

LESSON 8

TOPIC: Aaron Douglas, Hall of Negro Life muralist

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students will articulate the significance of Aaron Douglas as an artist during the Harlem Renaissance, his role in the Hall of Negro Life, and his Art History legacy.

Synopsis: Aaron Douglas was an influential artist, teacher, from the Harlem Renaissance who painted four murals for the Hall of Negro Life. He was an innovative creator of modern art that depicted the African heritage and pride of the African American following the Great Migration. His works included magazine covers, book covers, murals, and paintings. He was also a teacher at Fisk University. His style is a distinctive blend of cubism, Afro-centric subject matter, and silhouettes.

Information:

The Harlem Renaissance was a time during the 1920's and 1930's that many African Americans, to escape prejudice and poor treatment in the south, migrated to large cities in the north. This is called the Great Migration. Many ended up in Harlem, New York. As they joined together in one place, they created a community of "racial pride, social power, and the importance of African culture." As a result of this, many African Americans were encouraged to embrace their racial heritage which resulted in their history and culture being represented and celebrated through the arts.

Aaron Douglas was one of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Not only was he a painter, but he helped and encouraged other artists to attain employment during a time of high unemployment due to the Great Depression. He was one of the first black artists to use traditional African roots in his works, as opposed to mimicking the artistic ideas of White Americans and Europeans.

Douglas was born in Topeka Kansas and graduated from high school in 1917. He received his B.A. from the University of Nebraska in 1922 and moved to New York and became associated with the Harlem Renaissance. During this time, he created illustrations for various book covers and

magazines, especially *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, as well as the cover of the legendary 1926 publication of *Fire!!* In 1930 he painted murals for Fisk University, began teaching there in 1940 and founded the art department. He taught for 27 years and in 1994, Fisk University named their art gallery for him. He has been called the Father of African American Art.

One of Aaron Douglas best known works is *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*. It was painted in 1934 along with a series of 3 other large-scale murals. These murals were made possible by the Works Progress Administration and found at the New York Public Library's 135th Street branch. This four-panel mural was said to have "succeeded in underlining the urgency for African American identity."

Douglas' work was prominent at the Texas Centennial, Hall of Negro Life at Fair Park in Dallas, Texas. He created four murals for the Hall of Negro Life. The first mural (now lost or destroyed) depicted Estivanico, a Moroccan slave who is acknowledged as the first black person to live in Texas. The second mural, also lost or destroyed, was known as the "Negro's Gift to America" and featured agricultural workers on the left and the industrialists on the right bringing their gifts to Labor. All the murals were related to the advancement of the African American from slavery to becoming productive citizens in modern twentieth century cities such as Dallas. There are two remaining murals, presently known as *Into Bondage*, part of the Corcoran Gallery of Art's permanent collection in Washington, D.C., and *Aspiration*, among the collections at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco.

Into Bondage reveals slave ships in the background, figures in shackles hesitantly moving toward the ships to take them to America. *Aspiration* shows the move from slavery at the bottom of the canvas to urban industrial life.

For an excellent explanation of these two paintings, you can view and listen at:

<https://smarthistory.org/seeing-america-2/aaron-douglass-aspiration-2>

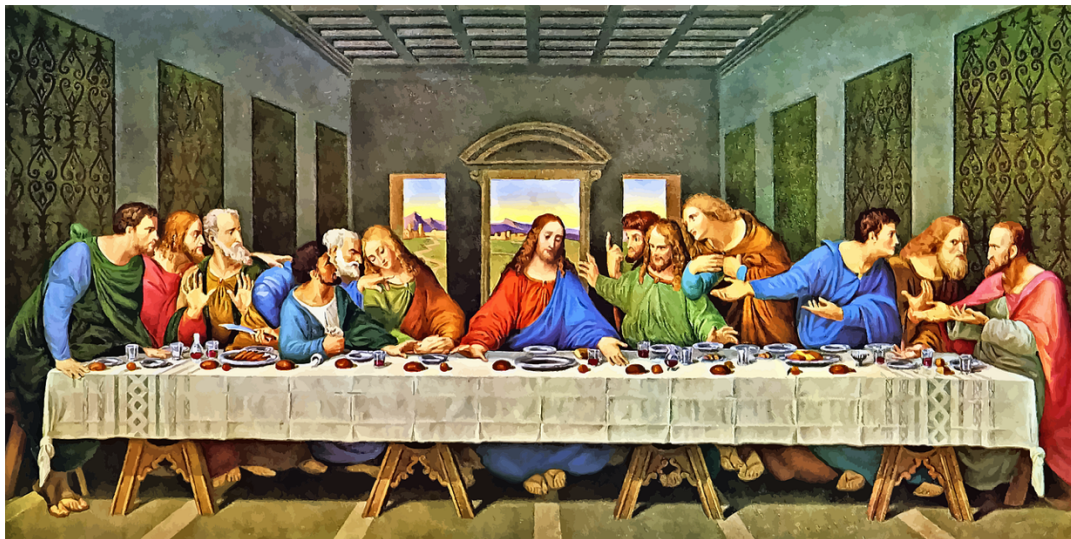
Douglas's painting style is very distinctive. The colors, radiating circles and cubist lines, diagonal lines, silhouettes, Egyptian influence, and African

themes and symbolism are features of his works. Many of the figures are looking upward to the light. To view several paintings of Aaron Douglas, go to:

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/aaron-douglas>

Aaron Douglas will be remembered as the most prominent artist-illustrator of the Harlem Renaissance. He has been dubbed the "father of African American art."

ACTIVITIES/ASSESSMENTS: Choose one to complete.



1. Analyze the characteristics of the paintings of the Renaissance vs Harlem Renaissance paintings. Determine which characteristics on the list match which painting. Place the characteristics in the correct column on the Where do I Fit table.

Characteristics of Renaissance vs Harlem Renaissance

Revive Greek Ideals

Cubism

Interest in architecture and sculpture

Often religious in nature

Symbolic and political

Scientific naturalism

Often detailed replication of a subject

Lines and circles

Silhouettes

Few details on the faces of a subject

Humanistic, interest in human body

Often involved in other art forms, sculpture.

Focused on light and looking upward.

14th-16th century

Muralist

Graphic design

Nature and serene beauty

Flat often disjointed bodies

Experimentation with new forms and shapes

African subject matter

Where do I fit?

[illegible]

2. Read the biography of Aaron Douglas and create and “interview” with him. You may perform it “live” or create a podcast to share with the class.

Biography:

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.38654.html>

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/douglas-aaron>

<https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/aaron-douglas/12039#>

REFERENCES:

Murals of Aaron Douglas

<https://usso.uk/2014/10/23/from-harlem-to-texas-african-american-art-and-the-murals-of-aaron-douglas>

<https://usso.uk/2014/10/23/from-harlem-to-texas-african-american-art-and-the-murals-of-aaron-douglas>

Magazine Covers of Aaron Douglas

<http://www.robertnewman.com/black-history-magazines-magazine-and-book-cover-illustrations-by-aaron-douglas>

Aspects of Negro Life

<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=evision>
<https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/aaron-douglas-aspects-of-negro-life>

Art and the Harlem Renaissance

<https://sejackson907.wordpress.com/2015/07/23/art-and-the-harlem-renaissance>

Artworks:

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/aaron-douglas>
<https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/aaron-douglas-aspects-of-negro-life>

Into Bondage

<https://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA03/staples/douglas/bondage.html>

Last Supper Image

<https://pixabay.com/images/search/last%20supper>

Book

Thomas, Jesse O. (1938). *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial*. Christopher Press, Boston USA.