

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was an African-American artistic and intellectual movement that flourished throughout the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance marked a cultural period during the 1920's when African-Americans celebrated their heritage through music, art, literature, politics and social movements. Harlem in the 1920s was like nowhere else on Earth. During World War I (1914-18), a mass movement called the Great Migration, an exodus of 6 million blacks from the South to Northern cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit (1916-70), began bringing African-Americans by the tens of thousands from the rural South to Northern cities. The movement was based in Harlem, New York, but its influence extended throughout the nation and even the world. Following the Civil War, large numbers of African-Americans migrated to northern urban areas, like New York and Chicago. Harlem was one of the prime destinations for many black Americans, and there, a distinct way of life developed.

'The New Negro Movement,' as it was called during its time, the Harlem Renaissance was essentially the flowering of a unique African-American culture. African-American writers, poets, artists, musicians and intellectuals found new ways to express pride in their race and culture. Central to the Harlem Renaissance was the concept that the time had come for African-Americans to take their rightful place in society and contribute to culture in meaningful ways. Although the movement peaked throughout the late 1920s, its impact continued into the 1930s and beyond.

Among the new arrivals was a whole generation of young writers and thinkers. "Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere," Langston Hughes wrote. As a group, they began writing with a bold new voice about what it meant to be a black American.

"At the beginning of the 20th century, black people were believed to have no history or culture," said scholar Howard Dodson Jr. For many Americans, the Harlem Renaissance was the first clue that they were wrong.

Art and Artists

Harlem Renaissance art often featured bold colors arranged in an expressionist fashion. Many of these pieces portray educated, well-to-do African-Americans dancing, making music, dining or engaging in other pleasurable activities. Palmer C. Hayden's *Jeunesse* is a prime example of this type of portrayal.

Archibald J. Motley was another popular Harlem Renaissance artist. His 1929 painting *Blues* shows African-Americans enjoying dance and music. These depictions of African-Americans enjoying culture was partly an attempt to break down stereotypes of African-Americans as less than refined.

William Henry Johnson was one of the most important artists of the Harlem Renaissance, although he continued to paint well into the 1940s-1950s. His works spanned a variety of genres, but he has come to be known for his expressionist, folk style and his use of texture. Johnson painted everything from landscapes to portraits to scenes of daily life.

Another common theme within Harlem Renaissance art was a renewed emphasis on continental Africa as the root of African-American culture. Jungle and tribal scenes were often presented in idealized imagery as a way of glorifying African-American heritage. Aaron Douglas employed this type of imagery with great success. Tribal African imagery was also synthesized with modern art, resulting in an innovative genre that connected African heritage with social progress.

African-American musicians and other performers also played to mixed audiences. Harlem's cabarets and clubs attracted both Harlem residents and white New Yorkers seeking out Harlem nightlife. Harlem's famous [Cotton Club](#), where [Duke Ellington](#) performed, carried this to an extreme, by providing black entertainment for exclusively white audiences. Ultimately, the more successful black musicians and entertainers who appealed to a mainstream audience moved their performances downtown.

Poets and Authors

Poetry and literature were important components of the Harlem Renaissance. Sterling A. Brown, a Harvard University graduate, taught at Howard University for much of his career. In 1932, he published *Southern Railroad*, a book of original poetry centering on rural, folk themes. Claude McKay, another popular poet, was among the earliest Harlem Renaissance poets. His 1922 'Harlem Shadows' was a major catalyst for a new wave of African-American poetry. Countee Cullen and James Weldon Johnson were other important poets.

A chorus of poems, novels, and essays poured forth. Florida native Zora Neale Hurston, who arrived in Harlem with \$1.50 in her purse, would write of the burden of black women in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In 1925, a collection of works by Harlem's writers contained a challenge in its very title: *The New Negro*.

One of the most influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance was **Langston Hughes**. Hughes was a prolific writer whose poems, articles and books had a tremendous impact on the movement. He also helped pioneer jazz poetry, a genre of poetry that emphasized syncopated rhythms that were in many ways reminiscent of jazz music. Written in 1920, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' is probably Hughes' most famous poem.

Another well-known poem, 'A Dream Deferred,' which some say foreshadows the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, reads:

'What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?'

Intellectual and activist **W. E. B. Du Bois** also played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance. A brilliant civil rights advocate, Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Two of Du Bois' most famous works are *The Souls of Black Folk*, and his magnum opus *Black Reconstruction in America*. As the editor of the NAACP's extremely influential journal *The Crisis*, Du Bois had the opportunity to publish many important pieces of literature from Harlem Renaissance writers.

Certain aspects of the Harlem Renaissance were accepted without debate, and without scrutiny. One of these was the future of the "New Negro". Artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance echoed American progressivism in its faith in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change, and in its almost uncritical belief in itself and its future. Black intellectuals, just like their White counterparts, were unprepared for the rude shock of the Great Depression –the end of the Harlem Renaissance.