

# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



*Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction, by Aaron Douglas*

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“To my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!’”

- Langston Hughes, on the duty of Black Artists

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## What is the Harlem Renaissance?

A period of rich artistic and intellectual development within the African American community, the Harlem Renaissance developed out of a New York neighborhood during the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considered a turning point in black history, the Harlem Renaissance gave African American artists and writers an opportunity to express their own experiences and culture during a time when African Americans were still facing harsh discrimination.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



*UNIA parade in Harlem, 1920*

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With the end of the Civil War in 1865 came newfound freedom for many African Americans in the South; with this came hope for more inclusion within American society, economic opportunities, and political agency for blacks. Though that hope was put to a screeching halt with the rise of white supremacy and “**Jim Crow Laws**” in the South.

Sadly, by the late 1870s only a small majority of African Americans were able to become landowners, while most were being exploited as **sharecroppers**. Meanwhile, hate groups such as the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)** continuously murdered and terrorized blacks as a means to stop them from voting or exercising the basic fundamental rights that were owed as American citizens.

Alternatively, in the North and Midwest booming economies offered industrial jobs for workers of every race. African Americans jumped at the opportunity for better opportunities and a more tolerant environment, causing the **Great Migration** in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Harlem section of Manhattan (which covers about three square miles) had drawn nearly 175,000 African Americans; making the neighborhood one of the largest concentrations of black people at the time. Harlem became a place for blacks of all social backgrounds who shared common experiences of racial oppression, slavery, emancipation, and the hope to form a new identity as a free people.

## IMPORTANT KEY WORDS



*A man drinks at a segregated drinking fountain, 1939*

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### *“Jim Crow Laws”*

- ❖ Jim Crow Laws were an accumulation of local and state level statutes that legalized **racial segregation**.
  - Racial Segregation – the policy or practice of separating a race from the rest of society.
- ❖ These laws were named after a **black minstrel show** character.
  - Minstrel Shows – racist shows where actors would color their faces black (called Blackface) to demean and dehumanize African Americans.
- ❖ These laws made African Americans second class citizens and existed for about 100 years.
- ❖ These laws were meant to deny African Americans rights to hold jobs, vote, education, among other opportunities.
- ❖ Those that tried to defy these racist laws were often subject to fines, arrest, jail sentences, violence, and even death.

## ***Sharecropping***

- ❖ A form of farming where families rented small plots of land from the landowner in return for some of the crops they had grown.
- ❖ After the Civil War the government did little to protect the rights of African Americans or help them acquire land of their own.
- ❖ Rather than help, sharecropping only put more blacks in debt while forcing many to sign unfair contracts that exploited them.

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## ***Ku Klux Klan (KKK)***

- ❖ The Ku Klux Klan is a hate group started in the southern United States after the Civil War.
- ❖ Most of the groups hate has been targeted towards African Americans, but also includes Catholics, Jews, and immigrants.
- ❖ This group has used hate and violence to promote their message of intolerance and ignorance throughout the years.

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## ***The Great Migration***

- ❖ During the early twentieth century more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South moved to the Midwest, North, and West.
- ❖ Dissatisfied with racial segregation laws and a lack of economic opportunities in the South, African Americans sought to improve their conditions by moving away.
- ❖ This occurred from about 1916 to 1970.
- ❖ During this time African Americans began to build new lives for themselves through the creation of black urban culture while actively fighting against racial prejudice.

# KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

## *Intellectuals and Scholars*



### Alain LeRoy Locke (1885 – 1954)

“The Younger Generation comes, bringing its gifts. They are the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance. Youth speaks, and the voice of the New Negro is heard.”

- Alain LeRoy Locke

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- ❖ American writer, philosopher, and educator.
- ❖ Considered the “Dean” of the Harlem Renaissance.
- ❖ The first African American Rhodes Scholar.



### W. E. B Du Bois (1868 – 1963)

“I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.”

- W. E. B. Du Bois

- ❖ American sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist.
- ❖ First African American to earn a Ph. D from Harvard.
- ❖ Co-founded the NAACP
- ❖ **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**

# KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

## *Musicians*



### Louis Armstrong (1901 -1971)

"Seems to me, it aint the world that's so bad but what we're doin' to it. And all I'm saying is, see, what a wonderful world it would be if only we'd give it a chance. Love baby, love. That's the secret..."

~ Louis Armstrong

- ❖ American jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and singer.
- ❖ First African American to write an autobiography.
- ❖ [More Information & Biography](#)

Example of Music: <https://www.louisarmstronghouse.org/music/>

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### Billie Holiday (Lady Day) (1915-1959)

“Love is like a faucet, it turns off and on.”

~ Billie Holiday

- ❖ American jazz and swing singer.
- ❖ Her career spanned over twenty-six years.
- ❖ Holiday originally auditioned to become a dancer.
- ❖ “Strange Fruit” was considered the song of the century.
- ❖ [More Information & Biography](#)

Examples of Music: <https://billieholiday.com/music/>

# KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

## *Writers & Poets*



### Langston Hughes (1901 – 1967)

"A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the Earth  
And every man is free."

~ Langston Hughes

- ❖ American poet, novelist, playwright, and social activist.
- ❖ His first poem was published when he was a teenager.
- ❖ His home at East 127<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem is a landmark.
- ❖ [More Information & Poetry](#)

*Langston Hughes by Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964)*

*Photographs. Place: Museum of the City of New York.*

[https://library.artstor.org/asset/AMCNYIG\\_10313880982](https://library.artstor.org/asset/AMCNYIG_10313880982)

A central figure to the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes wrote a variety of poems, short stories, novels, plays, and essays. Within his work, Hughes attempted to honestly communicate both the struggle and joy felt by working class African Americans while disputing stereotypes and other negative portrayals. Hughes commented that his poetry was about:

"workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the installment plan, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter—and pawning that suit before the Fourth of July."

## KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE ARTISTS

### Aaron Douglas (1899 – 1979)



*Study for Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*  
by Aaron Douglas

**Aaron Douglas** by Betsy Graves Reyneau  
[https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822001393394](https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001393394)

- ❖ American painter and graphic artist.
- ❖ His home became a social spot for other important Harlem Renaissance figures.
- ❖ Pioneered the African American modernist movement.
- ❖ Utilized elements of African American history and racial themes in his art.
- ❖ Douglas received countless honors in the later years of his life.

More Art Examples: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/douglas-aaron/artworks/>

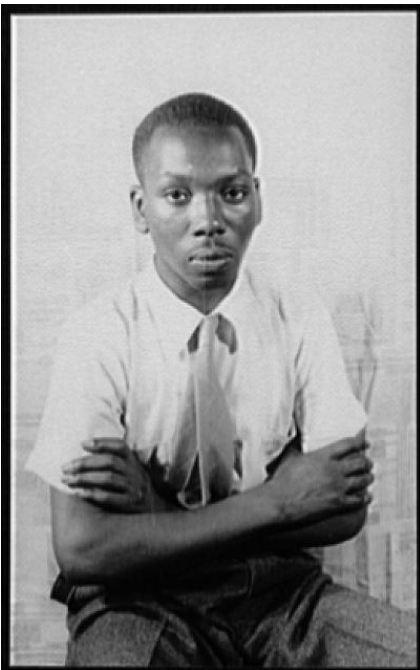


## KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE ARTISTS

### Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)



*The Migration of the Negro Panel no. 1. By Jacob Lawrence, Place: The Phillips Collection*



- ❖ American painter.
- ❖ He referred to his style as “dynamic cubism”.
- ❖ Well known for his modernist illustrations of everyday life and epic tales of African American historical figures and history.
- ❖ Received honorary degrees from Harvard University, Howard University, Yale University, New York University, and Amherst College.

**More Information:** <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/491855>

## KEY FIGURES DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE ARTISTS

### Romare Bearden (1911 – 1988)



Romare Bearden (right) talking about his work *Cotton Workers*

- ❖ American author, songwriter, and artist.
- ❖ Bearden worked with many mediums including oils, cartoons, and collages.
- ❖ Started his career by depicting scenes of the American South.
- ❖ The *New York Times* described Bearden as “the nation’s foremost collagist” and “one of America’s pre-eminent artists”.

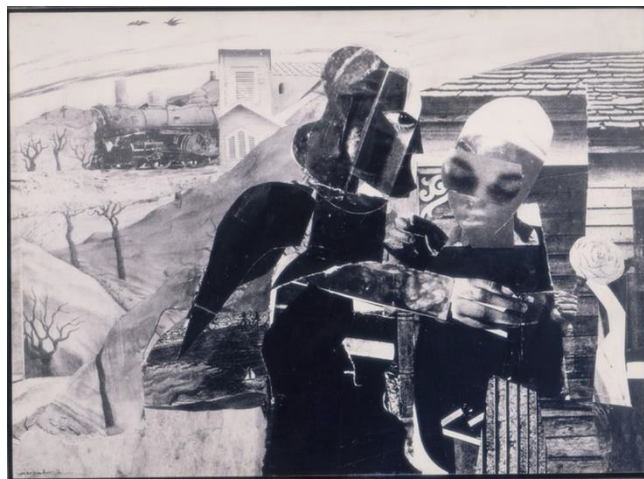
Considered one of the most important American artists of the twentieth century, Romare Bearden’s work expertly depicts African American culture within a Cubist style. Bearden began as a self-taught artist depicting realistic images before transitioning to more Cubist and abstract style painting. He is best known for his photomontage works, which were an assemblage of images torn from popular magazines, that were then assembled to create powerful statements about African American life.

**More Information & Art:** <https://beardenfoundation.org/romare-bearden/>



*Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong* By Romare Howard Bearden.

Graphic Design and Illustration. [https://library.artstor.org/asset/LARRY\\_QUALLS\\_1039764831](https://library.artstor.org/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_1039764831).



*Prevalence of Ritual: Tidings, Prevalence of Ritual.* By Romare Bearden

[https://library.artstor.org/asset/ABEARDENIG\\_10313650844](https://library.artstor.org/asset/ABEARDENIG_10313650844).

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- [https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/harlem-renaissance/m019y\\_2?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/harlem-renaissance/m019y_2?hl=en)
- <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/african-american-2012>

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## The Importance

The Harlem Renaissance was a turning point for black cultural history! It gave a voice to African Americans at a time when others were trying to silence and marginalize them. For the first time in many years, African Americans could represent and express themselves as they saw fit. Because of that we have so many great art and literary works that continue to influence us today. This is an example of how self-expression and freedom, when cultivated, can produce meaningful and informative views for others.