# Inside the Harlem Renaissance

*A leading illustrator for the New Negro Movement in the 1920s, Aaron Douglas is the focus of a traveling exhibition now at New York's Schomburg Center.*

**BY STEPHEN MAINE**

The rapid rise of artist Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), in the mid-1920s, from the obscurity of teaching art at a Kansas City high school to a position at the center of the New Negro Movement in New York (later termed the Harlem Renaissance) seems almost, in retrospect, to be predestined. Hardworking, ambitious, possessed of an impressive synthetic visual intelligence, Douglas was ready and able to provide the solution to a yawning problem confronting the kingpins of the Movement, by forging a distinctive graphical style that nearly became its trademark. A muscular blend influenced by Cubism, Art Deco, ancient Egyptian painting and West African sculpture and masks, it conveyed both the cosmopolitan sophistication and the self-aware "primitivizing" conceit of the Movement's essentially literary efflorescence. The work contrived to alloy the urban and the ethnically authentic.

"Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist" is an absorbing and long-overdue exhibition of the work of this versatile artist, organized by Susan Earle at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. The show attests that, in deftly balancing the drive to explore his creative and art-historical sources against a commercial artist's categorical imperative to keep the customer satisfied, Douglas produced a decade's worth of graphics and murals that secured for him a place in the pantheon of 20th-century American illustrators.

Douglas traveled from Kansas City to New York in June 1925, intent on sailing to Paris to study painting. It would be six years before he crossed the Atlantic. "I had hardly reached the city before I was called upon to prepare cover designs and drawings and sketches to be used for illustrating texts of various kinds," Douglas recalled many years later.[1] A stylistic chameleon, he quickly ran through various approaches to this magazine work before settling on a high-voltage, high-contrast idiom that captured the energy, optimism and burgeoning racial pride of the new uptown community. He received regular critiques from Winold

***Two works from Aaron Douglas's series "Aspects of Negro Life," 1934, oil on canvas, 57¾ by 138¼ inches. Above,* An Idyll of the Deep South. *Below,* From Slavery Through Reconstruction. *Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.***

Reiss, a German who had emigrated to the U.S. in 1913; Reiss's own style, probably derived in part from the German folk-art form of black silhouette cutouts called *Scherenschnitt*, clearly influenced Douglas. And while Alfred Stieglitz had exhibited African sculpture in his 291 gallery in 1914, it was through Reiss that Douglas understood the broader European modernist fascination with African motifs.

Elegant, accessible and polemical, the young artist's work was palatable to all camps within the ideological spectrum of black intellectuals in New York. Alain Locke invited Douglas to contribute illustrations for *The New Negro*, the watershed 1925 anthology Locke edited.[2] Douglas's work was published on the cover and in the pages of the National Urban League's relatively conservative, business-oriented journal, *Opportunity* (whose editor, Charles S. Johnson, had become aware of Douglas and urged him to come to New York[3]), as well as in *The Crisis*, the NAACP publication overseen by W.E.B. Du Bois. "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," Du Bois declared in 1926.[4] In Douglas's best work, medium and message achieve parity; formal dynamism matches and mirrors pedagogical urgency.

Sly and stunning is Douglas's cover for *FIRE!!*, the journal edited by Wallace Thurman, of which November 1926 would prove to be the sole issue. The profile of a bearded red sphinx is seen against a black ground, which turns out to be a looming, simplified head that nearly fills the page. Douglas was also hired to provide cover art and illustrations for books by many of the New Negro Movement's luminaries, including Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen. He did the cover graphic for *Nigger Heaven* (1926) by Carl Van Vechten, the white novelist whose book sparked bitter controversy within the black community (and was excoriated by Du Bois in *The Crisis*) but helped create the vogue for black culture that set jazz-age Harlem spinning.

Douglas forsook Deco cool for a ripe, humid expressionism in a 1926 series of woodblock prints illustrating Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*; the play featured a career-making performance by Paul Robeson in its 1924 revival. The prints depict a terrorized, sinewy Brutus Jones barreling through Caribbean undergrowth. Their visual syntax is unequivocally black-and-white but weirdly scrambled, with lapping ocean waves below stabilizing the frantic, jagged scenario. In *Defiance*, the gun-slinging Brutus is surrounded by insidious, insinuating fronds. Included in the exhibition is the block from which *Defiance* was printed, a modest and wonderful relic.


**Bravado,** ***from the series "The Emperor Jones," 1926, woodblock print on paper, 8 by 5⅝ inches. Collection Jason Schoen, Miami.***

The artist's mounting reputation led to commissions for murals, beginning in 1927 with a piece for Harlem's Club Ebony. Three years later, Douglas traveled to Chicago to execute *Dance Magic* in the College Inn Room, a lively nightspot in the Sherman Hotel. (A dilapidated gouache study of the work is included in the exhibition.) This was followed in 1933 by *The Evolution of Negro Dance* for the Harlem YMCA. Working on this large-scale mural, Douglas explored a frieze format in which figures are arrayed laterally in syncopated groupings. These works are breezy in emotional tenor, as befits their function as decoration; their rhythmic insistence trumps narrative content. Some of his other murals are far more complex.

At the Spencer, the quartet of large canvases that constitutes the sweeping "Aspects of Negro Life," painted in 1934 for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), was given prominent placement in the museum's Central Court. A Works Progress Administration commission, the cycle is considered by many to be Douglas's masterpiece, and even from the perspective of seven decades it is a stirring work. A bittersweet celebration of black identity and collective cultural memory, it proposes four major phases in the trajectory of the African-American experience, linked by the themes of music and labor. *The Negro in an African Setting* centers on a frenetic pair of dancers, flanked by drummers and backed by spear-wielding onlookers and jungle vegetation. The performers seem to be in thrall to a small, carved figure that floats in their midst, pulsing with light.

*From Slavery Through Reconstruction* acknowledges the Emancipation Proclamation, the ubiquity of cotton and the specter of the Klan, members of which are shown hooded and on horseback. The mural's central figure, a fiery orator, exhorts a gathering crowd, pointing to distant legislative and professional office buildings. A more laid-back group of figures plays instruments, dances and sings at the center of *An Idyll of the Deep South* while others work the fields below their shacks. From the upper left corner, just beyond a huddled group mourning a lynching, a star casts a piercing beam of light across the 12-foot-wide composition. Art historian and Douglas specialist David Driskell speculates that the motif does double duty, signifying both the North Star that guided escaped slaves out of the South through much of the 19th century, and the red star of Communism to which so many radical intellectuals and artists, including Douglas, were drawn during the early part of the 20th.[5]

*Song of the Towers* concludes the cycle, with the Great Migration of blacks northward as its subject. The work is in rough shape, owing perhaps to inexpert retouching or the effects of age. Its program can be appreciated, however, since Douglas, a plodding painter with not much of a touch, was nevertheless a terrific designer with an iconographical flair for playing the generic off the specific. The main figure, having arrived in New York dressed for city life, scampers to the summit of a huge cog, symbolizing the advancement made possible by industrialization while hinting at grinding factory linework. He glimpses, through a crevasse in the daunting wall of skyscrapers,

the Statue of Liberty with her raised torch. Seemingly elated to have shaken off the vestiges of subservience without crossing a border, this New Negro brandishes a torch of his own, his saxophone.

The silhouetted figures, flat areas of color and simplified forms seen in the graphics are present in the murals. Setting them apart is a theatrical, recessional space resulting from the layering of darker and lighter pictorial elements. Another device characteristic of many of these murals is one or more sets of concentric circles, superimposed over the composition. They divide it into distinct regions, stepping in value from a pale core to progressively darker surrounding bands. The resulting ripple effect energizes the entire surface and leads the eye to some telling narrative detail: a resounding banjo, a coiling serpent, a slave ship on the horizon. In others, zigzags or curling bands function similarly. These radiating orbs and waves of light are clearly meant to suffuse the scene with a metaphysical presence, and to suggest a spiritual dimension to history and to civic life.

Among the virtues of the show's thoughtful, handsome catalogue is "The Fisk Murals Revealed," a chapter by the artist's biographer, Amy Helene Kirschke, on the 2003 restoration of the murals Douglas executed for Cravath Hall at Fisk University in Nashville in 1930. One of those backing him for the commission was Johnson (formerly of *Opportunity* magazine), who had begun teaching at Fisk three years earlier. Indebted to Matisse, the murals hinge on billowing botanical forms as well as the human figure in movement, and are spatially flatter and more decorative than the Schomburg paintings. They are in oil on canvas, and affixed to the wall. A short video by Madison Davis Lacey, *Rhythms on the Wall*, responds to the curatorial challenge of how to represent this significant work in a traveling show and gives the viewer some idea of its enveloping, leafy vigor.

Recommended by Johnson, Douglas began teaching at Fisk in 1937, becoming the art department chairman two years later and remaining at the helm until his retirement in 1966. He visited New York frequently and earned a master's degree from Columbia in 1944. In his later easel paintings, he retreated to an unremarkable impressionist/realist style that is pleasant enough but lacks the charge of his stripped-down, hopped-up illustrations. He did haul out the old manner on occasion, as in *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944), in which a pyramid, a sphinx, a cathedral and the ruins of a Classical temple tower over a procession of figures who, bearing attributes of education and labor, emerge from a shadowy shack.

*Cover for the magazine* **FIRE!!**, *November 1926. Collection Thomas H. Wirth.*


The issue of Douglas's legacy is thornier than his latter-day champions allow. The roster of artists Earle cites as having "gleaned ideas" from Douglas includes Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and William H. Johnson, but surely Douglas was only one among a great many influences on these enormous talents. Earle notes that the artist embraced "the didactic potential of public art." Thus she makes no claim that he should be seen as an antecedent to modern-day masters of the poetic, elliptical public gesture such as David Hammons or William Pope.L.

Unquestionably, within the context of art by black Americans, the artist's most radical work represents a quantum leap of self-consciousness from, for example, the racially anonymous academicism of Henry O. Tanner, two generations Douglas's senior.[6] But the demise of the Harlem Renaissance in the face of the Depression mirrored a broader cultural retreat from modernism in favor of a reassuring, sentimental "American Scene" in which Douglas's innovations can scarcely be detected.

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But he was first and foremost a public artist, working in the public arena, and his achievement is subject to the expedients and simplifications that a mass audience requires. Propelled by surface design and subject matter, much of the work is coloristically unadventurous. If it looks a bit dated, it's only as documents utterly of their time necessarily are. Douglas's exploration of self, race and history accompanied a threshold moment that has since been absorbed into the contemporary visual fabric. What seem to be anachronisms in Douglas's vocabulary only demonstrate how far the visual culture of identity politics has advanced, and how subtle its semiotics have become. □

1. "Harlem Renaissance," speech by Aaron Douglas at Fisk University's Negro Culture Workshop, ca. 1970, quoted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 12.
2. A sprawling collection of fiction, poetry, drama, sociology, history and cultural commentary by many of the movement's luminaries, *The New Negro* was published in November 1925. The book is an expansion of the March 1925 edition of *Survey* magazine's monthly "Graphic" issue, guest-edited by Locke and titled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." In her essay in the exhibition's catalogue, Cheryl R. Rager reports that Douglas had read this issue of *Survey Graphic* while in Kansas City, and suggests that it prompted him to investigate the ferment in Harlem first-hand.
3. Johnson's secretary, Ethel Ray Nance, who had met Douglas in Kansas City, told him about the young artist.
4. "Criteria of Negro Art," speech given at the conference of the NAACP, Chicago; reprinted in *The Crisis*, October 1926, pp. 290-97.
5. *Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection*, numerous contributors, San Francisco, Pomegranate, 1998, p. 80.
6. A fellow Kansan, Tanner received a visit from Douglas at his Paris studio in 1932.

*"Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist" originated at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence [Sept. 8- Dec. 2, 2007], and was recently seen at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville [Jan. 18-Apr. 13], and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. [May 9-Aug. 3]. It is currently on view at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York [Aug. 30-Nov. 30]. The show is accompanied by a 254-page multiauthor catalogue edited by curator Susan Earle.*

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