

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist: The Exhibition, the Artist, and His Legacy

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On September 8, 2007, the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, opened the first nationally traveling retrospective to commemorate the art and legacy of Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), the preeminent visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* reaffirmed his position in the annals of what remains the largely white epic of American modernism and focused new attention on lesser-known facets of the lengthy career of the indefatigable artist. The retrospective of nearly one hundred works in a variety of media from thirty-seven lenders, as well as its accompanying catalogue, conference, and myriad complementary programs, declared the power of Douglas's distinctive imagery and argued for the lasting potency of his message.

This essay provides an opportunity to extend the experience presented by *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* during its fifteen-month tour. Beginning at the Spencer Museum of Art and continuing on to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, and Washington D.C.'s Smithsonian American Art Museum, the exhibition closed on November 30, 2008, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. Many of the works that were gathered together for the traveling retrospective with the purpose of showcasing Douglas, his role in American modernism, and his enduring legacy are discussed in this essay. Additionally, to acknowledge that rare is the artist whose work may truly be understood when divorced from the context in which it took root, the

art that composed *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* is presented here in tandem with key biographical elements. Knowledge of Douglas's life experiences, passions, and the routes he traveled in order to achieve his clearly defined goals enhance the appreciation of his *oeuvre*.

Presented chronologically and thematically, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* offered a compendium of half a century of Douglas's artistic achievement. The narrative detailing the native Midwesterner's monumental career recounted by the exhibition commenced with a seemingly quotidian object, a yearbook. Revelatory of Douglas's intrinsic abilities while only an eighteen-year old senior at Topeka High School, the 1917 yearbook cover with its distinctive typography surrounding a stylized sunflower motif not only discloses Douglas's Kansas roots, but also his latent modernist tendencies and avant-garde design sense. Easily overshadowed by the power of his mature work on view in the exhibition, the 1917 *Sunflower* cover nevertheless unassumingly foreshadows the development of Douglas's signature style that earned the artist great acclaim and for which he is immediately recognized today.

Following his graduation from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 1922 with a bachelor of fine arts degree, Douglas quickly realized that “the joy of sitting around with an empty stomach in a studio filled with unpurchased pictures held little glamour and no satisfaction.”¹ In the fall of 1923, he accepted a position as an art instructor at the elite, segregated Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, where he led seventy students through classes in drawing, painting, stenciling, and batik and served as a mentor to the Art Club.² In March of 1925, while still in Kansas City, Douglas poured over a special issue of *Survey Graphic* dedicated to “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.” This issue, edited by one of the architects of the New Negro Renaissance Alain Locke, chronicled the Harlem boom that was precipitated by African American intellectuals, writers, musicians, and artists flocking to a little known part of upper Manhattan roughly two-square miles in size.³ As the poet Langston Hughes so eloquently wrote, “Harlem was in vogue,” and the vibrations of this phenomenon traveled all the way to Douglas in the center of the country. “I can’t live here. I can’t grow here,” Douglas avowed. “[Kansas City] is not the way the world is. There are other places where I can try to be what I believe I can be, where I can achieve free from the petty irritations of color restrictions. I’ve got to go, even if I have to sweep floors for a living.”⁴ He was inspired by what he read in the *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* and especially the March issue of *Survey Graphic*. Further motivation came in the form of persuasive letters from acquaintances already living in New York. Douglas resigned his teaching position at Lincoln High School and headed East in June 1925.⁵

Remembering his initial impressions of Harlem, Douglas recalled:

There are *so many* things that I had seen for the first time, so many impressions I was getting. One was that of seeing a big city that was entirely black, from beginning to end you were

impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things and here was a black city and here was a situation that was eventually to be the center for the great in American Culture.⁶

In awe of the modern dynamism of New York, the unparalleled opportunities presented there, and the ambitious, interdisciplinary cadre with whom he became rapidly acquainted, the ever pragmatic Douglas developed a strategy for “solid attainment” in which he aimed to “avoid cheap and premature notoriety.”⁷ He carried out that plan with the aid of a two-year fellowship at the art and design school of German émigré Winold Reiss. While still in Kansas City, Douglas had admired Reiss’s sensitive portrait of the singer Roland Hayes that graced the cover of the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*. He also credited Reiss with an astute appreciation of the influence of African art on modernism. Reiss, concurrently a commercial and fine art success as was to be his pupil’s destiny, inspired Douglas during private weekly critiques. Echoing the directive espoused by Locke in his essay “Art of the Ancestors” that urged African Americans to lay claim to their profound African heritage in order to create art that would bring a new dimension to black America’s cultural identity, Reiss encouraged Douglas’s emerging tendency to blend motifs derived from African traditions with European modernist trends, and to utilize this rich *mélange* as the foundation for his work. This fertile equation grew increasingly evident as Douglas refined the distinctive style with which his name would soon be synonymous. This style comprised boldly flattened silhouettes that occupied complexly fractured spaces and were overlaid with transparent layers of geometric atmosphere. “Blackness”—both in terms of his palette and as a conscious evocation of race—was at its core.

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist showcased a diverse body of work that emphasized Douglas’s vital role in inscribing the Harlem Renaissance with an inimitable visual aesthetic. Early allusions to the style eventually equated with Douglas were given a wide audience in the freelance work he undertook for *Opportunity* just a few months after his Midwestern exodus. Additionally, Locke published six of Douglas’s Afro-cubist illustrations, including the ink and graphite *Sahdji (Tribal Women)* (1925) on view in the exhibition, in the first edition of his influential anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (Albert and Charles Boni, 1925). Notably, for this tome that functioned as a *de facto* manifesto for the fledging New Negro movement, Douglas’s illustrations marked the only graphic contribution to the volume made by an African American.

Douglas’s innovative style gained further exposure through a series of collaborative ventures with poet and fellow Kansan Langston Hughes that were also highlighted in the exhibition. In 1926, *Opportunity* offered to its subscribers a limited-edition portfolio of six blues-based poems by Hughes accompanied by starkly rendered, rhythmic illustrations by Douglas (Figure 21).⁸ The *Opportunity Art Folio* demonstrates Douglas’s deft ability to cultivate a vital synergy between text and image. Hughes and Douglas also joined forces with other key artists and writers of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance to produce *FIRE!! A Quarterly*

Journal Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists (November 1926). As its strategically chosen title implies, the journal's creators predicted that it would inflame the passions of subscribers and metaphorically burn down the strictures of the more conservative cultural set. For *FIRE!!* Douglas created a striking ancient Egyptian/Art Deco hybrid cover image in deep red and black as well as three whimsical line drawings depicting a waitress, an artist, and a preacher. The inaugural issue of the journal was also its last. *FIRE!!* was largely ignored by white critics and broadly disparaged by members of the African American press.⁹

In addition to emphasizing Douglas's contributions to popular, progressive periodicals and *The New Negro* as well as his important early collaborations such as the *Opportunity Art Folio* and the powerful, albeit short-lived *FIRE!!*, the exhibition underscored the resonance and agency of Douglas's sophisticated artistry as it was recognized by the coterie of literary luminaries who dominated the New Negro Renaissance. Several exceptional and rarely seen dust jackets designed by Douglas in the late 1920s through the early 1930s for books by Hughes, Claude McKay, and Wallace Thurman, among others, were included in the exhibition and revealed how Douglas's imagery was disseminated as a trademark of the era. His vivid brand of modernism was readily available to readers in libraries and in their homes on the covers and throughout the pages of several books that have since become canonical. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* included original art for illustrations to complement the work of authors from across the Atlantic as well, as with three of Douglas's "profound" and "disquietingly unanswerable" chapter-opening gouache and pencil illustrations for *Black Magic* (William Heinemann Ltd, 1929), the English translation of the French author Paul Morand's sensational fictional travelogue *La Magie Noire*.¹⁰

An explicit goal of the exhibition was to reassemble the best known alliance of images and text in Douglas's career: his gouache on paper illustrations for James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (Viking Press, 1927), in addition to his subsequent reworking of those motifs as large format oil on Masonite paintings (Figures 22-23). As Douglas's reputation grew, Johnson quietly admired the artist's work. In the spring of 1927, he requested that his publisher commission Douglas to illustrate his forthcoming volume. Johnson believed that the modern energy and unique aesthetic of Douglas's hard-edged style would make his free-verse poems based on the folk sermons of southern African American preachers more appealing to a contemporary audience. Douglas accepted the commission and dynamically visualized Johnson's verses with a monochromatic palette, a compressed and layered use of space, and an economic use of recognizable symbolic elements. For the eight illustrations—five of which were represented in the retrospective in the form of a study, an original gouache, or a later oil on Masonite version—Douglas appropriated from African sculptures and seamlessly merged his forms with references to the sort of symbolism inherent in Negro spirituals. The result was an insertion of visual cues connoting "blackness" into Johnson's biblical references. Douglas also incorporated into his vignettes a Cubist vocabulary and

hallmarks of modernist abstraction. It seemed that Douglas had invented a new style, prompting *Time* magazine to christen him a “race futurist.”¹¹

The collaboration between Johnson and Douglas earned praise. Locke, writing for *Survey Graphic*, extolled Douglas for the manner with which his illustrations “enhance the book and vivify its message,” and provided the reader “in an entirely sublimated, abstract way a background of sense and feeling in which there is this great, timeless, everlasting primitive folk-quality.”¹² In a review of *God’s Trombones*, Douglas’s hometown newspaper, the *Topeka State Journal*, predicted great future success for the native Kansan: “These illustrations are remarkable for their originality, their poetry of conception and their appropriateness to the text. They stamp Mr. Douglas as one of the coming American artists.”¹³

Douglas did not make a name for himself only through commissions to augment the written word. As *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* affirmed, some of Douglas’s most significant works were, and remain, his murals. In 1929, while on a summer trip from New York to Topeka with the purpose of sharing his recent achievements with family and friends, he received a telegram that detailed the desires of Dr. Thomas Elsa Jones, president of Nashville’s Fisk University, for a mural cycle to adorn the new campus library.¹⁴ The following spring, Douglas assumed the role of an artist-in-residence at Fisk and commenced work on studies for the murals that he would eventually paint on canvas and affix directly to the walls of Erasto Milo Cravath Memorial Library.¹⁵

As evinced by the three gouache preparatory sketches included in the exhibition, Douglas possessed a clear vision for the emblematic narrative he wished to relate in the mural friezes designed for the library’s second-floor reading rooms. Executed in a pared-down, abstracted mode reminiscent of the perspective and proportions typifying ancient Egyptian wall paintings, these studies reveal Douglas’s interest in African American contributions to labor and industry as well as the musical gift of Negro spirituals, from which he so frequently took inspiration. With the aid of South Carolina portrait painter Edwin Augustus Harleston and four novice assistants, Douglas also painted large allegories of science, poetry, drama, and philosophy with broad, flat masses of color that integrated classical references with abstract elements and dominated the niches of the library’s card-catalogue room. Friezes recounting black progress throughout the ages and across the continents inspired Fisk students in the reading rooms, while monuments from around the world appeared in murals in the periodicals room. Scenes of African life decorated the Negro Collection room. “To say that the murals are modern is to come as near as possible to a description of their style,” Douglas told readers of the *Fisk Herald*.¹⁶

Each of Douglas’s major mural cycles was represented in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* through either preliminary sketches, the digital video *Rhythms on the Wall* (2007) in the case of *in situ* murals, or by the murals themselves when executed in a manner that allowed them to be portable. Small-scale preparatory studies for the friezes at Fisk, for Douglas’s *Birth o’ the Blues* (1930) realized as a photomural for Chicago’s fashionable College Inn Room at

the Sherman Hotel, and for murals he designed later in his career for private homes in Wilmington (1942) and Hockessin, Delaware (1963), not only expose clues relating to the artist's working method, but also demonstrate the wide-spread and enduring popularity of his aesthetic. *Rhythms on the Wall*, a commissioned digital video by Madison Davis Lacy, professor of theater and film at the University of Kansas, blends archival footage with contemporary images to document the *in situ* murals at Fisk. This project, created with assistance from University of Kansas students Britt Bradley and Freddy Rhoads, also provides a visual record of the recently restored *Evolution of Negro Dance*, a mural reverberating with musicality that Douglas painted in 1933 for the Young Men's Christian Association at 180 West 135th Street in Harlem.¹⁷

It was Douglas's fully-realized transportable murals, however, that served as the locus of *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*. In 1934, Douglas painted four oil on canvas panels that continue to stand as paramount in his *oeuvre*. Known collectively as *Aspects of Negro Life*, all four murals, along with three preparatory studies, were lent to the exhibition and rightfully served as its centerpiece (Figures 24-26). Commissioned by the Public Works of Art Project, a federal relief agency under the Works Progress Administration, and executed for the auditorium of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem, the epic *Aspects of Negro Life* murals chart a progression that begins in Africa and continues across the Atlantic to present vignettes of slavery, Reconstruction, the Northern Migration, and the Great Depression. It is in this mural cycle that Douglas integrated into the stylized vocabulary he employed to express his customary message of hope some of his most distinctly political messages and overt social criticism. The murals include ghostly images of mounted Ku Klux Klan members, an aftermath of a lynching, as well as traces of Marxist theory that Douglas and many others in Harlem were studying in the mid-1930s. Shortly after *Aspects of Negro Life* was unveiled, Douglas shared with a reporter from the *New York Amsterdam News* that he had been "bolshevized by conditions" and claimed that if he could have painted a fifth panel for *Aspects of Negro Life*, he would have depicted black and white workers unified in class struggle.¹⁸

In addition to *Aspects of Negro Life*, the exhibition featured Douglas's tribute to the former slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman (1931). Commissioned by Alfred Stern, son-in-law of philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, for Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Tubman mural is a collage of the past, present, and future. Through the evocation of the woman who led more than three hundred slaves to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad, the silhouetted figures and abstract geometries of the mural comprise a history lesson. Simultaneously, Douglas attended to contemporary realities with the inclusion of a modern dreamer who, in his words "looks out towards higher and nobler vistas."¹⁹

Two years after painting *Aspects of Negro Life*, Douglas executed a second large-scale, four mural cycle at the behest of the Harmon Foundation. The two extant panels of the four-part oil on canvas series painted for the lobby of the

Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas were reunited for *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* along with a photographic reproduction of one of the two now lost murals. For this commission, the Harmon Foundation prescribed that Douglas relate the history of African Americans from slavery through the present day. The murals were so popular that many white visitors to the Hall of Negro Life asserted that it was inconceivable that they could have been executed by an African American. To combat these allegations, the exposition organizers added the following statement to the lobby wall: "These murals were painted by Aaron Douglass [*sic*], Negro artist of New York City."²⁰ *Into Bondage* (Figure 19) and *Aspiration* (both 1936), the first and final panels in the narrative, were loaned to the retrospective. They present, respectively, the enslavement of African men and women awaiting the arrival of a slave ship and a universal message of hope and promise that might be attained through the rigors of education.

The following year, in 1937, Douglas returned to Fisk University and visited Alabama's Tuskegee Institute and Dillard University in New Orleans with the aid of a one-year fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. While fulfilling his proposal to the Foundation to paint "interesting people and places" throughout the southern United States, he served as an artist-in-residence at all three institutions before joining the faculty at Fisk as an assistant professor of art education in the spring of 1938.²¹ *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* included work that encompassed Douglas's nearly three-decade tenure as a professor of art at the renowned historically black college. It aimed to shed light on his artistic production from the 1940s through the 1960s that had been largely relegated to the shadows in other considerations of his career. The exhibition gathered together examples of Douglas's work ranging from traditional portraits in oil and charcoal, to etchings and experiments in enamel undertaken following courses completed in the summer of 1955 at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, to a record album cover for the acclaimed Fisk Jubilee Singers (c. 1955), a watercolor painted while Douglas traveled in West Africa in 1956, as well as a 1966 reworking of the fourth panel of *Aspects of Negro Life, Song of the Towers* (1934), for the Madison residence of the Governor of Wisconsin (Figure 1).

In the spring of 1966, Douglas stepped down as chair of the art department at Fisk. In a letter written upon his retirement to the vice president of the university, James R. Lawson, Douglas articulated his guiding principal:

Because of my training and experience I have always tried to hold to a program which looked at art from the viewpoint of the studio, the artist, the worker. I have always endeavored to present art to our students as an objective toward which the majority of mankind has expended some of its best thoughts, feelings, and labor since the beginnings of recorded history.²²

Douglas's deeply felt responsibility as an educator underscored all aspects of his long career and was a perceptible current throughout *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*. A keen appreciation of world art and the reverberations of history, pride in his African heritage and the contributions of African Americans to all realms of society, and a dual awareness of the significance of the past in light of hopes for the future served as the basis for the lessons of racially conscious, socially significant artistry that Douglas imparted. Whether delivered in the more traditional setting of the classroom, or offered under the aegis of an expanded notion of public art—such as his murals and his contributions to journals, dust jackets, and books—Douglas's philosophies were and remain transformative.

An appropriate coda to the retrospective was the inclusion of art by Douglas's contemporaries and students. A 1948 ink on paper drawing by Richard Bruce Nugent and a later collage (1982) by Romare Bearden each reflect Douglas's influence in both their form and their content. *Nefertiti* (1989), a mixed media and brass repoussé panel on board, by Gregory Ridley, one of Douglas's students at Fisk, echoes the inspiration Douglas found in ancient Egypt that he likewise encouraged his students to seek. In her quilt *Jazz Storm* (2006), Fisk alumna Viola Burley Leak recast her teacher's silhouetted forms, concentric circles, and interest in jazz to respond to the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, verifying the impact Douglas has on generations of artists to this day.

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist

Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence: September 8–December 2, 2007; Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville: January 18–April 13, 2008; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.: May 9–August 3, 2008; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York: August 30–November 30, 2008.

Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist was organized by Susan Earle, Curator of European and American Painting and Sculpture at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence; and coordinated by Stephanie Fox Knappe.

The exhibition was accompanied by a fully illustrated volume of the same title published by Yale University Press in association with the Spencer Museum of Art in 2007 with contributions by Renée Ater, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, David C. Driskell, Susan Earle, Robert E. Hemenway, Amy Helene Kirschke, Stephanie Fox Knappe, Richard J. Powell, and Cheryl R. Ragar.

Notes

1. Aaron Douglas, "An Autobiography," typescript, 10, box 1, folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Franklin Library Special Collections, Nashville. (Hereafter Douglas Papers, Fisk).

2. According to the description of the Art Club published in the 1923–24 annual of Lincoln High School, this was the first academic year for the school to have a full-fledged art department. "Mr. A. Douglass [*sic*], our instructor, with seventy students of this department have worked ardently

under adverse circumstances to make a creditable beginning and to lay a good foundation for a promising future." *Lincollian* (Kansas City, MO: Lincoln High School, 1923–24) unpaginated.

3. See *Survey Graphic* 6 (March 1925). In a speech given late in his life, Douglas recalled that this particular issue of *Survey Graphic* with its essays by Locke, Albert Barnes, and W.E.B. Du Bois; poems by Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes; and portraits by Winold Reiss served as "The most cogent single factor that eventually turned my face to New York." Aaron Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," typescript of speech given at Dillard University, New Orleans, March 1971, 8, box 3, folder 2, Douglas Papers, Fisk. Others recognized the importance of the special Harlem issue as well, resulting in two sold-out printings. Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 28.

4. Aaron Douglas quoted in "Editor's Note" preface for Lester A. Walton, "Aaron Douglass [sic], Topeka Boy and Former Lincoln High Teacher Here, Wins Fame in New York as Artist," *Kansas City Call*, November 4, 1927, B-1, reprinted from the *New York World*.

5. David Levering Lewis suggests that letters from Ethel Ray Nance, the secretary for Charles S. Johnson, advised Douglas to leave Kansas City. "'Better to be a dishwasher in New York than to be a head of a high school in Kansas City, Missouri,'" Lewis quotes Nance as counseling Douglas. David Levering Lewis, "Dr. Johnson's Friends," *Massachusetts Review* 20 (Autumn 1979): 509. Douglas credits letters from author Eric Walrond as stimulating his growing intrigue with Harlem. Charles L. James, "On the Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance: A Conversation with Arna Bontemps and Aaron Douglas," *Obsidian* 4, no. 1 (1978): 38. Despite his intention to utilize New York simply as a layover point before sailing for Paris to pursue additional training, Douglas revised his plans, delaying his trip abroad for six years. Not until September 10, 1931, did Douglas leave New York for Europe. Upon his arrival in Paris, he initially studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, but transferred to the Académie Scandinave one week later where he trained under Émile Orthon Friesz, School of Paris painter Henri de Waroquier, and the sculptor Charles Despiau. *S. S. General von Steuben Passenger List*, box 9, folder 8, Douglas Papers, Fisk; Clarissa Bucklin, ed., *Nebraska Art and Artists* (Lincoln: School of Fine Arts, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 1932), 34; and Douglas, "An Autobiography," 16. Only one work from Douglas's time in Paris, between September 1931 and July 1932, was located for inclusion in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, a watercolor titled *French Chateau* (1931). A 1931 photograph of Douglas posed in front of the Louvre art museum in Paris added further context to this period in Douglas's career about which few details exist.

6. Aaron Douglas, interview by Leslie M. Collins, July 16, 1971, Black Oral History Collection, Fisk University Franklin Library, Special Collections, Nashville.

7. Douglas to Alta Mae Sawyer, [June 1925], box 1, folder 5, letter 48b, Aaron Douglas Papers, 1924–1939. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

8. This collaboration between Douglas and Hughes was originally printed in the October 1926 issue of *Opportunity* in a feature titled "Two Artists." The popularity of the pairing of Hughes's words with Douglas's evocative imagery persuaded the publishers of *Opportunity* to issue the *Opportunity Art Folio* just in time for the winter gift-giving season. Advertisement, *Opportunity* 4 (December 1926): 369.

9. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 236–37. See also John Farrar, "The Point of View: A Challenge to the Negro," *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* 64 (November 1926): 42–48.

10. Advertisement, *New York Times*, June 2, 1929, BR13.

11. "Trombones," *Time* June 6, 1927, 48.

12. Alain Locke, "The Negro Poet and His Tradition," *Survey Graphic* 58 (August 1927): 473.

13. Carl Bolmar, "Gleanings from the Field of Art," *Topeka State Journal*, May 26, 1927, Aaron Douglas Biography file, Special Collections, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, Kansas.

14. Douglas, "An Autobiography," 13, and Douglas interview with Collins.

15. For details regarding Douglas's mural program for Fisk's Cravath Library and its 2003 restoration by Washington, D.C.-based Cunningham-Adams Fine Arts Painting Conservation, see Amy Helene Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed: Memories of Africa, Hope for the Future," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 114–35.

16. Aaron Douglas, "Library Murals," *Fisk Herald* 37 (December 1930): 16. See also Douglas, "An Autobiography," 12–14; Libbie Morrow, "Progress of Negro Race Told in Fisk Library Mural Decorations," *Nashville Banner*, September 21, 1930, Aaron Douglas Clippings, *Banner* Archives, Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library; "The Art of Aaron Douglas," *Crisis* 38 (May 1931): 159; and "Fisk University Becoming a Culture Centre," *New York Times*, September 13, 1931, XX19. Concurrent with his work on the Fisk murals, Douglas accepted a commission for a mural cycle from the proprietors of the popular Chicago jazz venue the College Inn Room at the Sherman Hotel. Although *Birth o' the Blues* (also known as *Dance Magic*) was destroyed during renovations to the hotel, a preliminary sketch survives that was included in the exhibition. Douglas, "An Autobiography," 13–14. See also Walter Rendell Storey, "Now the Camera Lens Gives Us Murals," *New York Times*, January 18, 1931, 85.

17. For additional information about this mural, see S. G. Fitzgerald, "Home to the Y," *Legacy: The Magazine of African American History & Culture* 8 (Spring 2002): 66.

18. Douglas quoted in T. R. Poston, "New Murals Unveiled in Assembly Hall of Library Here," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1934. Miscellaneous Publications about Aaron Douglas, Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, The University of Kansas Libraries. See also Memorandum to Mrs. Dorothy Holmes from Aaron Douglas, "The Library Murals," October 27, 1949, box 1, folder 7, Douglas Papers, Fisk.

19. Douglas quoted in "The Aaron Douglas Fresco of Harriet Tubman," *Crisis* 39 (January 1932): 449.

20. Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1938), 27. For an extensive discussion of Douglas's mural cycle for the Hall of Negro Life, see Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 94–113.

21. "Rosenwald Fund Makes 30 Awards," *New York Times*, May 1, 1937, 21; Douglas, "An Autobiography," 19; and *Fisk University Bulletin* (June 1938): 9.

22. Douglas to James R. Lawson, April 1, 1966, box 1, folder 10, Douglas Papers, Fisk.



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 19: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Into Bondage*, 1936. Mural, Texas Centennial Exhibition. Courtesy of Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, New Jersey.



AARON
DOUGLAS

Play De Blues

Misery

Play de blues for me.
Play de blues for me.
No other music
'L ease ma misery.

Sing a soothin' song.
Sing a soothin' song.
Cause de man I love's done
Done me wrong.

Can't you understand,
O, understand
A good woman's cryin'
For a no-good man?

Black gal like me,
Black gal like me
'S got to hear a blues
For her misery.

Langston Hughes.

Figure 21: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Play De Blues*, (with “Misery” by Langston Hughes) from *Opportunity Art Folio*, 1926. Courtesy of Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas. Museum purchase: The Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, the Office of the Chancellor, and the Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund, 2003.0012.05.



Figure 22: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *The Creation*, 1927. From James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, gouache on paper. Courtesy of The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA.



Figure 23: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *The Judgment Day*, 1927. From James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, gouache on paper. Courtesy of The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA.



Figure 24: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Figure 25: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Figure 26: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*, 1934. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.