



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume II: Immigrants and American Identity

The Harlem Renaissance: Black American Traditions

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by Patricia Flynn

Art affirms the spirit of the individual and visually interprets a historical place in time as well as reflecting the artist's place in society. A work of art viewed as an original piece in a museum or gallery or as a reproduction in a text or photographed print makes art real to many students. The art product is validated and the student usually accepts the artist as a professional. Art history is an integral part of the high school art curriculum that is incorporated into the art process(es) when appropriate. A positive racial identity joined with raising self-esteem is a significant objective in art classes. Black American Art History is covered as a broad survey in Introduction to Art classes, which ranges from the painting of Robert Duncanson (mid-nineteenth century) to Romare Bearden, the collagist and painter who passed away this past March, 1988. Standard art history texts in the high school seldom, if at all, mention black American artists' struggle for recognition. The era known as the Harlem Renaissance can provide students in semester (one half year) classes in Advanced Drawing, Advanced Painting, and Ceramics with a rich and abundant source of inspiration.

The Harlem Renaissance flourished during the 1920's in New York City. This period of unprecedented black creative activity followed World War I, and the mass migration of many blacks from the rural South to the urban centers of the North. Issues of cultural identity as well as social and political tension in a segregated culture gave rise to a flowering of the arts in Harlem. Most well-known are the published works of writers, poets, dramatists and musicians; less is known about the painters, and sculptors of the Harlem Renaissance.

A visual vocabulary became to be developed for black Americans that celebrated black American's African heritage, folklore and their daily experiences of life. For the first time black artists had a national audience through exhibitions sponsored by The Harmon Foundation founded by William Elmer Harmon, a wealthy white real estate magnate in 1922.

In any discussion of black artistic achievement in the United States, the period known as the Harlem Renaissance (1919 to 1929) inspired a spirit of creative energy and production that provided a forum for black artists. The Harlem Renaissance occurred a little more than halfway between the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862 and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The term "Renaissance" might be considered a misnomer for the Harlem Renaissance because it was more of a birth than a rebirth. Its artistic production was based upon a powerful sense of intense race consciousness and pride in black heritage and community.

In the time before the Harlem Renaissance, being a professional artist was not a choice for black Americans. Jim Crow laws in the South separated blacks from the main stream of American life. The Ku Klux Klan and

other violently oppressive white groups extended the separation. The traditions of a segregated and largely rural agrarian culture that had experienced slavery had a distinctive and rich grass-roots oral tradition, music, and religion.¹

At the turn of the twentieth century the Great Migration of blacks to Northern urban areas began. This process encouraged rural blacks of the South to make the move to Northern cities with the hope of higher pay and improved living conditions. The North symbolized freedom from the social order and political restrictions of the South.

The area known as Harlem in New York City was an upper middle class neighborhood in the late nineteenth century. As Southern blacks moved into the area, a power struggle developed between white and black capital. Whites deserted Harlem and prices of property fell. Blacks bought up the properties. By the 1920's, the two square mile area between Eighth Avenue (West) and Fifth Avenue (East), and 125th Street North to 145th Street held 200,000 blacks.²

During World War I black soldiers in Europe witnessed the appreciation of jazz, original black American music, and an interest in African cultures from the poetry of African and Caribbean poets living in Europe. The war had created a demand for workers. The term "New Negro" evolved which described proud and independent blacks living in Northern cities. The "New Negro" emerged from within the black community, in contrast to the white stereotyped literary image of the comic and pathetic plantation black. Alain Locke is acknowledged as the leading black philosopher who asked blacks to recognize their African heritage as "New Negroes".³

Alain Locke

Alain Locke was probably the foremost spokesman for artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He was highly educated as a philosopher at Harvard University, and the first black American Rhodes Scholar (1907-1910). He chaired the Philosophy Department at Howard University. His theories of black art encouraged black artists to recognize and incorporate their African heritage within their work. He powerfully wrote and lectured that African artistic heritage was at the center of the black experience. African art had made a contribution to modern art in Europe, and it should have an even deeper, and more historical meaning to black artists in America. Locke felt that black artists needed to be liberated, free to express their heritage.

Alain Locke was one of the organizers of the patronage system that provided a white audience and financial support for black artists. This controversial system, designed to make Harlem the center of black art in America, became the main paradox of the Harlem Renaissance: on the one hand it permitted freedom from the past injustices and stereotypes to assert one's self with a new racial identity, and on the other hand financial support came from white philanthropists like The Harmon Foundation. The economic concerns of the Great Depression in 1929 turned much of the white financial support away.⁴

During this era many powerful black personalities influenced the shaping of the Harlem Renaissance: integrationists W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson were opposed by the separatist views of Marcus Garvey.

W . E.B. DuBois

Many consider William Edward Burghardt DuBois the greatest black intellect and activist of the early twentieth century. W.E.B. DuBois achieved many degrees, from Fisk University (A.B.) and Harvard University (A.B., M.A. and Ph.D.), as well as study and travel in Europe. He taught at many universities and published *Souls of Black*

Folk in order to awaken black and white American to race problems. He was founder of the Niagara movement which revealed his belief in black social equality and activism. This put him in opposition to the more conservative rural ideas of Booker T. Washington, and led to the organizing of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, His contributions to the Harlem Renaissance were many.

DuBois began a black theater group in Harlem known as the Krigwa Players, began *The Crisis*, the magazine of the N.A.A.C.P., and edited by DuBois. It offered young black writers a vehicle for their ideas. Some considered W.E.B. DuBois an elitist intellectual, especially his opponents Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington. James Weldon Johnson, executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., at the time, defended DuBois' intellect and talent. In his later years DuBois became a member of the American Communist party, left the United States, became a citizen of Ghana and died there in 1963. ⁵

James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson's accomplishments and versatility ranged from diplomat, author, songwriter, lawyer, educator to civil rights advocate and mentor to black writers and artists. He received his Bachelor's degree at Atlanta University, studied law and became the first Black American to be admitted to the Florida bar. With his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, he wrote lyrics for many songs—"Under the Bamboo Tree" which came to be known as the "Negro National Anthem": "Lift Every Voice and Sing"). Not satisfied with the popular musical theater, he joined the Republican party and became United States consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua.

One of his greatest successes occurred when he became Secretary of the N.A.A.C.P. James Weldon Johnson expanded the N.A.A.C.P. with his diplomatic and tactful personality as well as his abilities as a public speaker and organizer. These qualities led to Johnson's influence in encouraging the House of Representatives to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill (1921). In addition to his writing and publishing, he felt that the quality of greatness of people would be evaluated through their art and literature. As a result he influenced the Julius Rosenwald Fund to give fellowships to Blacks in the arts. James Weldon Johnson was granted one that permitted him to write a history of Black New York: *Black Manhattan*.

After his death in 1939 plans were made to erect a memorial, designed by the black artist Richmond Barthé, at the beginning of Harlem (110th Street entrance to Central Park). Metal was not available for the monument, since it was the beginning of World War II, and the memorial couldn't be built. The funds that had been collected were used by Johnson's friend Care Van Vechten to found the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University. ⁶

Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey, unlike W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, wanted nothing to do with white America. His goal was to instill self-help and racial pride through African Nationalism. He believed that blacks could not develop and grow in a white man's country, which led to his "Back to Africa" movement. Born in Jamaica, Garvey was not permitted to work there after he participated in a printers' strike. He went to England where he studied and worked for an African-Egyptian publisher.

When he returned to Jamaica, Garvey organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association, with the goal of reclaiming Africa for all blacks of the world. Marcus Garvey corresponded with Booker T. Washington, because he wanted to establish a school in Jamaica like Tuskegee Institute. Booker T. Washington invited Garvey to the United States, but when Garvey arrived Booker T. Washington was dead and his successor Robert Russa Morgan did not agree with Garvey's plan for African Nationalism.

Marcus Garvey decided that Harlem was the place to establish his Universal Negro Improvement Association since there were so many blacks from the Caribbean there. He began the newspaper, *Negro World* and denounced any white involvement in his ventures. He urged blacks to do for themselves, and criticized the N.A.A.C.P. as an interracial organization. His appeal was to the black working class, which gave millions to the U.N.I.A. Black intellectuals derided his movement. Garvey was confirmed as the Provisional President-General of Africa and organizer of the African Orthodox Church which had a black Holy Trinity, Madonna and Christ of Sorrow. His dynamic personality and colorful presence caused many blacks to give up their life savings for his causes. At meetings and parades he wore a purple and gold uniform with a feathered helmet. His black Cross nurses dressed in white; his African Motor Corps, African Legion and Black Eagle Flying Corps wore green, black and red uniforms. Garvey founded the Black Star Line, a shipping company, that was to compete with white shipping lines and transport blacks to Africa. All of his plans fell apart due to poor money management, inadequate subordinates and lack of backing from influential American blacks. He was found guilty of mail fraud, due to improper collection of money for his shipping company, and spent two years in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Garvey returned to Jamaica for a few years, and then he moved to London, where he continued his work to regain Africa for blacks until his death in 1940.⁷

Leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, who espoused the concepts of the new Negro, encouraged black visual artists, as well as writers, to come to Harlem from across the country. Artists were guided to a new image and ethnic identity that emphasized the influence of African art, and the folk art of black Americans.

Five black artists, one woman and four men, among others contributed to the new tradition that affirmed a personal and racial identity during the Harlem Renaissance: Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, William Johnson, and James Lesesne Wells.

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)

Aaron Douglas is recognized as the best well known painter of the Harlem Renaissance. He was born in Kansas, received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Kansas, and taught in Kansas City high schools for two years.

In 1924 Aaron Douglas came to Harlem where he met the German artist Winold Reiss, a white artist, who encouraged young black artists to look at African art for its elements of design. Douglas explored African art in his painting, which brought him into contact with Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois. Locke and DuBois, both committed to the exploration of African aesthetics, gave Aaron Douglas numerous opportunities to further his career in art.

Douglas' illustrations were often found in *The Crisis* magazine, as well as in numerous other publications such as: *Opportunity*, *Theater Arts Monthly* and *Vanity Fair*. Alain Locke used Douglas' illustrations between the chapters of his famous anthology of black writers, *The New Negro*, in 1925. Locke who wanted a "Negro School of Art" in Harlem called Douglas a "pioneering Africanist".

His fame and reputation spread to Nashville (Fisk University) and Chicago where Douglas painted historical murals and paintings that related pride in black history. Douglas created a series of paintings for James Weldon Johnson's book of poetry: *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Each of his paintings was done in a flat, hard-edge style that used themes from Negro spirituals, the Bible and African and black American customs. Rectangles, squares, triangles and circles were the dominant shapes he used in his paintings, as they are found in African art and Cubism of European artists. All of Douglas' paintings utilize the black American figure almost as a silhouetted form which can be seen in the mural he painted for the 135th

Street branch of The New York Public Library (Schomburg Center). The mural is known as *Aspects of Negro Life*.

Aaron Douglas joined the faculty of Fisk University in the late 1930's where he stayed until his death in 1979. Aaron Douglas is remembered most for having been the leader in the use of African inspired themes during the Harlem Renaissance. ⁸

Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968)

Even though Meta Fuller never lived in Harlem, she espoused the concepts of the Harlem Renaissance through her sculpture. She utilized African folktales and themes as her motifs in clay, plaster and bronze. Her parents encouraged her interest in art as a child in Philadelphia. She attended the Philadelphia College of Art on a scholarship, and from there went to Paris to continue her study in art. She experienced financial problems and racial discrimination. The renowned sculptor Auguste Rodin became her strongest influence when she worked with him in Paris.

When she returned to the United States she opened a studio in Philadelphia. In 1907 Meta Fuller was commissioned to sculpt black figures for the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition. A fire in 1910 destroyed all of her sculpture she had brought back from Paris, as well as her current work. She married Dr. Solomon Fuller, psychiatrist and neurologist, and had three sons.

Meta Fuller created a sculpture in bronze in 1914 known as *Ethiopia Awakening*. It was to become a symbol of Alain Locke's "New Negro" for it captured the spirit of the soon to come Harlem Renaissance. The sculpture was of a woman separated into two parts: the lower bound as a mummy with the head of a beautiful African woman with the headdress of an ancient queen of Egypt. The sculpture expressed womanhood and black Africa. W.E.B. DuBois asked her to produce a sculpture for the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in New York. She created one of a black boy and girl.

Framingham, Massachusetts became her home after 1929 where she continued her work in sculpture, exhibited and taught students. She was praised for her sculpture which includes one named *Talking Skull*. It shows an African man kneeling in front of a skull. Her sculptural themes were highly emotional reflecting Meta Fuller's concern with life and death. Her work was shown in The Harlem Foundation exhibitions and she later became a juror for their exhibitions in New York. ⁹

Palmer Hayden (1890-1973)

Palmer Hayden, his real name was Peyton Hedgeman, was born in Wide Water, Virginia. He attended Cooper Union in New York where he studied art. Soon after he studied at Boothbay Art Colony in Maine. While he attended Cooper Union he worked as a janitor. In 1926 he won the Gold Award in the first Harmon Foundation art competition. The next year he went to Paris to paint where he lived until 1932.

He was, along with Aaron Douglas, one of the black artists of the Harlem Renaissance to use themes in his work taken from African art and black folklore. His painting *Fétiche et Fleurs* is a still life that includes a Fang mask from Gabon along with a Bakuba raffia cloth from the Congo (now known as Zaire). The use of African objects in a traditional still life painting was original and unique at the time.

Palmer Hayden painted many works that borrowed from popular images of black culture. Some criticized him for exaggerating black features, and painting scenes of everyday black life. Hayden defended his painting; that he was referring to the tragedy and comedy of a black life-style. *The Janitor Who Paints* was an

autobiographical painting since Hayden was a janitor and handyman for The Harmon Foundation.

His interest in folklore is seen in the series of paintings he did that depicted the talk of the hero John Henry. Hayden's paintings are regarded as symbols of the changes in black culture that were occurring during and following the Harlem Renaissance. Many rural blacks had come North in the hopes of finding a better life in the city. He portrayed the struggle with a positive affection. ¹⁰

William Johnson (1901-1970)

William Johnson was born in Florence, South Carolina. He came to Harlem in 1918, and became a student at the National Academy of Design. His interest in art began in his childhood through newspaper cartoons. In 1926 he traveled to Paris where he studied the European painters of the time: Paul Cézanne, Chaim Soutine, Georges Rouault and Vincent Van Gogh. He admired the expressionistic styles that he saw and applied them to his own paintings. The Harmon Foundation awarded him a Gold Medal in 1929 for his *Self Portrait* .

William Johnson traveled to Denmark where he married Holcha Krake, a potter. There he painted many landscapes that reminded him of his childhood in the rural South. He and his wife traveled to North Africa in 1932 where he studied the arts and crafts of the area. The time he spent in Africa was to influence changes in his painting style when he returned to Harlem.

He painted scenes of Harlem in a flat, geometric style. His style of painting continued to change and he became interested in black subjects and black Christianity. He painted a series of religious paintings that had all black subjects interpreted in flat shapes and brilliant color: *Nativity* , *Descent from the Cross* , *Jesus and the Three Mary's* , *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* and *Swing Low* , *Sweet Chariot*.

William Johnson traveled back and forth between Harlem and Denmark. He continued painting scenes that dealt with the social and political life of Harlem as well as black heroes and historical figures. Johnson died in New York in 1970, having spent his life portraying the black experience. ¹¹

James Lesesne Wells (1902)

James Lesesne Wells was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1902. His childhood was deeply influenced by his parents. His father was a Baptist minister in Florida. As a child, James Wells expressed his artistic abilities by stenciling designs along the lower walls of his father's church's prayer meeting room. James Wells was to use black religious themes from bible stories, sermons and hymns throughout his artistic career in teaching, painting and printmaking.

He graduated from the Florida Normal and Industrial Institute on a scholarship. James Wells received another scholarship to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, but he wanted to work for awhile to supplement his scholarship. This led him, like many other black Americans after World War I, to find work and a better life in Harlem. James Wells worked as a porter on the Hudson River Day Line. In his free time he sketched scenes along the banks of the Hudson River, and copied paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He went to Lincoln University for two years, and left to return to New York for professional art training. At Teachers College, Columbia University James Wells began his study in printmaking with woodcuts and linoleum, block printing. During this time, the late 1920's, publishing of books, magazines, journals and reviews was booming. Illustrations were needed, and Wells provided many, especially for the two leading black magazines of the time: *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. He combined an Egyptian theme with the modern art deco style in his 1928 block print *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice* . James Wells became a prolific and skilled

printmaker.

In 1929 he began his art teaching career at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The Harmon Foundation awarded him a Gold Medal in 1930. His dedication to printmaking techniques and processes were developed in lithographs, etchings, and engravings. His themes became predominantly mythological and religious printed in vibrant colors. Wells social messages, into his eighties, deal with topics such as violence, ambition, seduction and the emergence of Third World nations: *Phoenix Ascending* , *The Vamp* , *Emerging Continent* and *Salome* .¹²

Art Activities

General Objectives:

To relate and apply the art produced by five selected artists of the Harlem Renaissance discussed above to art activities in the classroom.

In order to have art students more fully understand the themes, styles and art processes the five selected artists of the Harlem Renaissance utilized in their work, they will view and discuss examples of each of the artist's work compiled by the teacher: the artists, and questions for students to complete. Following this students will complete and art project that demonstrates the artist's unique use of African and black American themes as well as design elements and medium (media).

Specific Objectives and Strategies

- I. Aaron Douglas—Painter
 - A. View examples of his paintings: Aaron Douglas. *Study for God's Trombones*, *Aspects of Negro Life* (a series).
 - B. Discuss and answer questions:
 1. What *themes* did Douglas use in his paintings?
 2. What *style* of painting did Douglas utilize?
 3. What *medium* did he use?
 - C. Art Process: Apply themes, style and medium to art process.
 1. African and black American history and religion.
 2. Geometric shapes, hard edge, silhouetted figure, light and dark values of color.

3. Paint in tempera, watercolor, or oil.
- II. Meta Warrick Fuller—sculptress
- A. View examples of her sculpture: Meta Warrick Fuller. *Ethiopia Awakening* , *Talking Skull* .
- B. Discuss and answer questions:
1. What *themes* did Fuller use in her sculpture?
 2. What *style* of sculpture did Fuller utilize?
 3. What medium did she use?
- C. Art Process: Apply themes, style and medium, to art process.
1. African folktales and themes, figure of African and black American men, women, and children.
 2. Emotional expressionistic human figures, life and death concerns.
 3. Sculpt in plaster, bronze and clay. (Clay is most accessible.)
- III. Palmer Hayden—Painter
- A. View examples of his paintings: Palmer Hayden. *Fétiche et Fleurs* , *The Janitor Who Paints* , *His Hammer in His Hand* (from the John Henry series).
- B. Discuss and answer questions:
1. What *themes* did Hayden use in his paintings?
 2. What *style* of painting did Hayden utilize?
 3. What medium did he use?
- C. Art Process: Apply themes, style and medium to art process.
1. African art, black American folklore, everyday black life.
 2. Realistic, exaggerated features, comedy and tragedy of black life.
 3. Paint in tempera, watercolor or oil.
- IV. William Johnson—Painter

- A. View examples of his paintings: William Johnson. *Self Portrait* , *Jesus and the Three Mary's* , *Café*.
- B. Discuss and answer questions
1. What *themes* did Johnson use in his paintings?
 2. What *style* of painting did Johnson utilize?
 3. What medium did he use?

- C. Art Process: Apply themes, style and medium to art process.
1. Scenes of Harlem, black subjects, black Christianity, black historical figures.
 2. Expressionistic, flat geometric, brilliant color.
 3. Paint in tempera, watercolor or oil.

James Lesesne
V. Wells—Printmaker
and Painter

- A. View examples of his prints (woodcuts and linoleum block prints): James Lesesne Wells. *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice*, *Phoenix Ascending* , *The Vamp* .
- B. Discuss and answer questions:
1. What *themes* did Wells use in his prints?
 2. What style of printmaking did Wells utilize?
 3. what medium did he use?
- C. Art Process: Apply, themes, style and medium to art process.
1. Egyptian, African, myths, religious and social messages.
 2. High contrast of light and dark, linear, brilliant color.
 3. Create linoleum blocks and/of woodcuts and print with inks.

Notes

1. David Driskell, David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis Ryan, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987), p.15.
2. Bruce Kellner (ed.), *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* (New York: Metheun, Inc., 1984), p.xv
3. Nathan Irving Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.56.
4. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1956), p.272.
5. Kellner, pp.105-107.
6. Ibid., 197-200.
7. Hughes and Meltzer, pp.270-271.
8. Driskell, Lewis and Ryan, pp.110-112, 129-131.
9. Ibid., pp.107-109.
10. Ibid., pp.131-134.
11. Ibid., pp.134-136, 153-154.
12. Richard Powell and Jock Reynolds, *James Lesesne Wells: Sixty Years in Art* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1986 Exhibition Catalogue—The Studio Museum in Harlem), pp.7-11, 34-35.

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(Exhibition Catalogue-The Studio Museum in Harlem, N.Y.)

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Materials for Classroom Use

"A Duke Named Ellington" PBS, July 18 and July 25, 1988; tape, 120 min.

(Parts 1 and 2 on the life and music of Duke Ellington).

Slides—Examples of art done by visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance: Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, William Johnson and James Lesesne Wells.

(figure available in print form)

(figure available in print form)

I. Aaron Douglas. *Study for God's Trombones* . 1926. Tempera on board, 21-1/2" x 17-1/2". From Levering Lewis.

(figure available in print form)

II. Metu Warrick Fuller. *Ethiopia Awakening* . 1914. Bronze, 67" x 16" x 20". From Levering Lewis.

(figure available in print form)

III. Palmer Hayden. *The Janitor Who Paints* . 1939-40. Oil on canvas. 39-1/8" x 33". From Levering Lewis.

(figure available in print form)

IV. William Johnson. *Café* . 1939-40. Oil on board, 36-1/2" x 28-3/8". From Levering Lewis.

(figure available in print form)

V. James Lesesne Wells. *The Vamp* . 1983. Color linoleum cuts 5" x 6-3/4". From Powell and Reynolds.

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