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The Arts at Home
and Abroad

Recorded Music and Radio

Jazz Roots and Routes

Motion Pictures

Black Theater

The Harlem Renaissance

French Connections

Visual Artists

Clashing Artistic Values

*The Awakening of
Ethiopia, Wera War-
del Fajana, c. 1921*

This bronze sculpture captures the
grace of African
women in world-
dominating

**Lois Mailou Jones,
Les Fétiches, 1938**

This largely abstract painting
incorporates a motif of African
masks.



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The 1920s witnessed an unprecedented spread of black artistic expression. This cultural diffusion was made possible by the fortuitous confluence of electronic innovation (the radio and phonograph), corporate publishing, and mass advertising and distribution networks that targeted newly identified intraracial and interracial consumer markets.

In the 1920s corporate America acknowledged and began systematically to cater to the black consumer. The popularity and profitability of black creativity did not escape the attention of the white-dominated entertainment industry, wealthy white art patrons, and publishers and literary agents. The renaissance of black musicians, writers, filmmakers, painters, and sculptors captivated black as well as white audiences with its vibrant, colorful appeal. As black cultural production flourished in the United States and abroad, some artists deemed themselves “New Negroes” with little need to “prove” their talents to whites or justify their very presence in the artistic arena. It was precisely in the arts, argued the New Negroes in Harlem, that the possibility existed for blacks to participate as equals to whites.

For the artistic New Negro, the Roaring Twenties proved to be an exciting time. The Jazz Age was also the maturing decade of American modernism—a cultural movement that spanned the years 1910–1950, during which the arts shifted away from realism and tradition and toward the abstract, the nonlinear, and the experimental. Modernist works often integrated and appropriated African art forms, which whites perceived as conveying a more uninhibited, free, and dynamic expression. White writers and artists themselves grew increasingly interested in a non-Western aesthetic—especially with African and African American subject matter, whose “exoticism” and sensuality conformed to racially charged notions of “the primitive” and constituted a crucial part of modernism’s desire to extricate artistic creativity from what were condemned as stifling old Victorian conventions. For their own purposes, black artists, too, adopted the “primitive,” manipulating it in word, dance, jazz, and the visual arts.

In this fluid and innovative cultural world, African American artists thought they saw an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the black image in the larger public mind, and they sought to win respect for themselves and for blacks as a group through their contributions in the cultural realm. Some even outlined an agenda for artists in the struggle for racial equality. But not all blacks engaged in the arts considered their role to be crusaders for racial justice; instead they sought merely to express their creative talents in an unfettered way. They produced poems, novels, films, and songs merely for the sake of art or for escape into an inner world without racial distinctions. Nor did all blacks agree on the reach of artistic license. The more traditional thinkers frowned on efforts to capture the full measure of the black experience, particularly the undignified realities. Black artists and their followers debated publicly the nature and the role of the arts in the struggle for racial equality. Ultimately, the works and the lives of black artists reflected the search for answers to two profoundly important questions: Is a black artist’s highest responsibility to the work of art or to the progress of black people? And can the two be reconciled?

Recorded Music and Radio

In August 1920, black vaudeville singer Mamie Smith sparked a momentous trend in American culture when she recorded black songwriter Perry Bradford’s “Crazy Blues” on the Okeh Records label. It is to Bradford’s credit that Smith became the first black woman to release a blues record for a major company. White companies had not looked to black

women for talent, judging their voices and diction unsuitable. Cognizant of the ever-swelling but still untapped urban black consumer market, Bradford insisted that “14 million Negroes in our great country . . . will buy records if recorded by one of their own.” His message eventually persuaded Okeh executive Fred Hager to take the risk, and his corporate gamble paid off handsomely. In the first month of its release, Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” sold 75,000 copies in Harlem alone. Within seven months, the record reached phenomenal sales in black communities all over the nation—facilitated by entrepreneurial black Pullman porters who bought copies of the record in northern cities for a dollar each and resold them at higher prices as the train headed south.

Smith’s instant popularity opened the doors of the major recording studios for other black women—most notably Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Trixie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Clara Smith, Ida Cox, Sippie Wallace, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters in her early years. This cohort of black women singers, who toured the vaudeville circuit (called the “chitlin” circuit), are best known for launching what music scholars term the “classic blues”—a female style of sassy, urban-sounding blues songs. The classic blues women were backed by instrumentalists and recorded for what white executives called the “race records” market.

Within three years of Mamie Smith’s record debut, the blues had become a smashing success. Bessie Smith (no relation to Mamie) was the most popular of the classic blues singers during the 1920s. Her debut release in 1923, “Down Hearted Blues,” reputedly sold more than 750,000 records within a year. In Chicago’s black neighborhoods, lines of eager consumers waited outside record stores to buy her latest releases. Far from the urban North—in West Virginia coal-mining towns to New Orleans—passersby heard the voices of classic blues singers from open home windows. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson noted the pervasive presence of blues records during her childhood in New Orleans: “Everybody was buying phonographs . . . and everybody had records of all the Negro blues singers—Bessie Smith . . . Ma Rainey . . . Mamie Smith . . . all the rest. . . . You couldn’t help but hear blues—all through the thin partitions of the houses—through the open windows—up and down the street in the colored neighborhoods—everybody played it real loud.”

Sales of the classic blues records generated tremendous competition for the “race records” market. Five years after the debut of Mamie Smith, Paramount Records heeded a suggestion to record a Texas bluesman named Blind Lemon Jefferson, who was brought to the label’s Chicago studios in 1925. Jefferson’s was the first solo recording by a male blues singer, and the tremendous success of his first recordings in 1926 resulted in a new genre—male-dominated country blues. Unlike the “classic blues” artists, the rural bluesmen played their own instruments, usually the guitar and harmonica. The country blues reaped huge profits for white companies—Okeh, Columbia, Gennett, Paramount, and Victor Records—all of which searched breathlessly for new talent on the street corners and in the juke joints of the Deep South.

Race records of rural bluesmen in the 1920s included those of Blind Blake from Jacksonville, Florida, and Charley Patton and Son House from Mississippi. In the 1930s the songs of Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson would be added to the record list. For the sake of cultural “authenticity,” the recording engineers permitted the rural bluesmen full control over the presentation of their distinctive regional sound and musical repertoire.

In the 1920s the black consumer became a significant economic factor in the production and marketing of black culture. Presuming to cater to the race market, however, begged the

Classic Blues

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Bessie Smith, blues singer

A protégé of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Smith sang, danced, and played comic sketches. As a successful recording artist, she sold as many as 100,000 copies in one week many times.

questions of how to define and market to black cultural tastes and of who was to do the defining and the marketing. As black entrepreneurs sought to capture this market’s burgeoning profits, they quickly realized how difficult it would be to retain black control. This was certainly true of the music business. In **Black Swan Records** 1920 black publisher and businessman Harry Pace decided to create Black Swan Records as a company for the production of a broad range of black musical forms—spirituals, opera, and other classical music, in addition to blues and ragtime. Pace envisioned Black Swan as not merely a business but also a vehicle for racial advancement. Through its range of musical offerings, Pace argued, Black Swan refuted minstrelsy and other racist images of black

culture, and through its business model it brought capital and middle-class respectability to the black community. Historian David Suisman observes that Pace's goals complemented the cultural agenda of those writers and literary critics of the Harlem Renaissance, who similarly sought to utilize the arts in the struggle for racial equality and justice.

Pace's civil rights interests probably began while he was a student at Atlanta University, from which he graduated in 1903. W. E. B. Du Bois was on the faculty of the university at this time. In 1905 Du Bois invited Pace to be the business manager of the Niagara Movement organ, *Moon Illustrated Weekly*. After the founding of the NAACP, Pace became president of the Atlanta chapter and personally hired young Walter White, who would later lead the national organization. It was Du Bois, according to David Suisman, who suggested the name of Pace's recording company, which recalled the nineteenth-century black concert singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, known during her career as the "Black Swan."

Economic considerations ultimately dictated Black Swan's repertoire of mostly popular music, rather than concert and opera. It was not that Pace was averse to the blues. Before coming to New York and establishing Black Swan records, he had collaborated with W. C. Handy, known as the Father of the Blues. A business partnership with Handy, the Pace and Handy Music Company, brought Pace to New York to establish a business in sheet music. At all times, however, racial respectability and middle-class values were important to him. The blues vocalist Ethel Waters, whose first recordings were made for Black Swan in 1921, noted in her autobiography Pace's concerns in this regard. When she was first hired, as Waters recalled, she had lengthy discussions with Pace and pianist Fletcher Henderson (the business manager at Black Swan) as to "whether I should sing popular or 'cultural' numbers." Waters's recordings, such as "Down Home Blues" and "Oh Daddy," clearly positioned her within the emergent classic blues tradition, but Black Swan went out of its way to distance her art from what Pace considered the undignified marketing of such blueswomen as Bessie Smith. Black Swan refused Bessie Smith a record contract, although Columbia Records signed her soon afterward. Advertising in the *The Chicago Defender*, Black Swan boasted that Waters "changed the style of Blues singing overnight and brought a finer interpretation of this work. She dignified the blues."

To ensure maximum distribution of his product, Harry Pace sold Black Swan records in drugstores, furniture dealers, newsstands, barber shops, pool halls, and even speakeasies—any place that might conduct business with a heavily African American clientele. The label also sold records by mail order, and Pace attempted to diversify his product line by introducing Black Swan record-playing machines, marketing models emblematic of black racial pride. The Dunbar (Paul Laurence Dunbar) model of a Swanola phonograph and a L'Ouverture (Toussaint L'Ouverture) model were advertised in the NAACP's *The Crisis*, edited by Du Bois. Feeling the pinch of powerful white competitors, Black Swan Records advertised in *The Crisis* in December 1922 that "passing for Colored has become popular since we established Black Swan Records as the only genuine Colored Records, sung by Colored Artists and made by a Colored Company."

Ultimately Black Swan Records was defeated by the larger white industry's decision to exploit the black consumer audience. The massive sales of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" had cast the die. The very musicians deemed too earthy and "rough" for Black Swan's own catalog were signed on and recorded on the white record labels: Bessie Smith on Columbia, Jelly Roll Morton on Gennett, King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band on both Gennett and Okeh. A host of new labels rivaled Black Swan for the profitable jazz and blues market,

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forcing Pace to urge the black community to stay true to racial self-help by patronizing Black Swan—the only “genuine” black business. But the rival record companies, plus the radio, put Black Swan out of business after only two years in operation.

The radio industry, having been effectively inaugurated during the 1920 Cox-Harding presidential election, introduced black talent over the national airwaves in a way that eroded the kind of cultural and social isolation defining the rural southern black world. The radio, particularly national broadcast networks, reached across time zones and regions, providing the highway on which black musicians traveled into homes across America. Throughout the 1920s, radio was a significant factor in the dissemination of black music—blues, jazz, gospel, and other forms. Black musicians could be heard on many local stations and, to a lesser extent, network broadcasts as they performed live in studios, or live for white audiences in nightclubs, hotels, and dance halls.

National and Live Broadcast Radio

Telephone and telegram requests from fans flooded into the WMC station in Memphis when it aired Bessie Smith live from the city’s Palace Theater on October 6, 1923, singing “Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness if I Do,” “Beale Street Blues,” and “Outside of That He’s All Right With Me.” Music historian William Randle, Jr., has identified eight hundred broadcasts of black musicians between 1921 and 1930 in cities across the nation. The greatest opportunities for black radio listeners were in urban centers with large concentrations of black musical talent, including Los Angeles, New Orleans, Memphis, Dallas, Atlanta, Detroit, and (most prominently) Chicago and New York. Based on the existing documentation, Randle reveals a diversity of programming—performances of dance bands, opera, blues, and religious music. In the 1920s, at a time when African American music, particularly jazz and dance band music, were emerging as the nation’s most popular musical trends, white listeners who might never have purchased recordings by blacks or attended a black music concert now had the luxury of hearing this music over the airwaves for free and through a medium in which the performer’s racial identity was effectively masked. In a similar vein, African Americans, excluded from the upscale white entertainment venues, could nevertheless enjoy the music via radio.

In Chicago, several local stations carried blacks in performance in white establishments. Station WBBM, a significant source of live jazz broadcasting throughout the decade, presented Jimmy Wade’s Moulin Rouge Orchestra as part of its broadcasting premier ceremony. Earl “Fatha” Hines and his orchestra broadcast from Hines’s long-term base at the Grand Terrace Hotel, on station WEDC. Legendary black clarinetist Jimmie Noone, who was an important influence on the young white Chicagoan Benny Goodman, broadcast live from the Plantation Lounge on Chicago’s WWAE. Blues masters Pine Top Smith and Albert Ammons (father of tenor saxophonist Gene Ammons) were also featured in live performances on Chicago radio stations. These local radio stations did not limit black performance fare to the popular secular music of the 1920s. As early as 1923 the Mundy Choristers, eighty voices strong and the best-known black choir in Chicago, were featured on special Sunday broadcasts with other black religious groups over station KYW. Recordings of black religious music, especially the gospel blues made famous by once-secular blues composer Thomas Dorsey, found fast-growing consumer and radio appeal initially in Chicago and soon the entire nation.

New York stations aired black musicians regularly. Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake were guests on at least three radio stations during 1923 and 1924 (WJZ, WHN, and WEAF),

performing music from their Broadway hit *Shuffle Along*. Clarence Williams, an early jazz-recording figure, accompanied black singers live on station WJZ as early as 1922, and he also performed live in 1924 with his wife Eva Taylor, both of whom made memorable recordings during 1924 and 1925 in Clarence Williams's Blue Five, featuring jazz greats Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. On April 8, 1925, a recital by the young singer Paul Robeson was carried live on local radio.



Duke Ellington in top hat

A famous photo showing an elegant Duke Ellington in top hat and tails.

The big band broadcast tradition was tremendously popular in New York in the 1920s and remained so through the heady radio days of the Swing Era of the 1930s and 1940s. Black performances could be heard over the airways direct from white cabarets, nightclubs, and theaters. Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra broadcast live from the Club Alabam at least forty-seven times during 1924; it also broadcast live between 1924 and 1928 from the fashionable, whites-only Roseland Ballroom. Beginning in 1927, Chick Webb's Orchestra was broadcasting regularly from the Savoy Ballroom, from which emanated as many as eight broadcasts per week through 1930.

Certainly the greatest beneficiary of radio's live music policy in the 1920s, and the decade's most frequently broadcast black musician, was Duke Ellington. Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (April 29, 1899–May 24, 1974) was renowned for his numerous jazz compositions. His career spanned over half a century, ultimately meriting him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969 and France's Legion of Honor in 1973. Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Ellington began to play the piano in earnest after his high-school years—at which time he formed a band and eventually moved to New York. He became a national celebrity after his orchestra was heard via radio more than two hundred times between 1927 and 1931. Ellington's initial broadcasts were heard on the New York local station WHN, but his performances were soon picked up weekly and given a national audience by the CBS radio network.

Direct from Harlem's Cotton Club with its whites-only clientele, listeners of all races in America heard Ellington's "jungle music," described by musicologists as such because of its timbral twists, "primal" syncopations, and growling sounds from the horn section. Ellington's early music drew on an imagined exotic "primitive" notion of African Americans similar to that portrayed by black writers and visual artists in Harlem in the 1920s. The titles of Ellington's pieces during this period carried unmistakable racial meaning—"Black Beauty," "Black and Tan Fantasy," "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo," "The Mooche," and "Creole Love Call."



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The Cotton Club in Harlem

The nightspot that best invokes glittering images of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s is the Cotton Club. White, well-heeled patrons swung by the Cotton Club to see and hear African American entertainers like Louis Armstrong and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.

Jazz Roots and Routes

The decade of the “Roaring Twenties” is also called the “Jazz Age” in recognition of the preeminence of jazz as America’s most popular music. Its rhythmic buoyancy, improvisational content, and presumed unrestrained style appeared to define the very spirit of the times. Yet jazz was an extremely controversial art form in the 1920s—not without harsh critics among whites and blacks alike. Many middle-class blacks believed it to be a hindrance to racial progress, since jazz artists often presented it as a referent for sexuality, primal passions, and exotic “primitivism.”

In the early 1920s some observers had already begun to use the term *Jazz Age* in tribute to the numerous African American musicians whose compositions and performances made jazz so popular among Americans of all classes and races. Perhaps no one gave more substance and depth to the meaning of the *Jazz Age* than did Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, composer, pianist, and raconteur. By World War I, Morton had composed a number of works that won for him recognition as the first jazz composer.



The Great Blues Migration

In the two Great Migrations, millions of African Americans left the South for cities in the North and on the West Coast, spreading several styles of Blues music across the country.
 Map by Michael Siegel, Rutgers Cartography, In Motion: The African American Migration Experience, Schomburg Center Online Exhibition

**The Evolution of Jazz:
 New Orleans to Chicago**

Jazz evolved from clearly demarcated regional differences in black music—shaped by the migration routes of southern musicians and their blues tradition, as well as by the rise of the northern record industry that encouraged jazz bands and black singers after Mamie Smith’s success in 1920. Many early jazz greats (including Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, and James P. Johnson) began their careers, and later supplemented their income, by playing behind the classic blues singers in live performance and on records. Black migration routes figured significantly, since the development of jazz in the early 1920s reflects African American migration trends, specifically the northward migration route from Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi to the Midwest. It is no coincidence that the emergence of jazz in Chicago was transformed by the classic blues-based, improvisational music of New Orleans—the city identified as the birthplace of jazz.

More important, New Orleans’ best musicians migrated to Chicago, where musical opportunities appeared as plentiful as the industrial opportunities that lured the many thousand others during the Great Migration. By 1918 a number of New Orleans musicians had become established in Chicago, and they in turn sought to bring other musicians out of the South to form new bands in Chicago’s heavily black South Side. Indeed, Chicago’s fast-growing black population assured a consumer base for the city’s music industry, while black musicians promised excellent entertainment for nightclubs that catered to white patrons.

The New Orleans influence could be seen in the major jazz recordings by Chicago-based bands in the 1920s. The bands comprised five to seven musicians. The most important of

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the early New Orleans-to-Chicago bands was the acclaimed King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, which recorded for several white companies—Gennett, Columbia, and Okeh Records. Joseph “King” Oliver, a virtuoso cornetist in New Orleans, had been Morton's contemporary. Oliver's Chicago band represented the New Orleans ensemble style—typically small, combo jazz featuring solo improvisations. In the Oliver band, the roles of trumpet(s), trombone, and clarinet were strictly defined, in terms set in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Moreover, Oliver's Creole Jazz Band was assembled between 1918 and 1922 and composed almost entirely of New Orleans-to-Chicago migrants—Oliver (trumpet), Johnny Dodds (clarinet), Baby Dodds (drums), Bill Johnson (bass and guitar), and Honore Dutrey (trombone); only pianist Lillian Hardin did not come from New Orleans. Only one New Orleanian subsequently joined the band, when within months of his opening at the Lincoln Gardens Oliver decided to add to the group a second cornet—a young man named Louis Armstrong, whom Oliver had known as a child. Armstrong arrived by train in August 1922. Armstrong's migration out of the South had a transformative effect on the development of jazz in the early 1920s.

New York had its own small band tradition, as evidenced in the “Stride” piano style, a pioneering and influential jazz form that evolved from ragtime. The solo piano “cutting contests” and the masters of this musical style—James P. Johnson (considered the father of Stride), Thomas “Fats” Waller, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Lucky Roberts—were heard in Harlem clubs, rent parties, vaudeville, musical theater, and on records. However, unlike Chicago, it was the big-band tradition that represented the more prominent New York jazz scene in the early 1920s. New York jazz grew out of an earlier music form, typified not so much by the blues but by the large band music of James Reese Europe, which began around 1910 (and thus prior to his illustrious role with the 369th Infantry during World War I).

If New York did not have a blues tradition to speak of, it did indeed have its own jazz tradition. According to musicologist R. Reid Badger, “between 1908 and 1919 certain subtle modifications of popular ragtime-based rhythms and tonality along with an increasing acceptance of extemporization, gained such wide-spread recognition that by 1919 it was common in the United States and Europe to speak of the existence of a new music—jazz.”

Bandleader James Reese Europe was a key figure in this evolution through his role in New York's black musical theater in the first decade of the twentieth century and his prewar leadership of the Clef Club. Organized in 1910, the Clef Club was a fraternal and professional organization of black musicians and composers, organized with the aim of bettering their working conditions, income, and opportunities. It also functioned as a booking agency for its members. The Clef Club addressed the same kind of issues for blacks that the segregated New York American Federation of Musicians addressed for whites. Europe's stated ambition was to create “an orchestra of Negroes which will be able to take its place among the serious musical organizations of the country.” The Clef Club held major concerts each spring and fall, featuring its Clef Club Symphony Orchestra. The most historic of those concerts were the performances—firsts for black orchestras—at Carnegie Hall between 1912 and 1914.

Because of James Reese Europe's connection to dance idols Vernon and Irene Castle (Europe was their musical director and the conductor of their accompanying orchestra), Victor Records offered him a recording contract in 1913. The James Reese Europe Orchestra recordings revealed a unique sound of syncopation and drums, according to Reid Badger, giving a “looser or freer approach to tonal variations and interpretation by the performers.”

Jazz in New York: Ragtime to Stride

The James Reese Europe Orchestra



James Reese Europe's Society Orchestra c. 1914

Europe is at the piano on the right.

Later in 1913, in an interview about the dance music field, Europe himself stated, "Our Negro orchestras have nearly cleared the field."

During World War I, James Europe and his Hellfighter's Band of the 369th infantry brought jazz to France, and upon his return home after the war, he received an exclusive recording contract with Pathé, a French recording company. The arrangement was announced as a contract to record the "Jazz King," whose popularity only heightened once Europe's army band toured cities throughout the United States in 1919. The musicians thrilled their audiences with "No Man's Land," a jazz performance that entailed darkening the concert hall and re-creating the sounds of the battlefield. Impressed by the band's performance in Chicago in May 1919, *The Chicago Defender* explicitly linked the arts to the battle against racism.

The jazz aesthetic in New York differed from Chicago jazz not only in its big-band tradition, which emerged from the contexts of Broadway and the society dance, but also in its tight, intricate orchestrations with only modest amounts of improvisation. Musicologists, looking for the roots of big-band jazz, have attached specific importance to the Europe band's recordings in 1919 of two W. C. Handy tunes, "St. Louis Blues" and "Memphis Blues," as indicative of Europe's shift away from ragtime to a blues-inflected jazz.

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Window in Time

“Jazzing Away Prejudice”

WE HOPE THE SWING of Europe [James Reece Europe] and his band around the country will be nationwide. The most prejudiced enemy of our Race could not sit through an evening with Europe [James Reece Europe] without coming away with a changed viewpoint. For he is compelled in spite of himself to see us in a new light. . . . It is a well-known fact that the white people view us largely from the standpoint of the cook, porter, and waiter, and his limited opportunities are responsible for much of the distorted opinion concerning us. Europe and his band are worth much more to our Race than a thousand speeches from so-called Race orators and uplifters. . . . EUROPE AND HIS BAND are demonstrating what our people can do in a field where the results are bound to be of the greatest benefit. He has the white man's ear because he is giving the white man something new. He is meeting a popular demand in catering to this love of syncopated music he is jazzing away the barriers of prejudice.

Source: “Jazzing Away Prejudice,” *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1919.

With Europe's tragic death at the hands of a fellow band member while on tour in Boston in May 1919 (ironically within days of his Chicago appearance), pianist and orchestra leader Fletcher Henderson emerged as his successor. Like Europe, Henderson emphasized professionalism on the part of his musicians, since his orchestra was often booked to play in the prestigious white Times Square area. For Henderson, the black musician's professional image required discipline, proper appearance, and musical reading skill over improvisation. An Atlanta University graduate, and friend and business associate of Harry Pace of Black Swan Records, Fletcher Henderson was a race-conscious man, of whom trumpeter Howard Scott recalled: “Every night you had to . . . stand inspection. He'd look at your hair, your face, see if you shaved, your shoes, see if they're shined. You had to be perfect to suit him.”

By 1925 music critics and the black press had discovered Henderson's orchestra and applauded its image of respectability. Under the title “Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra,” the group attained such broad appeal that white record companies advertised it as part of their general series targeted to white consumers. Recording over one hundred sides in 1923 and 1924, however, the “lowdown” blues also formed part of Henderson's repertoire. In this case, Henderson made money from the “race records” market, playing as backup to the classic blues singers. In these advertisements, which appeared prominently in black newspapers, the name of Henderson's orchestra appears in small print and is far less conspicuous in relation to the names of prominently featured blues women such as Alberta Hunter, Gladys Bryant, and Ida Cox.

In 1924, Louis Armstrong accepted Fletcher Henderson's offer to join his orchestra in New York. Armstrong brought extraordinary new talent to the orchestra, while enhancing his own skills. In

**Louis Armstrong Transforms
Big Band Jazz**

working with Henderson at downtown Manhattan's Roseland Ballroom, he had joined the most sophisticated black orchestra in the country. Although a musical genius, Armstrong was not a strong reader of musical scores. Armstrong's development as a jazz artist had occurred in a format that was just the opposite of the Henderson band's requirement for an occasional soloist who played from written scores. Yet it was Armstrong who electrified the Roseland audience. One onlooker noted that "people stopped dancing to come around and listen to him. And they could hear him out on the street. . . . The next night you couldn't get into the place. Just that quick. It had gone all around about this new trumpet player at Roseland." Armstrong helped to transform New York's big-band jazz.

The New York experience transformed Armstrong in a number of ways. While in New York he connected with an old New Orleans colleague, Sidney Bechet, who had spent much of the early 1920s in Europe. In 1924, Bechet was the only jazz musician in America who rivaled Armstrong as a soloist. Critics have marveled at the sweeping operatic influences on Bechet's virtuosity, as they have similarly commented about Armstrong. Bechet claimed to have been influenced by the French opera he heard as a child in New Orleans. As a technician, he was Armstrong's peer. In a series of 1924–1925 recordings for Okeh and Gennett records, made under the direction of black jazz pianist Clarence Williams, Armstrong and Bechet challenged one another in virtuoso displays that were, in their own way, as musically historic as the pairings of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie twenty years later. The Bechet and Armstrong recordings had done something completely new. They started jazz on the road to the development of sequential solo improvisation, following the melody or theme. This gradually became the template for virtually all post-1920s combo jazz.

Armstrong returned to Chicago in 1925, but during his short time in New York, he had a catalytic impact on Henderson's musicians. Armstrong's arrival brought to the Henderson orchestra a new rhythmic momentum—a blues-infused sensibility and, equally important, a new spirit of improvisational boldness. Particularly affected were the band's young tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and the principal arranger Don Redman. Redman is traditionally credited with translating Armstrong's flexible rhythmic qualities into a big-band framework and with making big-band music "swing."

On his return to Chicago in 1925, Armstrong set out to develop further the art of the jazz solo. He had refined his improvisational and technical skills in the Henderson orchestra and applied what he had learned to the new series of recordings that his wife Lillian Hardin had arranged. In Chicago, he also became the leader of his own combo, the Hot Fives (later, the Hot Sevens). By the early 1930s, however, Louis Armstrong had turned to the big-band format, having moved back to New York and becoming one of the best-known musicians in America.



Louis Armstrong

Poster for a Chicago appearance by Louis Armstrong in the 1920s

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By 1926, jazz had transcended its narrow southern appeal and become a national craze. Jazz flourished not only in New Orleans and Memphis, from which it sprang, but also in Chicago, New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, all cities to which it migrated. The jazz stylists of the early 1920s would soon share center stage with Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and other groups of the big-band era. Meanwhile, the virtuosity of such soloists as trumpeter Louis Armstrong, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, and pianists Teddy Wilson, Earl “Fatha” Hines, and Mary Lou Williams commended them to white musical combinations as well as to black ones. In the late 1920s recording companies became centralized in New York, black Broadway reawakened, and the club scene provided work for black musicians. Many of Chicago’s most influential musicians—King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton—moved to New York, now the center of the jazz world.

Duke Ellington and the Big Band Era

However, it was Duke Ellington from Washington, D.C., who grabbed the spotlight of New York’s big-band era. His public image, a legacy of Fletcher Henderson, was self-consciously tailored. A professional musician, he looked every inch a New Negro whose racial pride and devotion to the best interests of the race were visually encoded into his style. Reflecting on his music in 1931, Ellington compared it to the cultural work of the Harlem Renaissance, saying that he wanted to “portray the experience of the colored races,” as Countee Cullen and others had done through literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a scholar of the Harlem Renaissance, has gone so far as to conclude that “the 1920s, as it should be remembered, saw the rise of surpassingly accomplished musicians such as Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, whose artistry had a greater influence on the nation as a whole than the work of any of the renaissance writers.”

Motion Pictures

The African American community’s outrage in 1915 against D. W. Griffith’s racist motion picture *Birth of a Nation* underscored the great hunger of African Americans for films that featured members of their race in a positive light and addressed issues that affected their lives. It is no coincidence, then, that black film companies began to appear in Harlem in 1916. The most significant of the black companies were the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, established by the brothers George and Noble Johnson in 1916, and Oscar Micheaux’s film and book company, begun in 1918.

Before the Lincoln Company’s demise in 1923, the Johnson brothers produced at least six films and pioneered in establishing patterns for advertising, booking, and promotion that would be imitated by other black independent filmmakers. Micheaux, a man of great drive and energy as well as shrewd business acumen, was the most important and prolific producer of black films during the 1920s. Yet, he and other African Americans in this field were never able to overcome the restrictions imposed by their limited capital, their inability to purchase state-of-the-art equipment, and the vast advertising budgets and powerful distribution systems of the white filmmakers with whom they competed in the African American community.

The early black filmmakers produced a steady stream of films, called “race movies,” with all-black casts. Coming before the “talkie” revolution, the silent black films played in southern segregated theaters and in northern urban black neighborhood theaters. On occasion, they played as well at black churches and schools. Race movies were intended by their producers to offer more than entertainment. They provided black audiences with a separate



The Micheaux Film Corporation: Cameraman, director, and actor

Oscar Micheaux's silent films, such as *Within Our Gates* (1920), addressed black social concerns.

film culture insulated from the racial stereotyping of Hollywood; they gave black film actors and craftsmen the opportunity to express their cinematic talent with dignity; and they guaranteed black entrepreneurs control over the means and content of production. The films presented black versions of the established Hollywood genres: musicals, westerns, gangster films, and melodramas. The racial pride evoked by these films, the real subtext for all black film production, rested in the novelty of seeing black actors of all types in the same popular film genres that existed in the world of Hollywood with white actors. Hollywood routinely either excluded black actors or gave them demeaning, stereotyped parts.

Black films did not so much offer a separate aesthetic genre as respond to the commercial demands of black audiences who shared, with white audiences, a general popular understanding of what constituted cinematic entertainment. In some instances, black films made explicit social statements. One such example was the film *Scar of Shame* in 1927. The film, produced by the Colored Players Corporation, directly addressed issues of racial respectability and racial uplift, through the story of a woman from lowly origins who marries into the black middle class. Oscar Micheaux's silent films sought to address social concerns important to blacks. He perceived his film *Within Our Gates* (1920) as the black response to *Birth of a Nation*. For example, Micheaux's film contains a lynching scene and depicts a sexual assault of a virtuous black woman by a white man. It ends with a message of racial uplift by the well-educated and supremely refined character Dr. Vivian, who intends to be a leader of the race. *Birthright*, a silent movie from 1924, also featured as the hero a member of the black educated elite—in this case a Harvard-educated black man who goes south to found a school for the purpose of racial uplift.

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The musical short-subject and feature film was a new, direct product of the “talkie” revolution in film. The black talent first tapped by the major white studios were those performers who had made national reputations on records and, significantly, on radio, rather than performers with exposure limited **Black Talent in White Studios** to the New York stage. Two of the earliest features for black performers who had gained national followings through radio and recordings were Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington. In 1929 both starred in musical shorts released by RKO Productions, and directed by Dudley Murphy. Smith was featured as actress and singer in *St. Louis Blues*, which told the story of mistreatment and abandonment by her man, leading to Smith’s poignant rendition of the W. C. Handy classic. Ellington’s *Black and Tan*—a film on which film scholars believe the white literary figure Carl Van Vechten worked—offered a more complex plot with Ellington as a struggling composer whose girlfriend, played by black actress Freddie Washington, risks her life by taking a job at a club that agrees to hire Ellington’s band to accompany her. A frenzied dance by Washington, whose character suffers from a heart condition, causes her eventual death. The death scene occurs against the haunting strains of Ellington’s “Black and Tan Fantasy,” a staple of his Cotton Club “jungle music” performances.

More revolutionary in its intentions, but far less financially successful, was the all-black musical *Hallelujah!* (1929), conceived and directed by white filmmaker King Vidor. Intending to offer a sympathetic rendition of black family life in the South, and particularly of the religiosity of black folk culture, Vidor’s film does much more. The palate of characterization shows rich contrast. The core family has two grown sons, the literate, responsible, and religious Spunk, and the irresponsible, womanizing Zeke. Lead female actress Nina Mae McKinney plays a seductive role that divides the brothers. It is Spunk’s accidental death that motivates the dramatic scenario of the prodigal Zeke’s route from sin to ultimate redemption within a strong two-parent family.

King Vidor’s most striking and radical move for the time was his treatment of Zeke, portrayed by the actor Daniel Haynes, as a complex and conflicted adult rather than as the more pervasive childlike or buffoonish black character. Press leaks about the adult, nonstereotypical concept of black manhood, along with the sexual message in *Hallelujah!* sparked sufficient racist backlash to require King Vidor to hire bodyguards for the film’s leads Haynes and McKinney. Film historian Donald Bogle has argued that the portrayal of the black family in *Hallelujah!* was the most sensitive and realistic treatment in Hollywood film until the release of *Southern* in 1972, over forty years later.

Black Theater

In the prewar years African American theater flourished in Harlem, to predominantly African American audiences. Black actors performed in a range of roles, free of the stereotypical ones acceptable to white audiences. The Lafayette Players, formed in Harlem in 1915 as the first African American stock company, presented almost every type of play, including those by white playwrights—*Madame X* by the French playwright Alexandre Bisson, *The Servant in the House* by Charles Rann Kennedy, and *Within the Law* by Bayard Veiller. The Lafayette Players performed at the Lincoln Theater in Harlem, and from this group emerged a number of highly respected dramatic actors, including Abbie Mitchell, Laura Bowman, Edna Thomas, Charles Gilpin, Frank Wilson, Clarence Muse, and Jack Carter.

Black actors began to appear before wider audiences beginning in the war years, especially with their employment in plays written by white authors. In 1917 a group of black actors under the sponsorship of Emily Hapgood presented three one-act plays by playwright Ridgely Torrence at the Garden Theater in New York's Madison Square Garden. Torrance's *The Rider of Dreams*, *Granny Maumee*, and *Simon the Cyrenian: Plays for a Negro Theater* marked the first time that African American actors had commanded the serious attention of New York's white critics and the general press. Because the United States entered the war on the day following the opening of the three one-act plays, black dramatists had to wait until the war's end before they could claim a substantial place in American public entertainment.

In 1919 there was a revival of interest in African Americans in the theater with the appearance of Charles Gilpin as the Reverend William Custis in John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*. In the following year Gilpin's performance in the title role of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* received such outstanding acclaim that he was given an award by the Drama League of New York as well as the NAACP's Spingarn Medal. Some critics predicted for him a career similar to that of Ira Aldridge, who had captivated European audiences with his Shakespearean roles in the previous century.

Postwar Theater

In 1924 Paul Robeson played the leading role in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. It was the first time in American history that a black man had taken a principal role opposite a white woman. In 1926 Paul Green of the University of North Carolina brought to New York *In Abraham's Bosom*, in which Jules Bledsoe played the leading role, ably assisted by Rose McClendon, Abbie Mitchell, and Frank Wilson. The play was a distinct success and demonstrated both the adaptability of African American life to the theater and the ability of African American actors in the theater. In the following year, *Porgy*, a folk play of black life in Charleston by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, was produced by the Theater Guild. Once more, black actors Rose McClendon, Frank Wilson, and others in the cast captivated New York audiences. These plays about black life by white authors reached a high-water mark with the long-running production in 1930 of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*, a fable of a black person's conception of the Old Testament, with Richard B. Harrison as "De Lawd."

Popular musicals, written and produced by blacks themselves, appeared on Broadway, the longest running being *Shuffle Along* by Eubie Blake (music), Noble Sissle (lyrics), and Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles (writers). The play opened in 1921 and ran for over five hundred performances on Broadway and afterward toured theaters in

Black Musicals

Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and other cities for more than two years. With the songs "I'm Just Wild about Harry," "Love Will Find a Way," and "Shuffle Along" masterfully performed by talented singers and dancers, *Shuffle Along* enjoyed record-breaking success. "I'm Just Wild about Harry" would be revived as the campaign theme song in 1948 by Democratic presidential candidate Harry Truman. Although overshadowed by the extraordinary success of *Shuffle Along*, another Broadway musical *Put and Take* (1921), by Irving Miller (the brother of Flournoy Miller of *Shuffle Along* fame), was described in *The New York Times* as a lively "all-Negro revue . . . filled with excellent dancing, good singing and quite a dash of comedy." In 1923 Irving Miller also produced the musical *Liza* and the following year *Dinah*, which introduced the popular dance the "Black Bottom" to New York.

Black musicals contributed to the image of the Roaring Twenties. In 1923 the black-produced Broadway musical *Runnin' Wild* contained songs by stride pianist James P. Johnson, whose keyboard style decisively influenced the prolific songwriter Thomas "Fats" Waller, probably best known for his song "Ain't Misbehavin,'" which he

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Shuffle Along chorus girls

Shuffle Along was the longest running Broadway musical by blacks in the 1920s.

wrote for the Broadway play *Hot Chocolates*. Although the Broadway show *Runnin' Wild* is little known today, James P. Johnson's "The Charleston" remains the "theme song" of the 1920s, the first few bars of which automatically call forth an image of the decade. The song's melody and rhythmic structure were influenced by the southern dance, which became a national fad following the debut of *Runnin' Wild*. The song "The Charleston" may actually have resulted from the particular migration patterns of the early part of the twentieth century, which brought black migrants from Georgia and the Carolinas to New York. James P. Johnson admitted that he often altered his solo piano performances in New York to meet the music requests of migrants from Charleston, South Carolina.

Lesser-known black musicals introduced singers and dancers who would later come to fame on the stage. Blake and Sissle's *Chocolate Dandies* ran three months on Broadway in 1924. In its chorus line was then-unknown Josephine Baker, who would soon become the rage of Paris. Another black woman who would soon enjoy international acclaim was Florence Mills. First appearing in *Shuffle Along*, she later gained leading roles in a number of white-produced musicals that featured all-black casts—*Plantation Revue* (1922), *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923), *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), and *Blackbirds of 1926*. Mills's headliner roles in those musicals brought her top billing and other celebrity benefits that had been previously reserved for male comedians. Her performances, which included pantomiming, singing, and dancing, were considered signal triumphs in New York, Paris, and London. Her death in 1927 at the age of thirty-one opened the way for new women singers (Ethel Waters, Adelaide Hall, and Ada Ward) in subsequent versions of *Blackbirds*. In addition, *Blackbirds of 1928* brought tremendous renown to the tap dancer and actor Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

The Harlem Renaissance

Before World War I and even before the migration of blacks into Harlem, black artistic talent had begun to flower in New York City. Its roots were planted in the world of black bohemia, located in the tenement district known as the Tenderloin on Manhattan's West Side, from Fifth to Seventh Avenues and between West 24th and West 42nd Streets. (As yet, blacks had not moved in significant numbers to Harlem.)

The Tenderloin According to census data for 1900, the Tenderloin contained most of New York City's 60,000 black residents. Three-quarters of those employed were working as laborers or servants; about a thousand (less than 3 percent of total employed) had professional or clerical jobs.

In his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1927 [1912]), James Weldon Johnson describes the area around West 27th Street, just west of Sixth Avenue, as a vibrant world of clubs, cabarets, dance halls, and also brothels and gambling houses. It was a world that afforded unique places to gather, according to the book's protagonist, for "coloured Bohemians," prize fighters, famous black vaudevillian "minstrels"—"notables of the ring, the turf, and the stage." Comprising writers, composers, musicians, theatrical performers, and others in show business, the *mélange* of artists plied their craft at the turn of the twentieth century. Ever since black comedians Bert Williams and George Walker reached New York in 1896 and introduced their highly successful vaudeville team, white managers had begun to employ black entertainers. Aside from introducing the "cakewalk" dance to white New Yorkers, Williams and Walker (who at times played in blackface) appeared in numerous world-famous revues.

The precursor to the Harlem artistic community, black bohemia expanded as black migration increased and spread northward into the San Juan Hill area, with whites in the area moving elsewhere. When Bert Williams and George Walker rented their flat on **The Marshall Hotel** West 53rd Street, they described their role as availing themselves to "all colored men who possessed theatrical and musical ability." According to black theater historian Karen Sotiropoulos, in the years before World War I, the Marshall Hotel on West 53rd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues became the residence for a coterie of talented figures, including James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole, Lester Walton, Ernest Hogan, James Reese Europe, and other entertainers who either lived or met there.

New York's segregated housing did not permit blacks to live in the white neighborhoods that constituted vaudeville's main centers, in Union and Madison Squares. Thus blacks sought to create opportunities and places for networking among themselves. The most outstanding spot for networking, mentoring, and collaborating was the hotel run by an African American named Jimmie Marshall at 127–129 West 53rd Street. The Marshall Hotel, a four-story brownstone, became the fashionable gathering place for black actors and musicians. Marshall converted what had been formerly a family residence into a rooming house, restaurant, and hotel. In his autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), Johnson referred to the Marshall as responsible for the black presence on the New York stage. The hotel also attracted white entertainment elites, who visited from time to time.

Black bohemia proved short-lived, however. The Marshall Hotel closed after a change in cabaret licensing laws in 1913. More important, the demographic pattern of the ensuing Great Migration began to shift to Harlem, where a housing glut led profit-hungry real estate agents and developers to open up their once racially exclusive market to black home purchasers and renters. Some blacks, such as George Walker, had moved to Harlem as early as 1908.

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In the postwar years, however, black periodicals began to speak of Harlem as the “Negro’s Zion” and “Race Capital of the World.” Harlem had become a highly sought-out location, not merely by the many black southern migrants and Caribbean immigrants who settled there, but also by whites who flocked to Harlem for its nightlife and entertainment. By the mid-1920s, white magazines depicted Harlem as having surpassed Broadway as an entertainment magnet. White socialites in their limousines, politicians, gangsters, and white tourists all found their way to Harlem’s cabarets and speakeasies. If Harlem represented to white tourists the opportunity (according to *Variety* magazine) for immersion in a “seething cauldron of Nubian mirth and hilarity,” it also became a place for the literati of both races to come together for more highbrow pursuits.

Black authors and playwrights rose to prominence in New York during the 1920s, an era of prolific publishing for all authors. The growing pluralistic culture of urban America, particularly New York, offered black authors a vibrant mix of new ideas and art forms. During the second decade of the twentieth century, white and black intellectuals alike offered new frames of reference for analyzing and understanding race. Members of the black literati differed among themselves ideologically, shifting their positions and identifying with distinct yet frequently overlapping intellectual trends: cultural racialism (rejecting the biological construction of race), pragmatism, cultural pluralism, socialism, American cultural nationalism (as contrasted to European culture), and pan-Africanism.

In this cultural movement, the civil rights organizations—the NAACP and the National Urban League—played crucial supportive roles. Through their magazines’ literary contests, banquets, and home parties, the officers of both organizations encouraged new literary talent and initiated opportunities to bring exposure to young black writers, as well as to broker introductions to influential white authors, publishers, and prospective patrons. Jessie Fauset, novelist, worked as the literary editor of *The Crisis* for seven years and brought into print for the first time the work of both Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen. Literary scholar Cheryl Wall also credits Fauset for mentoring or at least encouraging several other prominent Harlem Renaissance writers, including Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Anne Spencer, and Georgia Douglass Johnson. Also, to call attention to Harlem’s budding talent, Fauset hosted readings and lectures at the 135th Street Library.

Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League edited *Opportunity* magazine. Like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity* played a tremendous role in calling attention to younger

Black Periodicals



Jessie Redmon Fauset

As the literary editor of *The Crisis*, Fauset first published the work of Langston Hughes, among other talented writers and poets.

writers, especially with Charles Johnson's creating the opportunity for them to be introduced to New York's white literary establishment at a banquet he arranged at the Civic Club in March 1924. Organized as an event to honor Jessie Fauset and the recent publication of her novel *There is Confusion*, the banquet's larger purpose was to announce in a very public way the Harlem Renaissance itself. Members of the white publishing elite—Carl Van Doren, editor of *Century* magazine; Paul Kellogg, editor of *Survey Graphic*; Frederick Allen of Harper & Row; and other distinguished guests—sat in rapt attention for readings by new, young black artists. For example, after reading his poems, the twenty-one year-old Countee Cullen saw them appear in four national magazines.

The Civic Club event also signaled the ascent of the Harvard-trained philosopher Alain Locke, by then a professor at Howard University, as the architect of the New Negro renaissance. Serving as master of ceremonies, Locke's insightful remarks on the significance of this younger generation of black writers led to the request by Paul Kellogg that Locke edit a special Harlem series for *Survey Graphic*. The issue, which appeared in 1925, was further enlarged and published as the anthology *The New Negro* (1925), today recognized as the foundational text of the Harlem Renaissance. The Civic Club dinner was followed by numerous occasions for racially integrated conversations and networking. In large public affairs and in the salon atmosphere of homes, black writers conversed, laughed, and dined with New York's rich and famous. In growing numbers, black writers found their words in an array of influential periodicals—*Survey Graphic*, *Current History*, *The American Mercury*, *Modern Quarterly*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and *The New Masses*—that presented black authors to the larger American readership.

Alain Locke perceived this groundswell of interest in the arts as proof of Harlem having become a "race capital" and—more than that—of forming part of a larger transnational movement of "nascent centers of folk expression and self-determination." Locke noted that "Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia." Many black literary artists helped to play this role. Although only a sample of the entire number of black poets and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, key figures include James Weldon Johnson, Eric Walrond, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Anne Spencer.

The fame of Jamaican-born Claude McKay (September 15, 1890–May 22, 1948) preceded that of the cohort of young writers introduced at the Civic Club event in 1924. Such black writers as McKay, Fauset, and Jean Toomer (and earlier Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson) had already made a mark in literature. McKay, an active socialist, had published his poems and essays in a number of left-wing magazines in the 1910s, as well as briefly co-edited the leftist magazine *The Liberator*. One of the most acclaimed of the Harlem Renaissance writers, McKay was already heralded as a poet. James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP leader and also a novelist, would later describe McKay's poetry as "one of the great forces in bringing about what is often called the 'Negro Literary Renaissance.'" It is ironic, however, that for most of the 1920s McKay lived outside the United States—in the Soviet Union, France, and North Africa.

McKay immigrated to the United States in 1912 at twenty-one years of age, having already published his *Songs of Jamaica*, a collection of poems in the island's dialect. He attended Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University before moving to New York. His

Before the Civic Club

poetic style was traditional in form but militantly defiant in its content. Perhaps his most well-known poems—"The Lynching," "If We Must Die" (written in response to urban race riots in 1919), "The White House," and "To the White Fiends"—most boldly express McKay's protest and bitter contempt for American racism. Seemingly having expended all his poetic talents, McKay turned to prose and in 1928 brought out *Home to Harlem*. In the following year, he published the novel *Banjo*, whose protagonist is a black expatriate and musician living in Marseilles. In the 1930s he published *Banana Bottom* (1933) and his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (1937). During the years of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay's writings both enjoyed great acclaim and stirred great controversy on account of his unabashed affection for the black working class in all its complexity. His portrayal of the raw, even lurid side of black life in *Home to Harlem*, for example, left race-uplift readers such as Du Bois and Jessie, and younger readers such as Langston Hughes, inspired by the freedom to be able to write on such subjects.

Also respected as a writer before the Civic Club event was Jean Toomer (born Nathan Toomer, 1894–1967). The grandson of the black Reconstruction-era politician P. B. S. Pinchback, Toomer won accolades for his literary style in *Cane* (1923), his one major work of the Harlem Renaissance. Toomer did not live in Harlem; rather, he commingled in the white bohemian world of Greenwich Village, associating primarily with white writers and artists. Yet when *Cane* came out, it received far greater attention in the black press than in the white. Its rave reviews and sales in black circles were coupled with only modest sales among whites. Today, however, *Cane* is recognized as the first African American modernist writing and also as among the most extraordinary and evocative books in American literature in the first half of the twentieth century.

Divided into three parts, *Cane* offers a series of meditations, in the form of short stories and poems, on the meaning of black culture. Toomer had earlier taught briefly in a black school in rural Georgia, and it is this setting that serves as the basis of the short story "Fern." In Part One, "Fern" captures the dying, beautiful, and tragic black "folk-spirit" in a rapidly changing South of rural out-migration, technological innovation, secularization, and cultural loss. In "Fern" the rural South, along with its culture and history, is ill-equipped to survive the dawn of modernity. Toomer tells this story in his portrayal of the sensuous, untamable beauty of southern rural black womanhood, which he embellishes in death and decay and the slow setting of the sun. In Part Two, Toomer's modernist sensibilities turn to the urban North, particularly Washington, D.C. and Chicago, signaling frenetic, strident, repetitive, rhythmic syncopations—sounds of movement and of jazz. In a visual and sonorous rendering, Toomer writes: "Arms of the girls, and their limbs, which . . . jazz, jazz . . . by lifting up their tight street skirts they set free, jab the air, and clog the floor in rhythm to the music." Shortly after the appearance of *Cane*, Toomer retired from active participation in the New Negro literary awakening and the world of African Americans altogether, blending among whites instead.

The lyric quality, rich imagination, and intellectual content of Countee Cullen's poetry place him among the central figures of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1926 Alain Locke acclaimed Cullen as a genius, quintessentially young and talented—the best of what was "new" about the New Negro. "Posterity will laugh at us," Locke asserted in the January issue of *Opportunity*, "if we do not proclaim him now." Cullen (1903–1946) published his first book of poetry, *Color* (1925), to critical acclaim. His poems had individually appeared in numerous magazines—*Bookman*, *The American Mercury*, *Harper's*, *Century*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The Crisis*, *Messenger*, and *Opportunity*.

Countee Cullen

One of most famous poems, "Heritage," in *Color*, appeared first in the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*. "What is Africa to me?" Cullen asked in the first line of the poem, revealing his own unresolved conflict. Firmly committed to traditional poetic form, Cullen's work included both racial and nonracial subject matter. In the poems with a racial message, Cullen's choice of words is generally more delicate and subtle in protest than is the poetry of McKay or Langston Hughes. Indeed, Cullen emphasized his need to write on themes of his own choosing and was thus equally comfortable in search of the beauty and effectiveness of verse that did not depend on the use of racial experiences at all.

In his second book of poetry, *Copper Sun* (1927), he paid less attention to racial themes than he did in *Color*. When asked why, Cullen did not shy away from voicing his position on the responsibility of the black poet. He recoiled from the idea of racially politicized poetry. Although admitting that he was always conscious of his race, Cullen was quoted in the *The Brooklyn Eagle* in February 1924: "If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET." Literary critics in his day and later praise him for his poems on racial subjects. Typical of the quality of his writings are these two lines, perhaps the best known of all Cullen's work:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

The most memorable writer of the Harlem Renaissance is Langston Hughes (1902–1967). He arrived in New York in 1921, by way of Kansas, Illinois, Ohio, and Mexico. He had come to New York to attend Columbia University, but

after one year of study he was yet again on the road, this time on a freighter bound for Africa and Europe. Before he was twenty years old, his poems had been published in *The Crisis*. A prolific writer, Hughes wrote in various genres, challenging the restrictions of race no less boldly as restrictions on artistic form. He composed deeply moving verses full of race pride, such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and of humble walks of life, as in "Brass Spittoons." His volume of poetry *Weary Blues* (1926) incorporated jazz and blues rhythms. Hughes's lyrics and subject matter flaunted his experimental modernist voice, but they also ruffled the feathers of Countee Cullen, who described the book as having "too much emphasis here on strictly Negro themes."

In 1927 Hughes followed with the volume *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which was greeted with a mixture of admiration and denunciation. Like McKay, Hughes admired the colorful aspects of black vernacular culture—the blues and jazz, juke joints and shouting churches, and the complex individuality of what he fondly called the "low-down folks." Also in 1927, Hughes contributed to the bold, highly controversial, and short-lived journal *Fire!!* A versatile writer who did not shy away from politically charged and leftist themes, Hughes continued to write poetry in the 1930s as well as the successful novel *Not without Laughter* (1930) and a volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934). Later, he experimented with pieces for the theater. In 1940 his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, was published.

Langston Hughes



Poet Laureate of the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes, shown here at his typewriter, also wrote novels, essays, and plays.

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Window in Time

In Praise of the Black Vernacular

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well wed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance!

Source: Langston Hughes, "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 1926.



Writings by Harlem Renaissance women reveal gender consciousness but also differences among women in regard to literary style and class predilection. Jessie Redmond Fauset (1882–1961), a 1905 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Cornell University, was the leading female figure of the movement during its heyday in the 1920s. From 1919 to 1926, the literary arm of *The Crisis* flourished under her tutelage. Fauset introduced and encouraged new talent (recent scholarship deems her to be the true midwife of the Harlem Renaissance), along with writing novels and articles, reviewing publications, and translating the work of Francophone Caribbean writers. Her first novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924), won her respect as an author. A review in *The Crisis* called the book “the novel that the Negro intelligentsia has been clamoring for.” While problems of race are present in the four books that she published, Fauset’s intention was to emphasize universal qualities and values that make blacks react to their circumstances just as whites and other people do.

Harlem Renaissance Women

Although Fauset was very much a traditionalist in her style, employing familiar conventions of sentimentalism and the tragic mulatto, this fact did not prevent her second novel, *Plum Bum* (1929), from telling a complex story of racial passing, of racial concessions to patronage and the publishing industry, and of the gender limitations of marriage. Literary scholar Deborah McDowell finds the gender dimension of the book the most sophisticated of the plots, since the African American female protagonist, Angela Murray, whose light skin permits her to pass for white in order to better her material life, comes face to face with painful but inevitable gender realities. In the white world, she soon comes to realize that her fairytale understanding of wifehood and marriage is shattered, and she learns in the process to value a woman’s individuality and independence—all this bringing her greater appreciation for the black world she left behind. Considered Fauset’s best work, *Plum Bum* was followed by *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy: American Style* (1933).

Gender is central to the novels of Nella Larsen (1891–1964). Of mixed-racial heritage (her mother was Danish and her father black), Larsen authored two important novels—*Quicksand*

(1928) and *Passing* (1929). In 1929 she became the first black woman to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. Both Larsen and Fauset focused on middle-class life, but Larsen was far less conformist, questioning many of the basic beliefs of the “Talented Tenth.” *Quicksand*’s protagonist, Helga Crane, rejects the conservative values and ideas about women’s dress and comportment taught at the black Naxos College (Saxon spelled backward). She finds no respite in Europe, where her white lover sees her only through the lens of primitivism. The novel’s race leader, Ms. Hayes-Rore, is not respected as a race woman or black clubwoman but instead is caricatured along with her rhetoric and agenda of racial uplift. As the title *Quicksand* implies, Larsen’s ending is a tragic one—its larger message critical of middle-class racial hypocrisy and of the inevitable fate of women who dare to question conformity. Such women find no refuge among whites, or in black institutions, or even in the largely female-populated church. Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* conclude with hopelessness and death.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) deliberately sought to give the impression that she was one of the young writers of the Harlem Renaissance—in age a peer of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. However, she fabricated her age, often claiming to be around ten years younger than she was. An educated woman who had trained under Alain Locke at Howard and under the famed anthropologist Franz Boas at Barnard in the 1920s, Hurston was both an anthropologist in her own right and a literary modernist.

It was not her age or educational attainment that took her on a path different from Fauset’s and Larsen’s but instead her childhood and specifically the rural folk culture of her childhood. Having been raised in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, Hurston firmly believed in the racial “authenticity” of the rural folk. They were, to her, the natural embodiment of the life, soul, and moral health of black people as a group, and particularly for black women. Hurston, who always based her subject matter on rural black community life, conducted ethnographic research between 1927 and 1932 in Alabama, Florida, and the Bahamas in order to be faithful to their true dialects, beliefs, and practices. She showed negligible concern for interracial themes. Hurston’s unique voice is found in the entanglement of sexuality, gender, race, region, and class. She focuses on folk customs, speech patterns, and values, addressing black women’s sexuality by metaphorically freeing it from the oppressive gaze of both white people and the black middle class. Particularly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, female sexuality flowers in all-black towns and other rural settings that afford the book’s protagonist Janey an evolving understanding of women’s independence and regenerative power.

Hurston’s flamboyant behavior—her antics and “darkey” jokes at the interracial parties hosted by the wealthy white patron of the arts, Charlotte Osgood Mason—also highlighted the differences between her and middle-class black Harlemites, who criticized Hurston for catering shamelessly to Mason’s fascination with “primitives.” Langston Hughes, after parting ways with Mason and her financial support, wrote that



The Harlem Renaissance's intellectual

Arriving on the scene late, when many writers were well established, Zora Neale Hurston was both brilliant and prolific.

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Window in Time

Enter the New Negro

The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem. A Negro newspaper carrying news material in English, French, and Spanish, gathered from all corners of America, the West Indies and Africa has maintained itself in Harlem for over five years. . . . Under American auspices and backing, three pan-African congresses have been held abroad for the discussion of common interests, colonial questions and the future cooperative development of Africa. In terms of the race question as a world problem, the Negro mind has leapt, so to speak, upon the parapets of prejudice and extended its cramped horizons. In so doing it has linked up with the growing group consciousness of the dark-peoples and is gradually learning their common interests. . . . As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international.

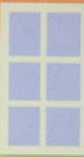
Source: Alain Locke, preface to *The New Negro* (1925).

Mason wanted him to “be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive.” Hurston, too, eventually fell out with her patron and escaped from under Mason’s financial largesse, when she used her research trips and findings to inform her novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and her anthropological study *Mules and Men* (1935). In so doing, Hurston had broken the contractual agreement that gave Mason sole ownership of her research. Hurston’s productivity continued throughout the 1930s, and in 1937 she published her most successful novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

French Connections

Harlem was not the only race capital or nascent center of artistic blacks. The popular vogue of African visual artists and African American musicians captured the imagination of white audiences in cosmopolitan cities abroad, such as Paris, Marseilles, and London. Paris attracted an array of intellectuals, writers, artists, and musical performers of African descent from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa who forged a diasporic community and articulated an internationalist outlook through their interaction and exchange of ideas.

In many ways, Paris in the 1920s resembled Harlem. Although smaller in number, the black population in Paris grew considerably more large and heterogeneous during World War I because of the presence of black troops from the United States and from France’s colonies in Africa (primarily Senegal and the Sudan) and the Caribbean. For the black Americans who remained in or returned to Paris in the postwar years, the cosmopolitan character of Paris afforded a haven from the many reminders of racial inequality in the United States, and it also offered the opportunity to cultivate intellect, talent, fame, and fortune. American musicians went on tour to Paris, and some lived as expatriates in the city. Black visual artists studied in Paris. Harlem Renaissance figures Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes,



Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Bennett, and others all traveled to Paris and incorporated Parisian settings into their writings.

The French initially became aware of African American popular culture as a result of World War I, when black soldiers, such as in Lieutenant James Reese Europe's 369th Infantry Regiment Band and other black regiment bands, carried the sounds of jazz throughout France. In the 1920s, such black American musicians as Palmer Jones's International Five, Louis Mitchell's Jazz Kings, Eugene Bullard, Ada "Bricktop" Smith, Florence Embry Jones, and Josephine Baker established their performance careers in Paris. For those African American entertainers, Paris offered celebrity status unattainable in the United States. For example, black drummer and band leader Louis Mitchell, considered among the earliest musicians if not the first to introduce jazz to Europeans, performed in vaudeville revues in England in 1915, and in 1917 Mitchell and his jazz band, the Seven Spades, played in concert in Paris. After the war, Mitchell returned to New York, but by 1920 he set sail for Paris after forming the new band Mitchell's Jazz Kings, of which Sidney Bechet was a member. The Jazz Kings played at hotels and dance clubs in France, and Mitchell, who remained in Paris until World War II, opened a restaurant in Montmartre, a hill in the northern part of the Right Bank known for its bohemian subculture since the 1890s, where artists, including black musicians and visual artists, continued to gather after World War I.

Of all the black performers, the most renowned—indeed, legendary—was Josephine Baker, who had previously danced in chorus lines in black hits on Broadway. Once in France, however, Baker set Paris afire in her *Revue Nègre* in the mid-1920s. In *Opportunity* in 1927, Countee Cullen described the effect of the scantily banana-clad Baker: "Paris is in a state of violent hysteria over her; there are Josephine Baker perfumes, costumes, bobs, statuettes; in fact, she sets the pace."

As magazines heralded Harlem's popularity among whites, it was manifestly evident that the *vogue nègre* in France occurred concurrently and may have even preceded the years when Harlem was in vogue. No more telling example was the growing influence of African art shapes, particularly African masks, on the European artist Pablo Picasso's epoch-making painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.)* (1907). The fascination with primitive art and its relation to modern art connected whites in both France and the United States with African American artists and critics. The Parisian art collector Paul Guillaume published articles on African art in *Opportunity* during the 1920s, and he also co-authored with Thomas Monro the book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1924), which included pieces owned by the white American collector Albert Barnes.

In France, African-descended people from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa formed a cosmopolitan community of color, but with different intellectual, social, political, and class perspectives. If black authors found in New York in the 1920s a plethora of periodicals in which to publish, the same could be said in France of African authors and editors of such newspapers and magazines as *Les Continents*, *La Voix des Nègres*, *La Race nègre*, *Le Courrier des Noirs*, *La Dépêche africaine*, *Légitime Défense*, *La Revue du Monde noir*, *Le Cri des Nègres*, *L'Étudiant martiniquais*, *L'Étudiant noir*, and *Africa*.

Before New York's white literati paid public homage to the role of blacks in the arts, in 1921 France bestowed its highest literary award—the Prix Goncourt (Goncourt Prize)—on René Maran for his novel *Batouala*. Maran had been born in the French Caribbean colony of Martinique and had worked in an administrative position in French West Africa, so his prizewinning novel depicted Africans' indigenous culture and practices within the political context of colonialism. His portrayal of the cruel and debilitating effects of French colonial

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policies was unmistakable. Thus the Goncourt Prize made the book all the more an international sensation. Some blacks, for example, Jessie Fauset and Hubert Harrison, read *Batouala* in the original French; however, the book was translated into English in 1922 and was discussed and reviewed extensively in the black press. Maran's picture appeared on the cover of *The Crisis* that year.

News of Maran's achievement surprised and elated African Americans. Even the famous and elderly nineteenth-century black novelist Charles Chesnut wrote to black literary scholar Benjamin Brawley in 1922 that "while he [Maran] is not a United States Negro, I think his triumph is one of which all those who shared the blood of his race—for from his portrait he seems to be of the full-blood—may well be proud." Chesnut was especially complimentary of Maran's sonorous and visual treatment of nature—the wind, woods, streams, smoke, birds, and the like. Black nationalists Marcus Garvey, William Ferris, and J. A. Rogers also enthusiastically praised Maran.

Maran began to correspond with black writers as well as to contribute to black periodicals such as *Opportunity*. Before Alain Locke's *New Negro* or even the special *Survey Graphic* issue that introduced to many Americans the flowering literary movement in Harlem, Maran informed his French readers about such budding Harlem writers as Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen. Moreover, Harlem Renaissance notables visited Maran in Paris. Reflecting on the tremendous international stature of René Maran, literary scholar Brent Edwards proposed resetting the time of the black literary renaissance to account for the influence of Paris rather than Harlem. Edwards argued that the "the impact of *Batouala* at the dawn of the 'Harlem Renaissance' would mean reconfiguring the accepted cartography of black literary modernism. If nothing else the relocation of the center of a diasporic movement from Harlem to Paris calls attention to a broader understanding of black internationalism than heretofore recognized."

In Paris, black artists and intellectuals found a great diversity of languages and political perspectives—a diversity that produced linguistic and other ethnic challenges to transnational conceptions of diaspora. Language differences confounded a simple and straightforward translation of words. The black yet multi-ethnic community in France found that the process of translation was, according to Edwards, "indispensable to the pursuit of any project of internationalism, any 'correspondence' that would connect populations of African descent around the world." The Harlem writers certainly followed newspapers from the black Francophone world, while their counterparts in France followed the African American scene. Alain Locke was contacted in 1927 by Jane Nardal, a young student from Martinique at the Sorbonne in Paris, for permission to translate *The New Negro* into French. Nardal was well qualified to do this translation, and she was also able to publicize the book widely, given her contacts at Parisian newspapers, including *Le Soir* and *La Dépêche africaine*, which was edited by the Guadelupe-born Maurice Satineau. Nardal and her sister Paulette were among a growing number of black intellectuals who, in the 1920s, located themselves within a larger black transnational movement.

Yet the articulation of a black diaspora revealed at times misunderstanding and differing viewpoints. For example, most black Americans held an opinion of France similar to that of Alain Locke, who lauded France for its racial egalitarianism. However, some of France's black colonial subjects, such as René Maran of Martinique and left-wing trade unionist Lamine Senghor of Senegal, took a more critical position. Maran wrote of the French: "They tolerate us because they need us more and more due to the growing lack of manual



Couple wearing raccoon coats, with a Cadillac

This James Van Der Zee photograph was taken on West 127th Street in 1932. The photographer was a chronicler of life in New York's Harlem.

labor. . . . But this has not prevented France up to now from blocking our access to jobs of primary importance." In addition, distinctions among persons of African descent over the usage of *noir*, *negre*, and *Negro*—all meaning “black”—connoted different and conflicting political and class orientations in the pursuit of racial equality.

Visual Artists

Noting African art's influence on European modern art, Alain Locke proposed that African art forms be sources of inspiration to “culturally awakened” blacks, because they provided a liberating “racial idiom” in contrast to conventionalism. The most noted African American visual artists of the period included Aaron Douglass, Sargent Johnson, Richmond Barthé, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, and Augusta Savage. The demand for black artistic renderings continued to heighten during the 1920s, when a plethora of periodicals, books, and theatrical and musical playbills' publishers demanded black illustrations. However, noted African American artists of the period developed their work not simply from their consciousness of the “legacy of African art”; several also developed their technique from training in Paris. In certain cases, exposure in the United States to the Bavarian-born modernist Winold Riess also played a formative role.

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Not least of all, African Americans were emboldened to develop a variety of different styles (modernism, realism, primitivism, folk) and aesthetic forms (painting, sculpture, drawing, photography) through the support of such wealthy white patrons as the collector Albert C. Barnes and Charlotte Osgood Mason, as well as the wealthy black heiress A'Lelia Walker, the daughter of beauty magnate Madam C. J. Walker. Awards from philanthropic institutions such as the Barnes and Harmon Foundations played a significant role in encouraging artistic creativity. At a time of great cultural ferment, black visual artists experienced levels of unprecedented productivity. New Negro artists broke away from what Locke called "timid conventionalism" as they rendered in photographs, paintings, and sculpture the rural folk culture, the black vernacular in street life and cabarets, and the fashionable world of the black elite.

Capturing the mood and the spirit of black life in Harlem took many forms, but none conveyed a more realistic picture of black middle-class life or

Photographers and Illustrators
Harlem's leaders and institutions than the photographs of James Van Der Zee (1886–1983). His photographs have significantly shaped the way the Harlem Renaissance is remembered. Van Der Zee operated a successful studio in Harlem for nearly a half-century, using as his subject matter ordinary Harlem residents as well as such celebrities as the poet Countee Cullen, political leader Marcus Garvey, and dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Van Der Zee's photographs chronicle the emergence of the New Negro, documenting memorable images of war veterans, parades, and leisure life on New York's Lenox Avenue and in the upwardly mobile Striver's Row.

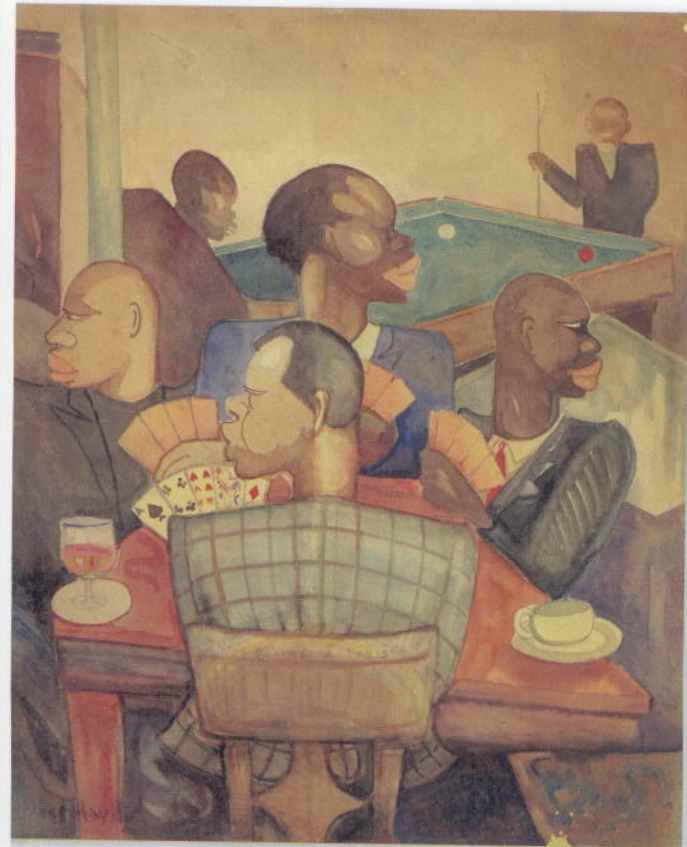
The Great Depression of the 1930s ended the prosperity of both Harlem and Van Der Zee, who found himself struggling to make ends meet. His client base dropped precipitously, since people were far less able to pay for photographic services. The growing use of personal cameras further diminished his business. His work was rediscovered in the 1960s, when it was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1968 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*.

Like James Van Der Zee's photographs, the prolific artwork of Aaron Douglas (1898–1979) seems to embody the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas's art graced the covers of several playbills and more than thirteen books, including those by Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Douglas was a frequent illustrator for such popular magazines as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Douglas moved from Kansas to Harlem in 1925 and quickly became acquainted with the elite coterie of intellectual and cultural leaders. He



Rise, Shine, Aaron Douglas

This painting depicts the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.



Palmer Hayden, *Nous quatre à Paris [We Four in Paris]*, 1928–1930

The figures, positioned very close to one another, form a tight unit that underscores their relationship, as does the similarity of their physical appearance in head shape and hairstyle.

with his aunt in Washington, D.C., to study commercial art. After nine years in the army, Hayden eventually settled in New York City, where he took art classes and exhibited his work at several venues, including the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now called the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture). In New York, Hayden supported himself with jobs that also served his interest in art. For example, he cleaned the studio of an art instructor who, in return, taught him to paint in oils.

In 1926, Hayden was thrust into the limelight after winning first prize in the Harmon Foundation Awards for Negro Artists. The Harmon Foundation provided support to a number of important black artists. The prize money and support from wealthy white patrons allowed Hayden to travel to France, where he eschewed formal study and instead let his own experiences inform his work.

Hayden experimented with a variety of styles and subjects, creating post-Impressionistic seascapes, comic cartoon sketches, a series based on the life of African American folk hero John Henry, and a sensitive nude self-portrait in watercolor. Hayden is most known for his

abandoned the artistic style that he had studied as a student at the University of Nebraska, adopting instead a more stylized African-influenced aesthetic. In New York, Douglas studied under the German artist Winold Reiss, who had illustrated the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, the forerunner of Alain Locke's *The New Negro*. Reiss, a European artist who had been inspired by African sculpture, encouraged Douglas to look to his artistic "ancestral legacy" for inspiration.

Douglas's modernist aesthetic earned him important commissions as a commercial artist and solidified his reputation as the preeminent visual artist of the period. Alain Locke called Douglas a "pioneering Africanist" and commissioned him to create the illustrations for *The New Negro* (1925).

The painter Palmer Hayden gained stature as an artist from his experiences living in both Harlem and Paris in the 1920s. Born Peyton Cole Hedgeman in a small town in **Painters** rural Virginia, Palmer Hayden received the name by which the world would come to know him when he enlisted in the army during World War I. A letter of reference for Hedgeman accidentally identified him as Palmer Hayden, and, afraid to advise the army recruiters of the mistake, he adopted the new name.

As a child, he attended a one-room schoolhouse where teachers first noticed and encouraged his special talent for drawing. Hayden quit school at a young age in order to go to work, performing such odd jobs as sand hauling and fish packing on the Potomac River. He never stopped drawing, however, and in 1906 he went to live

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Archibald J. Motley, Jr., *Saturday Night*, 1935

This stylized, shorthand depiction of cultural groups was popular in the American Scene painting of the time.

scenes of urban black life, such as his *A Midsummer Night in Harlem* (1938). Some black art critics found Hayden's portrayal of black physiognomy—with round heads and exaggerated lips, eyes, and ears—to be offensive. Describing Hayden as “a talent gone far astray,” art historian James Porter compared Hayden's representations of black people to “ludicrous billboards that once were plastered on public buildings to advertise the blackface minstrel.” However, this visual idiom was employed by other black artists, including Archibald J. Motley, Jr., in part because it spoke of and to black working-class culture.

Much of Hayden's oeuvre portrays homosocial communities—groups of men at work or enjoying one another's company during their leisure time. *Nous quatre à Paris* features four dapper black men (including him) seated around a table and playing cards; two others shoot pool in the background. The relationship among men, a fact further signified by the painting's title, represents the figures not as four independent beings but as four bodies involved with one another so as to constitute a “we.”

Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891–1981) was an outstanding Chicago artist noted for paintings of his city's black nightlife and for portraits of his family and friends. Motley's two concerns, presented in different styles, convey the different representations of black life and culture that were often hotly debated in regard to New Negro literature. Motley, the child of a middle-class family living in an integrated Chicago neighborhood, enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing before enrolling in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Removed from the modernist New York art scene, Motley was schooled in a realistic aesthetic and was

taught to disdain the modernist aesthetic as epitomized by the works of the pivotal Armory Show of 1913, officially called the International Exhibition of Modern Art, which was the first large-scale exhibition in the United States of modernist European and American art.

Motley began his career as a portrait painter, undertaking what he considered a “scientific” study of race. His portraits of family members and of women of mixed racial heritage, such as *Octoroon Girl* (1925), won him a Gold Medal from the Harmon Foundation. Art scholars note that his renderings of very light-skinned, elite middle-class women were intended to question ideas of racial demarcation. In fact, the similarity between Motley’s portraits of apparently well-to-do mulatto and octoroon women and those of his white wife, painted during the same period, are striking—offering dignified and refined images that are virtually undistinguishable as far as racial difference is concerned.

Motley’s stature grew largely from his later work, however, particularly from his Bronzeville series of paintings, which focus not on the accoutrements of the black elite but rather on the world of leisure in Chicago’s black working-class neighborhoods. This series did not express the realist aesthetic of his portrait work but rather modernism with its vibrant colors, rhythmic motion, and a very different visual idiom for his peopled streetscapes and cabaret scenes. Motley’s painting *Saturday Night* (1935) depicts large, bright red lips and brilliantly white smiles, reflecting the artist’s attempt to use a distinct visual language to signify class differences among blacks.

A talented and versatile artist, Motley was one of the first African American artists of the 1920s and 1930s to achieve a significant degree of critical as well as financial success. He became the first black artist to mount a one-man show in a major New York gallery. He was also the first African American to win a Guggenheim fellowship, which financed a year’s study in Paris (1929–1930).

On several levels, the artist Sargent Johnson shared Alain Locke’s interest in producing “Negro art.” He was among those African American artists who heeded Locke’s call to claim the “legacy of the ancestral arts” not only thematically but also in a visual aesthetic form. Johnson was less interested in proving the legitimacy of such a project to the larger white world than in providing his own people with an image they could embrace.

Johnson once stated: “It is the pure American Negro I am concerned with, aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip, and that characteristic hair, bearing and manner; and I wish to show that beauty not so much to the white man as to the Negro himself.” Although many black artists included African content in their works—for example, Douglas’s *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting* (1934)—or incorporated African art into their paintings, such as the Fang statuery in Palmer Hayden’s *Fetiché et Fleurs* (1931–1932), Johnson conveyed a restrained, often spare, sculptural aesthetic of African forms.

Based in the San Francisco Bay area, Sargent Johnson was one of the few West Coast artists to rise to national prominence and to participate in the Harmon Foundation exhibitions in New York. Therefore, although Johnson can clearly be considered a part of the New Negro arts movement of the 1920s and 1930s, his California context and geographical distance from Harlem and other urban centers of the North exposed him to other influential artistic styles, such as the California modernism of his local peers and the populist Mexican art movement, exemplified by the murals of Diego Rivera. Later in his career, Johnson would abandon his earlier artistic notions of racial representation and experiment with abstract forms.

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Clashing Artistic Values

The decade of the 1920s witnessed not only the flowering of “Negro” arts in the realms of music, visual media, and in literature but also controversy over the role and the meaning of art. New Negroes debated form and content, the social significance of art, its “racial” characteristics, and the acceptable boundaries of artistic representation. At the heart of the clash of opinions was the explicit and sometimes implicit argument over the image of blacks that art codified in the minds of whites.

Of the major intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, W. E. B. Du Bois was the most dogmatic advocate of the propagandistic role of art. In his essay “Criteria of Negro Art” in 1926, which was given first as a speech in June and published in *The Crisis* in October of that year, Du Bois insisted **Art as Propaganda** that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. . . . I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.” The challenge for the black artist, as Du Bois identified it, was to create art work, be it literary or visual, that countered the stereotypes, the caricatures, and the overall racist images replete in the larger white society.

Du Bois loathed Claude McKay’s novel *Home to Harlem* for its depiction of the seamy side of black life—the fighting, drunkenness, and sexual promiscuity. Remarking that the book left him feeling “distinctly like taking a bath,” Du Bois railed against McKay’s willingness to cater to whites’ fascination with the primitive, sarcastically lambasting him for satisfying “that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying. . . .” To cultural arbiters such as Du Bois and Jessie Fauset, who likewise shunned the blues and jazz, books like McKay’s harmed the struggle for racial equality.

Although abhorring the idea of art as propaganda, Countee Cullen of the younger generation also denounced what he believed to be pejorative representations of black people. He argued that they simply replicated and confirmed racist stereotypes. In March 1928, while working as the assistant editor of *Opportunity*, he pursued this topic in his column, “The Dark Tower,” admonishing: “Negroes should be concerned with making good impressions. They cannot do this by throwing wide every door of the racial entourage, to the wholesale gaze of the world at large. Decency demands that some things be kept secret; diplomacy demands it; the world loses its respect for violators of this code. . . . Let art portray things as they are, no matter who is hurt, is a blind bit of philosophy.”

It is interesting that the black artists who repudiated the values of Du Bois, Fauset, Cullen, and other advocates of middle-class propriety chose to do so in the white press, thereby announcing in a very public way the debate, as well as their own liberation from a politics of respectability that held African Americans imprisoned to the white gaze, or in Cullen’s words “the wholesale gaze of the world.” The message of such writers as McKay, Hughes, and Wallace Thurman was meant for white readers no less than for the black literati. In the article “The Negro and the Racial Mountain,” which appeared in *The Nation* in 1926, Hughes defiantly maintained his artistic freedom, as he rebelliously summoned a new race consciousness and a generational divide: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly

white luminaries in his home, and he also wrote the novels *Fire in the Flint* (1924)—a story of racial violence and the psychic journey to black consciousness—and *Flight* (1926). The respected writer and thinker H. L. Mencken influenced Walter White in the debate over artistic freedom. Mencken rejected the hypocrisy and prudishness of white readers who were appalled by sexual images and yet apathetic about lynching and other social injustices.

Amid the growing racism of the early twentieth century—with its emboldened Ku Klux Klan, its segregated army that fought to safeguard world democracy, its lynchings, and its horrific Red Summer of 1919—James Weldon Johnson saw all these events firsthand from the vantage points of artist and civil rights warrior. On various levels, the positive link between the arts and civil rights did not escape him. In response to the NAACP's fundraising campaign against lynching, the casts of the popular musicals *Shuffle Along* and *Runnin' Wild* held successful charity benefit performances.

Johnson was able to assess the racial situation, as few others could. His first awareness of a glimmer of white respect for black artists appears in his account of the artistic world of black bohemia at the dawn of the twentieth century. He watched this dim glow brighten into the extraordinary and illuminating exchange between white and black writers, publishers, and rich benefactors—with the unprecedented rise of black artists in the public sphere. Despite the racial limitations (for example, some whites' perceptions of blacks as primitive), the 1920s witnessed a newfound recognition and respect for black creative artists. Johnson focused on progress. "The creative author has arrived," he announced of those who had made best-seller lists, thus disproving racist claims about black intellectual and cultural inferiority.

Black artists, and Harlem, were in vogue. It seemed a new day—with lush parties, with music and theater, with rich conversation, with the good life of travel to Paris and other cities abroad, with the speakeasies and cabarets, and, most of all, with boundless creativity. The leading black and white literati reveled in the parties of such whites as Charlotte Osgood Mason, Carl Van Vechten, and Nancy Cunard, and of such blacks as A'Lelia Walker, Walter White, and James Weldon Johnson. The arts appeared to be the elixir for America's racial ills. As early as 1911, David Mannes, the concertmaster of the New York Symphony Society, reflected this way of thinking when he stated that "through music, which is a universal language, the Negro and the white man can be brought to have a mutual understanding." For W. E. B. Du Bois in 1926, this cultural influence harkened a new day in racial pride and hope: "We black folk . . . have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future."

However, hopes for a splendid future would soon be dashed. The stock market crash in October 1929 shattered the gaiety and optimism. Longstanding inequalities and malfeasance in the American economy had finally come home, like chickens to roost. The nation's economic foundation rapidly collapsed, unleashing poverty and devastation unknown in America. The arts did not perish, but the suffering caused by the Great Depression was unalleviated by a government ill-prepared for such a catastrophe. As the future got bleaker, some would even liken the economic fallout to God's punishment for the materialism, self-indulgence, and seeming wanton abandon of the Roaring Twenties. In this scourge of biblical proportions, they would invoke Old Testament language: "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

