

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)

Aaron Douglas was a "pioneering Africanist" artist who led the way in using African-oriented imagery in visual art during the Harlem Renaissance of 1919-1929. His work has been credited as the catalyst for the art genre "incorporating themes in form and style which affirm the validity of the black consciousness and experience in America."

The mid-west background of Douglas--who was born on May 26, 1899, to Aaron and Elizabeth Douglas in Topeka, Kansas, and was graduated from the University of Nebraska School of Fine Arts in Lincoln in 1922--was an unlikely indicator of this man who would rise to meet W. E. B. Du Bois's 1921 Citis challenge, calling for "the transforming hand and seeing eye of the artist, white or black," to lead the way in the search for African-American identity. Yet, after a year of teaching art in Kansas City, Missouri, Douglas moved to New York City's Harlem neighborhood in 1924 and began studying under German artist Winold Reiss. His mentor discouraged the budding artist's penchant for traditional realist painting and encouraged him to explore African art "for design elements that would express racial commitment in his art." The young painter embraced the teachings of Reiss to develop a unique style incorporating African aesthetics and black American subject matter, and he soon had captured the attention of leading black scholars and activists.

About the time of his marriage on June 18, 1924, to Alta Sawyer, Douglas began to create illustrations for periodicals. Early the following year, one of his illustrations appeared on the front cover of *Opportunity* magazine, which awarded Douglas its first prize for excellence in art. A few months later his illustration for the NAACP *Crisis* magazine won the publication's first prize for drawing. Also in 1925, Douglas's illustrations were published in Alain Locke's survey of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro*. Publisher Locke called Douglas a "pioneering Africanist," and that stamp of praise and approval for the artist influenced future

historians to describe Douglas as "the father of Black American art." His fame quickly spread beyond Harlem, and he began to mount painting exhibitions in Chicago and Nashville, among numerous other cities, and to paint murals and historical narratives interpreting black history and racial pride.

During the mid-1920s, Douglas was an important illustrator for *Crisis*, *Vanity Fair*, *Opportunity*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, *Fire!!*, and *Harlem*. In 1927, after illustrating an anthology of verse by black poets, *Caroling Dusk*, Douglas completed a series of paintings for poet James Weldon Johnson's book of poems, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Douglas's images for the book were inspired by Negro spirituals, customs of Africans and black Americans, biblical stories, and contemporary black history. The series, soon to become among the most celebrated of Douglas's work, "defined figures with the language of Synthetic Cubism and borrowed heavily from the lyrical style of Reiss and the forms of African sculpture." Through his Precisionist-style drawings for the series, Douglas "came close to inventing his own painting style by this eclectic combination of elements in his work." At the height of his popularity, Douglas left for Europe in 1931 to spend a year studying at *L'Academie Scandinave in Paris*. When he returned to New York in 1932, the Great Depression was engulfing America.

Under the auspices of the United States Public Works of Art Project, Douglas completed for the New York Public Library in 1934 a series of murals depicting "the entire African-American experience from African heritage, the Emancipation, life in the rural South, and the contemporary urban dilemma." Three years later, after Douglas was recruited to establish an art department at Nashville's Fisk University by his long-time friend Charles S. Johnson--one of the "midwives" of the Harlem Renaissance, who joined the Fisk University faculty and became the university's president

(cnuimted)

This publication is a project of the 1998 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. Information was compiled by the Department of History, Tennessee State University. The Metropolitan Historical Commission assisted with editing and design.

in the 1940s Douglas and a fellow black artist, Edwin Harleston of Charleston, South Carolina, completed a series of highly significant murals (begun in 1929), depicting “the course of Negro History” for the Eratus Milo Cravath Library (Cravath Hall Administration Building since 1969) at Fisk University. Douglas taught painting and was chair of the art department at Fisk from 1937 until his retirement as professor *emeritus* in 1966.

Prior to Douglas’s death in Nashville on February 3, 1979, his work had been exhibited throughout the country and featured in companion volumes, including *Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings by Aaron Douglas (1971)* by David Driskell, Gregory Ridley, and D. L. Graham and *Two Centuries of Black American Art (1976)* by

David Driskell. In the decade following his death, the innovative art of “pioneering Africanist” Aaron Douglas was featured in numerous exhibitions and in critical publications such as *Flash or the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (1983)* by Robert Farris Thompson; *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America (1987)*, published by The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (1989)*, co-edited by C. R. Wilson and William Ferris. As further study of Douglas’s art unfolds, additional credence will accrue to the belief that the artistic insight and influence of “the father of Black American art” continues to live far beyond the time and place of the Harlem Renaissance.

-Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.

*Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* by Mary Schmidt Campbell, David Driskell, David Levering, and published by The Studio Museum in Harlem: Harry N. Abrams.