presents the majority of Harlem artists as being funded and supported by this group, which he argues led to the movement’s goals being compromised early on and weakening its justification.

As a ranking exponent of the NAACP interracial philosophy, [Harlem poet James Weldon Johnson] instinctively suppressed (as Robeson did later) whatever feelings of cultural nationalism were within him. Thus he ignored the obvious fact that the Harlem Renaissance, in its creative form, content, and essence, was paying a high price for being allowed, now, to contribute “to the nation’s common cultural store” and “to form American civilization.” The price was that in exchange for the patronage gained from Carl Van Vechten and others among the downtown white creative intellectual movement, the Negro’s “spiritual and aesthetic” materials were taken over by many white artists, who used them allegedly to advance

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the Negro artistically but actually more for their own self-glorification.\textsuperscript{114}

The central problem, despite the last line, is not of white patrons defining black culture for their own benefit but of them defining and wholesale appropriating black culture at all. Cruse is very much correct that the concentration of white patronage and control over the Renaissance went entirely against the self-empowerment that Locke perceived, as the whites compromised the interests of the artists themselves.

On a fundamental level, this is a problem that often comes up for nonwhite American artists – black artists in particular – as their art may be forcibly turned into “socialist realism”. This term can implies a variety of vague attitudes about “the role of art as a mirror of human beings functioning in class society”, but in American terms usually refers to black art made about racial persecution. Black artists are encouraged by the political climate to use naturalism or realism; “anything else is suspected of being decadent or formalistic.”\textsuperscript{115} This essentially creates a “double standard” in which black artists are unable in the eyes of the public or critics to move beyond defining their own culture (often in clichéd forms), but that causes them to be defined by others. Huggins identifies this problem as well; since black art, or even art that prominently featured blacks, was invariable tied to issues of social reform, viewers inevitably expected black art to have a similar message. Despite Locke’s claim that beauty was paramount in Harlem art, there was a distinct assumption on the part of Du Bois and black critics that pieces should have political stances.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} {	extit{Crisis of the Negro Intellectual}, 35}
\textsuperscript{115} {	extit{Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual}, 215}
\textsuperscript{116} {	extit{Huggins, Harlem Renaissance}, 201 – 202}
To a certain extent, Cruse’s argument appears to be a more personal response to views of the Harlem Renaissance, grounded in his personal politics. He was largely self-taught, anti-integration, and *Crisis* and his statements afterward – including criticism of Ossie Davis for accepting white culture and blaming Jewish liberals for black anti-Semitism.\(^\text{117}\) He mentions at the beginning of *Crisis* an anecdote from 1940 about his “disappointment” with his black YMCA drama group’s disinterest in performing black plays,\(^\text{118}\) and he openly mentions his frustration at the lack of foresight on the part of the Renaissance’s members. To a certain extent, the book reads like an extension of the cynicism and pessimism about the Civil Rights movement at the time of its publication (1967), and his portrayal of the Renaissance works well as a surrogate of those concerns. This is not to denigrate his arguments, which are legitimate and well made, just to suggest that in this case he is using his analysis to make political statement, at the cost of ignoring and reducing the actuality of the history itself. This is apparent in his main argument. While in hindsight the excess of white patronage devalues the political value in the (deliberately political) art somewhat and seriously compromises the integrity of the members’ goals, this only devalues the art retrospectively. He does not suggest that this compromise had an affect on the public when the art was being made and published. This may be the reason for his complete lack of interest in visual art: his interest in the period comes entirely from a specific position that he has disinterest in leaving, that of the writer and performer dissatisfied with this artistic period he is part of. Historian Arnold Rampersad’s foreword to the 2007 reproduction of *Harlem Renaissance* recognized the


\(^{118}\) Cruse. *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 3
problem of Cruse’s argument, criticizing him as an “autodiadect” whose “polemical aspects of the book tends, for some if not most readers, to overwhelm its major insights.” Despite his clear biases, however, portions of Cruse’s argument are often supported, particularly on the problems of excessive white patronage.

Wikipedia as Representative of Modern Interpretations

While both *Harlem Renaissance* and *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* were central to retrospective interpretations of the Renaissance, their place as early interpretations of the period (along with their respectively political and academic interests) make them poor as examples of how the movement has been viewed in the public eye. While various encyclopedias, and art books have been published on the period, none of them gives us nearly as good a look into the general interpretation of the Harlem Renaissance as, somewhat sadly, the Wikipedia article dedicated to it. Leaving aside its well-deserved notoriety for its common lack of citations, the “free encyclopedia’s” eschewing or including particular details of its subject can be very illuminating. This is less because of the information it includes directly, but how the public has interpreted it. Its “Harlem Renaissance” article, in this case, offers an extremely brief, inadequate history of the period that highlights little about it and largely ignores its actual history. Additionally, its minimal discussion of artists and other members of the perceived movement show both a

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119 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, xxii – xxiii
lessened interest in visual artists as a whole and a general lack of knowledge (or, more cynically, disinterest) in many of the period’s works.\footnote{“Harlem Renaissance”, Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance}, last updated March 24, 2013}

One of the first things to note about the article is how little it discusses the specificities about black cultural changes at the time. It discusses the Great Migration and the influences from the fallout of the Civil War, but outside of the fact that black artists were in a more concentrated area than before, it does not go into the reasons for the form the movement took, or the reasons for its ending. For example, its discussion of white patronage of Harlem artists is as follows:

The Harlem Renaissance was one of primarily African-American involvement. It rested on a support system of black patrons, black-owned businesses and publications. However, it also depended on the patronage of white Americans, such as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason, who provided various forms of assistance, opening doors which otherwise would have remained closed to the publication of work outside the black American community. This support often took the form of patronage or publication.

There were other whites interested in so-called "primitive" cultures, as many whites viewed black American culture at that time, and wanted to see such "primitive" in the work coming out of the Harlem Renaissance. As with most fads, some people may have been exploited in the rush for publicity.

While its subsequent section “Criticism of the movement” mentions the problem that (nameless) critics had with black emulation of elements of White identity, this is still a discussion simultaneously too broad in its depictions and too miniscule in others. The notion of “primitive” art, for example, is significantly deeper (as well as being rooted in
the politics of the interwar western world) than this presentation suggests. This does not show the nature of the interactions between white patrons and black artists, any impacts it had on the work, or what forms the works took. Also noteworthy is how there is no start or end date given or explained; while it ended only from its members gradually losing interest than any specific action, the timescale should still be noted when identifying an historical period.

Harlem art is largely ignored in this article, as well; it only has a token list for “visual artists” under the collection of “notable figures and their works”, and aside from that all contributions of visual artists are entirely ignored. It is interesting, however, to compare propensity of members of the different groups toward having unique pages. While much smaller than the list of poets, only two of the noted visual artists – Leslie Boiling and Paul Heath – lack individual articles. By contrast, while the list of poets is almost three times as large (45 vs. 16), less than half of the presented people have articles of their own. While comparing the sizes of each separate article is largely an exercise in futility – Paul Roberson\(^\text{122}\) and Langston Hughes each had a greater cultural impact than virtually all of the painters, so it makes sense that they would have more detailed articles – it is interesting that despite their lesser presence, visual artists are still given a comparable presentation outside of the article itself.

To its credit, the article has a fairly substantial bibliography (even if a large number of books are biographies on Langston Hughes) and a link to an extremely

\(^{122}\) Paul Robeson, Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Robeson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Robeson), last updated March 25, 2013. This page is substantially larger than the Harlem Renaissance article
comprehensive site and group of articles from the Library of Congress. However, it still contains fairly glaring omissions (the New Negro, Crisis, and Opportunity are given at most a cursory mention) and never shows any larger context for the period. Essentially, its implication is that “blacks came to Harlem in larger numbers and made vaguely racial art” (an interpretation), with little substance in either the work that was created or why. This has larger implications, because if this article’s writers had only a more casual interest in the period – and the very nature of Wikipedia encourages that over a more academic design – then it suggests that this is how the Harlem Renaissance is viewed as a whole. The larger political machinations and tensions have been deemphasized, as well as much of the subtext of the work. Additionally, its general lack of interest in visual arts (and in particular, painted art) suggests that the entire visual component of the period is ignored in popular discussion. While it is unfair to suggest that Wikipedia is the encapsulation of the modern public perception of the Renaissance, its version of the movement will very likely be the dominant non-scholarly one in the future, as well as one most people will see.

Despite their differences in interest and structure, the interpretations have two things common to all three: a lack of interest in visual work and an implicit agreement that the Harlem Renaissance is not just a vague concept but something specific to that time and place with legitimate cultural value. Regarding the former, their interest in visual arts does not extend beyond using them as a basic example of African symbolism; this may be due to Cruse and Huggins’ lack of familiarity with the medium. Since Wikipedia matches their lack of interest, it seems that this has effectively become the

norm in interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance. Secondly, and ostensibly less
important, is the general agreement that the Harlem Renaissance was a period that merits
distinction. In a belated response to Archibald Motley’s criticism of the period, two of the
most prominent critics of the period and he repository for the most basic and banal
understanding of concepts agree that it is worth study and examination. While the
legitimacy of the period was in doubt among its own members, it has today become if
nothing else a legitimate and accepted notion.
Conclusion

As much as it has a certain colloquial value in American culture – specifically, as a creative “black space” – the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, despite being a particularly interesting link between issues of race, culture, art, identity, and legitimacy in 1920s America, are surprisingly neglected. On the other hand, the fact that a failed attempt at political change through explicitly racial art has today become accepted as a distinct period of art development suggests that it has been far more influential than its inglorious dissipation implied. While the details of the period have steadily declined, and outside of post Harlem artists like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence the direct influences on successive black artists has not been particularly strong, it has gained more political legitimacy than it ever had in its time.

On a similar note, as the Harlem Renaissance moves further into the past, the art that defined it has similarly lost some of its power along with its context. As different black aesthetics and cultural touchstones have each become the new “definitive marker of black culture”, only to be supplanted in turn, the New Negro Movement has taken on a role that removes much of its history but makes it much more heroic. While modern works like the Wikipedia article gloss over the intense tensions between members of this ostensibly singular movement, this image inadvertently gives it the power that Locke and Du Bois wanted. Now, the Harlem Renaissance is the vague image of black art and culture exploding in Harlem; with little connection to the larger context, it now implies an innate need among people – in this case, black people – to create art and promote

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124 Holland Cotter, “Jacob Lawrence is Dead at 82; Vivid Painter Who Chronicled Odyssey of Black Americans”, the New York Times; Jun. 10, 2000
different ideas. Like a surprising amount of its art, it ignores the history and context of the period to focus on its inherent symbolic value.

Additionally, as much as the art of the movement has been ignored, the works of the Harlem artists have become increasingly valuable among collectors. William H. Johnson’s *Streets of Cages Sur Mer* is reported to have bought $102,000 on art auction.\(^{125}\) Between 2007 – 8, when his first national tour was underway, Aaron Douglas’ *Emperor Jones*, one of his small monochrome drawings for *the New Negro*, had gone for $75,000. *Building More Stately Mansions* is even more impressive at a shocking $500,000; this single mural is worth more now than likely his entire collection during the height of his work.\(^{126}\) As they slowly move from the context in which they were made, these paintings have been gradually evolving into the powerful and recognized symbols of black identity and history that the movement’s intellectuals wanted them to be, albeit not on their terms. While this carries a hint of illegitimacy about the current state of the art, it is ironically fairly close to how much of the work was made, in which facts and naturalist figures are superseded in favor of symbols and action. And in that way, they prove accurate Alain Locke’s claims that they would over time become the acclaimed portrayals of black culture – just not at all in the way he assumed.


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