

The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas's Musical Art

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My subject today is Aaron Douglas and music—*the flat plane and the jagged edge*. I will survey Douglas's theorization of the relationship between music and visual art, and explore how it plays out in his use of concentric circles to structure his compositions. Zooming in, I will consider Douglas's aesthetic of smooth flatness and jagged texturation alongside that of his musical contemporary, Duke Ellington. As I make my case about Douglas, I will also reflect on one of Douglas's sons in the realm of music-inflected visual art—an important inheritor of the flat plane and jagged edge—Romare Bearden.

By way of preface, I want to urge that we interdisciplinary scholars of art campaign to return art history—which somehow has been defined outside the scope of the “back to basics” thrust of contemporary curricular studies—to the standard liberal arts course list. This campaign should radiate from art history departments as well as its allies, academic units beyond art history as such. As champions of interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship and learning, American studies and African American studies should take the lead in this campaign. These departments and programs typically have embraced literature and history (the starting-place disciplines for American studies) as well as politics, but now that these interdisciplinary fields have come of age, they must become more steadfast in their embrace of what the Greeks called *musika*: the ancient term signifying not only music but muse-inspired expression in theater and literature, dance and visual art.

This only makes sense for serious study of the American scene. For it is impossible to understand 1920s America without considering Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Katherine Dunham and Loie Fuller, Ernest Hemingway and Jean Toomer, as well as Willard Motley and Aaron Douglas. Douglas and these others should be part of the academy's increasingly broad and variegated conversation on *modernism*, American and otherwise. This year I'm using an office at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where the librarians report that by far the most requested topic among all readers, regardless of age or background, is the Harlem Renaissance. It is fair to summarize the Harlem Renaissance's political motive as simply-put but sweeping—it was nothing less than, in Langston Hughes's definitive modernist phrase, “*to make the world anew*.” I won't dwell on this sprawling subject today, but surely the continuing Harlem Renaissance, the U.S. black modern movement, has involved visual art, including movies and dance (“African art in motion”),¹ as a central aesthetic/political project.

Concerning this prefatory issue of black art and the academy, how do we as scholars help correct the longstanding inattention to African Americans' work in the field of visual arts? Notwithstanding the general acceptance of Jacob Lawrence, Douglas himself, Romare Bearden, and, more recently, Roy DeCarava and Kara Walker, the nation's galleries and museums have remained stubborn bastions of the white cultural elite. (The recent retrospective of Bearden's work at the National Gallery of Art was that institution's first one-artist show by an African American.) Perhaps the reason for this scandalous cultural lag is that supporting black visual artists requires substantial amounts of money—far more than it costs to buy records, attend concerts, go to movies, or read books. It also involves the sea-change of recognizing forms of black cultural production which are not necessarily experienced as *entertainment*.²

When it comes to the modern, scholarship across expressive and racial categories is called for: Picasso and Diaghilev, Virginia Woolf and Matisse, Ellison and Bearden, Billie Holiday and Hemingway, Morrison and Max Roach, Zora Neale Hurston and the blues, and—as we'll see—Aaron Douglas and Duke Ellington. Through their art (and sometimes directly, face to face), these artists speak to one another. Such dynamic conversation in the making of the modern is the subject of my presentation today.

My focus, as I have said, is Aaron Douglas and music. What I offer is more meditation than finished article, more improvised hypothesis than thesis. My main point is that to understand the paintings of Aaron Douglas it is imperative to remember that for him music was more than a historical subject or airy muse, it was a vital formal model³; specifically, that both Douglas's paintings and the music that moved him most involved experiments with images and textures that were—like those of Duke Ellington—at once smooth and rough: wondrously flat but also jaggedly edged.

No discussion linking visual art and music can have meaning without a warning sign up front, a bright line forbidding the easy equations of the dilettante. How, we should begin by asking, is a painting by Douglas—or any other visual artist—*not* like a piece of music?⁴ The classic answer is that certain forms of art, including music and drama, exist by definition *in time*, while painting and the plastic arts exist *in space*. Is it not also true that the different forms of expression stimulate different parts of our brains and bodies? Douglas's paintings are *not* the same as poetry or music, and recognizing the borders separating the arts helps us appreciate all the better both the integrity of each form as well as their sometimes overlapping and porous edges: the points of visitation and juncture.

Well warned, then, let's start by looking at *Song of the Towers* (Figure 1) by Douglas as we also listen to the Negro spirituals "Good News" and "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel" as recomposed by Douglas's friend the modern composer William L. Dawson.⁵ Here the temptation to see the music and to hear the painting is very strong. Note the highly organized sections of these musical performances, their multiple moving parts; their insistently percussive pulses, their incentives to dance (to dance a holy dance before the Lord, church people might say); and note in particular the music's circular repetitions, particularly in "Ezekiel," where the words themselves call for "a wheel in a wheel, 'way in the middle of the air.'" As if to underscore the circularity of form, at one point the sung words dissolve into a rollicking turn of sung syllables, a wheeling chant. Surely it is not a stretch to see in Douglas's painting every one of these elements—the complexity of organization (you could turn this painting upside down and the structures as a whole would still be balanced and otherwise aesthetically alluring), the dance beat-oriented movement, the playful rippling of circle inside circle. Douglas helps us *see* the church song's resounding "*wheel in a wheel, 'way in the middle of the air.*"

Such comparisons of Douglas's art to music remind us of the critical language and motives shared by all the arts: all involve rhythm, line, color, figure, style.⁶ The arts of what Robert Farris Thompson calls the Afro-modern idiom,⁷ where music is the most common touchstone, all typically involve call-response (which Romare Bearden has brilliantly termed *call-recall*), swing, and improvisation. The work of Douglas (and Bearden) enacts these definitive characteristics.

But before turning again to any specific Douglas painting, let us ask how, broadly speaking, a piece by this visual artist might be compared to a piece of music. Here, Stephen Henderson's classic definition of *saturation* offers the most productive place to start.⁸ The black American communities where Douglas grew up and found his voice as an artist, both in the Midwest and in New York, were *music-centered*. In sacred and secular settings, women and men, working-class and otherwise, were not only influenced by music, but also washed in the ubiquitous flow of musical sound: culturally speaking, they were saturated with it. Further, as he came of age, Douglas witnessed the emergence not just of jazz music, but of a multi-faceted new cultural *style*: dress, language, dance, and literature were part and parcel of this U.S. jazz culture. "Regardless of how

good you might be at whatever else you did," reported Romare Bearden of 1930s Harlemites,

you also had to get with the music. The clothes you wore, the way you talked (and I don't mean just jive talk), the way you stood (we used to say stashed) when you were just hanging out, the way you drove an automobile or even just sat in it, everything you did was, you might say, geared to groove. The fabulous old Harlem Renaissance basketball team, like the Globetrotters that succeeded them, came right out of all that music at the Renaissance Casino.⁹

"Nor," adds Bearden's friend the writer Albert Murray in an essay on the artist, "were the Globetrotters unrelated to the fox trotters at the Savoy Ballroom. . . . When Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got That Swing* came out, Bearden was eighteen and very much the fly cat about town."¹⁰

In the mid-1920s, Douglas also was "on the scene" in Harlem, and "hanging out" with a multitude of gifted people who knew what it was to "get with the music" (to be, culturally speaking, "*stashed*"). Here such colloquial terms as "on the scene" and "hanging out" need to be redefined in terms of their practical value to the working artist, particularly to the young artist-in-training as he or she seeks footing and direction. For these phrases describe more than social camaraderie, as important as that can be (for all of us); they refer to the mutual mentoring of cultural workers who share a concord of sensibilities and a will to support one another's projects as they work/play together in the stirring and structuring of new ideas.¹¹ Being *on the scene* in this sense was a key part of Douglas's education as an artist, and particularly as one oriented to music as a source and model. Douglas's mentor Alain Locke touted the wide acceptance of jazz music as an example of what the African American visual artist could achieve. In the words of Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, Locke

. . . jabbed, goaded, and held up the popularity of jazz as an inspiration. Jazz musicians were basking "in the sunlight and warmth of a proud and positive race-consciousness" while "our artists were still for the most part in an eclipse of chilly doubt and disparagement."¹²

It should not be overlooked that the Harlem music scene of the 1920s comprised a highly spectatorial culture or—in the marvelous phrase of one cultural critic¹³—it was a *runway culture*: from the church-house to the house of blues, Harlem was a highly musical sphere that was splendid to hear as well as to see and be seen in. Harlem stride piano player/composer James P. Johnson eloquently revealed certain aspects of this 1920s "runway culture" when he told an inter-

viewer that Harlem “ticklers” typically strode into a nightclub with an arresting degree of visual drama:

You never took your overcoat or hat off until you were at the piano. First you laid your cane on the music rack. Then you took off your overcoat, folded it and put it on the piano, with the lining showing. You then took off your hat before the audience. Each tickler had his own gesture for removing his hat with a little flourish; that was part of his attitude, too. You took out your silk handkerchief, shook it out and dusted off the piano stool. Now, with your coat off, the audience could admire your full-back or box-back suit, cut with very square shoulders. The pants had about fourteen-inch cuffs and brodered clocks. Full-back coats were always single-breasted, to show your gold watch fob and chain. Some ticklers wore a horseshoe tiepin in a strong single-colored tie and gray shirt with black pencil stripes . . . Of course each tickler had his own style of appearance. I used to study them carefully and copy those attitudes that appealed to me.¹⁴

In his paintings and drawings, Douglas recorded a variety of aspects of this U.S. black “runway culture”—including its will to “flourish” and its “attitude.” Indeed, with his oils and canvases this artist *made records*. Here the play on words refers not only to his experience as one who literally designed at least one image for an album of black music—a wonderful Folkways album of modern renditions of Negro spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers (about which, more later).¹⁵ What I mean to emphasize is that in his paintings Douglas made a visual record of performers and spaces where the music was featured in his time, North and South: at cabarets and theaters, at outdoor gatherings, at churches, and on work-gangs where the music was a balm in Gilead. This is the kind of visual rendering of singers, instrumentalists, and instruments to which Douglas referred in an important unpublished lecture on music and painting, evidently a gallery talk.¹⁶ Writing with intensity and focus that made clear his own investment in the project of translating music into visual terms, Douglas said that in the European Renaissance,

we find performing singers singing . . . [as soloists] and in groups as well as musicians performing on every type of instrument known at the time, harps of all descriptions, organs, flutes, horns and drums. Singing angels or seraphims and cherubims are always included in the heavenly hosts encircling the enthroned image of God the Father on the apse of the early Christian churches. Again and again we find this

type of representation in the frescoes of Giotto, Fra Angelico, Botticelli and other master painters of the early Renaissance.¹⁷

Among the other Renaissance depictions of musical scenes which Douglas cites are Titian's "Three Musicians," Giorgione's "Concert Champetre," and Tintoretto's "Marriage at Cana." In his own work (in Harlem's own renaissance), Douglas followed these painters' example, and made art that carefully recorded musical subjects and scenes, as well as the moods and values these images suggested.

While Douglas's musical scenes evoke characteristic historical places, he is interested in revealing them not as loci of local color but as sites of a larger (and perhaps universal) ritual drama wherein the musicians are leaders of their community. In *Song of the Towers*, the saxophonist is a chiseled heroic figure lifting his saxophone as if it were a royal scepter or trident as he leads a processional dance from an African past to a new life in Harlem. Elsewhere, Douglas's cabaret and jook-joint scenes bring to mind Albert Murray's definitions of such public dance spaces as ones where musicians "stomped the blues," i.e., purified the dance-floor of trouble and discord (at least for as long as the party was underway) as they invited ritual participants to revelry, courtship, and fertility—to community-wide celebrations of the black group.¹⁸

In *Song of the Towers*, and many other works, Douglas depicts jazz not as a country but a city music, soundtrack to the energizing hurry and din of modern urban America. The historian John A. Kouwenhoven has written eloquently of Manhattan's skyline as one of *the* definitive American images, the one matching jazz music's insistent cadences with its steady grid of streets, and jazz's soaring solos with skyscrapers that seemed to climb forever.¹⁹ "What is jazz?" an interviewer once asked Thelonious Monk. "New York," was the often-enigmatic pianist/composer's deadpan reply.²⁰ Asked to clarify, he repeated his answer: "New York." The composer/reedman Sam Rivers told an interviewer that New York City—with its sirens and car horns, flashing lights, multiple voices, and incessant thrumming rhythm of activity—was itself a musical instrument.²¹ In many of his paintings, Douglas the recorder of culture offers visual proof of the citification of jazz. A whole set of his musical works, canvases, and wall paintings as well as drawings—some of them for book and magazine covers along with musical programs and at least one record jacket—are set against a modern Manhattan skyline. And as Douglas painted the musical city²² he recorded *attitude* as well as physical presence. He captured some of the typical stances (physical as well as aesthetic and philosophical) of musicians and listeners alike.

In his superb lecture on music and painting, already cited, Douglas says that after the efforts by European artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to depict musical culture by portraying musicians and their instruments—a process I have called "recording"—there was a lengthy lull during which the painting of musical subjects went out of fashion. What followed, in Douglas's account, were nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists who took the music/painting project into the modern period by attempting not only "the illustration and interpretation of

[musical] subject matter” but also the translation into visual terms of the *forms* of music itself—its sound and structure. In this more ambitious project of formal translation, says Douglas, “we find a genuine and conscious effort to probe into the much deeper relationships between painting and music.”

According to Douglas, James McNeill Whistler is the champion of this nineteenth-century search for visual equivalents of music. Ignoring the standard warnings against mixing music and painting, Whistler sought to understand unifying principles, “the haunting, elusive, but ever-present universality at the roots of all our art forms.” Douglas the lecturer’s language becomes increasingly figurative as he reaches for words to express Whistler’s quest to imbue Impressionist painting with the principles of musical form. “To the shimmering, fragile, broken contours of the Impressionists’ form,” writes Douglas, Whistler “adds a fusing, drifting, relationship between the contours and patterns, recalling the fusion and drift that is a natural aspect or characteristic associated with musical forms.”

Nor, in Douglas’s view, was the music-painting influence flowing only in one direction. If Whistler’s paintings were compelled by music, so too were the nineteenth-century composers Debussy and Cesare Franke inspired by the “new and revolutionary work” of the Impressionist painters. These young composers sought ways to translate the colors and rhythms of the exciting new painters into the arena of the concert hall.

And then—continuing with Douglas’s account—enter the twentieth century moderns—those who set the stage for his own entrance as an artist. “The Cubists were especially active in their efforts to bring to realization a closer harmony or coordination between music and painting,” he writes. While Braque and Picasso “divided, subdivided and turned [images of guitars and other musical instruments] in all possible ways,” other modernists like Piet Mondrian and Casotti moved beyond the Cubists’ reorientation of conventional subject matter in favor of a “modern pictorial language” that disclosed “something of the very essence of contemporary music—especially the jazz forms.” Consider Mondrian’s signature jazz canvases, which did not depict musicians or musical scenes per se—though some of his maplike oil-on-canvas works did suggest the city as a jazz site—but sought to evoke the music itself with lines and colors that created a sense of musical theme, variation, rhythm, and color.

Here Douglas defines the challenge of the modern visual artist as a quest for abstract and spiritual revelation, in the realm of the here and now. This search is not only for the most radical understanding of the principles of the plastic arts—which in this lecture Douglas defines as “opposition, transition, rhythm, repetition, domination, variation, alternation, and continuity” and then “lines, tones, color, and texture,” but also is a quest for “correspondences or analogies between these arts and music.” And such a modern mission seeks the common ground where the world’s art forms, and its peoples, have historically met. “The use of line in the arts of the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Persian peoples gives one the impression that it is always drawn with a kind of rhythmic response to

the total life of the people.” Particularly among non-European peoples, says Douglas, we find “that there has always existed a closer relationship between the arts than is apparent today”: Asian art from Persia to Korea maintains “a unity in [its] sweep and movement that we are just now beginning to understand and appreciate in Western lands.” This is the aspect of Douglas’s project that I have termed “spiritual”: the move beyond representationism toward modern forms of painting that would reflect the motives and practices of all the art forms, and music in particular, and which would sound the depths of art history across the continents.

How, then, to speak of Douglas’s own musical paintings not as mere “records” but as works that share forms with music as they reflect this quest for a radical, global expression shared by all the arts? His strategy, in the words of Nathan Scott, was to seek the universal “through the narrow door of the particular.”²³ And so—perhaps following the lead of Harlem Renaissance leaders like Alain Locke, who felt black music was the vanguard among the new Afro-arts—Douglas took modern settings of the Negro spirituals and the complex shapes and turns of the then-new music called jazz as guides for his pictorial art. Douglas found both the spirituals and jazz (which, in Locke’s view, formed “one continuous sequence of Negro music, being just different facets of the same jewel”²⁴) to be inspiringly attractive in structure—at once wondrously simple and magnificently complex. “Ezekiel Saw de Wheel,” like “Good News,” is divided and subdivided into carefully articulated sections that cohere and repeat in beautiful shapes and patterns. “I tried to keep my forms very stark and geometric with my main emphasis on the human body,” said Douglas. “I tried to portray everything not in a realistic but [an] abstract way—simplified and abstract as . . . in the spirituals. In fact, I used the starkness of the old spirituals as my model—and at the same time I tried to make my painting modern.”

No less than the Negro spirituals, most jazz of Douglas’s era was structured by choruses that repeated in a cyclical pattern. The compositions of such early jazz masters as Jelly Roll Morton and Joseph “King” Oliver—with their vamps, riffs, choruses and outchoruses, breaks, and solo spaces (where, in the case of Morton, sometimes the solos were painstakingly written out in advance)—were modern masterpieces of organization and engineering. Take Morton’s “Kansas City Stomp” as an example, or look at the orchestral scores of Duke Ellington, most with fourteen or more parts written out in A, B, C, and D (and frequently more) sections. It is particularly fascinating to observe these complexly sectioned and layered pieces compressed into the miniature time-frames of the 78 rpm records, perfectly cut gems that are rarely more than three minutes long.

Likewise, in piece after piece Douglas geometrized his work not into cubes and triangles but into concentric circles, curving rainbows, and rippling bands. He was very precise about measuring these structuring curves, as is clear from the drawings in his Harlem address book/sketch book, c.1920s-60s. In one example from the book, a family looks out upon a world divided into a repeating pattern of curving arcs and other geometrical shapes, evidently measured and numbered

with the greatest care. (Might he have been thinking of an arrangement of a spiritual by his friend Dawson or of the rhythmically repeated sections of a work by Morton?) Bearden, who frequently spoke with the older artist about matters of composition, said that Douglas typically commenced working on his murals by putting these circles in place. “In his murals,” writes Bearden, “Douglas first arranged a series of concentric circles expanding from a fixed point, much like the reverberations from a pebble thrown into a still pond. He then superimposed figural elements over the circular design.”²⁵ Gerald Early has suggested, too, that as Douglas sought new ways to record music in visual imagery he may also have been inspired by the new technology of the audio-recording—with its revolving cylinders and then its rotating flat disks of shellac, into which narrow wavy music-grooves had been cut.²⁶

Start looking for these concentric circles in Douglas, and one finds them everywhere. Whether they suggest, in the language of the spirituals, the “rainbow sign” of God’s people; levels of religious, philosophical, or political consciousness;²⁷ the ripple and flow of the body’s pulses or of the tides of humanity—perhaps emphasizing some sense of African continuities²⁸—these concentric bands help define Douglas’s work. Their rhythmical repetition through most of his paintings gives them a natural and supernatural aspect, and underscores their sense of musicality. Even when music per se is not their direct subject, they suggest the music of the spheres.

These concentric circles, wheels in wheels, structure Douglas’s picture plane. Yet within that plane we find a play of liquid smoothness *and* jagged texturation. I will turn to the jaggedness in a moment, but for now, on the question of smoothness; we may understand it, in part, as a modernist assertion of the flatness of the picture plane. Douglas’s signature work followed the lead of many modern painters—most notably Picasso, Matisse, and Braque—who turned from the centuries-long experiments with perspective to an aperspectival view of flat surfaces. Douglas’s decision to present the human figure as a featureless (or virtually featureless) silhouette against a flat background of other shadowy forms could be a full-dress essay in itself. May it suffice to say here that he was aware (through Alain Locke’s writings in particular)²⁹ that making his paintings flat connected him not only to the European moderns I have named but also to the traditional arts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Bearden and Henderson noted Douglas’s debt to the flatness of certain ancient Greek art as well:

Douglas’s lively, flat black silhouettes impressed many publishers, editors, and artists but upset some academically trained African-American critics. Few realized that he was impressed by the classic black silhouettes on Greek vases, such as *The Return of Hephaistos*, a masterpiece by Lydos in the sixth century B.C. . . . Utilizing black silhouettes and reducing objects to their basic shapes, as in Cubist paintings, he created relationships among the flat figural groups that have

a rhythmic movement similar to that in Greek vase painting.
Sometimes these figures were dancing.³⁰

Douglas's aesthetic of flatness provided the kind of radical link he spoke of in the music/art lecture to which I have referred, a defining characteristic of the art of painting: whatever else a painting may be, it is an image on a flat surface. Making such images that exulted in their flatness connected Douglas with his African heritage and with the arts of the world, ancient to modern. In the words of Alain Locke, "Both modernist art and African art are . . . nearer the common denominators of world art, and whoever understands them has a master key to the art expression of humanity at large."³¹

In the spirit of Douglas's project of finding common ground among all the arts, I would suggest that for art, literature, and music, the modern moment was, in a sense, a moment of radical flatness. In the realm of painting, as we have seen, the elaborate imagery and drama of the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists was followed by the understated aperspectival work of the Cubists. Inspired by the flat geometric stylizations of African and Asian artists (and, Bearden says, in the case of Douglas, also by the ancient Greeks), certain European moderns also undertook an art of subtraction and compression. In literature, the case is equally clear. After the magnificently elaborated fiction of Jane Austin and Charles Dickens, and then, later, of Herman Melville and Henry James, the twentieth-century modern impulse was to elaborate no more—rather to cut back radically to the foundations and floorboards of literary form. Thus we find the spare lines of Ernest Hemingway and Langston Hughes—examples of flatness after a period of efflorescence and expansion.

Something like this will to flatten out and start over also occurred in music. After the symphonies and quartets of Beethoven, what more was there to say? Some of the musical strains of modernism that followed in the wake of Beethoven included minimalism to the point of silence, and, on the American scene, the re-discovery of the spare lines of church hymns and jubilees, and the understated but dynamically suggestive eloquence of the blues—traditional forms which would become the basis for so many works by Ellington and other jazz composers.

It is Ellington's particular brand of musical flatness that I want to emphasize here. I define Ellington's flatness less as a spare approach to composition than as a smoothness of musical tone. Ellington's musicians—particularly his reed and horn players—were virtuosos at creating a relentlessly smooth sound, free of any textured rasp or graininess. This made for a music that was, at times, gloriously, splendidly flat—as level and even as the surface of a perfect gemstone, and as liquidly smooth as cashmere and silk. What is flatter, in this sense, than Ellington's "I Got it Bad and That Ain't Good," with Johnny Hodges's saxophone smoothly jetting upward like one of Manhattan's midtown towers? What flatter than the colloquy of section-work, typically played in unison (the "chords" flattened to single notes) by Ellington's reeds and brass on such works of the 1920s as "Black and Tan Fantasy" and "Birmingham Breakdown?" (Here the Tuskegee

choir's unison singing also could be described as evocatively flat.) The flatness celebrated here is by no means the same as "slickness," which implies a facile or "easy-listening" aspect. I refer rather to the chiseled or fine-spun flatness, an exuberance of flatness which, in combination with the complex division of form discussed already, makes for a classic sound, one as multifaceted and pristine as a diamond. I refer to the sense of flow that Robert Farris Thompson associated with so many of the dances of Africa, with movements sufficiently "smoothed and finished [to] . . . shine and become brilliantly visible . . . Smoothness is thus identified in unified aesthetic impact; seams do not show, the whole is moving towards generous conclusions based on total givings of the self."³²

I choose the Ellington analogy with care. For this composer is known not only for his magnificently smooth and flat walls of sound but also for his roughed-up surfaces, his jagged edges. Ellington, who hand-picked his players and wrote especially for them, chose musicians who could play with ethereal smoothness as well as with a graininess and grumble which, in the earliest years of the band, defined what was called his "jungle" sound. (For a prime example, listen to Ellington's "The Mooche," first recorded in the 1920s and then rerecorded in an even more complexly evocative new arrangement of 1966.) No early jazz orchestra experimented more with plungers and mutes than Ellington's, as he sought these textures of sound that varied the sonic weave of his compositions—the jaggedly edged contrasting with the unerringly smooth.

From Bubber Miley and Johnny Hodges to Cootie Williams, Ben Webster, and (in the vocal department) Al Hibbler, all Ellington's greatest soloists could perform with smoothness beyond belief, but they could growl and shout, too—sometimes in different sections of the same piece. Newcomers to the band typically had to learn this aesthetic of the dramatically contrasted rough and smooth. The reed virtuoso Jimmy Hamilton almost always played with a delicate liquid smoothness on his principle instrument, the clarinet, but when he picked up the tenor saxophone, he projected a thick, burly raucousness. Part of what is meant by the phrase "the Ellington sound" is precisely this rich variation of texture: the flat plane and the jagged edge. Listen to "Creole Love Call," which features Kay Davis's crystalline soprano voice above the cascading waves of reeds—topped by Hodges's creamy alto; note that Ellington decides to blast through these flat surfaces with Cootie Williams's burnished blade-like growl-trumpet, whose notes seem violently torn from the horn. Flat surface, jagged edge: each intensifies the effect of the other.

Likewise, Aaron Douglas's highly musical flat paintings and drawings, for all their flatness, often have a fiercely jagged edge—a bristling Ellingtonian edge, one might say. Like Ellington's, this artist's work is at once flat and edgy. Consider again Douglas's *Emperor Jones* series. Here *Defiance* (Figure 2) and *Flight* (Figure 3) are especially potent examples of this combination of flat and textured effects—this although the work is not about music per se at all. In this light, consider also *Sahdji (Tribal Women)* with its complex Cubistic organization, its rhythmical repetitions of human shapes, its loops and triangles, its overall sense

of movement. Note in particular the work's flatness, as usual with Douglas, but also the way that the wavy and jagged images grant the work a third dimension: an edge one imagines could swing out, sculpturally, from the flattened plane. Douglas used these sharply edged lines—often occurring in foliage but also in skylines and elsewhere—to turn the roughed surface to its side, to create a lateral jaggedness. In his way, without layering his flat images (as Bearden would do), Douglas gave his work what Bearden called—in another fascinating cross-media term—a sense of *volume*.

It is in certain Douglas masterworks which are explicitly about music that the artist's dedication to the musical aesthetic of the smooth plane and the jagged edge speaks most eloquently. Consider Douglas's splendid design for the cover of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' album. Here is a typical Douglas work, luxuriating in its aesthetic of flatness. And yet the work's Art Deco-style vegetation (one of the aspects marking piece as "Afro-Deco," in Richard Powell's fine phrase)³³ albeit flat against the plane, gives the work a jagged-edged dimension. These silhouetted leaves, with their serrated edges, seem on the verge of bursting the two-dimensional plane; likewise, the palm-like fronds seem to nod out of the front of the flattened space, as if in accord with the singers, who are straining their voices toward heaven.

The subject of Ellington and his "jungle orchestra" of the 1920s suggests another important aspect shared by the composer and the painter. True to the thrust of the Harlem Renaissance, Ellington and Douglas both sought to portray Africa as faithfully as possible, and to celebrate it as an ancestral homeland and continuing source of pride and inspiration. But in the 1920s neither man had actually been to Africa, and, despite all best intentions, both responded to what has been called an African imaginary, an "Africa" largely comprised of fanciful imagery, not excluding racist myths. This was most emphatically true of Ellington in this early period, when his orchestra was a fixture at the Cotton Club—a club named in honor of the glorious days "when cotton was king" in the "dear old southland" and decorated in an Afro-Deco style whose exaggerations involved strong elements of racial caricature. Ellington's "The Mooche" reflects the exotic heat of that (virtually) all-white uptown club, whose over-the-top "African imaginary" drama is described by Marshall Stearns with biting humor:

The floor shows at the Cotton Club, which admitted only gangsters, whites, and Negro celebrities, were an incredible mishmash of talent and nonsense which might well fascinate both sociologists and psychiatrists. I recall one where a light-skinned a magnificently muscled Negro burst through a papier-mâché jungle onto the dance floor, clad in an aviator's helmet, goggles, and shorts. He had obviously been 'forced down in darkest Africa,' and in the center of the floor he came upon a 'white' goddess clad in a long golden tresses and being worshipped by a circle of cringing 'blacks.' Producing a bull

whip from heaven knows where, the aviator rescued the blonde and they did an erotic dance. In the background, Bubber Miley, Tricky Sam Nanton, and other members of the Ellington band growled, wheezed, and snorted obscenely.³⁴

Nor should it be overlooked that Ellington's relationship with the Cotton Club audience was complex in ways that sheds light on Douglas, whose magazine covers traveled into thousands of white homes as well as black homes. While Cotton Clubbers lost themselves in fantasies of "Africa" and the "Land of Cotton," Ellington maintained a sense of audience beyond those who sat in front of him. By the late-1920s, these shows were routinely broadcast via national radio connection. One thing this meant was that jazz musicians in Harlem—banned from the club itself—could listen in from home or in local watering-holes. "Immediately after our early broadcasts," recalls baritone sax player Harry Carney, "we'd run on down to the corner of 131st and Seventh, where all the musicians used to hang out, and get their reactions." In this process of facing multiple audiences, Ellington made music that was deep with irony. Ralph Ellison compared this aspect of Ellington's art to that of those American slaves who, gathered outside the plantation house windows to watch their master's Europeanized dance steps, answered with steps revealing "their own special flair." As he writes,

The whites, looking out at the activity in their yard, thought that they were being flattered by imitation, and were amused by the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps, while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of a people partially sprung from Africa. So, blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply.³⁵

In the midst of what Ellison sees as a dynamically Americanizing process, listen for the mimicry and mockery in Ellington's music—and sometimes in his spoken comments on it. Asked about one of his large compositions of the 1960s that was based on Africa, Ellington said with a wink that he'd "been doing African music all my life." The maestro was connecting his more complexly Afro-centric 1950s and '60s concert pieces like the *Liberian Suite*, the *Togo Brava Suite*, the Senegalese Suite (*La Plus Belle Africaine*) with the 1920s Cotton Club "Mooche," with its notes of affirmation and aggressive mockery sounding through the surfaces of the stereotyped drama.

Douglas's "African imaginary"—evident in the *Emperor Jones* series and elsewhere—recalls Ellington's reach for the real Africa through the circus-mirror of mythology. Perhaps there's a bit of an ironical wink that goes with Douglas's presentation of "Africa," too. It does strike me that Ellington's "The Mooche" could serve as a soundtrack to some of these "jungle" pieces by the painter.

Douglas forged his aesthetic of flatness in a crucible which included the era's new literature and the new music of Harlem, where flatness (call it cool smoothness) reigned supreme. This aesthetic was confirmed in the modern painting of his era and in his investigations into the history of global art. On the day when someone brilliant tries to play Aaron Douglas's paintings—the flat musical scores full of loops and rainbowlike bands of light and jagged edges turned sideways—I want to be there. I predict a sound something like Ellington's—something alto saxophone smooth through the middle, something flat, but also with the jagged growl of the trumpet sounding at the edges.

I will close with a word about Romare Bearden, who called Douglas the “dean” of African American painters and who may be fairly described as Douglas's most apt student or artistic son. In many respects, Bearden's work flows from Douglas's: in its presentation of panoramic views of black American history—from African backgrounds through the present; in its uses of narration; in its uses of music-makers as subjects and of music as a model for form and practice. (There is a short film of Bearden dancing to the music of the Modern Jazz Quartet while improvising a painting with a fellow artist, Herbert Gentry.) One also sees in Bearden's process of working some of Douglas's impulse towards collaboration (consider Douglas's series of drawings based on the poetry of Langston Hughes and Bearden's series based on Derek Walcott)—something which also could be called *jazzlike*. In Bearden's many musical collages, one feels Douglas's influence in the aesthetic of the flat plane and the jagged edge that is accentuated here. Note that even in his *Odysseus* series of the late 1970s, a sequence in collage based on the Homeric epic, Bearden employs these Douglas/Ellington artistic forms and strategies. In so doing, Bearden, like Douglas, evokes the flat paintings on ancient Greek pottery, the stylized flatness of African and Asian art, the experiments of modernists Picasso, Matisse, and Mondrian. And like Douglas, Bearden also reaches for a third and fourth dimension to his work: aspects at once flat and jagged, black and universal, visual and musical.

Notes

For this conference, I want to offer my sincere thanks to this wonderful museum and to the University of Kansas, and especially to this conference's visionary leader, my beloved friend Billy-Joe Harris, and to his wonderful assistant, Stephanie Knapp. A large measure of thanks and praise also to Billy's wife, Susan K. Harris.

1. This phrase comes from Robert Farns Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; and Los Angeles: Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, 1974).

2. For this point I am indebted to Emily J. Lordi, Columbia University graduate student in English.

3. In an unpublished manuscript, Douglas wrote about his early efforts to use black music as a model: “I shall not attempt to describe my feelings as I first tried to objectify with paint and brush what I thought to be the visual emanations or expressions that came into view with the sounds produced by the old black song makes of antebellum days when they first began to put together snatches and bits from Protestant hymns, along with half remembered tribal chants, lullabies and work songs.” Quoted in Richard Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, D.C.: Project for the Arts, 1989), 35.

4. This argument about the integrity of each art form is spelled out by Susanne K. Langer, in *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1953).

5. See the William Levi Dawson Papers. Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Manuscript Collection No. 892.
6. This point is explored and orchestrated in Kurt Sachs. *The Commonwealth of Art: Style in the Fine Arts, Music and the Dance*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1946).
7. See Thompson, "Afro-Modernism," *Art Forum* 30 (September, 1991): 91-94.
8. Henderson, "Introduction: The Forms of Things Unknown," *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: Morrow, 1973), 62-66.
9. Quoted in Albert Murray, "The Visual Equivalent of Blues Composition," *The Blue Devils of Nada* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 123.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Eventually, Douglas's own home would become a salon where a young artist could meet "everybody," and where a broad continuum of music-oriented artists, including Bearden and many others, were nurtured. See Romare Bearden, "A Final Farewell to Aaron Douglas," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 24, 1979, 66.
12. Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 124.
13. This phrase, and the insight it represents, belong to Michaela Angela Davis; from a conversation with the author at the Romare Bearden Foundation on 16 September, 2008.
14. "Conversation with James P. Johnson" by Tom Davin (1955), in *Jazz Panorama*, ed. Martin Williams (New York: Collier Books, 1964), 57-58.
15. *The Fisk Jubilee Singers, Directed by John W. Work*. Folkways/Scholastic record FA/SA 2372, 1955.
16. Thanks to Stephanie Knapp for sending me this hand-written lecture, from the Franklin Library, Fisk University.
17. Aaron Douglas, Unpublished Lecture Notes. Fisk University. Special Collections, Franklin Library, Box 3, Folder 13.
18. Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976).
19. Kouwenhoven, "What's American About American Culture?" in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 123-136.
20. Robin D.G. Kelley on Monk, in conversation.
21. Brent Edwards mentioned this as he interviewed Mr. Rivers at Columbia University, 9 October, 2007.
22. See Donna Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).
23. Scott, "Afro-American Literature," *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979 c. 1980).
24. Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 70.
25. *History of African-American Artists*, 130.
26. Mr. Early made this suggestion during the Aaron Douglas conference where this paper was given.
27. See Marissa Vincenti, "Aaron Douglas, Gurdjieffian Thought, and the Expression of 'Conscious Art,'" *International Review of African American Art* 21 (Fall, 2007).
28. One thinks of the ring-shout, and of the rippling water imagery often used by Douglas's mentor, Alain Locke, to describe African American musical impulses and influences. See Locke *The Negro and His Music*, 72ff.
29. Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 34-42.
30. *History of African-American Artists*, 128, 133.
31. *Negro Art: Past and Present*, 41.
32. Robert O'Meally, *Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 364.
33. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997). Powell defined Douglas's debt to Winold Reiss's "Afro-Deco" vocabulary not in terms of the presentation of vegetation per se but of "chevrons, mask-like designs, and bold color juxtapositions," 44-45.
34. Stearns, *The Jazz Story* (New York: Oxford, 1956), 183-184.
35. Ellison, "Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday," *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert O'Meally, (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 77-86.

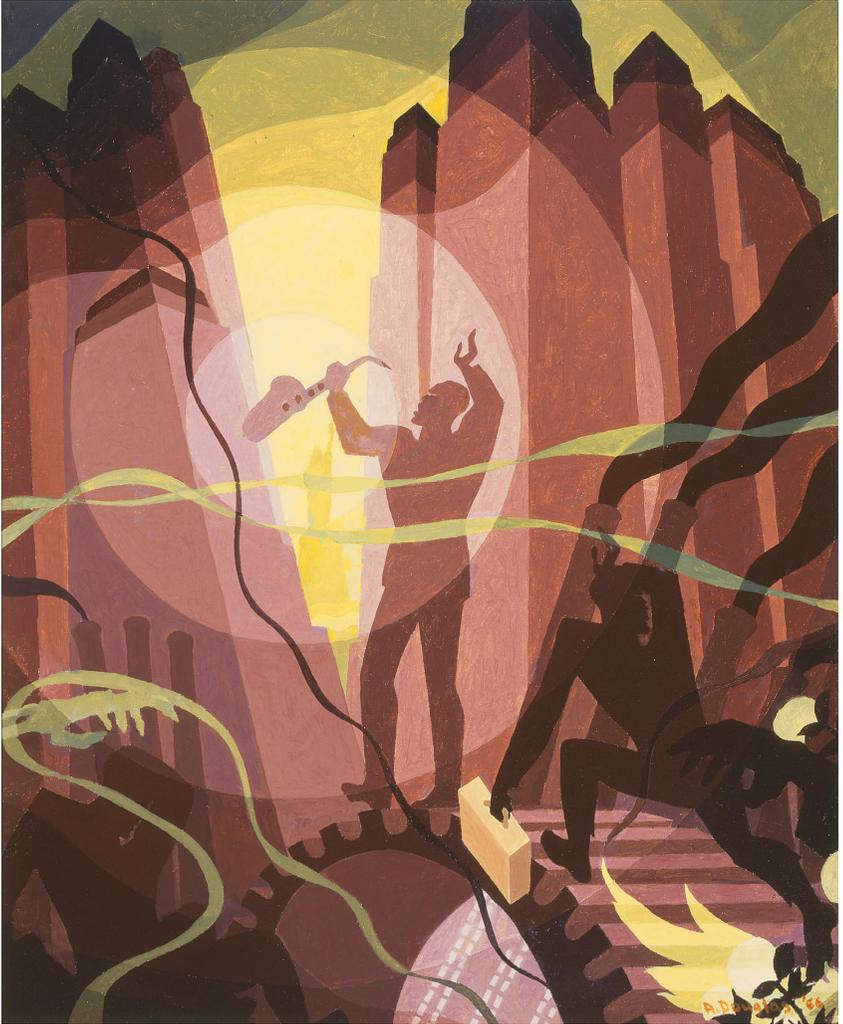


Figure 1: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Song of the Towers*, 1966. Oil and tempera on canvas, 25 1/4 x 20 3/8 in. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum, Lent by State of Wisconsin, Executive Residence, Madison WI L1.2006. Photography by John R. Glembin.



Figure 2: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Defiance*, from *The Emperor Jones* series, 1926. Woodblock print on paper. Courtesy of Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, New Jersey.



Figure 3: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Flight*, from *The Emperor Jones* series, 1926. Woodblock print on paper. Courtesy of Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, New Jersey.