

Object Labels for Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

cover for *The Sunflower*, 1917

Topeka Room, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, Kansas

Douglas designed this yearbook cover as a senior at Topeka High School in Kansas. The stylized sunflower surrounded by distinctive typography demonstrates his sophisticated sense of graphic design, even at a young age. The modernist aesthetic displayed in this design—soon to be linked to Jazz Moderne, later called Art Deco—was evident long before his move to New York and his study there with German designer Winold Reiss. In the text that appears beneath his senior year photograph, Douglas, who aspired to be a commercial artist following graduation, is recognized as the most talented artist in school.

Carl Van Vechten (American, 1880-1964)

Aaron Douglas, 1933

gelatin silver print

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Gift of Carl Van Vechten

A white patron of Harlem Renaissance artists including Douglas, Carl Van Vechten was the author of the controversial book *Nigger Heaven* (1926), for which Douglas created two advertisements. Van Vechten was also a photographer who portrayed a number of Harlem luminaries, including Douglas as seen in this photograph. Van Vechten later provided funds to help start the art gallery at Fisk University in Nashville.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Sahdji (Tribal Women), 1925

ink and graphite on wove paper

Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

This ink and graphite drawing was included in Harvard-educated philosopher Alain Locke's influential anthology *The New Negro* (1925). It appeared as an illustration for Richard Bruce Nugent's short story of the same title about an East African girl named Sahdji. In both its form and content, this work reveals the lessons Douglas learned from his teacher Winold Reiss concerning the potential for African art and motifs to transform modern art.

Winold Reiss (German, 1886-1953)

Harlem at Night, 1924

ink on paper

Collection of Renate Reiss

Shortly after his arrival in New York in the summer of 1925, Douglas enrolled at the art and design school run by the German émigré artist Winold Reiss with the aid of a two-year fellowship. Reiss, a product of Munich's Royal Academy of Fine Arts and School of Applied Arts, had come to the United States in 1913. He was likely familiar with German Expressionism as well as the German folk art technique of paper cutting known as *Scherenschnitt*, which produced flat images in silhouette. He also brought with him from European modernist circles the use of African motifs and he encouraged Douglas to incorporate these influences into his work. Like Douglas, Reiss combined commercial work with "high art" production.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Zora Neale Hurston, 1926

pastel on paper

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville

Folklorist and author Zora Neale Hurston first met Douglas when she was completing her studies in anthropology at Barnard College in New York. Originally from Florida, she had also studied at Howard University in Washington, D.C. She became famous for her short stories and novels including *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Douglas rendered this sensitive pastel portrait in the same year that they collaborated with other young progressive African

American creative thinkers to produce *FIRE!!*

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
cover for *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted
to the Younger Negro Artists* (November 1926)
original edition
Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

In November 1926, Douglas joined forces with key artists and writers of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance to produce *FIRE!! A Quarterly Journal Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. His collaborators included Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, John P. Davis, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Langston Hughes. These young men and women envisioned a magazine that, as its title implied, would inflame the passions of its subscribers and metaphorically burn down the strictures of the more conservative cultural set. The endeavor was widely disparaged by the black press and never continued beyond this first volume.

Douglas's striking cover image can be read as both an abstract design including a sphinx and also a face shown in profile with a large dangling earring. Inside the journal he contributed three whimsical line drawings depicting an artist, a waitress, and a preacher, two of which are shown here in a later reproduction issue.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Langston Hughes (American, 1902-1967)
Opportunity Art Folio, 1926
relief print and letter press; cover and six sheets
Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: The Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, the Office of the Chancellor, and the Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund, 2003.0012.01-.07

Soon after he moved from the Midwest to Harlem in 1925, Douglas began creating graphic work for two important civil rights journals, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* and *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. In 1926, Douglas collaborated with the poet and fellow Kansan Langston Hughes on a group of six prints for *Opportunity*. Their image-and-text collaboration proved so popular that *Opportunity* made the prints available to subscribers in the form of an art folio. Douglas's angular, silhouetted forms are starkly rendered, reminiscent of both German Expressionist art and the rhythms and content of the blues, creating a visual equivalent to Hughes's poems.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Birds in Flight, 1927
oil on canvas
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

This painting is one of Douglas's most abstract and overtly Cubist works. It is reminiscent of the Synthetic Cubist collages of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque from 1912-13. The attention to architectural elements also connects to American modernists and Precisionists, including Arthur Dove and Charles Demuth. In the upper right, Douglas incorporated three towering smokestacks into his abstracted composition of fluttering wings.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Charleston, circa 1928
gouache and pencil on paperboard
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest) and the State of North Carolina, by exchange

This painting, along with *Congo* and *The Black Tsar*, was created as a chapter-opening illustration for *Black Magic* (1929), the English translation of French author Paul Morand's fictional travelogue *La Magie Noire*.

Morand's chapter "Charleston" recounts a Southern white woman's attraction to an African American saxophone player. In his illustration, Douglas suggested the lynching that occurs in the narrative by including a noose in the center and three claw-like, menacing, disembodied hands at the lower edge. A scene of a jazz band and nightclub patrons provide a disquietingly incongruous back drop for the implied terror.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Congo, circa 1928

gouache and pencil on paper board

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Gift of Susie R. Powell and Franklin R. Anderson

The gouache illustrations that Douglas executed for *Black Magic* (1929) suggest the central significance of Douglas's sophisticated artistic ethos among the key literary figures of the New Negro Renaissance.

This illustration portrays the young woman Congo who delighted audiences in Paris with her dancing. Douglas superimposed transparent concentric circles over ecstatic figures engaged in a Vodou ceremony. Perhaps these circles serve as a visual indication of the music that accompanies the figures in their ritual. As is common in his work, Douglas utilized the innermost circle, the one lightest in tone, as a focusing device. In this instance, he used it to draw attention to the large snake that has slithered into the midst of the dancers. The outermost circle is bisected by a chevron-shaped ray that links Congo's mind's eye to the eerie premonition of her own drowning.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Black Tsar, circa 1928

gouache and pencil on paper board

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Gift of Susie R. Powell and Franklin R. Anderson

From amid a clearing deep in the Haitian forest, Douglas offers a glimpse into the world of "The Black Tsar," a story in Paul Morand's book *Black Magic* (1929) that this painting illustrates. Here a mixed-race lawyer named Occide conjures his powers through Vodou* rituals.

*This is the Haitian spelling for what is commonly known in the United States as "Voodoo."

Paul Morand (French, 1888-1976)

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Black Magic, 1929; first edition

London: William Heinemann Ltd

Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

Douglas supplied chapter-opening illustrations for the first edition of *Black Magic* (1929), the English translation of French author Paul Morand's popular novel *Magie Noire*. *The New York Times* lauded Douglas's images and characterized Morand's text as "profound," "savage," "magnificently fascinating," and "disquietingly unanswerable."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

cover for *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, February 1926

Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

In the late summer of 1925, Douglas took on free-lance work creating illustrations and covers for the National Urban League's official journal of culture, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, edited by Charles S. Johnson and first published in 1923. In February 1926, Douglas designed this cover for *Opportunity*'s "Industrial Issue." It features an arresting image of two laborers toiling at a forge in an aggressively fractured Cubist space.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

cover for *The Crisis: A Record of the*

Darker Races, January 1930

Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

When Douglas was still a student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he regularly read the articles printed in *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*. He described this progressive political journal, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois and published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as "different" with "poems and other creative works...by Negroes about Negroes." At the invitation of Du Bois, by November 1925 Douglas held a position in the journal's mailroom. It was not long before he contributed powerful illustrations for the cover of *The Crisis*. The demand for his striking covers continued into the 1930s.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979) [this tombstone for the prints goes on the same label as tombstone for the *The Emperor Jones* series, 1926: block and the text]
Bravado, Defiance, Flight, and Surrender
woodblock prints on paper
Collection of Jason Schoen, Miami, Florida

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
printing block for *Defiance* from
The Emperor Jones series, 1926
wood
Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

In 1926 Douglas created four woodblock prints inspired by Eugene O'Neill's 1920 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Emperor Jones*. The drama follows the murderous Brutus Jones as he flees from prison to an island in the West Indies where he boldly declares himself the emperor. Following the rebellion of his subjects, the self-proclaimed emperor escapes into the forest. As he attempts to hide, he is beset by hallucinations, tormented by his inner demons, and eventually captured and killed by a silver bullet.

Douglas may have been inspired to recreate scenes from this O'Neill play as a result of Paul Robeson's performance in the title role in 1924. Douglas conveyed the drama of the tale through these four expressive vignettes, characterized by a compelling economy of form and arresting black-and-white contrasts. The woodblock shown here for *Defiance* is the original block that the artist used to make this print.

[Book jacket section panel – for a series of books in a scroll case]

[*God's Trombones* section panel]

James Weldon Johnson (American, 1871-1938)
Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, 1927; first edition
New York: Viking Press
Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

Douglas contributed eight illustrations to Johnson's *God's Trombones*. The collaboration between the author and Douglas elicited accolades. The Harmon Foundation awarded Johnson first prize for literature for his "vivid impression, realistically conveyed, of the imaginative creation of the old-time Negro preachers." Critics praised Douglas for the synergy with which his illustrations complemented and vivified Johnson's words.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Listen Lord, 1935
oil on Masonite
Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

In the mid-1930s, Douglas returned to the poems in James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* and created new paintings in a larger format, on the back, textured side of Masonite boards, although with similar compositions to the original gouache illustrations from 1927. In this later version of *Listen Lord*, Douglas built upon the arching forms in the lower corners of the original gouache, repeating them in a manner that evokes his signature concentric, radiating circles.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
study for *Listen Lord*, 1927
graphite and gouache on paper board
Collection of Dr. Sheryl L. Colyer, New York, New York

This drawing reveals Douglas's working methods. It is a study for the finished gouache painting, *Listen Lord*, the first of eight illustrations for James Weldon Johnson's book *God's Trombones* (1927). Drawing on Johnson's text that reads: "O Lord, we come this morning / Knee-bowed and body-bent / Before thy throne of grace," Douglas presented a simplified, geometric human form on bended knee, engaged in supplication.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Creation, 1927

gouache on paper

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African
American Art

In this illustration for James Weldon Johnson's 1927 poem "The Creation" from *God's Trombones*, Douglas offered a peaceful, abstracted view of the idea of God creating humankind. After establishing day and night, forming the land and sea, and shaping the moon and the stars, the great hand of the Creator hovers in the heavens above the first man.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Creation, 1935

oil on Masonite

Howard University Collection, Washington, D.C.

In his poem "The Creation" from *God's Trombones* (1927), James Weldon Johnson wrote that God "rolled light around in his hands" to fashion the sun, then gathered the light that remained into a "shining ball" that he flung against the darkness "spangling the night with the moon and the stars." The circles of varying sizes and tones at the center of both the gouache and this later oil painting suggest the ball of light Johnson described as used to create the celestial bodies. In this later version of *The Creation*, however, Douglas added a scattering of pink stars.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon, 1927

gouache on paper

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African
American Art

From James Weldon Johnson's poem "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon" from *God's Trombones* (1927):

"...And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past sun and moon and stars;
On Death rode,
And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
On Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight on down he came...."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Judgment Day, 1927

gouache on paper

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African
American Art

From James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Judgment Day" from *God's Trombones* (1927):

"...Early one of these mornings,
God's a-going to call for Gabriel,

That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;
And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,
Blow your sliver trumpet,
And wake the living nations....
And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Blow it calm and easy.
Then putting one foot on the mountain top,
And the other in the middle of the sea,
Gabriel's going to stand and blow his horn,
To wake the living nations...."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Go Down Death, circa 1934

oil on Masonite

The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund and Gift of Prof. and Mrs. David C. Driskell, 2005.181

In this larger, later version of *Go Down Death*, Douglas added a radiating star at the upper left. It has been suggested that the inclusion of the star alludes not only to "Old Death / Coming like a falling star" as described in Johnson's verse in *God's Trombones*, but also to the North Star followed by fugitive slaves to freedom, as well as to Douglas's interest in Communism in the mid 1930s.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Noah's Ark, 1935

oil on Masonite

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville

In this large version of Douglas's illustration for James Weldon Johnson's poem "Noah's Ark" from *God's Trombones* (1927), Douglas combined silhouetted forms, motifs from African sculpture, dynamic diagonals, and a compressed and layered use of space to convey the powerful idea of the ark that would preserve both human and animal kind during an epic flood. In Douglas's interpretation, Noah possesses facial features akin to African masks, particularly those of the Dan people of the Ivory Coast.

William H. Johnson (American, 1901-1970)

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, circa 1944

oil on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the
Harmon Foundation

In this painting, William H. Johnson, a Harlem Renaissance contemporary of Douglas originally from South Carolina, gave vibrant visual form to his interest in African American subjects underscored with specifically Christian themes. Johnson, like Douglas, experienced a "Hallelujah period"—as Douglas termed it—during which time he drew upon and interpreted African American spirituals and religious motifs. The naïve or folk style Johnson consciously employed in this work belies his training and years spent abroad.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Rise, Shine for Thy Light has Come, circa 1927

opaque watercolor and black ink on paper board

Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

In this work Douglas depicted a moment of transcendence or spiritual awakening as expressed in the lyrics of a hymn. The theme could also be a metaphor for the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro: rising and shining. The voice carried forth in song echoes Douglas's deep affinities for music, especially for Negro spirituals. The stylized,

wavy hair suggests both ancient Egyptian wall painting and the dynamic modernism of Art Deco. Alain Locke, philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, purchased the painting and bequeathed it to Howard University.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
study for *God's Trombones*, 1926
tempera on board
Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts

While this work has been called a study for *God's Trombones*, it does not appear anywhere in James Weldon Johnson's 1927 book. The style and subject matter, including the distinctive plant forms, seem closer to those Douglas presented in *Harriet Tubman*.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Harriet Tubman, 1931
oil on canvas
Bennett College for Women Collection, Greensboro, North Carolina

In this painting Douglas combined modernist, abstract geometries and the historical figure Harriet Tubman, who led more than three hundred slaves to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad. *Harriet Tubman* was commissioned by Alfred K. Stern of Chicago, son-in-law of philanthropist Julius Rosenwald.

Douglas described this painting in the *Crisis* in 1932, saying that he portrayed Tubman as "a heroic leader breaking the shackles of bondage and pressing on toward a new day. Behind her and stretching back symbolically to Africa are the black men and women who toiled and prayed through three hundred years of servitude...."

Later in his description, Douglas wrote, "The group of figures to the right of the center symbolizes the newly liberated people as laborers and heads of families. The last figure symbolizes the dreamer who looks out towards higher and nobler vistas, the modern city, for his race. He represents the preachers, teachers, artists, and musicians of the group. The beam of light that cuts through the center of the picture symbolizes divine inspiration."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
study for *Cravath Hall, Fisk University*
Mural, 1929
gouache on illustration board
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

In the summer of 1929, Douglas was commissioned by Fisk University in Nashville to create a set of mural paintings to adorn the new Cravath Library, a Neo-Gothic, Art Deco building.

This work is a sketch for a section of one of the mural friezes in the library's second floor north reading room. The dark, rectangular voids indicate where doors and other architectural elements interrupt the mural frieze. Douglas modeled the silhouetted forms of the toiling men who populate this frieze in part on ancient Egyptian wall paintings. He adopted and slightly modified the perspective of Egyptian art that dictated that the shoulders of figures be portrayed parallel to the horizontal picture plane rather than receding in space. At this time ancient Africa, and especially Egypt, was increasingly symbolic for black Americans as the source of an alternative classical tradition.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
The Negro in Industry, 1930
gouache on paper
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design,
Gift of Mrs. Leonard Granoff, 82.188.3

This work may be the most complete surviving sketch for one of the long friezes of mural paintings that Douglas created for the Cravath Library at Fisk University.

In a description of this set of paintings that illustrate the contributions of African Americans to labor and industry in the United States, Douglas said: "In all the work an expression of beauty of the rhythmic motion of arms, legs and

bodies is always one of the ideas. At the extreme end of the wall a laborer sits upon a slope, hammer in hand, gazing toward a factory just beyond. Behind him a railway train moves in the distance; the three figures are railway workers. Further on, farmers are at work in the field, cotton pickers gather their crops; miners work their way into the earth. At the extreme end of the wall a tiny figure turns questioningly toward a compact mass of skyscrapers. Will the Negro become a machine-tending city dweller or will he remain a rural people?"

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Negro Spiritual, 1930

gouache on paper

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design,

Gift of Mrs. Leonard Granoff, 82.188.2

This work is a sketch for another mural frieze for Fisk's Cravath Library painted for the north reading room on the second floor. In this mural Douglas paid tribute to the African American gospel songs that so often inspired him by including painted references to such popular spirituals as "Gabriel blow your horn," "I Want Two Wings," "Arise, Shine for Thy Light is A-Comin'," "Steal Away," and "My Ship is on the Ocean." As in many of his works, Douglas treated the figures in this mural frieze emblematically, using abstract, flat forms rather than naturalistic ones.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Fisk Jubilee Singers *The Gold and Blue Album* cover, circa 1955

Private collection

Douglas's design work continued throughout his career and is evident in items he created for Fisk such as this album cover for the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee Singers, who continue to perform today, are a historic touring a cappella choral ensemble founded in 1871 by Fisk music professor George L. White as a means to earn funds for the fledgling university. Over the next several years, the group held concerts throughout the northern United States, including at the White House at the invitation of President Ulysses S. Grant. They also performed before England's Queen Victoria and sang traditional spirituals on stages across Europe. In 1873, funds generated by their acclaimed tours led to the construction of the university's first permanent building, the aptly named Jubilee Hall.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Building More Stately Mansions, 1944

oil on canvas

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville

Douglas created this epic painting for Fisk University, where he led the art department from 1937 to 1966. The painting conveys his interest in architecture and its symbolic relationship to humankind, especially as a metaphor for the achievements of people of African descent, both past and present.

The title of this work comes from the poem "The Chambered Nautilus" written in 1858 by the physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.:

"... Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll! / Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!"

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Centennial, 1966

tempera

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville. Gift of the John C. Taylor Estate

Douglas felt a strong attachment to the students of Fisk, depicted here on graduation day. At the time of his retirement in 1966, the same year as this painting, Douglas described his teaching philosophy: "Because of my training and experience I have always tried to hold to a program which looked at art from the viewpoint of the

studio, the artist, the worker. I have always endeavored to present art to our students as an objective toward which the majority of mankind has expended some of its best thoughts, feelings, and labor since the beginnings of recorded history.”

Edwin Harleston (American, 1882-1931)

Portrait of Aaron Douglas, 1930

oil on canvas

Carolina Art Association/Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina, 1988.03

An accomplished portrait painter from South Carolina, Edwin Harleston went to Nashville in the summer of 1930 to assist Douglas with painting the Fisk library murals. Douglas appointed Harleston to monitor the progress of the project and supervise four novice helpers (Andrew Foster, Cornelius Lunceford, Preston Peterson, and Julius Brown) while he worked to complete the mural for the College Inn Room of Chicago’s Sherman Hotel. Harleston painted Douglas as so many of the European Old Masters were depicted, holding brushes and a palette while at work on a masterpiece—in this case the allegory *Science* that Douglas painted for Cravath Library’s card catalogue room.

Madison Davis Lacy (American, born 1944)

Rhythms on the Wall: The Murals of Aaron Douglas, 2007

digital video, 6.5 minutes

Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, in cooperation with Oldfather Studios

To capture Douglas’s on-site murals painted in the 1930s, the Spencer Museum of Art commissioned this high-definition digital video. Created by noted filmmaker, producer, and director Madison Davis Lacy with assistance from University of Kansas students Britt Bradley and Freddy Rhoads, this video represents Douglas’s murals at Fisk University in Nashville and at the Harlem YMCA in New York. A blend of contemporary images of the murals and archival footage interspersed with statements by leading scholars of African American art and culture, this video adds a new dimension to the record of Douglas’s murals. This commission was made possible through the generosity of the Judith Rothschild Foundation, the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Kansas, and Ann Thompson.

Alternating with Lacy’s video are still images of Douglas’s Fisk and Harlem YMCA murals.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Dance Magic, 1930

gouache on paper

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design,

Gift of Mrs. Leonard Granoff, 82.188.1

This work is a study for the mural cycle Douglas created in 1930 for the Sherman Hotel in Chicago. Referred to as both *Dance Magic* and *Birth o’ the Blues*, Douglas’s original sketches for the murals were enlarged and made into photographic murals to fill much of the newly renovated College Inn Room, a popular nightclub and restaurant in Chicago’s biggest hotel. Now destroyed, the new College Inn Room contained a teak and ebony dance floor and an oyster bar in the same Art Deco space with Douglas’s murals. Douglas may have been selected for this commission based on his ability to portray visual equivalents of jazz, the avant-garde musical form pioneered by African Americans.

The five sections that comprise *Dance Magic* emphasize two important themes in Douglas’s work: the development of black music and the evolution of black dance forms. The forms flow freely to suggest joy and lightness of movement. A banjo picker entertains as cotton is harvested. Waiters weave between Lindy Hoppers, night clubbers, and a jazz band in front of skyscrapers skewed at jaunty angles.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

French Chateau, circa 1931

watercolor

The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection

This watercolor depicting a large house in the French countryside is a rare surviving example of Douglas's work from his year in France.

Artist unknown

photograph of Douglas in front of the Louvre, Paris, France, 1931
Private collection

Shortly after completing *Harriet Tubman* in 1931, Douglas sailed for Paris to study art. On his passport, he listed his occupation as "illustrator." During his year there, Douglas studied with the painter Henri de Waroquier; the painter Othon Friesz, a Fauvist experimenting with an expressionistic, decorative style; and the sculptor Charles Despiau.

In this photograph Douglas is shown looking very dapper in his spats and holding a cigarette. He stands in front of the Louvre museum, imbibing what the cultural capital of Paris had to offer him. In the 1920s and 1930s, Paris was a haven and important gathering place for African Americans, including the performer Josephine Baker, the painters Palmer Hayden, Hale Woodruff, William H. Johnson, and the sculptor Augusta Savage among others.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Negro Speaks of Rivers (For Langston Hughes), 1941

pen and ink on paper

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African
American Art

This 1941 work acknowledges Douglas's continued friendship with and admiration of poet, novelist, and fellow Kansan Langston Hughes. It draws its title from the 1922 Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," written for W. E. B. Du Bois:

"I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

[Book jacket section panel for *Black Venus, God Sends Sunday, Not Without Laughter* – with books in small case]

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Founding of Chicago, 1933-40

gouache on paperboard

Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret
Clevenger Fund, 2006.0027

The Founding of Chicago articulates powerful ideas about the often uncelebrated role of African Americans in the building of American cities. Chicago is a particularly interesting example, since it was founded by a fur trader from Haiti, Jean-Baptiste Pointe du Sable. He is portrayed here with a shovel and coonskin cap, emerging from a rural setting with an enchained mother and her baby. Architectural emblems rise in the distance symbolizing the promise and the future of urban life in the North.

Douglas's gouache probably dates to the time of the important American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940, and it may be the surviving sketch for a mural intended for this exhibition. A modernist allegory, the painting indicates the clarity with which Douglas understood the reverberations of history.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

untitled, date unknown
pen and ink with graphite
Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

In the upper right quadrant of this undated drawing, Douglas's portrayal of a policeman as a brute, ready to wreak havoc on a bystander, is consistent with how many in the African American community viewed law enforcement around the time of the Harlem Riot of March 1935. As symbols of authority in the midst of racial discrimination in local employment, the police were a major target of the rioters for several days. It is especially telling that Douglas would insert such a negatively charged image among his standard scenes of African American everyday life, shown in the two quadrants on the left, thus implying that the threat of oppression from these officers was a familiar possibility.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

cover of *Spark: Organ of the Vanguard*, 1934

conté crayon on board

Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Douglas created this drawing of a powerful fist raised in protest as the cover of a journal that was never published. Combined with the Cubist, fractured space containing vignettes of marching troops, gunships, and a lynching, the raised fist with its broken manacle reveals Douglas's strong interest in politics, social justice, and Marxist theory during what has been called the "Red Decade." The subject matter and style of this work also connect Douglas to Depression-era social realist artists William Gropper, Philip Evergood, George Biddle, and Louis Lozowick, among others.

[Murals section panel]

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

study for *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*, 1934

gouache over pencil on artist board

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Purchase: Nelson Trust through the gift of David C. and Thelma G. Driskell; the generosity of Jeannette Nichols, Gwyn Prentice and Andy Atterbury, Rex and Jeanne Sinquefield, Mary and Alan Atterbury, the Sosland Family, Adelaide C. Ward, G. Wesley Nedblake, J. Scott Francis, Nancy and Rick Green, Sherrill Mulhern, Ann and G. Kenneth Baum, Sandra and Willie Lawrence, Phyllis and Ron Nolan, Union Pacific Foundation, Ann Dickinson, Rose Bryant, and Barbara and Herman Jones; Clifton R. Mitchell Fund; bequest of Dorothy K. Rice; and exchange of the gifts and bequests of numerous donors) 2007.18

This gouache is a study for the finished portable mural *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*. Douglas only slightly modified the composition of this study for the fully-realized mural. In both he depicted figures with heads bowed in grief as they witness the chilling aftermath of a lynching (left), men and women dancing to the music of a guitar and banjo (center), and laborers toiling in the fields (right). As with many of his works, Douglas combined images of the harsh realities of African American life with more positive and uplifting vignettes.

Photographer unknown

Aaron Douglas (left) and Arthur A.

Schomburg with *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934

gelatin silver print

Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Arthur (Arturo) A. Schomburg, shown in this photograph with Douglas in front of Douglas's mural *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, was an important scholar, writer, bibliophile, and patron of the Harlem Renaissance.

Born in Puerto Rico in 1874, Schomburg in 1891 came to New York, where he quickly immersed himself in the world of the African American intelligentsia and began collecting materials by and about Africans and African Americans. He frequently lent his growing personal collection of books and art to the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem. In 1926, the New York Public Library purchased his collection of 10,000 items with

the assistance of the Carnegie Corporation. From 1932 to 1938, Schomburg served as the curator of the new Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints. At the time of Schomburg's death in 1940, the 135th Street Branch was renamed in his honor. In 1972, it was designated as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture under the umbrella of the New York Public Library.

Betsy Graves Reyneau (American, 1888-1964)

Aaron Douglas, 1953

oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution;

Gift of the Harmon Foundation

In this work a forty-six year old Douglas poses before *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*. Nine years before this portrait was painted, the Harmon Foundation organized a touring exhibition to honor African Americans of great accomplishment with an aim to increase racial harmony. Betsy Graves Reyneau and Laura Wheeler Waring portrayed twenty-three sitters, ranging from businessmen, authors, scientists, and artists. During the ten years that the exhibition *Portraits of Outstanding Americans of Negro Origin* traveled across the country, other portraits, such as this one of Douglas, were added to the tour. The Harmon Foundation discontinued the tour in 1954 after the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Song of the Towers, 1966

oil on canvas

State of Wisconsin, Executive Residence, Madison

In 1966 Douglas was commissioned by the Milwaukee chapter of The Links, Inc., an African American women's civic organization, to paint a work for the Madison residence of Wisconsin Governor Warren P. Knowles and his wife. Douglas chose to revisit the motif of the fourth panel of his *Aspects of Negro Life* mural cycle from 1934. The 1966 version is very similar to the original *Song of the Towers*, with the notable addition of cotton plants in the lower right.

[display with longer label/panel with Douglas's statement about 1966 *Song of the Towers*]

W. E. B. Du Bois (American, 1868-1963)

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

What the Negro has Done for the United States and Texas, 1936

U.S. Department of Commerce

Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

This pamphlet, written by W. E. B. Du Bois with a cover designed by Douglas, was distributed at an information desk in the lobby of the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas in 1936.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Into Bondage, 1936

oil on canvas

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,

Museum Purchase and partial gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr., The Evans-Tibbs Collection

This painting is the first of the four-mural cycle that the Harmon Foundation commissioned Douglas to paint for the lobby of the Negro Hall of Fame at the Texas Centennial Exposition, held in Dallas during the summer of 1936. The Harmon Foundation specified that Douglas's murals should document the history of African Americans from slavery to the present day.

Into Bondage depicts the enslavement of already shackled African men and women who await the arrival of the slave ships on the horizon. A pink star at the upper left of the composition casts a brilliant ray of light and possibly prefigures the importance of the North Star as a guide in the night sky for escaped slaves bound for freedom in the North.

The paintings were so popular that numerous white visitors to the Hall of Negro Life asserted that it was impossible that an African American had painted the four murals that hung in its lobby. As a result of this, the exposition organizers added the following statement to the wall: "These murals were painted by Aaron Douglass [sic], Negro artist of New York City."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Aspiration, 1936

oil on canvas

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Museum purchase, the estate of Thurlow E. Tibbs, Jr., the Museum

Society Auxiliary, American Art Trust Fund, Unrestricted Trust Fund, partial gift of Dr. Ernest A. Bates, Sharon Bell, Jo-Ann Beverly, Barbara Carleton, Dr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Coleman, Dr. and Mrs. Coyness Ennix, Jr., Nicole Y. Ennix, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Francois, Dennis L. Franklin, Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell C. Gillette, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Goodyear, Zuretti L. Goosby, Marion E. Greene, Mrs. Vivian S. W. Hambrick, Laurie Gibbs Harris, Arlene Hollis, Louis A. and Letha Jeanpierre, Daniel and Jackie Johnson, Jr., Stephen L. Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Latham, Lewis & Ribbs Mortuary Garden Chapel, Glenn R. Nance, Mr. and Mrs. Harry S. Parker III, Mr. and Mrs. Carr T. Preston, Fannie Preston, Pamela R. Ransom, Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin F. Reed, San Francisco Black Chamber of Commerce, San Francisco Chapter of The Links, Inc., San Francisco Chapter of the NAACP, Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Dr. Ella Mae Simmons, Mr. Calvin R. Swinson, Joseph B. Williams, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred S. Wilsey, and the people of the Bay Area, 1997.84

Aspiration is one of two surviving murals from the original four-mural cycle that Douglas created for the Hall of Negro Life at the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition. In this painting, three silhouetted figures, holding emblems of education, turn away from the chained hands in the foreground toward the illuminated city and factory in the upper right. Douglas characteristically emphasized the continuity between human ideals, architecture, and modernity through his use of bold forms combined with transparent layers connecting the different elements. The radiating "Lone Star of Texas" provides a specificity of location to the universal message of hope conveyed by this mural.

Included nearby is a reproduction of Douglas's *Negro's Gift to America*, one of the two lost paintings for the Hall of Negro Life. The image was reproduced on the book jacket for Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1938), from the Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

study for *Haitian Mural*, Wilmington, Delaware, 1942

oil on canvas

Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland, Detroit, Michigan

In 1942, four years after he journeyed to Haiti, Douglas painted an eight-by-twelve-foot Haitian-themed mural for the Wilmington, Delaware, home of Grace Price Goens and her husband Dr. W. W. Goens. This work is a study for the finished mural, which still adorns the wall on which it was painted.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Portrait of Grace Goens, 1944

oil on canvas

Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland,
Detroit, Michigan

Douglas counted Grace Price Goens, a distant cousin, as one his closest friends. She and her husband, Dr. W. W. Goens, were consistent patrons of Douglas; their commissions included two large residential murals as well as numerous portraits. Grace Goens was a pioneering supporter of cultural activities in Wilmington, Delaware, where her husband's medical practice was located and where she was often the only African American member of local arts councils. Both of Grace Goens' parents attended Fisk University as did this Nashville native (Class of 1927), her three siblings, and several dozen extended family members. Her niece Deborah Fitzgerald Copeland, who inherited this work, is also a Fisk alumna (Class of 1970) following in the footsteps of her mother and maternal grandparents.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

untitled, 1955
etching and aquatint
Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
untitled, 1955
etching
Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

Douglas not only integrated African motifs into his stylized compositions, but also incorporated African sculptural forms into his more realistically executed subjects. For the grimacing figure seated in the foreground of this etching, Douglas may have adapted traditional Akan art, with an upwardly tilted face and characteristically high forehead.

As with many of Douglas's works, this etching may also be politically inspired. The domed structure in the upper right with an apparent dark cloud over it appears to be the United States Capitol. To many in the mid-1950s, the Capitol served as a symbol of government inaction in spite of landmark legal decisions such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), which progressive-minded Americans hoped would promote rapid desegregation in all facets of society. The owner of this work writes: "There was particular outrage in the African American community over the federal government's neglect in not prosecuting the white perpetrators of the brutal murder in August 1955 of 14-year-old African American Emmett Till, whose killing was one of the catalysts for the modern Civil Rights Movement."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
untitled, date unknown
graphite
Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

This sketch offers a glimpse into Douglas's working methods. It includes a head form that may relate to the figure of the seated man on steps in the etching nearby.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
untitled (*African Ritual*), 1948
crayon on paper
P. Bruce Marine and Donald E. Hardy Collection

Douglas gave this crayon drawing to his friend Loren Miller, a lawyer for the NAACP. Miller wrote articles for *The Crisis* in the 1940s and owned the African American newspaper *The California Eagle* in the 1950s. He brought civil rights cases before the Supreme Court and was an attorney of counsel in *Brown vs. Board of Education*—the public school desegregation case of Topeka (1954)—along with Thurgood Marshall. Douglas presented this drawing to Miller at a time when Miller was battling the Federal Housing Administration against segregation in housing.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
three pendants, circa 1930s-50s
enamel
Private collections

Douglas created several examples of enamel jewelry that feature African motifs inspired by masks and sculptures as well as fetish or fertility figures. He studied enameling along with printmaking at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in 1955. These three enamels could date to that time, or perhaps might have been done prior to his formal training.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)
Self-portrait, 1954
charcoal and conté drawing on paper
Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1995.0042

In 1954, Douglas executed this charcoal self portrait and portraits of several other faculty members at Fisk University. When the group of portraits was exhibited at Fisk's Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Douglas was praised for his ability to delineate the appearance of his sitters in a commanding manner without flattery, but also for the acute skill with which he captured their spirit.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Lagos, Nigeria, 1956

watercolor

Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

Accompanied by his wife Alta and friends Dr. W. W. and Grace Goens, Douglas traveled to West Africa in the late summer of 1956. Their itinerary included the African port cities of Dakar, Senegal; Accra, Ghana; and Lagos, Nigeria. In an interview following the trip, Douglas clarified that he did not go to the subcontinent in search of "face-types or jungle scenes to paint." Rather, his interest was in "seeing something of African urban life, its 'colorful' people, markets, houses and streets."

While in the bustling central business district in Lagos, Douglas painted this image of a residential compound entry gate that includes elements of the Afro-Brazilian style of architecture common in that Nigerian city. Between the mid-19th century and the early-20th century numerous previously enslaved people of African descent returned from Brazil to Lagos, combining indigenous Yoruba building design with aspects of Portuguese Baroque and other influences. Douglas likely recognized these forms because of his extensive knowledge of and interest in architecture as well as in the African Diaspora.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Junk Man, circa 1955

print likely pulled by Stephanie Pogue, 1972-74

etching and aquatint

Collection of David C. and Thelma Driskell

Douglas frequently portrayed the working man. In this etching, using subtle variations in tone, Douglas preserved a glimpse of the neighborhood junk dealer as he leads his rickety, detritus-laden horse cart down the street.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Window Shopper, circa 1955

etching and aquatint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams (1999.529.60)

During the summer of 1955, Douglas returned to New York and enrolled in a printmaking course at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. In *Window Shopper*, the radiantly lit store window shimmers in contrast to the shadowy world inhabited by the young woman who gazes at the mannequin displayed on the other side of the glass. Through this contrast of light and dark, Douglas might be making a poignant statement about racial inequality and segregation, or perhaps a more general comment on the disparity between the realms of the haves and the have-nots.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Subway Scene (Train Station), date unknown

watercolor

Collection of Dr. Sheryl L. Colyer, New York, New York

Like the 1936 oil painting *Power Plant in Harlem*, this watercolor shows Douglas's interest in everyday scenes of urban life.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Boy with Toy Plane, 1938

oil on canvas,

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African

American Art

Douglas described the young boy named Joe who sat for this portrait as having “one of the most pitiful faces.” He believed that this portrait embodied not only the hardships endured by African Americans, but also their aspirations. For Douglas, the toy plane Joe holds in his lap served as a symbol of lofty goals.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Window Cleaning, 1935

oil on canvas

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NAA-Nebraska Art Association Collection

In 1936 the Nebraska Art Association honored Douglas, who had graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1922, through the acquisition of *Window Cleaning* for the permanent collection of the university. The Association members at that time noted that Douglas was the only African American student ever elected to membership in the University Art Club.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Power Plant in Harlem, 1934

oil on canvas

Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia

In this painting of a power plant in Harlem, Douglas conveyed his interest in the urban landscape of his New York City neighborhood, minus the nightlife, music, historical content, or literary themes that inform so many of his murals and illustrations. The painting does not ignore Douglas's political passions, however, as it was exhibited with the anti-Fascist American artists' group the American Artists Federation.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Alta, 1936

oil on canvas

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville

The sitter for this portrait is Douglas's wife, Alta Sawyer Douglas. A Topeka native, Alta was a distinguished and devoted teacher with an important professional profile of her own in New York City, where she taught until her death in 1958.

Portraits became an increasingly important part of Douglas's output in later years, especially while he was in Nashville teaching art at Fisk.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

The Studio, 1955

etching

Collection of Steven L. Jones, Philadelphia

In a great tradition of European modernists, Douglas depicted his own artist's studio, as seen in this etching.

Douglas's address book/sketch book,

circa 1920s-60s

Private collection

Douglas's sketchbook is opened to a drawing for his mural allegory of black achievement painted in 1963 for the living room wall in the home of Grace Price Goens and her husband Dr. W. W. Goens in Hockessin, Delaware, seen in a photograph nearby.

Included in this case are photographic images of other pages from this sketchbook, providing a wonderful glimpse into Douglas's working methods and influences.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

study for mural in the home of Dr. W. W. and Mrs. Grace Goens in Hockessin, Delaware, circa 1963

oil on canvas board

Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland, Detroit, Michigan

In this mural study, Douglas depicted what he saw as two of the most important contributions of African Americans to United States' culture: the creative arts, which had given so much pleasure, and labor, so decisive in building this country. Flanked on the left by the pyramids and sphinx symbolizing the distant heritage of Africa and on the right by smoke-belching factories and a cogwheel denoting recent labor, two figures offer their creations to the cosmos as a universal symbol of the creative process. The lightning bolts in the upper left may suggest that threats to African Americans remained a constant presence.

Photograph of the interior of the home of Dr. W. W. and Mrs. Grace Goens in Hockessin, Delaware, circa 1963

Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland,
Detroit, Michigan

In this photograph, the mural portraying an allegory of black achievement that Douglas painted for one of the homes of his friends the Goenses is visible on the left. (A painted study for the mural hangs nearby.) Douglas's 1944 portrait of Grace Goens can be seen on the back wall in the photograph.

[Legacy section panel]

Romare Bearden (American, 1911-1988)

Jazz Rhapsody, 1982

collage on board

The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art

As a boy, Romare Bearden moved from Charlotte, North Carolina, to Harlem. He was initially critical of many Harlem Renaissance artists, but over time, his views shifted and he wrote the following at the time of Douglas's death in 1979: "...I knew Mr. Douglas best in the late 1930s. We younger artists called him either 'Doug' or the 'Dean' and found him a friendly, genial man, kind, helpful and always modest. During the years when his home was a gathering place for the famous, he and his late wife, Alta Sawyer Douglas, were inspiring and welcoming spirits to persons in all the arts. The entire roster of personalities who participated in Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology could be seen [at the Douglas home]. ...As distinguished as this salon was, there was always room made for the younger unknowns, thanks to Douglas's encouraging cordiality."

Richard Bruce Nugent (American, 1906-1987)

untitled, 1948

ink on paper

Collection of Thomas H. Wirth

Richard Bruce Nugent was a friend and colleague of Douglas's in Harlem and he was influenced by Douglas's art, including the use of figures in graphic silhouette. Nugent gave his figures curves and musculature that Douglas generally omitted—a difference evident in this striking ink drawing. Nugent contributed illustrations to some of the same texts that Douglas did, including *FIRE!!*: *A Quarterly Journal Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* in 1926.

Stephanie E. Pogue (American, 1944-2002)

Aaron's Meadow, 1977

color viscosity etching on paper

Collection of David C. and Thelma Driskell

From 1968 to 1981 Stephanie Pogue served as the chair of the art department at Fisk, where Douglas had taught from 1937 to 1966. Even after he retired, Douglas was an active presence on Fisk's campus and he and Pogue became friends. Pogue created this print as a tribute to Douglas, whose work she avidly collected. The lush "meadow" she portrayed for him depicts foliage reminiscent of the type that Douglas included in so many of his works.

Viola Burley Leak (American, born 1944)

Jazz Storm, 2006

quilt

Collection of the artist

A 1965 graduate of Fisk University, Viola Burley Leak studied art with Douglas. She writes: "Mr. Douglas was my teacher. He taught me about the subtle nuances of color, design, and visual messaging. His graphic language was powerful—filled with hidden treasures and secret voices embedded within the designs. The coded images filled the multi-tonal backgrounds and drew the viewer into the picture.

"When I am executing my own work I remember him. I think of the power of his artistic suggestions and his kind and gentleman-like manner.

"I know that somehow the subliminal has remained with me. I have been influenced to think of the values of color as well as its visual impact. Conceptually, I approach each work with an idea that is allowed to expand and slowly reveal itself. I engage in a visual conversation with the piece that eventually dictates its own ending."

Gregory Ridley (American, 1925-2004)

Nefretiti, 1989

brass repoussé panel and mixed media on board

Fisk University Galleries, Nashville. Bequest of

Dr. John C. Taylor

Gregory Ridley studied art with Douglas at Fisk in the 1940s. At the time of Douglas's retrospective exhibition at Fisk Ridley wrote: "In the middle forties, it was the work of Aaron Douglas that inspired me most. ...Unlike that of other great artists of the day, the work of Aaron Douglas was full of African heritage. It showed fetish motifs, masks, and artifacts that related to African culture. There was a special meaning communicated in the blues, pinks and grays that he worked with. The transparent quality of paint, which helped to create two-dimensional narration, put him ahead of Op art and many of the other experimental movements of our time.

"For me, his spirit in art has fostered the Afro-American idiom. It all came through clearly from Douglas, the artist, creator, and professor long before we knew what he was about."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting, 1934

oil on canvas

Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

In 1934, Douglas undertook his most widely known mural commission. He was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create a mural program for the auditorium of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem.

Douglas described this painting, the first of the four mural cycle *Aspects of Negro Life*, as follows:

"The first of the four panels reveals the Negro in the African setting and emphasizes the strongly rhythmic arts of the music, the dance and sculpture which have influenced the modern world possibly more profoundly than any other phase of African life. The fetish, the drummer, the dancers in the formal language of space and color recreate the exhilaration [sic], the ecstasy, the rhythmic pulsation of life in ancient Africa."

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction, 1934

oil on canvas

Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Douglas wrote about this portable mural, the second in the four-panel cycle *Aspects of Negro Life*, that it is “composed of three sections covering the periods from slavery through the Reconstruction. From right to left, the first section depicts the slaves’ doubt and uncertainty transformed into exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. The figure standing on the box in the second section of this panel symbolizes the careers of outstanding Negro leaders during this time. The third section shows the departure of the Union soldiers from the south and the onslaught of the Klan that followed.”

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South, 1934

oil on canvas

Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

An Idyll of the Deep South is the third in the series of portable murals from Douglas’s famed mural cycle *Aspects of Negro Life* painted for the auditorium of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem.

Douglas described the action occurring in *An Idyll of the Deep South*, moving right to left: “‘An Idyll of the Deep South’,” portrays Negroes (1) toiling in the fields, (2) singing and dancing in a lighter mood, and (3) mourning as they prepare to take away a man who has been lynched.” As with many of his works, Douglas combined images of the harsh realities of African American life with more positive and uplifting vignettes.

Scholar of African American art David C. Driskell has noted that the star that casts a beam of light from the upper left symbolizes not only the North Star that led many slaves to freedom, but also the star of Communism. At the time that he painted the *Aspects of Negro Life* series, Douglas shared a belief with many other progressive thinkers in Harlem that equality might only be possible if other socialist political systems were adopted.

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979)

Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers, 1934

oil on canvas

Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

About this fourth and last panel in the group of four *Aspects of Negro Life* murals painted for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, Douglas wrote: “In the fourth mural, ‘Song of the Towers,’ the first section on the right showing a figure fleeing from the clutching hand of serfdom is symbolic of the migration of Negroes from the south and the Caribbean into the urban and industrial life of America during and just after World War I.” He described the saxophone player holding his instrument aloft as emblematic of “the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the late 1920s which spread vigorously throughout all of the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people.” The man in the lower left portion of the composition plagued by a skeletal, grasping, disembodied hand was a means for Douglas to “recreate the confusion, the dejection and frustration resulting from the depression of the 1930s.”

In 1966, Douglas returned to the themes he explored in *Song of the Towers* for a work of the same title commissioned by the Milwaukee chapter of the African American women’s civic organization The Links, Inc. The Links gave this later version of *Song of the Towers* to the Madison residence of the Governor of Wisconsin.