Pollinators

In conjunction with the Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist exhibition, the Spencer Museum of Art commissioned an original public mural inspired by Aaron Douglas's vision and the interconnected history of other well-known African American artists with ties to Kansas. This community-based project, which was unveiled in September 2007, was directed by nationally recognized muralist Dave Loewenstein, who involved students and Lawrence citizens in designing and painting the mural.

The mural suggests a metaphorical relationship between the insects and birds that pollinate the flowers and crops of our region and the seven artists with Kansas roots who pollinated American culture when they moved to big cities and their talents blossomed. Locating the mural on this site, home of the Lawrence Saturday Farmers' Market, inspired this connection.

For more information, visit www.aarondouglas.ku.edu.

Lead artist: Dave Loewenstein

Assistants: Yuri Zupancic and Jessica Molina

Mural design team: Jill Ensley, Whit Bones, Jordan Briceland, Anne Bruce, Christina Hoxie,

Becky Mullins, Jeremy Rockwell, Amanda Schwegler, Tara Skaggs, and John Reeves

The mural celebrates the important but often overlooked contributions of Kansas artists to one of our country's greatest art movements, the Harlem Renaissance.

From left to right:

Aaron Douglas Born to laborer parents in Topeka, Kansas, Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) overcame many obstacles to pursue his passion for art and ideas. He was one of the first artists to put African aesthetic influences and African American life, labor, and freedom at the center of modern art. In 1925, after earning a B.F.A. degree in 1922 from the University of Nebraska and teaching at the elite, all-black Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Douglas migrated to New York to join the cultural flourishing that has been called the New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance. He later taught art for three decades at historically black Fisk University in Nashville.

Gordon Parks Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, the youngest of 15 children. He enjoyed a long and successful career as an artist, working in poetry, fiction, autobiography, film, and ballet as well as in the medium for which he is best known,

photography. During the 1940s he made photographs for the Farm Security Administration and the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, projects that documented American life during that time. He joined the staff of *Life* magazine in 1949 as its first African-American photographer, working in France, the United States, and Brazil. He retired from *Life* in the early 1970s to make films, write, paint, and compose music, in addition to his photography.

Langston Hughes Born in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes (1902-1967) grew up in Lawrence, living with his grandmother from 1903 to 1915. He attended Columbia University, studying engineering, but left the program, eventually earning a B.A. from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. In 1930 his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, a bittersweet account of a fictional African-American boy growing up in a small Kansas town, won the Harmon gold medal for literature. Throughout his life, Hughes wrote poetry, novels, short stories and plays, portraying black life in America from the twenties to the sixties. He was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and counted jazz among his many influences.

Gwendolyn Brooks, Poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) was born in Topeka, Kansas and moved with her family to Chicago when she was still a baby. She published her first poem at the age of 13 and became a regular contributor to the poetry column of the African-American newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. Her poems addressed both race and gender issues and she was the first African-American to win a Pulitzer Prize for her book *Annie Allen*. Brooks once told *Contemporary Literature* "I want to write poems that will be non-compromising. I don't want to stop a concern with words doing good jobs, which has always been a concern of mine, but I want to write poems that will be meaningful."

Oscar Micheaux, Born to former slaves in Metropolis Illinois, Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was the first African-American to produce a feature length film. Micheaux's uncles lived in Great Bend, Kansas and his parents moved to Great Bend when he was a young man. Though he didn't live in Great Bend for an extended period, he visited regularly and is buried in the cemetery there. As a young man, Micheaux moved to South Dakota to homestead and take up farming. He wrote an autobiographical novel called *The Homesteader*. He then turned to filmmaking, producing his first movie, based on *The Homesteader*, in 1919. Because film studios of the time would not hire a black producer, Micheaux formed his own studio, writing, producing and directing at least 43 films in his lifetime. He was also the first African-American to produce a "talkie."

Hattie McDaniel, Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952) was born in Wichita, Kansas. As a young woman, she toured with a minstrel troupe and did occasional radio shows until the stock market crash

of 1929. Unable to find work performing, McDaniel took a job as a restroom attendant at a night club in Milwaukee. Her singing voice eventually earned her a spot on stage. In 1931, she moved to Los Angeles and again found work on the radio. Her screen debut came in 1932 in the film *The Golden West* and her first major role was alongside Will Rodgers in *Judge Priest* (1934). McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award in 1940 for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Coleman Hawkins, Coleman Hawkins (1904-1969) grew up playing music, from piano lessons starting at age five, to playing at school dances by the age of 12. He finished high school in Topeka, Kansas and studied harmony and composition at Washburn University for two years. His first regular job was with the orchestra at the Twelfth Street Theater in Kansas City. There he was "discovered" by Mamie Smith and began touring the US and later, Europe. Hawkins was an influential tenor saxophonist. His uninhibited improvisational style changed the face of jazz and brought the tenor saxophone to the forefront. Hawkins' 1939 version of "Body and Soul" is considered a true American masterpiece.

The Spencer Museum of Art extends special thanks to Aquila, Lawrence Farmers' Market Board of Directors, Sunflower Broadband, the City of Lawrence, Lawrence Arts Commission, and the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, for making *Pollinators* a reality.