

# The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s



## “Take The A Train”

Billy Strayhorn for the Duke Ellington Orchestra

You must take the A train  
To go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem

If you miss the A train  
You'll find you missed the quickest  
way to Harlem

Hurry, get on, now it's coming  
Listen to those rails a-humming

All aboard, get on the A train  
Soon you will be on Sugar Hill in  
Harlem



# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

# Where was the Harlem Renaissance centered?

- Centered in the Harlem district of New York City, the *New Negro Movement* (as it was called at the time) had a major influence across the United States and even the world.



# Where is Harlem?

The island of Manhattan



Neighborhoods



New York City is on Manhattan island

# What is it?

- The Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of African American social thought which was expressed through
  - Paintings
  - Music
  - Dance
  - Theater
  - Literature



# How does the Harlem Renaissance connect to the Great Migration?

- The economic opportunities of the era triggered a widespread migration of black Americans from the rural south to the industrial centers of the north - and especially to New York City.
- In New York and other cities, black Americans explored new opportunities for intellectual and social freedom.
- Black American artists, writers, and musicians began to use their talents to work for civil rights and equality.

# Did whites play any role?

- Well, yes.
- There wasn't enough money in the black community to finance all this artistic productivity, so:
  - There were a few major white financial backers (which made some of the artists uncomfortable).
  - The audiences in the clubs were white.
  - Blacks weren't allowed in as customers, and even famous performers had to enter by the back door.

# How did it impact history?

- The Harlem Renaissance helped to redefine how Americans and the world understood African American culture. It integrated black and white cultures, and marked the beginning of a black urban society.
- The Harlem Renaissance set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

# Whom do we associate with the Harlem Renaissance?

- Artists such as Aaron Douglas & Jacob Lawrence (although he was at the end of it)
- Authors such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, & Countee Cullen
- Musicians such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, & Billie Holiday

# Jacob Lawrence



- Jacob Lawrence grew up in a settlement house in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance
- Lawrence's parents were among those who migrated between 1916-1919, considered the first wave of the migration.
- His own life in Harlem , and the struggle of other Black Americans inspired his earliest work



# Lawrence's Work



- Jacob Lawrence painted his Great Migration series during the 1940s (after the Harlem Renaissance) to capture the experience of African Americans during the 1920s
- <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/odonnell/w1010/edit/migration/migration.html>

# Langston Hughes



- Hughes is known for his insightful, colorful, realistic portrayals of black life in America.
- He wrote poetry, short stories, novels, and plays, and is known for his involvement with the world of jazz and the influence it had on his writing.
- His life and work were enormously important in shaping the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s.
- He wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself.

# The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(1919)

To listen to Langston Hughes read this poem, go to

[http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/  
singlePoem.do?poemid=1553](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemid=1553)

One of Hughes's poetic innovations was to draw on the rhythms of black musical traditions such as jazz and blues, but in 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' it's the heritage of Negro spirituals which is recalled by the poem's majestic imagery and sonorous repetitions. Written when Hughes was only seventeen as he traveled by train across the Mississippi, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' is a beautiful statement of strength in the history of black people, which Hughes imagines stretching as far back as ancient Egypt and further into Africa and the cradle of civilization. The poem returns at the end to America in a moment of optimistic alchemy when he sees the "muddy bosom" of the Mississippi "turn all golden in the sunset".

From PoetryArchive.org

*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.*

# I, too, sing America

(1920s)

To listen to Langston Hughes read this poem, go to

[http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/  
singlePoem.do?poemid=1552](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemid=1552)

'I, Too' written just before Hughes' return to the States from Europe and after he'd been denied passage on a ship because of his color, has a contemporary feel in contrast to the mythical dimension of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. It is no less powerful however, in its expression of social injustice. The calm clear statements of the 'I' have an unstoppable force like the progress the poem envisages. Hughes's dignified introductions to these poems and his beautiful speaking voice render them all the more moving.

From PoetryArchive.org

*I, too, sing America.*

*I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in  
the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.*

*Besides,  
They'll see how  
beautiful I am  
And be ashamed--*

*I, too, am  
America.*



# Duke Ellington



- Ellington was a jazz composer, conductor, and performer during the Harlem Renaissance.
- During the formative Cotton Club years, he experimented with and developed the style that would quickly bring him worldwide success. Ellington would be among the first to focus on musical form and composition in jazz.
- Ellington wrote over 2000 pieces in his lifetime.



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# The Cotton Club



- The Duke Ellington Orchestra was the "house" orchestra for a number of years at the Cotton Club. The revues featured glamorous dancing girls, acclaimed tap dancers, vaudeville performers, and comics. All the white world came to Harlem to see the show.
- The first Cotton Club revue was in 1923. There were two new fast paced revues produced a year for at least 16 years.

# Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong



- Louis Armstrong was a jazz composer and trumpet player during the Harlem Renaissance.
- He is widely recognized as a founding father of jazz.
- He appeared in 30 films and averaged 300 concerts per year, performing for both kids on the street and heads of state.
- He noted that in France he was not discriminated against as he was in the United States.
- To hear Louis Armstrong, go to <http://www.artistdirect.com/artist/louis-armstrong/398440>



# Bessie Smith



- Bessie Smith was a famous jazz and blues singer during the Harlem Renaissance.
- Smith recorded with many of the great Jazz musicians of the 1920s, including Louis Armstrong.
- Smith was popular with both blacks and whites
- To hear Bessie Smith, go to <http://www.artistdirect.com/artist/bessie-smith/494457>

# Josephine Baker

One day I realized I was living in a country where I was afraid to be black. It was only a country for white people. Not black. So I left. I had been suffocating in the United States... A lot of us left, not because we wanted to leave, but because we couldn't stand it anymore... I felt liberated in Paris.

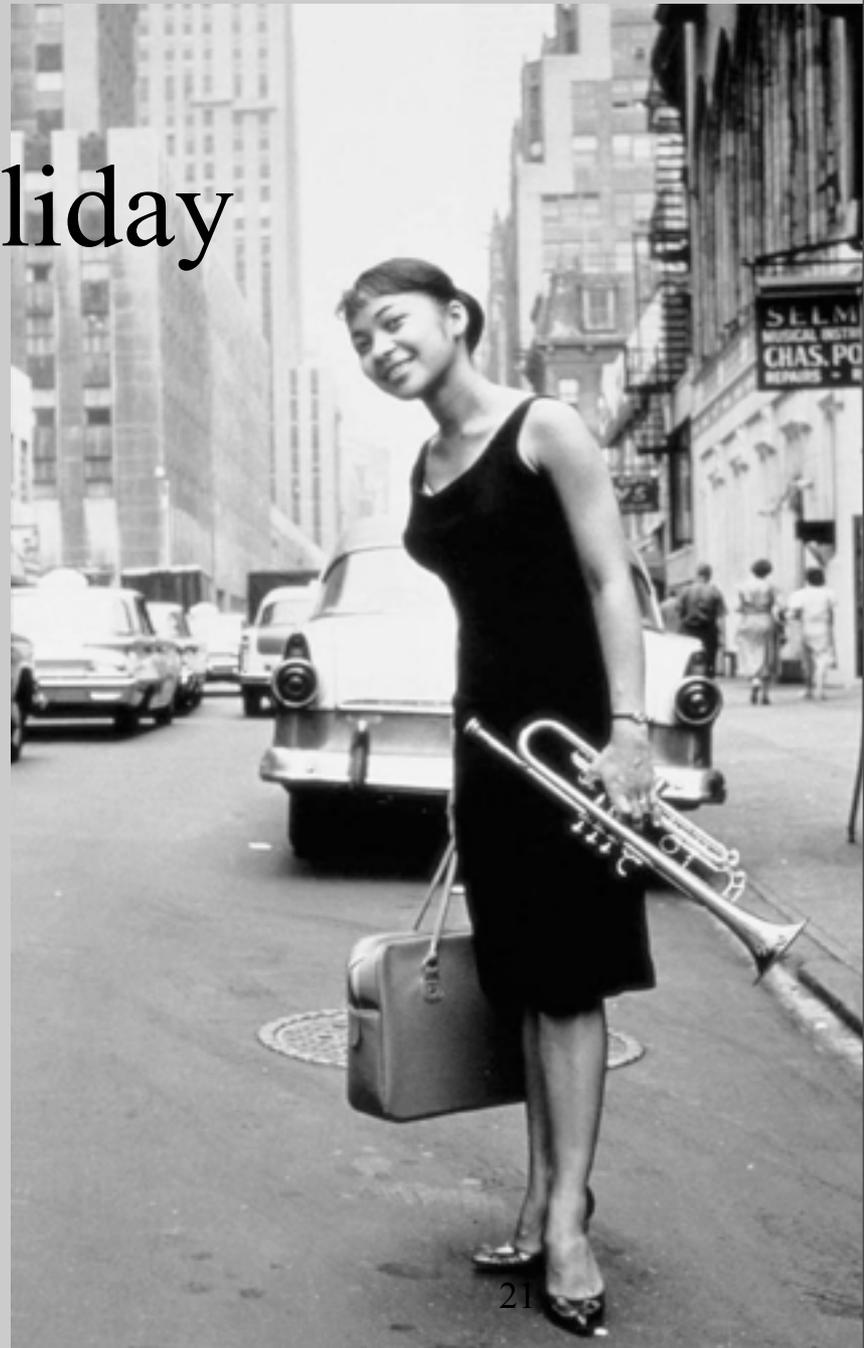
To hear Josephine Baker, go to  
[http://www.artistdirect.com/  
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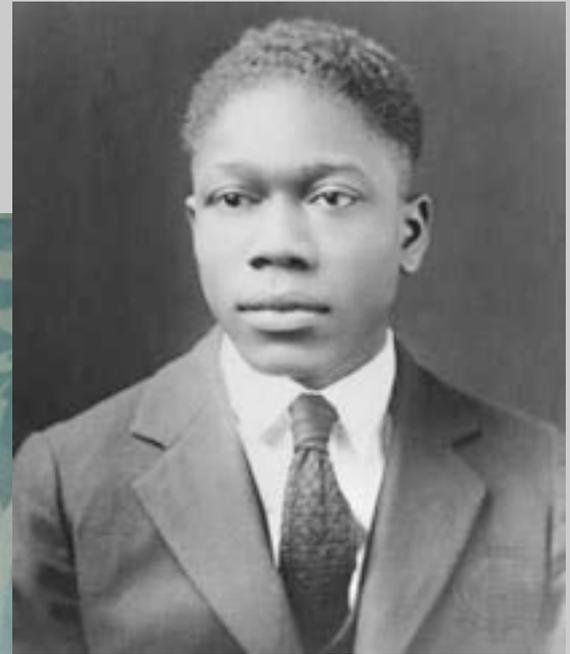
# Billie Holiday



To hear Billie Holiday, go to  
[http://www.artistdirect.com/  
artist/billie-holiday/404309](http://www.artistdirect.com/artist/billie-holiday/404309)

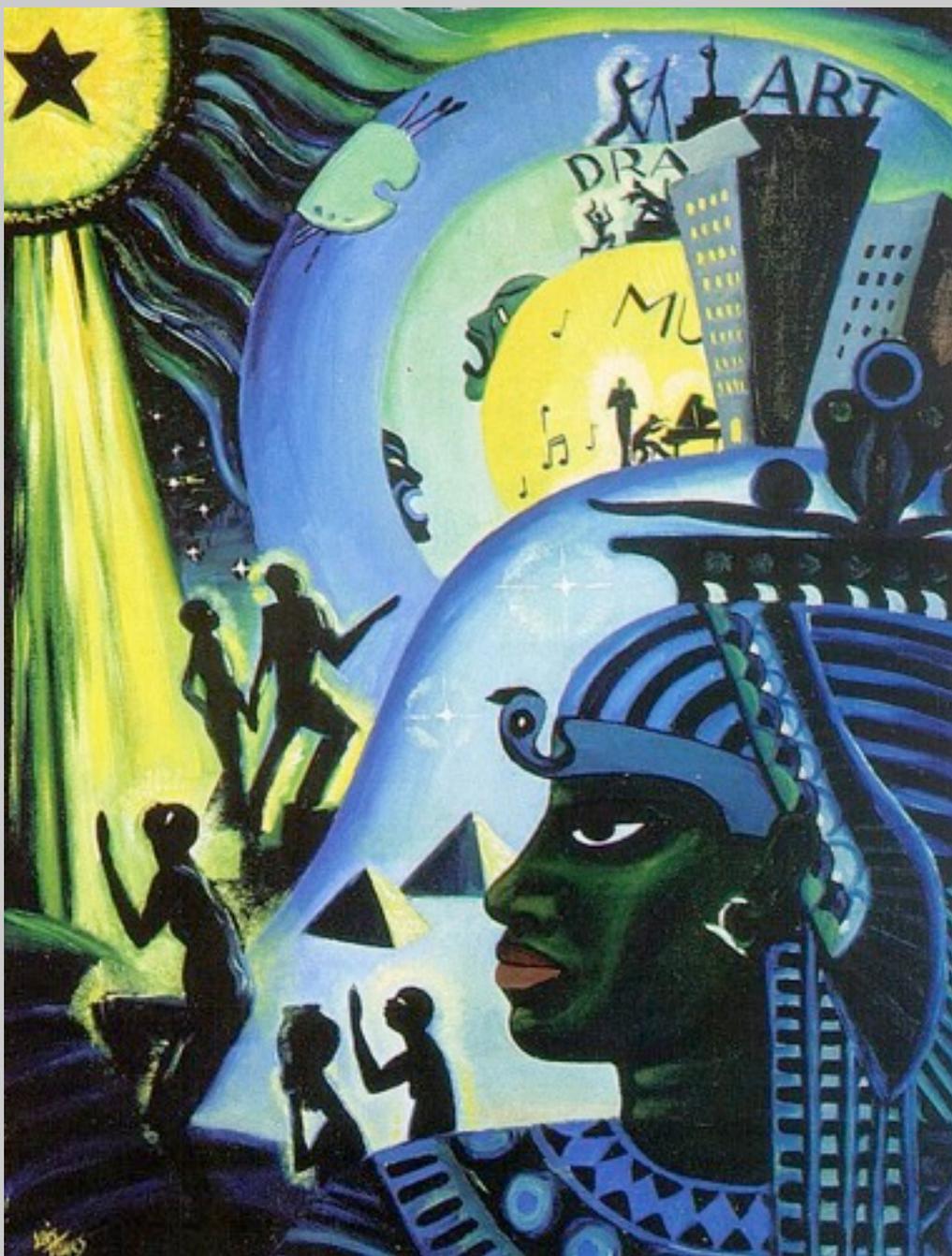


# Aaron Douglas



Aaron Douglas, American (1898-1979) - Harriet Tubman, 1931 - Oil on canvas. Bennett College Art Gallery, Greensboro, N.C.





“Ascent from Ethiopia”, Louis Mailou Jones. 1932

Study the picture for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the painting, then start to focus on individual details.

### **Questions to think about:**

1. What do you see?
2. What people do you see?
3. What objects do you see?
4. What colors do you see?
5. What actions/activities do you see?
6. What questions does this painting raise in your mind?
7. How does this painting relate to the Harlem Renaissance?
8. Based on what you have observed, list what you may infer from this painting.