

# *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*, at New York's Metropolitan Museum: Rewarding, incomplete look at contributions of African-Americans to art and culture in first half of 20th century

Clare Hurley, Fred Mazelis  
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*Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, February 25-July 28, 2024*

*The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* is an imposing exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York of 160 works of painting, sculpture, photography, film and ephemera from the period of cultural awakening in the US between 1920-1940 that has come to be called the Harlem Renaissance.

These works of art, in a variety of styles, were part of a flowering that included not only the visual arts but also literature, essays, drama, dance and—perhaps most famously—jazz. The Harlem Renaissance indelibly influenced the art of the early 20th century in America and in much of the rest of the world. The influence of African folk art on European and American artists beginning in the late 19th century helped establish a new idiom befitting the radical transformation of the modern era.

Important as this exhibition is, however, it falls considerably short of doing full justice to its subject matter. The cultural transformations are not examined in their social and historical context, not understood as the complex product of material life. They are instead for the most part presented in isolation, as the product simply of the consciousness of their creators. The introduction to the exhibition itself, after correctly explaining that the Harlem Renaissance was “the first African American-led movement of international modern art,” declares, in the jargon of identity politics, that the exhibition “explores how artists...visualized the modern Black subject.” This is thoroughly inadequate and misleading.

The exhibition opens with two striking portraits, one of historian, sociologist and civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) and the other of Alain Locke (1885-1954), the writer, philosopher and the first black Rhodes Scholar, who is often called the “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance. Both portraits were done in 1925 by Winold Reiss, a German-born artist not widely enough known and acknowledged today. These men elaborated the theoretical basis of the movement, first championed by Locke as the “New Negro Movement,” and then renamed the Harlem Renaissance to signal a greater emphasis on its cultural and aesthetic aspects.

Some of the writers who became prominent in the early years included Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), Jean Toomer (1894-1967), Countee Cullen (1903-1946) and Langston Hughes (1901-1967). Claude McKay (1890-1948), the Jamaican-American poet and writer, joined the revolutionary movement for a number of years, and attended the 4th World Congress of the Communist International in 1922 in Moscow.

Charles Alston (1907-1977), Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), Horace Pippin (1888-1946) and William H. Johnson (1901-1970) were among the better-known visual artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance, while others who feature prominently in the Met exhibition, like Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891-1981) and Olivia Wheeling Waring (1887-1948), are less familiar.

The exhibition is divided into sections including street life, the European connection, photography and, perhaps most vividly, portraits. These run the stylistic gamut from sensitive, traditionally realist paintings by Waring, such as *Girl in a Pink Dress* (1927), of a young flapper, and *Girl with a Green Cap* (1943), reminiscent of the society portraits of American expatriate John Singer Sargent, to Alston's mesmerizing *Girl in a Red Dress* (1934), with her elongated neck and semi-stylized features evoking an African sculptural archetype as much as a young girl.

By contrast, the thoroughly modern, flat and brightly colored forms of Johnson's *Street Life* (1939-40), *Man in a Vest* (1939-40) and *Woman in Blue* (1942) wholeheartedly embrace abstraction over realistic representation. Johnson, in fact, did not live in Harlem, but in Europe and North Africa from 1926 until 1938 and in Denmark after the war, until he died in a New York hospital, a victim of mental illness.

Several of the portraits are of Harlem Renaissance figures: one of writer and NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson (1943) by Waring, a rather demure one of the outspoken Hurston, by Douglas (1926), and one of Douglas himself (1930) with his palette, by Edwin Harleston. Finally, there is another Reiss portrait of Hughes, likewise created in 1925, looking dreamily over an open page while a Constructivist background in blue suggests his thoughts.

The exhibition conveys the spirit of Harlem's legendary cabarets and barrooms, with figures hunched excitedly over poker games and pool tables (one by Lawrence) or jitterbugging to the wail of saxophones (several by Johnson). The style of these paintings tilts more to the modern; some, like Hale Woodruff's *The Card Players* (1930), have a Post-Impressionist feeling, reflecting a European, specifically Parisian kinship.

Though the Harlem Renaissance had its origins very much in Harlem, the Met show also includes work done in other US cities. A number are by Motley, a Chicago resident, another artist who deserves more serious appreciation. In addition to his lively, lavender-infused scenes of working class leisure time, his portraits of his father (1922), his Uncle Bob (1928) and his grandmother (1922), the latter included only in the catalog, are exceptionally moving.

The exhibition's selection of sculpture includes a powerful bronze head of actor Paul Robeson by Jacob Epstein (1928) and another thoughtful-looking Hughes by Teodoro Ramos Blanco (1930s), as well as standout pieces by Augusta Savage—*Gamin* (1929) and *Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)* (1939), the latter based on James Weldon Johnson's hymn of the same name, christened the black national anthem in the era of struggle against Jim Crow segregation.

The Harlem Renaissance cannot be understood apart from a detailed examination of the Great Migration. The exhibition makes brief mention of the latter, but without explaining its significance. Until 1910, going all the way back to colonial times, both before and after the abolition of slavery, 90 percent of the black population remained in the South, in general in rural areas. With the Great Migration, there was a movement from South to North; there was a movement from country to city, even in the south; and there was a movement to wage labor. All this took place alongside the emergence of socialism as a mass movement in Europe, and the first successful socialist revolution, in Russia in 1917.

The battlefields of the First World War may have been in Europe, but the impact of the war was also felt across the United States. The closure of borders to new immigrants during the war intensified the demand for labor. As soldiers returned, many of them radicalized not only by the carnage of modern warfare but also by contact with socialism, they joined masses of black, white and Latino laborers who had moved to the cities, including those millions who began to flee the Jim Crow South.

Moreover, to speak of the "white" population in the big US cities is a gross oversimplification. In the large Jewish, Italian and other immigrant neighborhoods of New York, little English was spoken in 1920. It was the relative freedom and cross-pollination of these cultures—including new audiences for music of the rural South, for instance—that provided the basis for the exhilarating developments in culture and in art of which the Harlem Renaissance is one of the greatest expressions.

The Renaissance was a heterogeneous movement, encompassing artists who were politically engaged and others who were not, some who espoused a somewhat nationalistic outlook, as well as those who focused on the fight against Jim Crow and for full integration and first-class citizenship. It included those whose aim was that of joining the middle class or developing a black elite, and others who, especially as the artificial boom of the so-called Jazz Age was followed by the Great Depression, turned to the left, to the working class.

Much of this, however, is simply passed over in the present exhibition.

There is almost no mention of the political ferment that dominated the US during the 1920s and 30s. The exhibition becomes as significant for what it leaves out as for what it includes. The political and industrial struggles of the working class, the fight to build the labor movement in the 1930s, are almost entirely absent, although they were far from absent in the lives and work of some of the prominent representatives of the Harlem Renaissance. There are only two works by Lawrence, for instance, the most famous African American painter from the 1940s onward, but none from his famous "Migration Series."

The left-wing political associations of many of the artists, principally in the orbit of the Communist Party, are also entirely ignored.

Du Bois, correctly acknowledged by the exhibition as one of the key intellectual spokesmen of the Harlem Renaissance, was a founder of the NAACP in 1909, but was fired by that organization in 1948, one of the early victims of the rapidly developing anti-communist Cold War atmosphere. Du Bois' political views were inconsistent over his long life, but he insisted on the fight for equality and integration and maintained some sympathy for Marxism, and he joined the Communist Party a few years before he died.

Robeson, the most famous victim of McCarthyism, was blacklisted because of his sympathy for the Soviet Union. He also had his passport withdrawn, thus effectively destroying his career as one of the most

acclaimed bass-baritones in the world. The exhibition makes no mention of his treatment.

Catlett, the American-born sculptor and graphic artist, is also represented in the exhibition, but the lengthy caption accompanying her *Head of a Woman* (1942-44) simply concludes that "Catlett spent much of her career as an arts instructor, working throughout the United States and Mexico at a time when many other Black American expatriate artists opted for Paris." Omitted is the reality that Catlett, who went to work in Mexico in 1946, several years later was declared an "undesirable alien" by the US embassy in Mexico City. She was unable to visit her mother before she died, and was unable to return to the US until a protest on her behalf in 1971.

Hughes, another one of the half dozen most famous figures in the Harlem Renaissance, was sympathetic to the Communist Party for much of the 1930s and 40s. He was part of a group of 22 African Americans who toured the USSR in 1932. In 1953, he was hauled before Joe McCarthy's Senate Internal Security Subcommittee and grilled on his political associations. Hughes, fearing for his career, supplied McCarthy with a denunciation of communism, and for the rest of his life mostly stayed away from political subjects.

While all of these figures were tragically misled or misguided by Stalinism, essentially accepting the lie that the bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union was building socialism, their left-wing sympathies form an integral part of the Harlem Renaissance, and they paid a significant price for their political principles.

Providing descriptions of the work and role of Du Bois, Hughes, Catlett and others without mentioning their political views or victimization amounts to intellectual and historical dishonesty. The reason for this selective account of their careers is the near-universal tendency within art and curatorial circles to see culture in racial or ethnic categories, along with the disparagement of the history of the struggle for socialism.

This reactionary and bankrupt outlook finds a reflection in the rather sorry-looking, small gallery labeled "Activism" toward the close of the exhibit. The half-dozen or so works include a well-known photograph of an NAACP march in New York City in 1917 against Southern lynchings. A particularly glaring example of historical falsification is a caption for a drawing of the Scottsboro Boys by Douglas, which fails to mention that the Communist Party played the leading role in the legal defense and political campaign against this notorious racist frame-up in the mid-1930s, after the NAACP refused to touch the case.

At the same time, the indisputable impact of African folk art on European art as a whole—Picasso's *Demiselles d'Avignon* (1907) being the most iconic example—is presented only by a few drawings by Picasso and Matisse, of black sitters. The impact of African art on Harlem Renaissance artists, rather than seen as part of the broader transformation of modern art as a whole, is instead presented as more authentic in the case of African-American artists—because they were black.

The exhibition does not deny the collaboration, in subject matter and technique, between black and white artists, as in the examples of Matisse, Man Ray and others. Underlying this, however, is the idea that the aim and final destination of the African-American artists was for the most part a separate "black art," a contention belied by the actual history of the Harlem Renaissance.

By reducing the Harlem Renaissance to a movement in which "Black artists created art about Black subjects," the exhibition does a serious disservice to the international character and enduring impact of this cultural movement. In spite of these drawbacks, however, the exhibition is well worth seeing, keeping its gaps and its weaknesses very much in mind. It should be a starting point for further study of the work of the artists, writers and intellectual figures of the Harlem Renaissance.



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