

The Douglas Legacy

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Aaron Douglas was a complex man. As artists often do, he expressed ambivalences, contradictions, and occasional inexplicable turns in the body of work he produced starting in his high school years (ca. 1915-17) and through the latter years of his life (mid-1970s). As a Black man whose life nearly spanned the turbulent twentieth century (1899-1979), such complexities may even seem reasonable. Upon closer inspection, however, key character traits that consistently guided Douglas's choices appear. His life story reveals a depth that is only just being discovered by scholars and an appreciative public audience.

The retrospective exhibition of Douglas, organized by the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in 2007, provided a space for all of us to see first hand the breadth of this artist's work. I vividly remember the sublime awe I felt as I stood in the atrium of the Spencer Museum, surrounded by the large mural panels of Douglas's best known work, *Aspects of Negro Life*, completed in 1934 as part of the federal government's attempts to provide income to artists while beautifying public buildings. For any viewer, I think, Douglas's work seen first hand evokes a powerful response. On one hand, we see the sheer beauty of his modernistic designs of flattened patterns typically rendered in earthy, warm tones that play lyrically across the canvases. On the other, we realize the importance of his messages of aspiration, hope, determination, and historical connection in his stories of the fulfillment of American promise. Even in his single-color drawings and prints, the playfulness of the two-dimensional figures and objects harmonize into stories that are both ancient and modern, in a similar manner to the best of jazz music that typified the era in which Douglas came

to maturity. (For more on this connection, see in this issue Robert O'Meally's "The Flat Plane, The Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas's Musical Art.") For me, the exhibition and the conference on Douglas that marked the official opening of the nationally touring show in Lawrence, Kansas, represented even more.

The exhibition and the conference validated my own long struggle to bring more recognition to this deserving native son of Kansas. I had discovered Douglas for myself one fall afternoon in 1996 while wandering through my favorite section of the public library in Topeka, Kansas. As I randomly pulled art books from tidy rows, I came across the pages of a book on the artists of the Harlem Renaissance that introduced me to Aaron Douglas for the first time. The images I saw astounded me. Although I had taken nearly enough art history courses to earn an undergraduate degree, including a full array that covered both modernism and postmodernism in Western art, I had never seen any of these paintings before. As I quickly scanned the words in the columns adjacent to the pictures, my astonishment grew when I discovered that Aaron Douglas was born and raised in the same small city, Topeka, where I then lived.

That I had not heard of Douglas's connection with Topeka might not seem so surprising at first. His biography was, after all, generally relegated to books on African American art when I came upon him. Yet, for several years at that point, I had been actively engaged with a historic preservation group in Topeka and had read and learned about many key figures in the Kansas capital city that remain obscure to most. Moreover, with my own strong interest in visual art, I would have taken note had I come across Douglas's story before. Why, I wondered, had I never before heard of this wonderful artist? What factors excluded him from my education in both art and Topeka history? What could be done to change this omission? When I applied to the graduate program in American studies at the University of Kansas that winter, I knew I had my research topic. I also had a mission that I confess I took up with some zeal.

By the time I began my first graduate courses in 1997, I had perfected my pitch. Why has Aaron Douglas been overlooked, particularly in his home state? We take pride in our "free state" history, our historical radicals (as epitomized by John Brown), and our populist embrace of hardworking folk who enacted the mythos of Manifest Destiny in settling on the Kansas prairie. Douglas's story touches on all those elements—so, why not him? Then I found my hook.

I realized that 1999 would mark the centennial of Douglas's birth in Topeka, Kansas. With the friends I had established in the Topeka historic preservation community, arranging for the recognition of Douglas in a ceremony held in the mayor's office on May 26, 1999, came easily. As a personal milestone, the event coincided nicely with the completion of my MA thesis on the role of Topeka and Midwestern roots in the development of Aaron Douglas's work. However, I was not content with this small, but significant, memorial. Throughout that spring in an American studies seminar, I had repeatedly complained of the lack of recognition of Douglas on the campus of the University of Kansas. After all, he was one of the most significant painters to come out of Kansas, a state not always

associated with the visual arts in national circles. I argued that the University of Kansas, as a large research institution with a well-regarded art history department and a significant art museum, had a duty to support the broader recognition of the work of this great Kansan.

While I got much sympathy and agreement from the participants of my graduate seminar, one person offered more. Maurice Bryan, then the director of the Equal Opportunity Office and a fellow graduate student, stepped in, offering to arrange a meeting of key people on campus who might help in making some kind of recognition happen. Held in the early months of 1999, the meeting kicked off a conversation that resulted a few months later in the visit of art historian Richard Powell on campus to deliver a talk in celebration of the centennial of Aaron Douglas. In the longer run, that meeting served as the challenge the Spencer Museum of Art needed to move forward in a more ambitious program that culminated in the 2007 conference and exhibition on the artist Aaron Douglas. With the enthusiastic support and encouragement of Chancellor Robert E. Hemmenway, an early biographer of Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston, the museum began the long process of organizing a pathbreaking show. At last the Kansas son had come home.

The exhibition provided viewers a chance to get to know Douglas through his work in a visceral way. Reading about Aaron Douglas's work without experiencing it first-hand is equivalent to trying to explain the lyrical beauty of Langston Hughes without reading his poetry, or to describe the power of Bob Dylan without hearing his music performed. At the same time, full appreciation of any artist's work grows from an understanding of the contexts out of which it originates, and the contexts through which his work has come to be recognized. The conference provided that supporting role for Douglas's work and challenged us to connect even more deeply with his diverse artistic production. In the spirit of that challenge, I offer here less of a comprehensive overview of Douglas's life and work and more along the lines of glimpses of revealing moments in his life.¹ By using contemporary newspaper notices and other primary source materials, I hope to contribute to the growing scholarship that reveals a man of great character, talent, and ambition.

In a book published in 1936, the scholar and cultural critic Alain Locke referred to Aaron Douglas as "one of the pioneer Africanists."² In so bestowing this recognition on the young man, Locke not only paid him tribute for his growing résumé of work, but also defined Douglas's unique take on modernist style as best exemplified in much of his public mural and illustrative work. In studying the full breadth of Douglas's oeuvre today, it becomes clear that Douglas was not only a pioneering "Africanist," in the sense of his pathbreaking stylistic developments, but he was also a pioneering "Americanist," in avenues he opened up to later (and better known) Black American artists like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. The title of pioneering Americanist fits, too, in the sense of Douglas's commitment to the improvement of the lives of African Americans through their attainment of a piece of the American dream of equality and prosperity.

By 1925, Douglas moved to Harlem to join the growing ranks of writers, musicians, and other artists and leaders who were self-consciously creating the Black capital of America. That same year, Langston Hughes, who would soon become a close friend and artistic collaborator with Douglas, composed a poem that captured the spirit of the moment. In “I, Too” Hughes wrote,

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed -

I, too, am America.³

Hughes wrote this update to Walt Whitman's 1860 poem in celebration of the populace, asserting the place of a racially segregated segment back at the table of American life.⁴ Aaron Douglas shared Hughes's unwavering vision of African American social and political improvement, and each man used their artistic talents as a vehicle for their fight.

In a 1926 column in *The Nation*, fellow Harlemit George Schuyler argued that there was no such thing as a uniquely African American aesthetic, because, as he put it, “the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon.”⁵ In the next issue of *The Nation*, Langston Hughes issued a passionate rebuttal to Schuyler's dismissal of racial difference that served as a manifesto for many of his generation of Black American artists. Hughes argued that the differing experiences of the average Black American from those of his White peers had indeed fomented the development of a unique aesthetic, which was recognizable in the lives of the everyday people. Artists who drew from those experiences, he asserted, would find a wealth of material that could be a key to their psychologi-

cal freedom. “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame,” wrote Hughes. But, as he further explained, the goal for them was not just personal freedom: “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”⁶ Hughes specifically called out Aaron Douglas (alongside blues singer Bessie Smith, actor and singer Paul Robeson, and writers Rudolph Fisher and Jean Toomer) as exemplifying this modern Black attitude toward art and its political power.

After only one year living in Harlem, Douglas had already established his presence as an artist of note at least within African American communities. After a year of financial struggle, Douglas had secured a position in the mailroom of the *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The journal’s editor, the esteemed W.E.B. Du Bois, also offered Douglas regular opportunities to publish illustrations in his publication, as did Charles S. Johnson, through his editorship of the National Urban League’s monthly *Opportunity*. In addition, Douglas earned a scholarship to train under Winold Reiss. Reiss was a German-born artist whose drawings were included in a special issue of *Survey Graphic* that introduced modern Harlem to Americans across the country and that served as a significant catalyst to Douglas’s own decision to give up a secure teaching position in Kansas City for the uncertain prospects of artistic recognition in Harlem. Douglas was thrilled—and a bit intimidated—when soon after his move the editor for that special Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, Howard University professor Alain Locke, asked Douglas to provide illustrations for the book-length treatment inspired by the success of the journal issue.⁷ By December 1925 Douglas’s illustrations were published alongside those of his teacher, Reiss, in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.⁸ Soon Douglas received regular commissions for illustrations and for book covers. As he later reflected, he seemed to fill a gaping need for a visual artist in the burgeoning Harlem publishing world.⁹ A notice of the marriage of Aaron Douglas to his high-school sweetheart Alta Sawyer in June 1926 provides four paragraphs of accomplishments by the artist who had arrived in the same month of the previous year.

Alta Sawyer’s coming to New York was significant. Though Douglas had known Sawyer since at least his high-school years, their union was anything but a given. Sawyer’s brief marriage to another man and Douglas’s years at the University of Nebraska separated the two. Saved letters from Douglas to Sawyer indicate, however, that the pair had rekindled their own connection in the years when Douglas taught at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, following his graduation from the University of Nebraska. In the letters, the young man described his joy in spending a few hours in Sawyer’s company. In one letter, soon after his move to Harlem, he revealed his poetic nature as he recalled one summer visit:

I looked at the moon last night. I wondered at it. What a beautiful thing it was. How full of mystery. How full of live [*sic*]. How full of love. It seemed to run with voluptuousness. What a sensitive thing it seemed last night. How charming. But the most fascinating thing about it was that it seemed to give me an unusual sense of your presence. I could feel you. . . . Last night I saw the happiness and beauty and love of all moons crowded into the memory of that most glorious of all moonlight nights. The night that I shall never forget. The night that we rode from Topeka to K.C. last June. I can see it now. We were one with nature that night as we sped along oblivious of everything except our own happiness and the flood of moonlight that spread over us a soft canopy of love.¹⁰

Though Alta Sawyer was busy finishing her teaching degree at Kansas State Teacher's College (now Emporia State University), even as Douglas immersed himself in the many educational and social roles required of him as a teacher, they found time to deepen their relationship while Douglas remained in the Midwest.

Douglas's decision to tender his resignation as a teacher and move to New York presented a challenge even as it opened up new opportunities. Letters posted to Alta soon after the move poignantly document his yearning for her company and her counsel, even as he wrote of his struggle to pay bills and feed himself. In one letter from Harlem, he shared his "slim chance" at securing a job that would have him working 1 – 5 on Christmas day. "I have worked desperately hard all day," he wrote, and continued, "I'm tired awfully tired. I'm also lonesome." As he closed the letter, faced with the prospects of spending the holiday alone, he shared, "It is very important that we be near each other next year. I feel a great hollow, yes a great open vacant room in my heart that I must continually clean and keep in order. I love you."¹¹ Even as Douglas struggled with his loneliness, he seemed to take heart in the prospect of winning her permanent companionship and expressed to her the role that possibility played in his ambitions to succeed despite the obstacles.

Following the Christmas holiday he seemed to cheer up as he wrote to Sawyer about his future. "I'm becoming awfully egotistic," he wrote.

Things have broken and are breaking so beautiful for me that I can't help patting myself on the back. Vanity Fair has one of my drawings and Theatre Arts will publish some of my work before long; but I want no more recognition of that sort. . . . I want to keep away from publicity. It's bad. At present. Distracts my plans. Distorts and forces my development. I should like to remain obscure for two years longer. At my present rate of progress I'll be a giant in two years. I want to be frightful to

look at. A veritable black terror. They (White America) believe that a black artist is impossible.¹²

It was clear that, while the pair remained apart geographically, Aaron Douglas increasingly relied on Alta Sawyer as a confidante. He shared his struggles to develop his own artistic voice and his perspectives on all those he met in his new life. He also solicited Sawyer's advice on topics ranging from employment to new aesthetic trends. As she updated him on the latest from friends and family in Kansas, he kept her informed on mutual friends and new acquaintances in New York.

How happy Douglas must have been when Alta Sawyer finally joined him in Harlem a year later. They were married almost immediately on June 18, 1926.¹³ Together Alta and Aaron formed a dynamic duo in the Harlem community. Where Aaron tended to be reserved, Alta was gregarious and charming. If Aaron were publicly reticent to brag about his considerable talents, Alta, behind the scenes, promoted and encouraged him. Together they hosted Harlem gatherings, attended many cultural events, and generally made their mark within the tight-knit community. In his fictionalized account of the Harlem Renaissance literati, *Infants of Spring*, Wallace Thurman described Aaron Douglas (using the pseudonym of "Carl Denny") as a rather serious man who struggled at times to express himself in words. "Carl did not possess a facile tongue," wrote Thurman. "He always had difficulty formulating in words the multitude of ideas which seethed in his mind." In contrast, "Annette" (the name given to Alta) came across as chatty and fun loving.¹⁴ Writers Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps were among the Douglas's coterie, and both mention parties held at their 409 Edgecombe address—"Harlem's tallest and most exclusive apartment house," according to Hughes.¹⁵ With Alta by his side, Aaron Douglas's star seemed to rise quickly in Harlem.

The names of both Alta and Aaron regularly appeared in newspaper columns. In 1927, Geraldyn Dismond, a gossip columnist who reported on social scene for African American newspapers across the country, featured a column on Aaron Douglas. Dismond approvingly told her audiences that the artist "has developed a technique of interpretive design that is distinctly his own—more decorative than that of Futuristic art, more flexible than that of African fetishes, yet definitely modern and Negroid."¹⁶ Douglas's prolific contributions first in the form of book covers and magazine illustrations, followed by his mural commissions, provided fodder for his regular mention in the pages of the Black newspapers through the 1930s. In 1931, journalist Eugene Gordon included Douglas among his "Thirteen Most Gifted Negroes in the United States," alongside singer and actor Paul Robeson, editor and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, and historian Carter G. Woodson, and others.¹⁷

At the same time, Alta Douglas received her own attention, often for her participation in social groups and event planning. Her status as a social leader can be measured by a 1932 advertisement in *The Pittsburgh Courier* for Genuine

Black and White Cold Cream that featured her photograph. The 3-column ad identified her as “Mrs. Aaron Douglas, beautiful society leader of Harlem.” In the photograph Douglas appeared in profile, looking down contemplatively, dressed in fashionable garb, her shiny, waved hair pulled back into a neat chignon.¹⁸ The same photograph—without the advertisement—appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World* in July 1932 under the heading “Charming.” The photo caption described, “Mrs. Aaron Douglas: Wife of the celebrated and talented young artist who paints in the African motif, is considered one of Harlem’s most charming hostesses.”¹⁹ By 1932, the Douglasses had established themselves as part of the Harlem cultural elite. And, with Harlem’s position as a national center for Black American life, race newspapers propelled the pair into a broader spotlight.

As early as 1927, the couple appeared in a list of prominent New Yorkers who attended the opening of Ethel Water’s hit Broadway show, “Africana.”²⁰ Newspaper columns suggest organizations regularly called on Aaron Douglas to speak to their members, serve as a judge in local competitions, and donate his artistic services.²¹ Alta Douglas, too, participated in a number of civic organizations. In 1940, she was elected to chair the membership committee of the Harlem Community Art Center, and for many years she served on the board of the National Urban League Guild.²² For both of the Douglasses fundraising and providing other forms of support were central components of their lives.

The Douglasses did not limit their interests, however, only to social and cultural concerns. Like many Black Americans, they understood their overarching responsibility to use their talents and their increasing fame and fortune for the betterment of the larger community. W.E.B. Du Bois, who mentored the artist as editor of *Crisis* magazine, had argued at the turn-of-the-twentieth century for the rise of a Talented Tenth of racial leaders, who in turn would be expected to pull the other 90 percent up with them as they prospered.²³ In some ways, Aaron and Alta Douglas modeled this strategy for improving the lot of African Americans. Even as early as 1927—when Aaron Douglas was still under 30 years old—the columnist Geraldyn Dismond had reported that he had ambitions that went beyond personal recognition. “Although art circles acclaim him,” wrote Dismond, “he is not satisfied because back of all his labor Mr. Douglas has two ideals. First, he wants to make a lasting contribution to that something called Negro Art. And this takes priority over his ambitions for his personal career. Secondly, for himself he wishes to become ultimately a painter of murals and portraits.”²⁴ Even as Douglas was starting to achieve his own recognition, he expressed his priority to the larger Black community. Douglas stayed true to this commitment throughout the rest of his long career as an artist, later as a teacher at Fisk University in Nashville, and, at key moments, as a social and political activist in the traditional sense. Until her sudden death in December 1958, Alta Sawyer Douglas was by his side in these pursuits.²⁵

As an artist, Douglas reached his goal of offering a lasting contribution to Black American art, especially through his mural and illustrative work. Again and again his public murals were lauded in the pages of the press. His first large mural

commission for Club Ebony in 1927 garnered positive reviews all around. The *New York Amsterdam News* asserted that his “futuristic art and the [w]ell-blended color scheme give the place a true ‘jazz age’ atmosphere.”²⁶ In a column from *The New York World*, Lester Walton stressed that Douglas “created a distinctive Negroid atmosphere” that “bespeak his artistry.” He noted how Douglas combined the historical with contemporary themes in the use of “tropical settings of huge trees and flowers, figures of African tom-tom players and dancers, pictures of the American Negro with banjo and in cakewalk.” The historical images worked together with a central panel that showcased “contemporary race dancers and musicians” in front of a modern landscape of urban skyscrapers. “A strong flavor of African influence will play a big part in giving to America modern art in the opinion of Harlem artists,” wrote Walton, “whose formula for a new artistic mood is African art plus American Negro plus present-day American life.” Echoing Walton’s assertion, Aaron Douglas stated in the article, “The Negro has greater rhythm and flexibility than his white brother and in such an environment his artistic contributions are neither like the farm hand nor the man on Fifth avenue. While it is absurd to take African sculpture and literally transplant it and inject it into Negro American life, we can go to African life and get a certain amount of understanding, form and color and use this knowledge in development of an expression which interprets our life.”²⁷

In this statement, Douglas reflected the mood of many of his artistic contemporaries as they struggled to develop an aesthetic that was both Black *and* American, part of a culture of both “high” art and working-class folk. In his 1926 artistic manifesto, Langston Hughes had encouraged such development, and Aaron Douglas continued to bring together these seemingly disparate elements into a new artistic form. As would become increasingly evident, moreover, Douglas embraced the idea of art playing a part in the social progress of Black Americans even as he insisted on the recognition of his work as the product of training and education. For Douglas and others at this time, these ideas were not at odds with each other. As he and other Blacks fought to be recognized as full citizens of the United States, with all the rights and opportunities of the dominant (White) society, he believed that he had unique talents and perspectives to contribute.

Under the guidance of German artist Winold Reiss in New York City and through the study of both modern European and traditional African forms in the Albert Barnes collection in Pennsylvania, Douglas fine-tuned his artistic formula. He drew from myriad influences including his own training in traditional European draftsmanship (for which he took great pride), the Art Deco-influenced modernism encouraged under Reiss’s tutelage, the African motifs he observed in traditional masks and sculptures, the everyday people he observed bustling around him, and his own growing pride in African American history. His personal artistic development, moreover, incubated within that unique moment of cultural ebullience known as the Harlem Renaissance. He shared ideas and collaborated with some of the greatest writers and thinkers of the day, as jazz music and rent

parties provided the cultural soup in which their ideas simmered. For the most part, the Black media cheered him on.

As the exuberant days of the 1920s turned to the more sober decade of the 1930s, Douglas, the man, came of age. By 1934 when Douglas received a federal commission to paint the mural series *Aspects of Negro Life* for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library's new community theater facilities, he had already moved toward a more politically engaged position. In July of 1934, Aaron Douglas was a noted speaker at a two-day labor institute sponsored by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Workers Education Bureau of America. At the same event Clark Foreman, a White advisor on Negro affairs within the Department of the Interior, came under sustained attack due to perceived inequities of the distribution of help to the Black community through Nation Recovery Act programs, charges that Foreman vigorously denied.²⁸ A month later, Douglas formed part of a welcome delegation for Angelo Herndon, an African American communist organizer arrested in 1932 on charges of insurrection following a demonstration in Atlanta. In August 1934, Herndon was released after the International Labor Defense (ILD) raised bail money and was greeted by a crowd of 7,000 well-wishers as he arrived in New York City. A day later Herndon appeared at a conference arranged to rally support for the release of the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black youths who had been falsely accused and imprisoned for the rape of two White women on a train in Alabama.²⁹ Douglas applied his artistic talents in the efforts by portraying two of the imprisoned men, Clarence Norris and Haywood Patterson in a sympathetic portrait executed in pastels.³⁰ Increasingly he involved himself in political matters. A column from Roi Ottley in December 1934 quotes Douglas: "All art is propaganda for one side or the other of the class struggle."³¹ Douglas took the side of the working class.

Alta Douglas, too, drew attention for her efforts. A 1938 *New York Amsterdam News* headline proclaimed, "Alta Douglas At Head of Anti-Nazi Parade in Harlem." According to the brief notice, Douglas led hundreds of women and children in "a spirited parade and mass rally here protesting Fascist aggression and Nazi brutality."³² That same year Alta Douglas appeared as one of the tenants of 409 Edgecombe Avenue who picketed against "exorbitant rents for 'the poorest service in Harlem.'"³³ The Douglasses continued to uphold their numerous social responsibilities as well. In the fall of 1949, Lady Huggins, wife of the governor of Jamaica (then a British colony), spoke at an event sponsored by the National Urban League Guild. Following the talk, Alta Douglas hosted a party in honor of this foreign dignitary in their Edgecombe Avenue apartment.³⁴

In 1934, journalist Ted Poston connected the Douglasses rising political profile to Aaron Douglas's artistic direction. Poston interviewed Douglas just after the installation of his mural series *Aspects of Negro Life* in the basement theater of the local library. Poston pointed out that the couple had been studying Marxist theory together. "Those who view Aaron Douglas' new mural at the 135th street branch library will hardly suspect the influence of Karl Marx on the delicately-

beautiful decoration,” began Poston. “But the patron saint of the Revolution has left his mark there just the same.”³⁵ Although, as Poston commented, stylistically the new murals seemed “little different from previous murals,” they represented a philosophical turning point in Douglas’s life.

In the interview, Douglas shared that previous murals, including those completed for Club Ebony in Harlem in 1927, for the Sherman Hotel in Chicago in 1930, and for Fisk University also in 1930, were part of what he called his “Hallelujah” period. Although the library murals, *Aspects of Negro Life*, might not appear greatly different from the earlier pieces, Douglas asserted that they were drawn from a more radicalized leftist impulse, though he declined to position himself as a proletarian painter. His path to a Marxist philosophy followed his early embrace of “Negro Destiny theory” and a flirtation with Gurdjieffian teachings (described by Poston as “the know-thyself cult in which Jean Toomer and other Negro intellectuals were interested”).³⁶ “I had sought escape through so many of these theories,” Douglas told Poston, “that when I finally encountered the truth through the revolutionary movement, I was absolutely unable to face reality. I had to cast aside everything that I had once believed and begin anew.”³⁷

As Poston observed, Douglas included few obvious markers of his Marxist leanings in the murals created under the aegis of the federal government. Douglas suggested that he considered a fifth panel to the series that would have shown “the way out for the Negro . . . the unity of black and white workers in the class struggle.”³⁸ Without this panel, he considered the series incomplete, yet Douglas understood that if he had included such a statement, federal administrators would have rejected the entire series. As they were, Douglas believed that his murals depicted a rather conservative and objective view of Black history. In the process of their creation, however, Douglas self-consciously turned the corner into a new more radical and leftist phase in his life.

As the economic depression of the 1930s ebbed, replaced by the post-war era of the 1940s, Aaron Douglas accepted a full-time teaching position at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Although his social and political commitments did not end when his teaching career began, his actions drew less attention from Nashville than they had in Harlem. Douglas continued to follow national events, participate in civic and social organizations devoted to the betterment of Black citizens, especially, and he embraced his new role as mentor to the next generation of Black artists. In 1971, the artist Romare Bearden recalled how, even as early as the 1930s, Douglas had been looked up to by younger artists who gave him the honorific of “Dean of Afro-American painters.”³⁹ In the years that followed, Douglas used his position to offer the younger generations some of the perspective he had gained as a pathbreaking Black American artist.

Accepting an invitation at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, in the fall of 1948, Douglas chose to talk on “The Negro, Too, in American Art.” As he explained, the topic was one “so widely misunderstood, so inadequately treated when mentioned at all, so often misrepresented that a true and just picture of the

role the Negro has played and is playing in art is extremely difficult to describe fully.⁴⁰ Douglas did his best, however, to provide a description, starting with the great art of Egypt and of India, both of which gave ample support to the notion that non-Whites were just as capable as Whites when it came to producing great art. After providing a condensed history of Black visual art achievement in the United States, including a fairly lengthy exposition of the stars and patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas, finally, turned to the obstacles Black artists faced.

In listing the obstacles that held back Black artists, Douglas first identified the problem of patronage. It was an issue that always plagues American artists, but was especially overwhelming for artists outside the mainstream. Douglas noted that he knew of “no really outstanding Negro collectors” but that a few institutions (Hampton Institute, Howard University, and Atlanta University) had begun collections. Next Douglas discussed the common stereotyping of Black people, which ranged from the mostly pre-World War I representation of the “amiable, pathetic and humorous side of Negro life” to a common antidote to previous portrayals emphasizing “the noble and the good.” Douglas, however, argued that “artists must preserve the right to present the distorted, the ugly, the unpleasant as constituting an integral inseparable, and necessary part of the truth and beauty of life. . . . In children’s books, in book illustrations, in easel pictures, in mural decorations it is the Negro artist who must tell the story of our existence in this land, beautiful when beautiful, ugly when ugly, exalted when exalted.” He believed that with the proper resources, “the extraordinary talent for art possessed by our people” would yield results. “But to obtain these results,” he cautioned, “we must be prepared to exert ourselves to the utmost in patience, endurance, understanding, unselfishness, and genuine humility.”⁴¹ Douglas encouraged the students listening to his advice to follow the path of hard work, dedication, and looking beyond selfish goals. He seemed to understand that this path was neither easy nor always successful in conventional ways, yet he maintained the optimism that had characterized his earliest days that these efforts were both necessary and, in the end, worthwhile.

Arthur E. Berry, a former student of Douglas, offered his own insight into the elder artist in a speech given in honor of the presentation of Douglas’s papers to Fisk University in 1974. Berry recounted Douglas’s response when asked by his students why he did not attempt Abstract Expressionism and other more contemporary approaches. “Little by little,” explained Berry, “we began to see that he had chosen a style and selected techniques that would allow him to speak in clear concise terms of Black men and the empires they had built aeons [*sic*] ago, and capable of speaking as succinctly in the present about the Black man’s involvement at the cutting edge of the here and now. And, he admonished each of his students to study the past for cues for now, and for the future.”⁴² Berry came to understand that Douglas chose his aesthetic approaches and illustrative techniques based on his deeply felt dedication to speaking both to and for his people. Throughout his life, even as his own ideas on art and life matured and

developed, Douglas remained true to his calling to serve his people through his art.

With Alta next to him, the Douglases put into practice their abiding belief in the possibility of achievement and the attendant responsibilities that come along with that success. As newspaper accounts reveal, both were ongoing forces in both Harlem and the larger Black community throughout the United States. Aaron Douglas early expressed a desire to contribute to the development of Black art through his public murals and through portraiture. While today his murals and illustrations remain his best known work, Douglas always expressed his personal preference for his portrait work. In his later years, he focused on this aspect, painting many portraits of Fisk colleagues and students, alongside those of celebrities like opera singer Marian Anderson. All of his work, however, spoke to his belief in the importance of representing Black American life as fully and truthfully as he knew how. His success, he believed, ultimately would be measured by the success of all Black people in achieving the fullness of the American promise. This remains his most lasting legacy.

Notes

1. An excellent annotated timeline for Douglas's life and work, composed by Stephanie Fox Knappe, is included in the catalog prepared in conjunction with the 2007 exhibition mounted by the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. See Knappe, "Chronology," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 207-234.

2. Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Albany, NY: The J. B. Lyon Press, 1936), 67-68. See also, Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art* 23, no. 3 (1931), 218. Artist and art historian and Douglas's successor at Fisk University David Driskell similarly described Douglas in the film *Hidden Heritage: The Roots of Black American Painting*, Landmark Films, 1990: "Aaron Douglas is the leading painter of the Renaissance movement, a pioneering Africanist, he accepted the legacy of the ancestral arts of Africa and developed his own original style, which was geometric symbolism."

3. Langston Hughes, "I, Too," *The Weary Blues* (1926; rep., Arnold Rampersad, ed., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 46).

4. Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing," was first published in *Leaves of Grass* (1861; reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961).

5. George S. Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum," *The Nation*, June 16, 1926, 662-663.

6. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692-694.

7. Regarding his illustrations for *The New Negro*, Douglas later explained, "These first efforts, as I recall them now, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as masterful. But when I return to them after more than forty years, I am amazed that they seemed to have been so readily accepted at the time." Aaron Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," Reel 1, Box 3, File 7, n.p., Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, TN (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

8. Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925). For more on the significance of this book, and especially the use of the illustrations within it, see Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), especially chapter 5, "Collective Identity in the Anthology: Representing the Race," *The New Negro*, 156-190.

9. See, for instance, Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," n.p. Douglas Papers, Fisk University. Douglas planned to go to Paris, France, to continue his artistic training but was "finally persuaded to drop anchor at the great city of New York, or rather black Harlem, where there was so much work to be done and almost no one prepared or willing to undertake it."

10. Aaron Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Aaron Douglas Papers, Folder 3, Letter 21, n.d. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

11. Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Douglas Papers, Folder 3, Letter 29, n.d., Schomburg Center.

12. Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Douglas Papers, Folder 2, Letter 13, n.d., Schomburg Center.

13. An announcement of their wedding appeared in *The New York Amsterdam News* on June 30, 1926, 11. Sawyer, the column mentioned, was teaching at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee, at the time, though she soon found work in the New York City school system. The column offered four paragraphs on Douglas, who had already begun to make his mark on the community with his book covers and magazine illustrations.

14. The pair appears in a party scene where guests, who include Alain Locke, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, and Eric Walrond (all under pseudonyms), discuss the role of art in society. See Wallace Thurman, *Infants of Spring* (1932; rep., Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 232-243. Quotation on 243.

15. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; rep., New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993), 247-48.

16. "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927, A2. Dismond also perceptively noted that Douglas displayed great courage in his choice to take up art as a profession. She wrote, "At the time he decided to make drawing his life work he knew of only one artist, Tanner, who had made good. Yet he believed that, if to his talent he added study, work and perseverance, he would succeed."

17. Eugene Gordon, "Gorden [*sic*] Names the Thirteen Most Gifted Negroes in the United States," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1931, 16. Gordon was a feature writer for *The Boston Globe*, a mainstream paper, and he regularly wrote columns for Black newspapers and magazines such as *Opportunity*, *The Messenger*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier* throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

18. "Display Ad 27—No Title," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 23, 1932, 8.

19. "Charming," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 26, 1932, 1A. Two years later, the *Atlanta Daily World* again ran the same photograph, with the caption "Meet the Artist's Wife. Mrs. Aaron Douglas wife of the distinguished young artist, who is one of the leaders in the top rung of Harlem society." See *Atlanta Daily World*, July 10, 1934, 1.

20. Floyd J. Calvin, "Prominent New Yorkers Congratulate Ethel Waters on 'Africana' Success," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927, A3. Douglas is described as "leader of the moderns in art."

21. For a few examples see "Montclair Y.W.C.A. Awards Four Cash Prizes in Essay Contest," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 2, 1928, 11; "87 Fair Damsels Parade in Apex College Contest," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 28, 1928, 5; "To Award 50 Prizes," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 1, 1933; "Utopia House Notes," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 21, 1934, 4; "Discussion Society to Present Artist," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 14, 1936, 5; "Douglass Lectures at Chattanooga," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1938, 2. Douglas's last name was often misspelled in the press, with an extra "s" added at the end.

22. See "Unit Pledges To get Donors," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 12, 1940, for more on her role in the Harlem Community Art Center. In recognition of her many years in the National Urban League Guild, the organization dedicated the Alta Douglas Lounge at the Urban League headquarters in New York City in the summer following her death. See "Uptown Lowdown with Jimmy Booker," in *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959, 9. She was also an active member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. See "Mrs. Alta Douglas Dies in Delaware," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 3, 1959, 1.

23. In 1903 Du Bois published an essay, "The Talented Tenth" that argued, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races." See Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" (1903) reprinted in Howard Brotz, ed., *Negro Social and Political Thought: 1850-1920 Representative Texts* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1966), 518-33. The debate continues today over the elitism inherent in such approaches where the "Best of this race" is pitted against "the contamination and death of the Worst," which is often simplistically equated to the elite versus the masses. Aaron Douglas, along with friends and colleagues like Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston certainly embraced the masses and drew from what Hughes famously called "the low-down folk" as sources for their work. Even Du Bois drew from the tradition of the old Negro spirituals to punctuate his well-known essay "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), and in a speech in 1948 refined his position to better acknowledge the role of the masses in concert with racial leaders (see "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address," reprinted in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* [New York, NY: Macmillan, 1995], 347-353). My point here is that Aaron and Alta Douglas together fit the criteria established by Du Bois of educated community leaders committed to the improvement of their society as defined, especially, in racial terms.

24. "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927, A2. Even in his desire to focus on murals and portraits, Douglas offered a glimpse into his ultimate commitment to the Black community, which became his nearly exclusive source for the material he represented in his art. This focus partially explains, too, the paucity of attention to his work from the mainstream art world, until the last decade or so.

25. Alta Sawyer Douglas's obituary appeared in the *New York Times*, December 30, 1958, 35. She was, in Aaron Douglas's words, "the most dynamic force in my life." (Aaron Douglas, "An

Autobiography,” Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 12, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.) A sheath of saved correspondence from caring friends and family to Aaron upon the passing of Alta fills one file in the papers donated to Fisk University in 1974. The illustrator E. Simms Campbell wrote to Douglas from Switzerland upon receiving the news of Alta’s death, offering his condolences and calling her “a sweet and gracious gal with a heart that practically encompassed everyone—even the chiselers of this world.” He recalled how Alta “guided me thru all of the ramifications of so-called ‘Negro Society’ as well as ‘White Society,’” when Campbell first arrived in New York. Likewise, Prince Eket Inyang-Udoh III of Nigeria wrote and stated simply, “She was a great woman.” (“Correspondence—Re: death of Alta Douglas [Wife] 1958-60,” Reel 1, Box 1, File 17, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.)

26. “Harlemites Open New Night Club,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 12, 1927, 7. Club Ebony was located at 129th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem and closed in March 1928 due to financial difficulties. See, “Club Ebony Closes Doors,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 3, 1928, 3. Douglas’s murals have been lost or destroyed.

27. Lester A. Walton, “Art and Business Join Hands in Harlem,” reprinted in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 19, 1927, 13.

28. “NRA Executives Face Critics at N.Y. Forum,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 28, 1934, 1. Some disagreement existed, too, among the Black leadership regarding the benefit of government programs. Notably, Ira Reid, research director for the National Urban League, argued that African American labor had benefited from the programs, while representatives of various labor groups, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and a number of journalists contested Foreman’s positive evidence which came from a recently released report produced by the Southern Commission on Interracial Conditions. No mention is made of Douglas’s position on this matter, only that he attended and spoke at some point in the two-day forum. He was the only artist listed among the invited speakers.

29. “Mammoth Crowd Greets Herndon in New York,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 15, 1934, 1.

30. The pastel portrait, *Scottsboro Boys*, ca. 1935, is part of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

31. Roi Ottley, “This Hectic Harlem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 8, 1934, 9.

32. “Alta Douglas At Head of Anti-Nazi Parade in Harlem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 17, 1938, 4.

33. “Tenants Picket 409 Edgecombe Avenue in Protest on Rentals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1938, 11.

34. “Lady Huggins is Guest of Urban League Guild,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 5, 1949, 16. The article included a photograph of Lady Huggins at the party alongside Alta Douglas, Mollie Moon, and Judge James M. Watson.

35. T. R. Poston, “Murals and Marx: Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left With PWA Decoration,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1934, 9. Ted R. Poston (1904-1974) reported for *New York Amsterdam News*, and he held a position as the first African American reporter for the mainstream *The New York Post* from the 1930s through the 1960s.

36. *Ibid.* For an analysis of the influence of Gurdjieff on the development of Douglas’s visual aesthetic, see Marissa Vincenti, “A Matter of Spirit: Aaron Douglas, Gurdjieffian Thought, and the Expression of ‘Conscious Art,’” *The International Review of African American Art* 21, no. 3 (2007): 11-15.

37. Poston, “Murals and Marx,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 9.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Romare Bearden, “The 1930s – an art reminiscence,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1971, D24.

40. Aaron Douglas, “The Negro, Too, in American Art,” speech delivered November 1, 1948, at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York, in Reel 1, Box 3, Folder 8, 1, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

41. *Ibid.*, 19-21.

42. Arthur E. Berry, “Aaron Douglas and His Art (A Speech Commemorating the Presentation of the Aaron Douglas Collection to the Fisk University Library), published in *BANC!* a publication of Fisk University Library 4-5 (September 1974-June 1975): 9.