

# The Vigilant Torch of an Olympian Painter<sup>1</sup>

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## SPARK

*Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine. Then in later years when I came to Nashville I saw the great temple builded of these songs towering over the pale city. To me Jubilee hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.<sup>2</sup>*

Jubilee Hall is the heart and soul of Fisk University—the symbol of its aspirations, vessel of its ideals, the architectural-hub of its history. Sheltered by the winding Cumberland, she has withstood the marching onslaught of so-called progress for nearly one and a half centuries. She is a hearkening icon of stability begotten by an engendered vision of sacrifice and inclusion. Jubilee embodies the realization of the hopes and dreams of Black Americans. She has passively witnessed the transient ebb and flow of human events as mirrored in the shifting sea of faces, minds, and ideas that have coursed through Fisk. Those of sympathetic ear can still hear the frozen music that is Jubilee Hall above the fray of modern life. She resounds with the majesty of everlasting hymns, unshaken

by the stutter and mounting brevity of time collapsed into space; unwavering by the reign of quantity that presently engulfs us.

## LIGHT

*In order to understand a culture it is necessary to love it, and one can only do this on the basis of the universal and timeless values that it carries within it. Nothing brings us into such an immediate contact with another culture as a work of art, which, within that culture, represents, as it were a "center." This may be a sacred image, a temple, a cathedral, a mosque, or even a carpet with a primordial design. Such works invariably express an essential quality or factor, which neither a historical account nor an analysis of socio-economic conditions can capture. These centers can convey to us immediately and "existentially" a particular intellectual truth or spiritual attitude, and thereby grant us all manner of insights into the nature of the culture concerned.<sup>3</sup>*

The work of Aaron Douglas is such a center, a magnetic pole that attracts, distills and anchors our consciousness as Jubilee Hall does. His creative imagination is a rock of ages in a deep river of song, a nourishing wellspring from which many have drawn inspiration and found solace. The commanding power of his public murals and collaborative book illustrations is simultaneously rooted in the epitome of both democratic and socialist ideals. It is an art of the people, by the people, for the people; yet it is also illuminated propaganda, a powerful chronicle of the black experience from the perspective of the Diaspora. Heavily influenced by the Pan-African manifestoes of Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois, by the New Negro philosophy of Alain Locke and by the political stance of the Mexican muralists, Douglas became a seminal figure in the revolutionary espousal of a visual public education for the black masses. His works of art fulfilled the need for uplift and empowerment for a folk barely a generation or two removed from slavery, utterly bound to the yoke of tenant farming, oppressively menaced by the talons of Jim Crow and awakened by the veiled nightmare of migratory hardship under the heel of industrial capitalism.

Armed with an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pertinent facts and figures concerning the true origin and development of the arts and sciences, Douglas disseminated compelling and dignified images of blacks—a defiant reprisal to the proliferation of minstrel stereotype and invisibility that permeated American society. While he primarily addressed the urgent needs of his own community, Douglas was also determined to quell the rising tide of misinformed public sentiment that upheld racism as the status quo. His semi-abstracted heraldry sanctioned a modernist expansion of blackness on its own peculiar terms, emphasizing the enduring residuals of African ancestry as both a

replenishing fountain of pride and an exemplary model of self-determination. Douglas championed the appointment of under-known black contributions to and influences on aspects of the life, culture and construction of the United States to their rightful place—merited prominence in the diverse tapestry that comprises American history. This remarkable multi-dimensional almanac of the Afro Atlantic still remains an authoritative and fortifying pronouncement of contemporary black culture. Aaron Douglas’s art heroically transcends the Harlem Renaissance that dates it. His timeless imagery spans class and enfolds generations because it is ever brilliant and relevant.

## FIRE

*. . . O Negro slaves dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air;  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes  
An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery,  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery.<sup>4</sup>*

The source of noble anonymity and lingering significance in the art of Aaron Douglas can be traced to his all-embracing worldview of sacred art traditions. Based primarily on the principles and devices of ancient Egyptian painting and medieval Christian iconography, his work fuses the old and modern into a utopian vision meant to impart a new outlook on art. Through the economy of silhouette and a monochromatic palette, Douglas augments panoramic scenes of black life that grapple with the synthesis of dynamism and simultaneity. We find ourselves in the midst of a refracted dispersion of space, wherein one senses the interplay of its coordinates to be drawn vertically upwards towards the heavens and the abode of the gods; horizontally backwards so that the acts of the ancestors can be perpetually reenacted<sup>5</sup> and projecting outward from the depths of magnetic epicenters that summon us to embark upon a transcendent path of heightened awareness. Douglas’s murals and paintings also share a fundamental characteristic with sacred art in that they are dedicated to a higher purpose than mere aesthetic beauty. While the harmonically shaded concentric circles are indeed layered dials of compositional emphasis that measure varying densities of time and space, they are also cosmic gateways to multiple states of being in the fourth dimension. Just as in the masterpieces of the iconic tradition, these “aureoles” as it were, are vehicles of numinous transfiguration (*mysterium fascinans*) from the opacity of our waking reality to the ethereal realm of contemplative action.

It is here that Douglas insists that we remake ourselves so that we might enter into mystical union with the becoming of his art as opposed to being passive analytical witnesses to it. Only then will we be able to fully assume the roles that

we are called upon to play in his universal theatre of beckoning responsibility. Total immersion in the world of Aaron Douglas allows us to truly absorb and to reflect both the atmospheric embodiment of his shadowy characters as well as the performance of their creative deeds—the muscular communion of fire, steel, and ringing hammers of blacksmithing; the centering soul of basketry and pottery; the ministry of ritual practices, materials, and light metaphysics of conjure and grave decoration; the cumulative power of repetition announced by the dramatic cadence of the preacher; the angular bodily gestures and expressive hereditary postures of ancestral dance and mime; the acculturative exercise of patterning and assemblage that appears in the arts of quilting and architecture; the improvisational invention extant in the evolution from ritual music to work songs to blues to black art music; as well as the canonic perpetual choir of Negro spirituals, which glorify the righteous passage from slavery to freedom, plantation to paradise, from time to eternity.

### EMBER

*My eye conversed whilst my tongue gazed; my ear spoke and  
my hand listened; and whilst my ear was an eye to behold  
everything visible, my eye was an ear listening to song<sup>6</sup>*

Aaron Douglas joined the faculty at Fisk University in 1937 and ran the art department until his retirement in 1966. He was still active as Professor Emeritus when I enrolled as art major in 1971. His pervasive influence on the cultural atmosphere of campus prevailed in his magnificent 1930 mural cycle in the administration building (formerly the Cravath Memorial Library), several *Oval* yearbook covers and page illustrations, as well as a myriad of brochures and special program announcements. Unlike the darting movements of his white-maned colleague Arna Bontemps, Douglas strode at a suspended, leisurely pace. He appeared to be the source of ethereal concentric circles, which displaced everything in their path with the gravitational force of a mighty sphere. Professor Douglas himself, however, was a humble man who shunned fame and glory. He was uneasy when either he or his work were the focus of discussion, preferring instead to know who you were, what ideas you had to offer and what you were doing to realize them.

I always pestered him with a flurry of questions at every occasional art opening in the Van Vechten Gallery or at chance encounters on campus and public buses that he often took to downtown Nashville via Jefferson Street. When I enthusiastically blurted out to him my aforementioned theory about the cosmic nature of his concentric circles, he merely replied, “Yes, they have that effect, yes.” He consistently downplayed his achievements as legendary relics of the past. When I extolled the importance of his *Emperor Jones* woodblock print series (Figures 2-3) to the history of American Theatre, he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, “Oh! I still have some of those. You can have a set

of them if you want.” Professor Douglas always saw things in a positive light. When I openly expressed disdain for the seeming lack of fundamental skills in the expressionist paintings of young Haitian artist Winston Branch, he countered that they were the most colorful things that he had seen in a while. On another memorable occasion, I happened upon him at the library—one of his favorite haunts. Douglas was uncharacteristically animated, unbridled from his usual cool. In his hands was an illustrated volume of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. He thumbed through the color plates and pointed out to me that each of the images of Lord Krishna were different from all of the other deities—he and only he was depicted with blue-black skin and wooly hair. Douglas then lowered his head to a nod, raised his eyebrows, looked me in the eye and without uttering a word slowly walked away. I later learned that the word “Krishna” was also Hindi for “the black.”

### ASH

*Behind each artist there stands a traditional sense of style, a sense of the felt tension indicative of expressive completeness; a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world. It is something which the artist shares with the group . . .*<sup>7</sup>

There are other graduates of Fisk University who were far closer to Aaron Douglas than I was. In addition to his successor David Driskell, they should be considered as invaluable resources for further study on Aaron Douglas the man and his thought. Most notable among them are photographer Robert Sengstacke of Chicago and filmmaker Johnny Simmons of Los Angeles. Mr. Sengstacke has boxes of taped interviews with countless hours of intimate discussions that he made on many late night visits to Douglas’s apartment. Bobby has informed me that among other things, Douglas imparted to him a detailed plan for a black monopoly on the supply and distribution of our cultural products to the world, especially during the periodic clusters of ripe flowering. Mr. Simmons can speak pointedly about the experience of working shoulder to shoulder with Aaron Douglas on the restoration of his 1930 mural cycle in 1970. Simmons and Sengstacke are but two of perhaps several others who harbor important testimonials that could possibly shed new light upon yet uncovered aspects of Douglas research.

While Richard Powell insightfully names Jean Toomer as Aaron Douglas’s lesser known cohort and literary counterpart, much more needs to be done in examining the depth of their mutual affinity. Douglas’s geometrical tendencies are foretold by the aesthetic structure of *Cane* in that the intersection of printed arcs that precede *Karintha*, *Seventh Street* and *Kabnis* form an incomplete circle. Furthermore, the nomenclature in *Cane* is a complex labyrinthine sub plot that has visual concordance with the multivalent layers of image, scene and meaning

in Douglas' murals and paintings. For instance, the strange spelling of the title of the poem *Rhobert* reveals it to be an anagram for "Brother." In *Blood Burning Moon*, the last name of Bob Stone and the first four letters of Tom Burwell when combined (as their tragic joint affection for Louisa suggests that they should be) spell "stone tomb," a possible testament to Toomer's grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback and his New Orleans roots. In the complex "*Box Seat*," the first names of both protagonists, Mrs. Pribby and Mr. Barry, are not given and their family names contain double consonants followed by the letter "y."<sup>8</sup> Toomer's influence as a devout proponent of the systematic teachings of Georges Gurdjieff partially accounts for Douglas's exposure to eastern beliefs of suprasensory perception, and other transcendental spatiotemporal concepts. The Aaron Douglas and Jean Toomer papers were both gifted to the Fisk library and, along with the Stieglitz Collection, form a triadic phalanx of collective vision that intended Fisk to be a bastion of avant-garde art and intellect. Let us continue this unfolding research, for the story of Aaron Douglas and his influence remains an open book.

## TORCH

*My body is opaque to the soul. Driven of the spirit, long have  
I sought to temper it unto the spirit's longing, But my mind,  
too, is opaque to the soul. A closed lid is my soul's flesh-eye.*

*O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger; Direct it to the  
lid of its flesh-eye. I am weak with much giving. I am weak with  
the desire to give more. (How strong a thing is the little finger!)*

*So weak that I have confused the body with the soul, And the  
body with its little finger.  
(How frail is the little finger.) My voice could not carry to you  
did you dwell in stars,*

*O spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger.<sup>9</sup>*

In an age where information is more important than knowledge; where quantity overwhelms quality; where image often veils a lack of substance; where the billionaire is the hero of modern life; where the intrinsic value of art is obfuscated by the degree to which it is absorbed by the gigantic; where mediocrity is propped up as genius, the work of Aaron Douglas still triumphantly speaks to the modern world. We return to him repeatedly for a motivating summary of our contributions to the struggle for liberation and justice because his work continues to address the needs of a community still in crisis. The Jena 6 are the Scottsboro Boys; the prison system is the new plantation; black voters remain disfranchised by gerrymander and thuggery; public education remains a separate but unequal sham; police brutality and forms of lynching persist while the opportunity for

creatively empowering the global influence of America's urban black community has been squandered on insidious posturing, buffoonery and mysogyny. May the urgent, dignified imagery of Aaron Douglas that recalls his devotion to and love for his people continue to inspire, renew and rally us to action—may they be as emblematic as Jubilee Hall or the words of W.E.B. Du Bois. It is these icons that have continued to propel us to bear the weight of our rich legacies into the twenty-first century. Let them not be forgotten in this present epoch of hasty amnesia and commoditization. As we celebrate the singular vision of Aaron Douglas, let us carry forth the vigilant torch of an Olympian painter that illuminates the passageway to the future.

## Notes

1. Parts of this essay were published in "Notes on the Precious Few A.D.," *Journal of Black Studies*, 35, no. 2 (2004): 224-230.
2. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Blue Heron Press, 1953).
3. Titus Burckhardt, *The Essential Titus Burckhardt*, ed. William Stoddart (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2003).
4. Jean Toomer, excerpt from "Song of the Son" in *Cane* (New York: Boni And Liveright 1923): 21.
5. Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Space," *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).
6. Umar Ibn Al Farid ob. 632/ 1235 verse 580 from his *Ta'yya*, in the *The Legacy of Islam*, eds. Thomas Walker, Arnold, and Alfred Guillaume, (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 210.
7. Ralph Ellison, "Introduction" in *Shadow and Act*, (1964; rpt. New York: Signet, 1966), xiv.
8. Terry Adkins, "Nomenclature as Labyrinth in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," unpublished essay, 1999.
9. Jean Toomer, "Prayer" from *Cane*, 131.



**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.