

AARON DOUGLAS

Father of African American Art



Dorian Douglas



Aaron Douglas was an African American illustrator and painter recognized as a prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance and referred to as the “Father of African American Art”.

Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas on May 26, 1899. He developed an interest in the arts at an early age. His mother painted watercolor and nurtured his passion. He graduated Kansas High School in 1927 and would later attend the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where he earned a Bachelor in Fine Arts (1922). He briefly taught art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri for two years before he decided to move to New York in 1925 and quickly became immersed in the thriving art scene.

Douglas soon won a scholarship to study under Winold Reiss, a German-born artist known for his portraits of Native Americans and African Americans. Reiss encouraged Douglas to look to his African heritage for artistic inspiration.

The Harlem Renaissance (1918- 1937) or the “New Negro” movement was a burgeoning cultural movement centered in Harlem, New York that focused on promoting civil rights, countering stereotypical representations of Negroes, and reevaluating and reconceptualizing the African American identity through creative expression. Literature, philosophy, music, dance and theatre. The factors that contributed to the movement were the migration of southern, rural blacks to the urban north who sought greater socioeconomic opportunities, retaliation against white dominance and racial violence, and a swelling racial pride following World War I.

Douglas’ career flourished during the 1930s. He produced illustrations for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s magazine *The Crisis* and the National Urban League’s *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. Publications that aimed to promulgate the life experience of African Americans, black culture and bring awareness to the social and political issues affecting them such as racism, unemployment and poverty. He also collaborated with other intellectuals such as Alain Locke (cover of *The*

New Negro, 1925), James Weldon Johnson (cover of *God’s Trombones*, 1927) and Langston Hughes (cover of *Not without Laughter*, 1930). Later, Douglas helped form and became the president of the Harlem Artists Guild in 1935, an organization that was dedicated to promoting and supporting young African American artists that struggled to find employment.

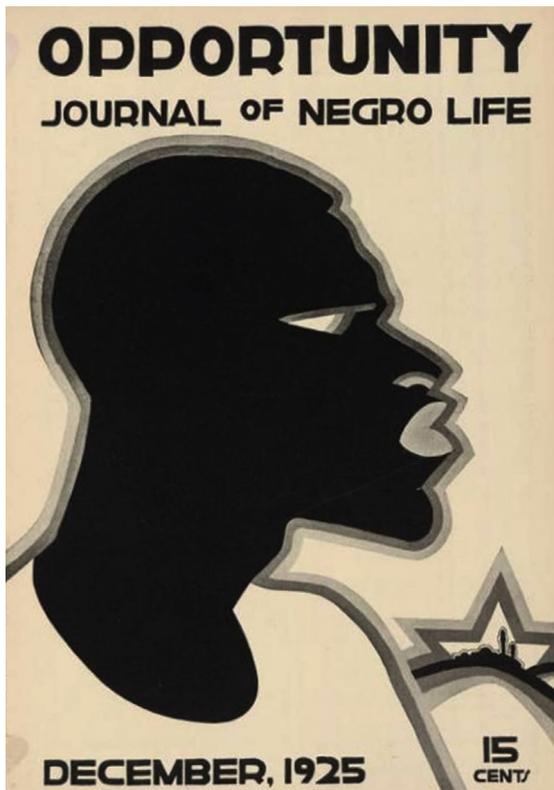
In 1939, Douglas was invited by Charles S. Johnson to develop the art department at Fisk University in Nashville. He also established the Carl Van Vechten Gallery at the university and acquired important pieces for the collection, including work from Alfred Steiglitz and his old friend Winold Reiss. Douglas served as the head of the art department at Fisk University until he retired in 1966.

Douglas, at 79 years of age, died on February 2, 1979 in Nashville, Tennessee.

Douglas’ most famous work were a series of murals for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library titled *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934). Four panels that depicted different facets of the African American experience. His signature style deviated from traditional European art. He employed the use of bold, rhythmic silhouette (a dark shape and outline placed on a lighter background) flat colors, concentric circles (rings of light) and geometric shapes in his work. His work channeled the two-dimensionality of Egyptian wall paintings, no shading and incorporated elements from jazz and cubism.



Aaron Douglas. *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*. Oil on canvas, 1934.

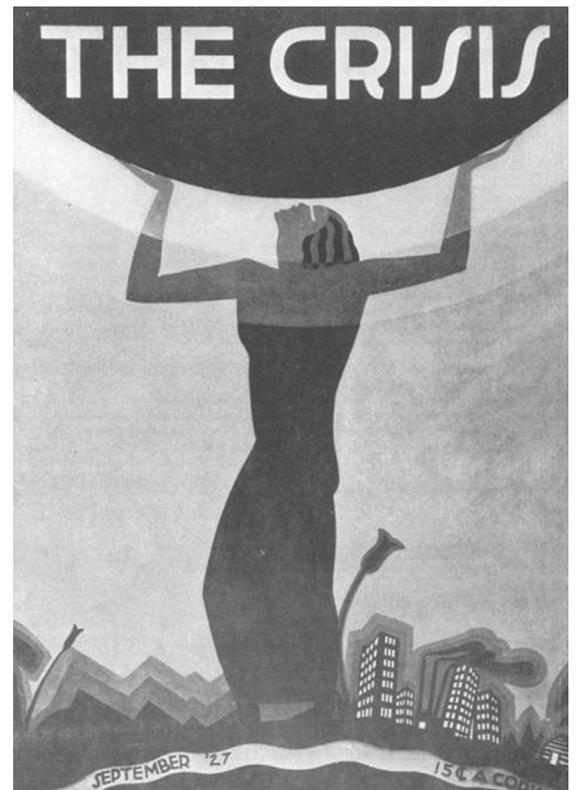


Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life. Aaron Douglas. December 1925.

This monochromatic magazine cover depicts the silhouette profile of an African American male with small buildings far in the distance. It borrows visual elements from African art such as stylized realism, in which the figure's face is slightly elongated and the lips are a lighter shade.

This magazine cover depicts a woman cradling a large globe with a cityscape in the background. It is designed in a way that it looks like she is holding the masthead (The Crisis) which creates a literal interpretation of her burdening the weight of the issues plaguing African Americans.

Aaron Douglas is remembered as the “Father of African American Art”, developing an artistic language for African Americans across many generations.



The Crisis. Aaron Douglas. September 1927.

WORK CITED

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