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THE AMBIVALENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN¹ CULTURE. THE NEW NEGRO ART IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Abstract: Reflecting on the issue of marginalization in art, it is difficult not to remember of the controversy which surrounds African-American Art. In the colonial period and during the formation of the American national identity this art was discarded along with the entire African cultural legacy and it has emerged as an important issue only at the dawn of the twentieth century, along with the European fashion for “Black Africa,” complemented by the fascination with jazz in the United States of America. The first time that African-American artists as a group became central to American visual art and literature was during what is now called the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Another name for the Harlem Renaissance was the New Negro Movement, adopting the term “New Negro”, coined in 1925 by Alain Leroy Locke. These terms conveyed the belief that African-Americans could now cast off their heritage of servitude and define for themselves what it meant to be an African-American. The Harlem Renaissance saw a veritable explosion of creative activity from the African-Americans in many fields, including art, literature, and philosophy. The leading black artists in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940 were Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, Aaron Douglas, Hale Aspacio Woodruff, and James Van Der Zee.

Keywords: African-American – “New Negro” – “Harlem Renaissance” – Photography – “African Art” – Murals – 20th century – Painting.

¹ The term “Afro-Americans” or “African Americans,” referred to Black Americans/Afro-Americans and is used to refer to people born in the Americas who have African ancestors.

Motto:

I believe, deep in my heart, that the dark tinge of my skin is the thing that has been my making. For, you see, I have had to work 100 per cent harder to realize my ambition.
Archibald Motley Jr., Artist²

Reflecting on the issue of marginalization in art, it is difficult not to remember of the controversy which surrounds African-American Art. In the colonial period and during the formation of the American national identity this art was discarded along with the entire African cultural legacy and it has emerged as an important issue only at the dawn of the twentieth century, along with the European fashion for “Black Africa”, complemented by the fascination with jazz music in the United States of America.

An important stage preceding the rise of the “New Black” Art was an attempt to search for mimetic African-American identity, deliberately ignoring the difference in skin pigmentation in an effort to find a common voice with a white center, read: the ethos and tradition of the American middle class. The consequence was the most strategic compromise to which artists consciously resigned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Robert Scott Duncanson (1821-1872), Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901) and Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918), creator of the wonderful and highly valued landscapes – the heirs of European aesthetics.

The first time African-American artists as a group became central to American visual art and literature was during what is now called the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Another name for the Harlem Renaissance was the New Negro Movement, borrowing the term “New Negro,” coined in 1925 by Alain Leroy Locke (1886-1954). These terms conveyed the belief that African-Americans could now cast off their heritage of servitude and define for themselves what it meant to be an African-American. Both labels are appropriate and correct, as the Harlem Renaissance saw a veritable explosion of creative activity from the African-Americans in many fields, including art, literature, and philosophy. One reason why the Harlem Renaissance was possible was the fact that many African-Americans migrated from the rural South to the cities in the north, including New York City, during World War I, the 1920s, and the 1930s. The increased numbers of African-Americans living in geographically limited areas naturally fueled a sense of community. Furthermore, in the northern cities these internal migrants experienced the freedoms and opportunities that had not been available to them in the South. These two factors encouraged African-Americans to seek the ways to re-define themselves socially and politically.

² Richard Newman, *African American Quotations*, Oryx Press, Phoenix 1998, p. 96.

Although the interest in African-American culture has grown during the last two decades, this lack of visibility within the historical mainstream, and the failure of art criticism to come to terms with the complexity and range of black visual art, continues to annoy artists and critics, as well as the scholars looking for a more representative history of American art. To a degree, this problem can be understood as a function of neglect, but it also unmistakably reflects the priorities and interests of the scholars working in the field of early twentieth-century American art and culture. For example, while there is a fair amount of literature on the history of American art criticism and theory, it rarely addresses art or criticism produced by Afro-Americans. Thus the issues which preoccupied American critics and artists during these years have been clearly identified, but these have not been brought to bear on the analysis of Afro-American art. Also, while there is a large body of scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance, it often does not draw major distinctions between artistic activity in different media³. The accomplishments in poetry and music tend to be centralized as the most representative forms of artistic expression during the Harlem Renaissance; the products of the visual arts have been overlooked until quite recently. Similarly, the studies of American culture in the interwar decades, which deal extensively with cultural nationalism, tend to privilege written expression and popular culture, while the visual artists receive only cursory attention. The 1920s in the United States was a decade of continuing economic prosperity and rapid industrialization. There was a sense of optimism, a revolt against the traditional values, and an exploration of new ideas. However, the burgeoning middle-class prosperity only thinly camouflaged an increasing class stratification, and ethnic and racial tensions caused by population shifts in the cities. The urban ambience and cityscapes of Chicago and New York were transformed by new technology, with skyscrapers, elevated trains, and subways built to accommodate and transport the growing population swollen by the constant flood of the Europeans arriving at Ellis Island⁴, and thousands of African-Americans migrating from the South to the North.⁵ The Harlem Renaissance was one of the most significant developments in American art of that time⁶. The 1920s and 1930s saw a new

³ To read more: George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1995 and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, New York 1973.

⁴ Ellis Island in Upper New York Bay, was the gateway for millions of immigrants to the United States as the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 until 1954.

⁵ Hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated from the rural, mostly agricultural South to the urban industrialized North from 1913 to 1946. Historians call this the Great Migration.

⁶ To see more: George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White...*, pp. 435-448.

generation of educated and politically wise African-American men and women, who sponsored literary societies and art and industrial exhibitions to combat racist stereotypes. The movement, which showcased the range of talents within African-American communities, included artists from across America, but was centered in Harlem. The work of the Harlem painter and graphic artist Aaron Douglas (1898-1979) and the photographer James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) became emblematic of the movement. Other visual artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance include Charles Alston (1907-1977), Augusta Savage (1892-1962), Archibald Motley (1891-1981), Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998), Palmer Hayden (1890-1973), James Richmond Barthé (1901-1989), Sargent Johnson (1887-1967) and slightly younger Romare Bearden (1911-1988) and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)⁷. It is also worth mentioning the literature that inspired them, especially the books and novels written by such Black writers as Sterling Brown (1901-1989), Countee Porter Cullen (1903-1946), Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) Wallace Thurman (1902- 1934), Dorothy West (1907-1998) and the most prominent black writer Alain Leroy Locke.

THE “NEW NEGRO”

The term “New Negro” which was initially used at the end of the nineteenth century to denote social and economic improvements since slavery, between 1900 and the 1930s became attached to a renewed racial pride, expressed in economic independence, culture and political militancy⁸. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), a black educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, emphasized industrial training as a means of self-respect and economic independence. He edited an anthology of historical and sociological essays: *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900), which argued that economic self-reliance should precede demands for social equality. William Edward Burghard Du Bois (1868-1963), African-American scholar and civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, was passionately opposed to this. Du Bois sought political action and racial equality as due to the black people. By the 1920s Washington

⁷ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts, British Association for American Studies*, University Press, Edinburgh 2008, pp. 56-88.

⁸ Introduction, in: *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2007, pp. 1-20.

and Du Bois represented two opposing camps on the subject of the “New Negro.”⁹

The rising expectations and an economic boom created largely as a result of the United States’ involvement in both world wars, combined with the effects of obvious racism brought on by Jim Crow laws (the segregation sanctioned by law in the South in the 1890s, and practised in the North), encouraged African-Americans to leave their traditional agricultural base in the South. African-American newspapers, such as the “Chicago Defender,” urged the blacks to leave their places of social and economic repression for those representing economic opportunity and freedom¹⁰. The social displacement of the African-Americans mirrored that of all Americans. As noted by the cultural historian Eugene Metcalf,

In the cultural turmoil following World War I many white middle-class Americans, especially intellectuals and the young, were cast adrift from the institutional and ideological moorings of American society. Feeling betrayed by the war and the false hopes it had raised and enmeshed in a society undergoing technological and demographic change, they revolted against traditional values and behavior. Some left America entirely; others stayed. But the 1920s were for whites as well as blacks a time of dislocation and adjustment¹¹.

THE JAZZ AGE

In Europe the interest in American popular culture, in the form of jazz, movies, and comic books, began in the 1910s and peaked in the 1920s. The period known as the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties was the time of bootleg gin and “speakeasies” – establishments in which intoxicating liquor was sold illegally¹². Jazz was referenced in visual art and design in a variety of ways, from the figurative scenes of Harlem or dance halls, the depictions of instrumental forms or dancers, to the abstractions representing the polyphony, repetition or variation of jazz through color¹³. For example, the Surrealist artist Man Ray used the aesthetic of collage in his abstract painting *Jazz* (1919) to refer to harmonic syncopation, and included some mechanical

⁹ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* ..., pp. 19-21 and 36-48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹ Eugene W. Metcalf, *Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control*, “Winterthur Portfolio”, vol. 18, No. 4, Winter, 1983, pp. 271-289.

¹² US Congress had passed the Eighteenth Amendment which prohibited the sale of alcohol during the so-called Prohibition era between 1920-1933.

¹³ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 1998, p. 111.

references to timing, measurement and syncopated beat in his photographic abstract *Admiration of the Orchestrelle for the Cinematograph* (1919). Such African-American artists as Archibald Motley, Charles Alston and Aaron Douglas also explored the connection between art, music and national identity in their works throughout the 1920s. Jazz, which began in South America and spread to the North and West, took its harmonic, melodic and rhythmic elements mainly from African music. In both America and Europe life was lived in the cities, where the clubs vibrated to new sounds and rhythms: the music and form of dance rooted in African-American culture. In Harlem, Chicago, Kansas City and Europe the scene resembled that shown in the three well-known paintings of *Parisian night life* (1929) by Archibald Motley and Hale Woodruff. The celebration of African-American culture in dance and jazz was an antidote to what was perceived as the sterility of modern, technology dominated Western modernist society. As was observed by Brendan Gill, an influential critic for “The New Yorker”,

Black writers, artists, composers, and theater performers were thought to be opening the door to a promising future—one that could be shared with a white majority only just beginning to perceive black culture not as a form of failed white culture but as something that had its own complex nature¹⁴.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, white people made Africa and the Africans a symbol of personal freedom, which embodied modernism. As the African-American novelist Langston Hughes wrote in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), “It was a period when the Negro was in vogue.”¹⁵ Primitivism – the cultural melting pot for modernism, was available for the European and white American audiences in the American Negro culture, regarded as a subculture of mainstream America. Despite the fact that the African-Americans had lived in North America since the seventeenth century, there was a widespread belief that Africa pervaded the Negro culture. As a descendant of Africa, the American Negro was the modern primitive. This explains why the white society expected African-Americans artists to portray particular subjects. For example, in 1928, owner and director of The New Gallery, George Hellman, urged Archibald Motley to concentrate in his paintings on the more exotic aspects of the Negro life, the scenes which should include the “voo-doo element as well as the cabaret element for his solo show.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Brendon Gill, *On Astor Row*, “The New Yorker”, 2 November 1992, p. 52.

¹⁵ Theodore O. Francis, Ted Francis, *Realism in the Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, iUniverse, Lincoln 2002, p. 45.

¹⁶ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art...*, p. 111.

Several white American patrons, including the collector and philanthropist Albert C. Barnes (1892-1979), considered African art important for the development of a unique Negro art style. Ironically, so did many African-American cultural critics. The black middle class had accepted an identity refracted through the prism of the white American/European culture and society. Thus while they promoted the cultural standards derived from Europe, some of the Afro-American educated élite saw the opportunity to use the white people's interest in primitivism to promote the American Negro arts that reflected the dominant dual heritage of Europe and Africa. While they made an effort to become part of mainstream American society and culture, there was a desire amongst the American Negroes and many other Americans to preserve and sustain that exotic "otherness," the imprint of Africa on American culture, as a palliative for the rapid changes in society. The visual artists took advantage of the interest in the black culture to broaden the boundary of modern art, its aesthetics and imagery, to accommodate an African-American artistic vernacular.

"NEGROPHILIA"¹⁷ IN EUROPE

As in the previous centuries, artistic training and experience meant travel to Europe, but in the 19th and 20th century Paris, not Rome, was the art capital of the world. American artists, musicians, and writers flocked to the "city of lights," where they saw the new art at first hand. The reputation of Paris for racial tolerance provided an additional motive for many musicians from the American Expeditionary Force in 1917¹⁸. Following demobilization, a lot of African-American musicians chose to remain in Paris, where they did not have to endure racial segregation. A pioneering African-American visual artist in Paris was Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), raised in Philadelphia. He settled in France in 1891 and enjoyed considerable success as a painter. He devoted 46 years of his life and career to France. Tanner often painted marine scenes that showed man's struggle with the sea, and after 1895 he was creating mostly religious works – a genre in which he gained his fame. In 1893 on a short return visit to the United States, Tanner painted his most

¹⁷ The word negrophilia is derived from the French *nérophilie* that literally means love of the negro. It was a term that avant-garde artists used amongst themselves to describe their passion for black culture. Petrine Archer-Straw, *Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, Thames and Hudson, London 2000.

¹⁸ Vincent Bouvet, Gérard Durozoi, *Paris Between the Wars Art, Style and Glamour in the Crazy Years*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London 2010, p. 370.

famous work, *The Banjo Lesson*, while in Philadelphia. The painting shows an elderly black man teaching a boy, assumed to be his grandson, how to play the banjo. This deceptively simple-looking work explores several important themes. Blacks had long been stereotyped as entertainers in American culture, and the image of a black man playing the banjo appears throughout the American art of the late 19th century.

By the 1920s there were enough black American artists in Paris to form what artist Hale Woodruff (1900-1980) termed a “Negro Colony”. Artists, sculptors, painters, and printmakers lived a bohemian life on the Left Bank or in the French countryside. They associated with expatriate writers and musicians, creating an informal network for learning about the latest ideas about styles and the leading artists. The artists studied either formally at art schools such as the École des Beaux-Arts or the Académie Julian, or informally by viewing and sketching works in the museums. They were constantly aware of the new art, abstract modernism, which used elements of African art.

The Negro Colony did not go unnoticed. The Parisians were fascinated with black arts and the culture of Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) one of the most multi-talented artists of the 20th century, describes the shock experienced by the audience when it first heard black musicians, “throwing out trumpet call the way one throws raw metal or fish to seals.”¹⁹ French critics and writers, such as Paul Morand and Cocteau²⁰ often lavishly praised African-American visual works. The salons, which were considered obvious exhibition venues for French and foreign artists exhibited their productions, for example the Société des Artistes Français, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune; Salon des Tuileries, the Société des Artistes Français and the American Artists Professional League²¹. Many French publications reproduced images of their art. American associations sponsored works and exhibitions of African-American art. This period of lively cultural activity was cut short by the economic depression in Europe and the United States, which made transatlantic travel difficult or impossible. However this Parisian love of new visual languages and subjects also spread to Amsterdam. Black writers, poets and musicians were as highly esteemed in the Netherlands during the 1930s as they had been in Paris in the 1920s. Their work was truly in vogue. Numerous books and poems by black American, Caribbean and African authors were translated and published. The Surinamese writers

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bernard Gendro, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*, University Of Chicago Press, London 2002, pp. 104-106.

²¹ Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934*, Rutgers University Press 2001, p. 243.

and anti-colonialists Anton de Kom and Albert Helmon were taken extremely seriously. Independent Dutch weekly newsmagazines published in Amsterdam, *De Groene Amsterdammer* and *Links richten* produced a special “Negro edition” containing a broad spectrum of opinions, some of which now seem odd, on “the negro,” “the negro in art” and “negro art”.²² *Variétés*, the Surrealists’ Belgian journal, had already preceded them in 1928 with an issue on art in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo)²³. Black music, black art, black dance, black history and black people were “hot” in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and other cities in Europe. Aspects of black culture were adopted by the western avant-garde, as European art and culture began to creolise.

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

During the interwar period African-Americans seized the opportunity to promote political, economic and social agendas that would benefit the black community nationally. Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)²⁴ and the National Urban League

²² *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas. The Catalogue*, De Nieuwe Kerk and Waanders Publishers, Amsterdam 2008, p. 121.

²³ *Ibid.* and Julia Kelly, *Discipline and indiscipline: the ethnographies of Documents*, “Papers of Surrealism. The Use-Value of Documents” 2007, vol. 7 <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/acrobat%20files/articles/Kellypdf.pdf>

²⁴ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, grew out of two events: the Niagara Movement, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter and 28 other African Americans in 1905, and the race riot in Springfield, Illinois in 1908. White Americans and a few black Americans were the core members. Their aim was to guarantee the reality of equality in the United States and elsewhere, and they focused on securing legal rights for African Americans and those of the African diaspora. The most prestigious award at the time was the NAACP’s Joel E. Spingarn Medal for Entrepreneurial Achievement. Another award, the Amy Spingarn Medal for the Arts, acknowledged the cultural importance of pan-Africanism. Du Bois was the editor of *Crisis*, which became the major intellectual publication among African Americans. The National Urban League, founded in New York City in 1911, was created by the merger of several organizations: the Committee for Improving the Industrial Condition of Negroes, the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, and the Committee on Urban Conditions among Negroes. The focus for the new organization was the development of economic opportunities and social welfare for African Americans in American cities. Charles S. Johnson was editor of the League’s magazine, *Opportunity*. The United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was established by Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey to promote pan-Africanism and economic self-reliance among ordinary African peoples throughout the world. It promoted unification between America and Africa, focusing on economic and political enterprises. It thrived in New York City from 1918

were instrumental in promoting the New Negro movement, also called the Negro or Harlem Renaissance, in their respective journals, "Crisis" (1910), and "Opportunity" (1922). The Negro Renaissance denoted a cultural revitalization in the cities. Its capital was Harlem (uptown Manhattan in New York), which had the largest African-American urban population. The Harlem Renaissance consequently represented most visibly what was also happening in other major American cities. The cultural historian Nathan Huggins noted that:

The Negro Renaissance was a struggle to show an African-American cultural "coming of age" that paralleled the same phenomena [sic] in American culture as it moved from under European cultural hegemony, and sought to reinvigorate itself. Literature, theatre, visual arts and, later, music were seen as a means to define and establish "membership in the African or black race," and simultaneously to enhance the reputation and self-esteem of African-Americans in America²⁵.

As was noted by the novelist James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) in *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1927), "No people that has ever produced great literature and art has ever been looked on by the world as distinctly inferior."²⁶ Achievement was not to be defined by that cultural production which only imitated European or white America, but by an art which expressed a distinctive African-American cultural identity, most strongly grounded in folk culture. This expressive and mature African-American was the New Negro. The ideology of the concept replaced that of the "race" of the men (and women) of the previous century. It was incumbent upon the black middle class, whom W.E.B. Du Bois called the "Talented Tenth" (approximately ten per cent were educated in the middle class), to lead the way, and consequently to prove their worthiness as American citizens, and provide role models for the less fortunate African-Americans²⁷.

until 1925. Garvey established the Black Star shipping line, and two publications: *The Negro World* and *Black Man*. Garvey felt that African peoples should proudly pro-claim Africa as their "motherland," because a people bereft of cultural and political heritage would always be regarded condescendingly by others.

²⁵ Molefi K. Asante, *A Note on Nathan Huggins' Report to The Ford Foundation on African-American Studies* "Journal of Black Studies", vol. 17, no. 2, 1986, p. 260.

²⁶ *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins, Oxford University Press, New York 1995, p. 281.

²⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth", in: *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day*, New York, 1903, <https://archive.org/details/negro-problemseri00washrich> (28.07.2014).

THE NEW NEGRO ARTIST

In 1924 during a dinner at the Civic Club, New York, organized by Charles S. Johnson, to promote the emerging black literati, W.E.B. Du Bois spoke to white editors and critics about the need for writers and artists to lead as the cultural vanguard of the Negro Renaissance. Upon hearing Du Bois, Paul Kellog, the editor of the literary journal "Survey Graphic," proposed and published a special edition entitled Harlem: *Mecca of the New Negro*, which was soon issued as a book, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925). It was a collection of political, sociological and historical essays focusing on Harlem as the stage for a "dramatic flowering of a new race spirit."²⁸

The leading strategist of the New Negro movement was Alain Locke. He was the first African-American who advocated for an identifiable racial art style and aesthetic. Locke graduated from Harvard University and was the first African-American to win a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship. In 1918, he completed his dissertation, *The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Value* and graduated with a doctorate in Philosophy. Locke eventually obtained a position as chair of the school's Department of Philosophy at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He saw the younger generation as capable of establishing the artistic vanguard, not only in terms of style and technique but also as subject matter and evocation of a "black sensibility." In grappling with what constituted this New Negro art, Locke believed African art provided the solution. His essay *The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts* in the "Survey Graphic" (1925) dealt with cultural retrieval from Africa: African-American artists had to learn, along with white artists, to appreciate the value of African art and culture. It was not an intuitive endeavor but, as Locke (using illustrations of African art from Albert C. Barnes's collection) wrote:

(...) there is the possibility that the sensitive artistic mind of the American Negro, stimulated by a cultural pride and interest, will receive from African art a profound and galvanizing influence. The legacy is there at least, with prospects of rich yield. In the first place, there is the mere knowledge of the skill and unique mastery of the arts of the ancestors, the valuable and stimulating realization that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance²⁹.

It turned out that African art for the New Negro artist, was much more important and was to replace the classical art of ancient Greece and Rome, which was the foundation for Western art and art criticism.

²⁸ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art...*, p. 115.

²⁹ Charles Molesworth, *The Works of Alain Locke*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 2012, p. 183.

Locke continued:

While we are speaking of the resources of racial art, it is well to take into account that the richest vein of it is not that of portraitistic idiom after all, but its' almost limitless wealth of decorative and purely symbolic material. It is for the development of this latter aspect of a racial art that the study and example of African art material is so important. The African spirit is at its best in abstract decorative forms. Design, and to a lesser degree, color, are its original fortes. It is this aspect of the folk tradition, this slumbering gift of the folk temperament that most needs re-achievement and re-expression. And if African art is capable of producing the ferment in modern art that it has, surely this is not too much to expect of its influence upon the culturally awakened Negro artist of the present generation³⁰.

The motivation was more complex. New Negro artists desired to find their racial tradition in Africa. Admittedly naïve and romantic, this project offered an alternative aesthetic source. As well as this, Locke's emphasis upon African arts as fundamental to the development of modernism was "in step" with avant-garde American art criticism and exhibitions in New York. Although not dictating one style, Locke saw a vital connection between this new artistic respect for African art and the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in art. The fact that European modernists borrowed extensively from African art made the racial art enterprise of the New Negro acceptable and credible within the mainstream American art community, while satisfying a need for cultural links. Locke, however, reduced Africa to a cultural trope for the purpose of promoting racial authenticity. For the next ten years, Locke characterized Africa in simple formalist terms, ignoring the real complexity of its culture.

GRAPHIC ART

The Negro Renaissance was primarily a literary movement and African-American authors demanded from their publishers images of African Americans that befitted the new era. Some of the best examples of African-American graphic arts could be found in New York City, which was by now the centre for America's proliferating book, popular magazine, and journal publishing.

Aaron Douglas regularly read "Crisis," "Opportunity" and "Survey Graphic" while teaching art in Kansas City. Commenting on his days at the University

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

of Nebraska, where he won a prize for drawing, he recalled: "I was the only black student there. Because I was sturdy and friendly, I became popular with both faculty and students."³¹ So when the opportunity arose for him to travel to Harlem and pursue his art career, encouraged by Charles S. Johnson, he moved without hesitation. Upon his arrival in 1924 he immediately became friends with W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, African-American novelists and poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, and whites such as Albert C. Barnes and Carl Van Vechten, who belonged to the intimate circle of New Negro leaders. Under the tutelage of Bavarian graphic artist Winold Reiss (1886-1953), a close friend of Alain Locke who had illustrated the special "Harlem" issue of "Survey Graphic"³². According to Richard J. Powell Professor of African-American Studies from Duke University "It was ironic that Alain Locke and other promoters of the «New Negro» chose Winhold Reiss – a Caucasian artist of German nationality – to portray this modern, black persona."³³ On the other hand, Reiss became fascinated by Native Americans and studied them intently as part of his creative work. In New York, Reiss established himself as a distinguished portrait painter, graphic artist, and muralist. It was because of his skills as a graphic artist and his empathy and respect for the dignity of humanity that he became a mentor to Aaron Douglas³⁴. Reminiscing his apprenticeships, Douglas recalled that Reiss constantly urged him to explore 'that inner thing of blackness.'³⁵ Consequently Douglas discarded realism for a more abstract 'African' style. On the strength of his illustrations for *The New Negro* Locke, called him a "pioneering africanist."³⁶ Ten black and white drawings, as in *Rebirth*, displayed forms conforming to hard-edge abstract design similar to Art Deco paintings of the 1920s and 1930s. Human figures are stylized, and complement the schematic patterns, both flat shapes. Commissions soon followed: for the covers of "Crisis," "Opportunity," the arts magazine "Fire!!" (published once in 1926), Condé Nast's chic "Vanity Fair" magazine, and various play-bills, including that for Carl Van Vechten's play *Emperor Jones*, starring

³¹ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 1995, p. 27.

³² Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art...*, p. 118.

³³ Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, Thames and Hudson, Ltd, London 2002, p. 43.

³⁴ Dele Jegede, *Encyclopedia of African American Artists*, Greenwood Press, Conn 2009, p. 69.

³⁵ Richard J. Powell, *op. cit.*, s. 44.

³⁶ Dele Jegede, *Encyclopedia of African American Artists...*, pp. 69-71 and Arnold Rampersad, *Introduction*, in: *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke, Oxford University Press, New York 1999, pp. IX-XXIII.

Paul Robeson³⁷. Douglas also illustrated thirteen books published by leading New Negro authors, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and James Weldon Johnson. Two assignments garnered Douglas the most attention, French journalist Paul Morand's *Black Magic* (1929)³⁸, and James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927)³⁹.

Each illustration for *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* is juxtaposed with text so that it functions as a preface to the individual sermon written as verse. The sixth sermon, the *Crucifixion*, does not show the traditional icon of Jesus on the Cross, but Simon, who carried the Cross when Jesus could carry it no longer. The standard hierarchic composition is inverted to show Simon, not Christ, as the dominant figure. Our attention is directed to the diminutive Christ figure by a diagonal beam of light, the guards' position, and the symbolic halo. African-American Baptist sermons accepted Simon as an African Jew, portraying him, as artist and art historian David C. Driskell noted, as "a black man who took upon himself the yoke of Jesus' cross in order to relieve him of one last earthly misery."⁴⁰ The *Crucifixion* becomes a metaphor for the African-American experience.

Douglas's signature styles were what he called "Egyptian form" figures, figures silhouetted in profile with the eye rendered from a frontal viewpoint as in ancient Egyptian tomb reliefs and frescoes, and his use of a single color, varying in value from light to dark⁴¹. The gradually enlarged circular shapes of color create a visual rhythm, evocative of music and spirituality. Historian Nathan Huggins felt that Douglas's attempts to "interpret what he understood to be the spiritual identity of the Negro people was a kind of soul of self that united all that the black man was in Africa and the New World."⁴²

PAINTING

Painters heeded Locke's and Du Bois' urgings to produce a new racial art. The discovery of African art and the rediscovery of black folk idioms caused dramatic style changes for some artists, Palmer Hayden among them. His picturesque seascapes became pseudo-naïve style genre paintings in the

³⁷ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art...*, p. 119.

³⁸ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas...*, pp. 64, 115.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 125.

⁴⁰ *Sculptures, Drawings, Paintings And Mixed Media By David C. Driskellii*, 2002, <http://www.driskellcenter.umd.edu/PressRelease/CreativeSpirit.php> (12.04.2014).

⁴¹ To see more: Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas...*, p. 72.

⁴² *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance...*, p. 20.

1930s. So too did the meticulous realism of Archibald Motley's academic portraits change to modernist genre paintings. The mid-1920s was a transitional period for these and others struggling with the challenge of representing the New Negro.

The most interesting painter Palmer Hayden was already mentioned above and he established his reputation first as a painter of landscapes and seascapes, later of genre. In 1926 Hayden won a prize worth USD 400 from the Harmon Arts Foundation⁴³ and he travelled to Paris, where he studied art until 1932. While in Paris, Hayden socialized with a coterie of African-American artists and writers. Some, like Countee Cullen and Hale Woodruff, were fellow Harmon award winners. They often met at the art studio of sculptor Augusta Savage (1892-1962), an important African-American artist and arts educator⁴⁴. They all teased him about making so many seascape paintings (watercolor *Concarneau-Andree de la Mer*, Hanks Gallery, Santa Monica or *Le Quai á Port Louis*). While Hayden was in France, he met Alain Locke. Locke showed him African art he obtained on a trip to Africa. This experience, along with Locke's call for artists to look to African art for inspiration and design ideas, led to *Fetiché et Fleurs* (1932-33, Collection Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles) a still life oil painting of an African mask and fabric. While Hayden admired African Art, he also said it had "no meaning to us Americans."⁴⁵ He was, however, attracted to other aspects of Africa. The work reflects the Negro Renaissance in that Hayden was one of an increasing number of African Americans deciding to make a career in fine arts, and striving to find a racial art idiom. However, it is not obviously 'African' in style, as Hayden avoided predictable abstract designs associated with African art. Instead, by assembling two African art objects – Fang reliquary statue and Kuba cloth (both from Central Africa) – within

⁴³ The Harmon Foundation was set up by William E. Harmon (1862-1928) in 1925 in New York. William E. Harmon was a real estate investor from Iowa who wanted to encourage excellence in a variety of professional endeavors through the William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes. Harmon hoped that the public recognition of such achievements would encourage others to excel. The Foundation, under the administration of Mary Beattie Brady, is best known for its awards in the visual arts, and for its juried exhibitions (1926, 1931, 1933) in New York City, under the direction of the Commission on Race Relations of the Federal Council of the Church of Christ in America. As part of its objective to familiarize Americans with Negro art, the Foundation also sponsored travelling exhibitions to major cities and colleges, primarily in the South, sometimes in collaboration with other organizations, such as the College Art Association. To see more: Mary Ann Calo, *African American Art and Critical Discourse between World Wars*, "American Quarterly", vol. 51, no. 3 (September) 1999, pp. 589-590.

⁴⁴ Dele Jegede, *Encyclopedia of African American Artists...*, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁵ Eric Hanks, *Journey From The Crossroads: Palmer Hayden's Right Turn*, "International Review Of African American Art" 1999, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 30-42.

a traditional still life, Hayden referred to Locke's New Negro artist (African art as a sign for ancestral legacy of African Americans) and Du Bois' Negro Renaissance (the cultured middle class) while retaining his interest in realism. Ironically, while Locke was stressing decorative art and abstract symbolism as an appropriate style, and downplaying portraiture as desirable subject matter, there was a portrait artist in the Midwest who became as great a representative of the Negro Renaissance in his region as was Aaron Douglas in New York. Palmer Hayden was known for his paintings of the African American scene. In a 1969 interview he described *The Janitor Who Paints*, created around 1930, as "a sort of protest painting" of his own economic and social standing as well as that of his fellow African Americans. Hayden said his friend Cloyd Boykin, an artist who, like Hayden, had supported himself as a janitor, inspired this piece: "I painted it because no one called Boykin the artist. They called him the janitor."⁴⁶ Details within the cramped apartment; the duster and the trashcan, for example; point to the janitor's profession; the figure's dapper clothes and beret, much like those Hayden himself wore, point to his artistic pursuits. Hayden's use of perspective was informed by modern art practices, which favored abstraction and simplified forms. He originally exaggerated the figure's facial features, which many of his contemporaries criticized as African American caricatures, but later altered the painting. He maintained the janitor as the protagonist as it represented larger civil rights issues within the African American community⁴⁷.

Another important painter who was already mentioned earlier, is Archibald J. Motley. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (he sat in on a class taught by George Bellows) in a curriculum embracing realism, portraiture, landscape, and genre painting. Motley painted professionally while still a student, and during that time won the Harmon Foundation Gold Medal for *The Octoroon Girl*⁴⁸, which he later considered, apart from *Mending Socks*, the best portrait he ever painted. It is one of several of his "scientific paintings" of mulatto women. They document a part of America's history of miscegenation, especially in Louisiana, his birthplace, and obsession with the biology of race. The preoccupation with skin color, linked inevitably to issues of class and slavery, was never far from Motley's work. He was not alone. For instance, Aaron Douglas illustrated a cover for "Opportunity" (October 1925), entitled *The Mulatto*, and another for "Crisis" (January 1930) which juxtaposed a light colored woman with a darker one. The image in "Crisis" was similar to one titled *Mother and Daughter* (1925)

⁴⁶ John Ott, *Labored Stereotypes: Palmer Hayden's "The Janitor Who Paints,"* "American Art" 2008, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 102-115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Octoroon – a person having one-eighth black ancestry.

by African-American portrait painter, Laura Wheeler Waring (1887-1948)⁴⁹. Aside from the politics of race, these images by Motley of fair-skinned women in middleclass settings denoting affluence, education and cosmopolitanism, were a visual rebuttal to the popular media images of the “mammy” or the “jezebel” of black American women which continued to hold a place in the minds of the majority of Americans⁵⁰.

Motley’s many portraits, dating between 1919 and 1931, were mostly of women. Lacking commissions early in his career, he portrayed his family and friends. In *Mending Socks*, considered to be his finest painting, he portrayed his paternal grandmother, Emily Motley. Exhibited at the prestigious “Chicago and Vicinity” show at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1923, it earned him the reputation of an up-and-coming portrait painter. This closely modeled study is at once a portrait and a genre scene of African-American middle-class life. In 1929 he won the prestigious grant from the Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed him to travel to Paris. He spent a critical year of study in France, where he painted memorable pictures of Paris. The most interesting work from this period was *Blues* (1929), which depicts well-dressed, handsome men and women dancing in the Petite Cafe in Paris to tunes played by musicians seated in the foreground, would seem to reinforce Motley’s point: paint transcribes the gradations of skin pigment incarnated by the various African, West Indian, and perhaps even African-American patrons of this nightspot. The color of skin, transmuted into the color of paint, identifies and catalogs race. The time Motley spent in Paris influenced him to paint black nightlife when he returned to Chicago.

Although he never lived in Harlem, his depiction of contemporary African American social life identified him with the Harlem Renaissance. He painted in his own modern style, and chose African-Americans for his cardinal subjects. According to his own words:

For years many artists have depicted the Negro as the ignorant Southern “darky,” to be portrayed on canvas as something humorous; an old Southern black Negro gulping a large piece of watermelon; one with a banjo on his knee; possibly a “crapshooter” or a cotton picker or a chicken thief. This material is obsolete, and I sincerely hope with the progress the Negro has made, he is deserving to be represented in his true perspective, with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence and understanding⁵¹.

⁴⁹ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas...*, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Cécile Whiting, *More Than Meets the Eye: Archibald Motley and Debates on Race in Art*, “Prospects,” 2001, vol. 26, October, pp. 449-476.

⁵¹ Steven Otfinoski, *African Americans in the Visual Arts*, Infobase Publishing, New York 2003, p. 246.

Motley's famous *Bronzeville Series* of paintings in the 1930s depicted black urban life in the Bronzeville section of Chicago in such memorable canvases as *Barbecue*, *The Picnic*, and *Saturday Night*. To capture his scenes, he used a modern post-Impressionist technique with vivid colors, often thick application of paint, with a strong inclination to emphasize geometric forms, to distort form for expressive effect, and to use unnatural or arbitrary color. The people in *Barbecue* (1934) do not have distinct features. Motley makes the painting's main idea – black people who were like everyone else, moving on and enjoying life. One does not get a sense of oppression, but then realizes that there are no white people in the painting, either. Without discrimination, these black Americans are free to enjoy life like everyone else in America⁵². Motley showed black people as they were; fun-loving, laughing, and unpretentious. He explained in the Interview from 1950s, that:

In order to study them (African-Americans in Chicago) I made a habit to go to places where they gathered a lot, like churches, movie houses, dance halls, skating rinks, sporting houses, sometimes not only sporting houses, but gambling houses⁵³.

Motley on occasion depicted rural, southern working class African-Americans, as in *The Old Snuff Dipper*. Here, as before, painterly technique creates a softly modeled form but now the figure is positioned before a plain backdrop, which makes for a shallow picture space, drawing the viewer's attention to the realistic face. Comparisons with his middleclass portraits reveal the same care in painting the face, and the frontal position and direct gaze of the sitter which command our attention and convey dignity. Motley's interest in portraiture as a way of exploring issues of class and race was able to develop freely because he lived in Chicago, beyond the scrutiny of Northeastern art critics, such as Locke, and far from the avant-garde centre of New York City. Motley and another Midwesterner, William E. Scott (1884-1969), painted more portraits than any other American artist of their time. A great many of these were images of the educated middle class, who had commissioned them, clear evidence that the "Talented Tenth" were conservative, still preferring portraiture, as in the nineteenth century. Locke would have been pleased with Motley's paintings of the 1930s. However, understandably Du Bois, whose notion of culture was class oriented, praised Motley in "Crisis" (1926) as a credit to the race. Conversely, Motley criticized African-American artists for their lack of vision:

⁵² Steve Moyer, *Party*. Archibald Motley painted African American having a good time, "Humanities" 2014, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 28-32, 5 p.

⁵³ Cécile Whiting, *More Than Meets the Eye...*, pp. 466-470.

*What a pity so many of our artists going for pretty landscapes and pictures which have no bearing whatsoever on our group. The Negro poet portrays our group in poems, the Negro musician portrays our group in jazz, the Negro actor portrays our group. All of these aforementioned portrayals are serious, original interpretations of the Negro. There is nothing borrowed, nothing copied, just an unraveling of the Negro soul. So why should the Negro painter, the Negro sculptor mimic that which the white man is doing, when he has such an enormous colossal field practically all his own; portraying his people, historically, dramatically, hilariously, but honestly. And who know the Negro Race, the Negro Soul, the Negro Heart, better than himself?*⁵⁴

Archibald Motley canvases dramatize African-Americans dancing, drinking, singing, working, praying, dreaming and loving in impoverished and opulent urban settings. His life's mission was to "instill an appreciation of art" into black audiences by putting "them in the paintings themselves, making them part of my own work so that they could see themselves as they are."⁵⁵

One painter surpassed the first generation of New Negro painters in being adept in exploiting abstract art to convey an image and aesthetic derived from black culture: Hale Aspacio Woodruff (1900-1980). He was one of the foremost representatives of African-American modernist art in the twentieth century. During his youth, he too met DuBois, Charles S. Johnson and Countee Cullen, and like several African-American artists of his generation, began his career as an editorial cartoonist and graphic artist for "Crisis" magazine. In 1927 he travelled to Paris where he studied art for four years, and met Henry Ossawa Tanner and members of the "Negro Colony."⁵⁶ In the 1920s abstraction for many American artists meant imitating early Cubism and the Post-Impressionist style of Cézanne. Form and space were converted into areas of color that emphasized the two dimensional surface of the painting, as in Woodruff's *The Card Players*. The elongated figures echo African sculpture which he had studied earlier in art books and observed during his forays with Alain Locke in the Parisian ethnographic markets. Woodruff later recalled:

On seeing the work of Paul Cézanne I got the connection. Then I saw the work of Picasso and I saw how Cézanne, Picasso, and the African had a terrific sense of form. The master I chiefly admired at that time was Paul Cézanne; then Picasso, who was certainly bolder and more courageous in his cubist work. Then when I saw his painting called "Les Demoiselles

⁵⁴ Jontyle Theresa Robinson, Wendy Greenhouse, *The Art of Archibald J. Motley, Jr.*, Sewall Co, Chicago 1991, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts...*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ Steven Otfinoski, *African Americans...*, p. 232.

d'Avignon" – cubist-like girls with black masks on – the whole thing was clarified for me⁵⁷.

The Card Players acknowledged in style an indebtedness to Cézanne, Picasso, and African art, and paid homage to his time in Paris, where he spent many evenings playing cards with his friends, among them poet Countee Cullen and artist Palmer Hayden.

After his return to the United States in 1931, Woodruff applied his understanding of Post-Impressionism and Cubism to painting for social advocacy. A Cubistic painting of an Atlanta shanty town from 1933-1934 is one result; a more rural but nonetheless charged landscape indebted to van Gogh is another. In 1936, Woodruff spent time in Mexico, working as an apprentice to Diego Rivera, the leader of the Mexican mural movement, who taught him the basics of fresco painting. Although it was a medium he would never use, its high-keyed colors clearly influenced the palette of his later murals⁵⁸.

Among Woodruff's well-known works from this period is the three-panel *Amistad Mutiny* murals (1938), held at Talladega College in Talladega County in Alabama. The murals, commissioned and painted during the Great Depression, are entitled: *The Revolt*, *The Court Scene*, and *Back to Africa*, portraying events related to the 19th-century slave revolt on the *Amistad*. Located in Savery Library, they depict events on the ship, the U.S. Supreme Court trial, and the Mende people's return to Africa. The library has an image of the ship that is embedded in its lobby floor. College tradition prohibits walking "on" the ship, despite its central location. In addition, the library has other Woodruff murals exploring other events from African-American history, including freedmen enrolling at the college after the American Civil War. Subjects of Woodruff's murals worked perfectly with his strong conviction that art should be democratized. He claims that "Art has been for the few, but it should be for the many. Great periods of art have been those in which some great purpose motivated all the artists."⁵⁹

It is necessary to emphasize that murals were a very important part of the Federal Arts Project (FAP)⁶⁰ during the Great Depression-era as they enabled

⁵⁷ Albert Murry, *An Interview with Hale A. Woodruff*, in: *Hale A. Woodruff: 50 Years of his Art* New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem 1979, pp. 77-78.

⁵⁸ Roberta Smith, *In Electric Moments, History Transfigured – Hale Woodruff's Talladega Murals*, "New York Times" 2013, 13 August, p. 68.

⁵⁹ Dele Jegede, *Encyclopedia of African American ...*, p. 267.

⁶⁰ The Federal Art Project (FAP) was the visual arts arm of the Great Depression-era New Deal Works Progress Administration Federal One program in the United States. It operated from 1935 to 1943. Reputed to have created more than 200,000 separate works, FAP artists created posters, murals and paintings. Some works still stand among the most-significant pieces of public art in the United States. To see more: Martin R. Kalfatovic, *The New Deal*

ordinary citizens to see the best of American art, an art that reflected nationalist ideals and values. Murals could, according to artist George Biddle (1885-1973), show that “these younger artists of America are conscious of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through.”⁶¹ African-American artists appreciated the pedagogical value as well as popular appeal of mural painting. They looked, as did Hale Woodruff and many American artists at the time, to the Mexican muralists for inspiration. African-American artists like Charles White (1918-79), and very prominent illustrator Aaron Douglas, used the Mexican muralists’ strategy, but tailored it to the context of Afro-American life, to convey their social concerns to the public, especially the African-American public. During the last phase of the Negro Renaissance, and sponsored by the FAP, Douglas completed *Aspects of Negro Life*, a group of four mural paintings, his most impressive response to Alain Locke’s directive to use African art and African-American folk culture as an inspiration. It also reflected W.E.B. DuBois’ conviction that any art of value must be morally responsible and instructive. In a 1926 issue of “Crisis,” Du Bois had asserted, “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped silent.”⁶²

The cycle known as *Aspects of Negro Life* was installed at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. The historical narrative, on Africa and African descendants in the United States, is shown in two horizontal and two vertical compositional formats, featuring African ritual and ceremony, and African-Americans, first in the South and finally in the North. As in his earlier works, Douglas restricted his palette, ranging from light mauve-browns to dark blue-purple, interweaving his silhouetted figures of abstract geometrical design. More clearly than in any of his previous works, one senses what literary historian Houston Baker termed ‘soundings’, the performative aspects of African culture. Africa’s musical progeny, jazz, is rendered in the color tones, concentric circles, and the unfolding of figural groups; the viewer’s eye transforms visual rhythms into sound⁶³. Douglas studied African art in the collections of Albert C. Barnes and of Alain Locke, but though this gave him a greater appreciation of African art, it had little effect on his representation and depiction of Africa. In the first painting of the series, *The Negro in an African Setting*, Douglas employs the popular tropes of primit-

fine arts projects: a bibliography, 1933-1992, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen – New York 1994 <https://archive.org/details/newdealfineartsp00kalf> (12.04.2014).

⁶¹ Karal Ann Marling, *Wall To Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000, p. 31.

⁶² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Criteria of Negro Art*, “The Crisis,” 1926, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 290-297.

⁶³ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas...*, p. 121.

ivism such as dancing figures, standing figures holding spears, drummers, and a highlighted fetish statue. The figures are painted in his elongated “Egyptian style.” The only ethnographically accurate image is of the dancing woman, whose profiled hairstyle is that of the *Mangbetu Woman* whom Douglas portrayed for the cover of “Opportunity” magazine (May 1927).

In the last painting, *Song of the Towers*, the Statue of Liberty has replaced the African fetish; the saxophone player the dancer. The first and last paintings represent the quintessential symbols of African and African-American culture. However, *Song of the Towers* also carries a social realist message, a critical comment on the forward march of science and technology, which has had little effect in improving the economic and social lot of Afro-Americans⁶⁴. The icons of American secular society modernism – industrialization and urbanism – are represented by skyscraper buildings, smokestacks, wheel cogs, belching smoke, the jazz musician, and the worker. The tilting perspective presses toward the viewer, virtually obliterating the sky and overshadowing the figures. Through such compositional devices, Douglas reveals his socialist and labour union sympathies. Socialist organizations attracted many African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s because of their credo of social and economic equality, and anti-racism. Artists’ organizations, such as the left-wing Artists’ Union (est. 1934), functioned like any other labour union, fighting for occupational solidarity, better working conditions and economic benefits⁶⁵. Another, the American Artists’ Congress, whose members included Douglas, strove to make a “politically cogent artistic intervention” and were concerned with international and national political issues, such as the Popular Front Against Fascism in 1935. Douglas also belonged to the Harlem Artists Guild, an African-American alternative to the Artists’ Union⁶⁶, whose members desired the visibility and economic opportunities which were denied to most of them. Aaron Douglas wrote in 1936 in his pessimistic essay entitled *The Negro in American Culture*:

Our chief concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality. This has been a difficult fight as we have been the constant object of attack by all manner of propaganda from nursery rhymes to false scientific racial

⁶⁴ Ken Johnson, *Black in America, Painted Euphoric and Heroic*, “The New York Times” 2008, September 12, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art...*, p. 121.

⁶⁶ Other Negro Art Organizations in Harlem in 1930 and 1940 were: Savage Studio of Arts and Craft opened; Harlem Community Art Center (1937-1942), Harlem Artists Guild (1935-1941) Harlem Art Workshop (1933-1937). To see more: <https://www.boundless.com/u-s-history/from-the-new-era-to-the-great-depression-1920-1933/the-culture-of-change/the-harlem-renaissance/> (29.07.2014).

theories. In this struggle the rest of the proletariat almost invariably has been arrayed against us. Some of us understand why this is so. But the Negro artist, unlike the white artist, has never known the big house. He is essentially a product of the masses and can never take a position above or beyond their level. This simple fact is often overlooked by the Negro artist and almost always by those who in the past have offered what they sincerely considered to be help and friendship⁶⁷.

PHOTOGRAPHY

From the very beginning black photographers used the camera to reclaim their people's experiences and lives, giving their people both humanity and individuality, resisting all the pressure on and stereotypes about African-Americans. From the 1920s to the 1940s, African-American photographers took pictures of prominent Harlem figures and documented the lives of the urban middle class. Skilled photographers felt a responsibility to portray emerging African-American leaders, communities and their lives. Typical such photographer was Addison N. Scurlock (1883-1964), who opened his first business in 1911, in Washington and maintained it there until 1964⁶⁸. The city had a sizeable African-American middle class society, which ensured him a substantial clientele. James Van Der Zee was largely self-taught and maintained a studio in Harlem for almost 50 years. Aside from the artistic merits of his work, Van Der Zee produced the most comprehensive documentation of the period. Among his most famous subjects during this time were Marcus Garvey, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Countee Cullen. By using props in his studio, including architectural elements, backdrops, and costumes, to achieve stylized tableaux vivants in keeping with late Victorian and Edwardian visual traditions, he denoted economic prosperity and education, and, like Addison Scurlock, reworking the photograph to emphasize its pictorial effect. Van Der Zee helped create the period, and not merely document it. When he photographed out-of-doors scenes in Harlem, Van Der Zee selected images which reflected the New Negro, such as: war veterans, funerals, parades, Sunday strollers on Lenox Avenue or in the middle-class neighborhood, Striver's Row on 135th Street as in *Couple with a Cadillac*. He was rediscovered as a documentary photographer and artist in 1968, in the *Harlem On My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.

⁶⁷ Aaron Douglas, *The Negro in American Culture*, cited after Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art, ...*, p. 147.

⁶⁸ *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise*, (ed.) Michelle Delaney, Washington Smithsonian Books 2009, pp. 40-69.

CONCLUSION

Certain aspects of the Harlem Renaissance were accepted without debate, and without scrutiny. One of these was the future of the “New Negro.” Artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance echoed American progressivism in its faith in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change, and in its almost naive belief in itself and its future. This progressive worldview rendered black intellectuals – just like their White counterparts – unprepared for the rude shock of the Great Depression, and the Harlem Renaissance ended abruptly because of naive assumptions about the centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities. And after years of black pride, assimilation and dreams between 1940 and 1963 (this is the year of a public speech “I Have a Dream” delivered by American civil rights activist Martin Luther King) the image of black culture underwent several major transformations. Today in the 21st century, after European artistic dominance and the Negro’s struggle for civil rights, a black cultural consciousness is particularly strong in American visual arts as well as in politics. Since 2009 Barack Obama is the 44th President of the United States, and the first African-American to hold this highest office. Strangely enough, one could say that the words of the Black poet Langston Hughes, who wrote in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), have finally materialized:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves⁶⁹.

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⁶⁹ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America*, Oxford University Press: Oxford–New York 2002, p. 131.

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**AMBIWALENCJA KULTURY AFROAMERYKAŃSKIEJ.
SZTUKA „NOWYCH MURZYŃÓW” W OKRESIE MIĘDZYWOJENNYM
(streszczenie)**

Odnosząc się do kwestii marginalizacji w sztuce trudno nie wspomnieć o kontrowersjach otaczających sztukę Afroamerykanów. W okresie kolonialnym, a także podczas krystalizacji amerykańskiej tożsamości narodowej, sztuka ta została odrzucona wraz z całością afrykańskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego. Uznanie znaczenia tej kultury i sztuki pojawiło się jako istotna kwestia dopiero u zarania XX wieku wraz z europejską modą na Czarną Afrykę uzupełnioną

o jazzowe fascynacje z USA. Ważnym etapem poprzedzającym powstanie sztuki „Nowych Czarnych” były próby poszukiwania wyrazu dla afroamerykańskiej tożsamości, świadomie ignorujące różnicę w pigmentacji skóry. Były to wyraźne dążenia do znalezienia wspólnego głosu z białym etosem i tradycją amerykańskiej klasy średniej.

Po raz pierwszy afroamerykańscy artyści jak grupa stali się dominującym elementem amerykańskiej sztuki wizualnej i literatury jako ruch “Renesansu z Harlemu” (*Harlem Renaissance*) w latach 1920 i 1930. Inną nazwą tego nurtu było określenie “Nowi Murzyni” (*New Negro*) ukuty w 1925 roku przez Alain Leroy Locke’a. Twórczości Afroamerykanów w tym okresie przeżywa prawdziwą eksplozję talentów w wielu dziedzinach, w tym sztuki, literatury i filozofii. Czołowi czarni artyści z lat 1920–1940 to: Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, Aaron Douglas, Hale Aspacio Woodruff, James Van Der Zee.

Słowa kluczowe: Afroamerykanie – “Nowi Murzyni” – “Renesans z Harlemu” – fotografia – “sztuka afrykańska” – murale – XX wiek – malarstwo.