Aaron Douglas and the Barnes Foundation:
The Complexities of Racial Identity

By

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Introduction

The Harlem Renaissance – the social, political, and artistic movement of the 1920s which sought to promote and celebrate Black talent in order to achieve social equality – fused political mobility with artistic innovation. Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) made such a profound contribution to this movement that his work has ultimately helped to define our contemporary understanding of its visual aesthetics, politics, and goals. His sketches, drawings, and paintings illustrated the literature of noted writers like Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Countée Cullen (1903–1946), Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), among countless others.1 Douglas, who left behind a rural Midwestern life in Topeka, Kansas to pursue a career in New York City, was drawn to Harlem (the newly dubbed “Mecca of the New Negro”) because of its seemingly infinite opportunities for growth.2

Douglas is celebrated today for his prolific number of murals, situated in places like the New York Public Library – 135th St. Branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), the Harlem YMCA, and Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Douglas’s mentor, Alain Locke (1885–1954), the philosopher and main intellectual architect of the Harlem

1 Douglas completed illustrations for Hughes’s poems such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1925) and Weldon’s books, such as God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse (1927) and The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912/1927). This close-knit group called themselves the “Niggerati,” positioning themselves as the game changers for young African Americans who sought to embrace their intellectual and artistic gifts as a means of promoting progressive ideals and racial equality. This group included Wallace Thurman (who coined the term), Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett (who also studied with Douglas at the Barnes Foundation), Richard Bruce Nugent and Douglas himself.

Renaissance, charged Douglas with the task of leading the artistic efforts of what Locke called
the “New Negro Movement.” In the introduction to his pioneering publication, *The New Negro*,
Locke encouraged his Black readership to be self-assertive and politically empowered in order to
discover and define their culture while assessing their contributions to modern America. The
predecessor of the “New Negro” had, as Locke poignantly stated:

…Been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about,
condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried
with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The
thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his
attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social
problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.

Locke’s words still profoundly resonate, as the topic of racial inequality and the value of Black
life is an increasingly pressing issue today. Art and art history play a key role in shaping both the
perception of Black bodies and the treatment of Black artists, respectively. To combat racist
perceptions of African Americans, Locke promoted the “New Negro” as being the “advance-
guard of the African peoples” who, as such, should “rehabilitate the race in world esteem.”
Douglas’s numerous drawings and murals eventually became an emblem of this movement, as he
not only embodied the characteristics of the “New Negro” but also effectively conveyed Locke’s
goal of racial rehabilitation through his works. This thesis aims to move past the celebratory
nature of existing Douglas scholarship by critically analyzing an often overlooked aspect of the

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3 Alain Locke graduated from Harvard University and was the first African American Rhodes Scholar. He
popularized the term ‘New Negro’ to motivate Blacks to proudly embrace their racial identity despite
widespread racial injustice, and to speak out against Jim Crow-era policies. This term was largely
popularized through his publication, *The New Negro* (1925), for which Douglas was a main contributor.

4 Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” 631.

5 Ibid., 633.
origins of his art: his sustained engagement with both West African sculpture and European modernism, which was profoundly shaped by his study at the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA from 1928 to 1929.

Douglas’s engagement with West African sculpture belongs to a larger movement that dominated much of twentieth-century visual modernism: modernist primitivism. Modernist primitivism refers to the practices of early to mid twentieth-century American and European artists whose fascination with African, Oceanic, and Native American art, led to their artistic appropriations from these cultures. European artists first began to borrow ideas from African art around 1906, the year that French artist Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958) claimed to have first “discovered” African art. The same year, Vlaminck purchased a Fang sculpture, which was then sold to fellow artist, André Derain [Fig. 1]. It was then shown to Henri Matisse (1869–1954) – who found in African art a new way to conceive the “planes and proportions” of the human figure – and Pablo Picasso, who, according to Vlaminck, “first understood the lessons one could learn from the sculptural conceptions of African and Oceanic art and progressively incorporated these into his painting.”

“Primitive art” as it became known, appealed to these artists because of their desire to break away from naturalistic, mimetic forms of representation championed by academic tradition since the Renaissance. It provided them with an alternative abstract visual

6 Maurice de Vlaminck, “Discovery of African Art,” (1906), in Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History, ed. Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27. Vlaminck wrote, “While sipping my white wine and seltzer, I noticed, on the shelf behind the bar, between the bottles of Pernod, anisette, and curaçao, three Negro sculptures. Two were statuettes from Dahomey, daubed in red ochre, yellow ochre, and white, and the third, from the Ivory Coast, was completely black….The three Negro statuettes in the Argenteuil bistro were showing me something of a very different order entirely! I was moved to the depths of my being.”

7 Henri Matisse, “First Encounter with African Art,” (1906), in Flam, Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History. Matisse’s words are cited in Flam, 31; The description of Picasso’s reaction is Vlaminck’s own analysis, cited in Flam, 28.
"Primitive art," according to Jack Flam, "seemed to contain a freer sense of plastic inventiveness and a greater emphasis on pictorial structure than any other art forms they knew, and it also seemed to evoke a deeper and more universal sense of humanity." Many of the ideas appropriated from these traditions – both formal and conceptual – were foundational to the development of abstraction and of modernism in general.

This same attitude was championed by the collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951). Barnes was one of the first collectors in America to embrace European modernist art, which he hung alongside his collection of African sculpture; both were displayed in his Foundation galleries together as definitive works of art. His meticulously structured installations – symmetrically hung, aesthetically harmonious, and rebelliously ahistorical – are a visual manifestation of a narrative central to the discourse of modernist primitivism: that Africa’s "ancient" artists were the true avant-garde, having embraced spatial complexity and material plasticity in order to convey an innate spirituality and mysticism. The seemingly intuitive, expressive nature of these objects was a sign to their Western admirers that Africa was closest to humanity’s origin (hence the term “primitive”). These fantasies of primitivism, and its practitioners, actively removed African art from its history, its socio-cultural contexts, and from its creators. The modernists – and those who collected African works – ultimately constructed a vision of an exotic, timeless, and geographically ambiguous Africa that became stripped of its modernity and subsequently positioned as a referential “Other.”

Douglas’s modernist primitivism is a complex issue that has shaped the reception of his work by critics and scholars. Locke dubbed him as among the “first of the Africanists” despite

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Douglas’s discomfort with the term, and Barnes saw potential in the artist as somehow being more spiritually connected to his African ancestors because of his racial identity. Douglas was positioned as the artistic leader of the Harlem Renaissance, which placed him in the middle of a contentious debate about the role of Black contributions to American society and the larger “New Negro Movement.” Many Black thought leaders dissented from Locke’s views about the “ancestral arts” as well as his push for a “school of Negro art” that could cultivate a “local and racially representative tradition.” Art historian James A. Porter (1905–1970), who decried Locke’s views as ideologically problematic, described the hesitation of Locke’s critics and colleagues regarding this presumed connection to African traditions:

Some Negro writers and scientists, taking these remarks as addressed to themselves, questioned this insistence on a racial heritage. They saw that such self-conscious pursuit of the primitive inevitably would stress a separate and singular existence for the American Negro, and they objected to the implication that he could resist the countless integrating influences of his environment. They held that this view of Dr. Locke and others would set apart, even if unintentionally, the form and content of Negro art, and they did not feel that this necessarily would make Negro art more acceptable to the white public. Between plantation tradition and African tradition, the Negro realist saw little choice.

Many of Locke’s contemporaries substantiated their arguments for Black artists to learn from their education and environment rather than to simply “take literally the advice of racial apologists.” For instance, Winifred Russell, painter and chairman of the art committee of Harlem’s 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, wrote, “Negro art, as all art, is a


11 Porter, 104.
product of time and environment….Can the Negro artist be immune to the dynamic influences of education and environment? No. Should he restrict himself in style and subject? No. Should the Negro artist become universal in conception, motive, manner and appreciation? Yes.”

Douglas’s modernist primitivism was not universally celebrated: many of his contemporaries saw his “dominant” modernism as a “stilted imitation” of the formal elements of African sculpture on behalf of racial apologists, while other scholars both past and present, like Amy Helene Kirschke, celebrated him as “the first African American artist to explore modernism and to incorporate African art into his work,” who eventually became “an important leader in African American art and the most significant visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance.”

Douglas consistently straddled these two paradigms, but his work has rarely been given a sustained critical analysis of the formal approaches and ideologies informing it.

Despite Douglas’s role as a modernist primitivist – and the conflicting responses it elicited – his search for ways to visually articulate racial identity and construct a narrative of African American history is significant. In order to fully understand his development as an artist, one must analyze the local and “dynamic influences of [his] education and environment,” as Porter encouraged. I contend that his study at the Barnes Foundation was an instrumental factor that marked a turning point for Douglas as an artist and Black thought leader. African art did play a key role in Douglas’s artistic process. Douglas is a modernist primitivist (his status as a

12 Ibid.


Black artist does not magically erase the Primitivist ideologies informing his work). Douglas did, however, fuse the cultural and visual ideas informing the Barnes installations to depict the collective Black struggle. The complexities of depicting racial identity in Douglas’s art exist in his use of an artistic language that was originally developed by those who benefited from colonization and racial persecution but was then adopted by Douglas to convey a narrative celebrating Black equality and progress.

This leads to the pertinent question of what his transformation of a primitivist language ultimately means today. One possible answer may be found by assessing Douglas’s strategic use of “afrotropes.” This neologism – recently coined by art historians Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson – refers to the “visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African diasporic culture and identity in the modern era…the recurrence [of which] makes palpable how subjects have appropriated widely available representational means only to undo their formal contours or to break apart their significatory logic.”¹⁵ I contend that Douglas’s geometrically abstract silhouette figures, stylized representations of West African sculpture, and the conflation of time, space, and cultural differences that were so central to his primitivism, are afrotropic by nature. His works can never be removed from the visual identity of the Harlem Renaissance, as he was largely responsible for shaping a form of Black identity during one of the most influential movements that marked American modernity. The difference between seeing these forms as modernist primitivist and afrotropic (strategically undoing the “significatory logic” of those same primitivist forms) rests in our understanding of Douglas’s intentions. By appropriating European modernists’ projected fantasies of an exotic Africa and turning to African

sculpture itself as a referent, Douglas applied modernist approaches to the story of the Black struggle in an attempt to dismantle the ideological limitations placed on the Black bodies he represented.

This thesis consists of three chapters. The first will establish the source and influences informing Douglas’s primitivism by closely studying a selection of his early works, analyzing archival materials such as letters and autobiographical texts, and investigating secondary sources that currently inform the scholarly conversation about Douglas’s work. Drawing from primary research conducted at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, this chapter will lay the groundwork for understanding how the development of his two-dimensional, abstract afrotropes was formed by an engagement with the West African sculpture and European modernist works of the Barnes Foundation. Using Douglas’s comments on his artistic training and early apprenticeship with the German artist Winold Reiss (1886–1953), I will explore the vision Douglas had for his work and how his time in Harlem influenced his working process in the 1920s and ultimately prepared him for study at the Barnes.

The second chapter will focus on a well-known mural series: The Aspects of Negro Life (1934). These murals have generally been discussed in art historical literature with a celebratory tone rather than a critical one, lauding Douglas for his ability to overcome racial barriers to produce a masterpiece. This mural series, long discussed as the pinnacle of Douglas’s career, is also the peak of his modernist primitivism. This series conflates the pre-enslaved African body with the 1920s modernized African American, rewriting only a portion of the African American freedom and “Great Migration” narrative through the use of modernist techniques. I argue that this mural series is the culmination of a sustained engagement with the galleries displaying West
African sculpture in the Barnes Foundation. Barnes’s installations figured West Africa as an origin for European modernists, which heavily influenced the ways in which Douglas represented Africa and its American diaspora.

The third chapter continues the exploration of Douglas’s modernist primitivism by focusing on the afrotropes of selected later works, *Haitian Mural* (1942) and *Untitled (African Ritual)* (1948). Although Douglas did not produce as much work during the 1940s as he did in the 1920s and 1930s, these later works reinforce the notion that Douglas’s continued interest in rewriting African diasporic communities’ histories were inextricably linked to his manipulation of primitivist approaches and themes. *Haitian Mural*, by recycling the same figures that appear in canvases depicting an ancestral motherland, conflates 1940s Haiti with ancient Africa.

It is my goal that this thesis – by contributing a more nuanced assessment of one of the most crucial elements of Douglas’s artistic development – will open new ways of understanding how Douglas’s work operated in the larger context of Black American modernity.
Chapter 1

Approaching Africa:
The Origins of Douglas’s Modernist Primitivism

While Douglas has been studied more extensively than almost any other Black visual artist from the Harlem Renaissance, his early works (from just before and after his 1925 arrival in Harlem have been largely overlooked. When discussed, they are often examined only in relation to how closely they adhered to the principles of the “New Negro” movement. In order to understand the more well-known works Douglas produced in the late 1920s and 1930s, after he established his professional and artistic reputation in Harlem, one must look closely at the diverse influences informing his early works, such as the December 1925 cover of Opportunity and Sahdji (Tribal Women) (1925) [Figs. 2, 3]. These works in particular offer crucial insights into Douglas’s primary interests as a young Black artist seeking to articulate the experience of “working people,” who Douglas identified in a 1971 interview as the “essence of this Negro thing,” at the height of overt systemic racism and racial tension in the United States. One can begin to understand Douglas’s complex approach to race and identity by critically engaging with these early works, which also shed light on the specific afrotropes that appear in his later work.

Douglas was equally drawn to images produced by Italian Renaissance masters (such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo) and modern artists (such as Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso) as a young autodidact, and was taken under the wing of Harlem-based, German artist Aaron Douglas, Interview, Leslie M. Collins, July 16, 1971. Black Oral Histories, Fisk University Special Collections, 187. Douglas believed that representing “black folk” was at the base of the Harlem Renaissance: “I was very careful to associate my figures so that they look like the working people, see. You would not confuse them with the aspiring middle-upper-class, not that I had any antagonism but that I felt that here is the essence of this Negro thing, here among these people.”
Winold Reiss after his arrival in Harlem. Reiss was then well-known in New York, and ran one of the most respected art studios in Greenwich Village. Alain Locke often turned to Reiss for character portraits of Native Americans and Blacks for the illustrations of *Survey Graphic.*

Reiss’s influence cannot be overstated: he introduced Douglas to both European modernism and African sculpture, and meticulously mentored the young artist during his formative Harlem years.

One scholar who has contributed significantly to our current understanding of Douglas’s work is Nathan Irvin Huggins (1927–1989), who authored the groundbreaking *Harlem Renaissance* (1971). While Huggins’s definitive text contributed significantly to re-invigorating discussions of the Harlem Renaissance, his views on the relationships between Black artists and their wealthy white patrons (and on the impact these relationships had on Black artists’ “authenticity”) oversimplifies a much more complex cultural and racial navigation. In a 1971 interview, Douglas himself refuted the idea that white patronage dictated Black artists’ work:

…there were certain white people at that time that came in contact with blacks and helped make it possible for them to reach a level from which they could create, but [the Harlem Renaissance] was not something dictated by white culture. It stemmed from Black culture. We were constantly working on this innate blackness at that time that made this whole thing important and unique. And in no way do I think that we should have any feeling of being talked down to or talked into things that they had no share in, that is to say, were given certain things and were simply manipulated and so on.\(^\text{17}\)

The assumption that Black artists who were funded, taught by, or received encouragement from white patrons are somehow “inauthentic” is based on the highly problematic idea that artistic innovation depends entirely on racial identity. Douglas, in his absorption of predominantly

\(^{17}\) Aaron Douglas, Interview with Leslie M. Collins. Cited in Lewis, “Aaron Douglas Chats about the Harlem Renaissance,” 120.
Euro-American ideas, did what any enthusiastic young art student would do: he cast a wide net and sifted accordingly for the most satisfying, interesting, and fulfilling ideas relative to his own vision. Furthermore, the assumption that Black artists should, by default, engage with topics of race because of their racial experience should be challenged. Artists’ abilities and merits should not be assessed on the basis of their ability to articulate their experiences with race.

If Huggins’s views require re-examining, then so, too, do those of art historian Amy Helene Kirschke. In *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), Kirschke comes across as an apologist at best, ambivalently assessing Douglas’s primitivist practices without committing to whether or not he was, indeed, a primitivist. In her attempt to deconstruct Huggins’s critiques of the movement, Kirschke makes sweeping generalizations that strip Douglas of his complex place within the development of modernism. She writes:

> Recent scholars have dealt harshly with the Harlem Renaissance, finding it narrow and parochial, controlled by white patrons, elitist, and excessively ambitious….It is true that white patronage was important, but artists were still able to create unique works. Artists have always struggled to please their patrons and at the same time create original art forms…Aaron Douglas was never dependent on patronage. He created African-inspired works largely under his own direction and the influences of prominent black leaders.

That Kirschke should label Douglas’s oeuvre as “African-inspired” is slightly misleading, as they are largely inspired by Douglas’s own fantasies and projections of Africa fueled by his

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18 Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Huggins does, however, challenge the essentialist notion that Blacks working with African art had an innate spiritual connection to what they saw, purely on the basis of race. In doing so, however, Huggins still dismisses the lasting effect African art had on Douglas: “Contrary to assertions of the soul-community of blacks, the American Negroes had to learn to appreciate the value of African art and culture. Too often they were taught by Europeans for whom Africa had a powerful, but limited, significance…But when the black American intellectual got the news, he wanted to be able to identify completely with Africa, to find his tradition there. Now that was quite fanciful. Consider, too, the Negro Aaron Douglas learning techniques of African art from the Bavarian Winold Reiss. While Douglas used the techniques he learned in this association, African art had little lasting influence.” (187)

19 Kirschke, 132.
inspiration from the European modernists. Very little of actual Africa is really seen in his canvases and drawings; it was not Africa that inspired him so much as it was the sculpture that came from it alongside other artists’ projections of the continent and its people. Further, Douglas did receive white patronage – from Barnes and from the author Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964). Douglas illustrated advertisements for Van Vechten’s novel Nigger Heaven (1926), a text widely acclaimed by distant white audiences for its “insight,” but largely decried by Black readers who were offended by its distortion of life in Harlem. Throughout her work, Kirschke accounts for Douglas’s choices as being primarily racially motivated in a way that celebrates Black bodies. She tucks away his European artistic education from Reiss rather than critically assessing and contextualizing it. Protecting Douglas’s work from the currents of Euro-American modernism does not elevate his work, but ultimately simplifies it.

Huggins and Kirschke’s scholarly motivations are drastically different. Huggins’s main prerogative was not only to fill the abundant lacunae in the Harlem Renaissance scholarship but also to write about the movement via a “lens through which one might see a new view: white men and black men unknowingly dependent in their work to shape American character and culture.”20 Kirschke took Huggins’s cue in writing the first comprehensive text of Douglas’s life and work, but did so with the very same congratulat[ing]” Huggins purposely avoided. While both scholars effectively incorporated Douglas’s work into conversations about the intersection of modernism and African sculpture, they fell short in analyzing the overall process of Douglas’s early development as an artist. Huggins misses the artistic individuality of Douglas and his fellow Black contemporaries while dissecting the “savior complexes” of their white patrons.

20 Huggins, 12.
Kirschke places a distractingly large emphasis on Winold Reiss’s mentorship of Douglas while simultaneously attempting to celebrate the artist’s individuality, overlooking the significance of Douglas’s time at the Barnes Foundation entirely. In the end, both Huggins and Kirschke bequeath their readers an incomplete idea of Douglas as an artist never able to fully own his artistic vision.

Both Huggins and Kirschke attempt to establish authenticity as it relates to the “African American aesthetic,” as if such a highly subjective criteria could ever be properly defined. Both scholars argue that art by Black artists must comprise of (and even directly address) social and racial consciousness. Celebrating Douglas’s work as representative of an entire race during a specific moment in American history should be treated with caution. My own use of the term ‘authentic’ is not intended to be restricted to the idea that Douglas, as an artist, constantly produced works based on purely original thoughts, ideas, techniques or on the basis of racial identity. Rather, his work is a visual culmination of his interests, culturally hybrid influences, and a visual education born from looking closely at objects. Huggins judges Douglas’s work (and thus, Douglas’s success as an ‘authentic Afro-American artist’) against a criteria that prioritizes racial consciousness and essentialism:

Aaron Douglas borrowed two things from the Africans. He thought that art should be design more than subject. And his personal predilections for mysticism encouraged him to find racial unity and racial source in Africa. Music, the dance, that spirit beneath the substance–soul–were a connective tissue between the African and the Afro-American.

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21 Kirschke writes, “Reiss was a demanding teacher, and Douglas wanted his approval. For a time, meeting Reiss’s standards was all that mattered to Douglas,” as well as “Reiss encouraged Douglas to continue to draw to improve his technique, and his training had a profound influence on Douglas. Douglas developed a flat, stylized signature method that closely resembled Reiss’s. Reiss’s insistence that Douglas turn to his black heritage and that he have proper training from live models greatly improved Douglas’s work. Douglas saw that he was progressing under his teacher’s direction but began as well to see his own work as becoming independent of Reiss” (63).
his art, he attempted to achieve that metaphor which would make that subliminal unity explicit.22

I will attempt to argue something fundamentally different. I believe that Douglas, while prioritizing design according to his modernist approaches, did not think “art should be more design than subject”; he made a concerted effort to convey the significance of his subject matter by using a spatially dynamic, compositionally unifying, multi-perspectival approach. Further, the “subliminal unity” that Huggins posits as a “connective tissue between the African and the Afro-American” holds very little weight, as Douglas demonstrated a similarly limited knowledge of African art as his Euro-American contemporaries and was no more connected to Africa than they were.

Douglas needs to be understood through the same critical lens afforded to all modern artists, regardless of race: as one who found his own mature, unique approach after an extensive amount of time and as one who embraced various cross-cultural ideas and techniques. As such, the concept of the “authentic” is highly problematic, and to argue that Douglas’s work is either more or less “authentic” is to accept a rather limiting spectrum favoring collective racial identity over individual artistic vision. What does it mean for Douglas’s work to be “authentically African-American,” and how does one determine its success under such parameters? Who determines “authenticity,” and is it culturally, intellectually, or geographically dependent? What does “authentic” mean within the rapidly mobilized (and globalized) society in which Douglas operated?

22 Huggins, 169.
If Douglas’s early works are not of his “own authentic voice,” it is not because he was pressured to compromise his vision as a beneficiary of white patrons, as Huggins would suggest. Likewise, if Douglas’s early works are indeed representative of said “authentic voice,” this should not be based solely on the fact that his subject matter connects to his racial identity, as Kirschke would argue. We need to delve further into Douglas’s early works in order to understand his growth as an artist. While his artistic motivations were first born from a racially motivated social agenda, and although his career drove the visual agenda of the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas participated in critical art historical, anthropological and sociological discourses beyond the Harlem Renaissance as well. I contend, however, that the most significant impact on Douglas’s artistic growth – the primary factor behind his choices in articulating ideas about race, African American history, and exoticized visions of Africa – was his time as a student at the Barnes Foundation from 1928-1929. The Barnes Foundation is where Douglas first experienced a sustained critical engagement with West and Central African sculpture, and first grappled with the deliberate figuring of Africa as a source for modernist artistic principles.

Scholars, especially Huggins and Kirschke, have not made much of Douglas’s study at the Barnes Foundation aside from the personal invitation Barnes sent to Douglas soon after they first met. The philanthropist generously offered full financial support in the form of free classes and a substantial living wage while Douglas studied in Merion. Art historian Christa Clarke

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23 Ibid., 187.

24 This information appears throughout the Douglas literature, but is most prominently drawn out in Driskell’s “Douglas as Renaissance Tastemaker” in Susan Earle, Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 90. Although Barnes was white philanthropist who amassed his wealth through the pharmaceutical, Argyrol, Dr. Barnes was a specifically interested in social welfare programs and public education in the arts. He wrote extensively on “unlocking the potential” of African and African American art, which he articulated in his essay “Negro Art in America,” later featured in the same publication Douglas helped illustrate, The New Negro.
recently wrote one of the only in-depth analyses of the visual legacy left by the Barnes’s collection of African sculpture on African American artists, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of L’Arte Nègre and the Harlem Renaissance* (2015). In a chapter of Clarke’s doctoral dissertation, “Defining Taste: Albert Barnes and the Promotion of African Art in the United States During the 1920s” (1998), Clarke briefly discusses the impact of the Barnes Foundation’s African sculpture on Douglas’s approach to anatomical form. Many scholars have celebrated Dr. Barnes for his advocacy on behalf of African and African American art in the United States, but Douglas’s own experiences while at the Barnes Foundation were barely documented by the institution’s staff, save for their acknowledgement of his studying there.

Douglas was carefully trained and prepared by his artistic mentor, Winold Reiss, to draw influence from individual African objects before his arrival at the Barnes, through a “detached” method of study intended to be devoid of racial and cultural stereotypes. Douglas later credited his mentor in this way, stating, “I clearly recall his impatience as he sought to urge me beyond my doubts and fears that seemed to loom so large in the presence of the terrifying specters moving beneath the surface of every African masque and fetish.” Douglas attributes his ability to move past his “doubts and fears” to Reiss and his consistent encouragement to carefully look

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26 E-mail correspondence with Robin Craren from The Barnes Foundation, November 2014.

at African art. Reiss was more than just an artistic mentor – he was also a mediator who showed Douglas the importance of African sculpture.

Douglas borrowed heavily from Reiss’s techniques in the brief time leading up to (and throughout the duration of) his first few years in Harlem. He first encountered Reiss’s work in the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* – in the same issue that convinced Douglas to emigrate to Harlem in the first place. This direct influence can be clearly seen in the December 1925 cover of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, which Douglas executed in the course of a single night [Fig 2]. Douglas gravitated toward bold, emphatic, abstract forms to depict Black figures in this cover, an approach he largely inherited from Reiss. Reiss, who was concerned with accurate depictions of “common peoples” and sought to avoid socially-driven stereotypes, consistently encouraged Douglas to follow his lead. Thus, Douglas’s concern for articulating racial identity in an expressive, nuanced manner was a top priority while learning from the Dan and Lagoons sculpture he later saw at the Barnes; both cultures’s works are generously represented and frequently re-interpreted in Douglas’s works dated from 1928 onward.

At first glance, the December 1925 *Survey Graphic* cover – commanded by the profile of a young, Black male figure – bears a remarkable resemblance to figures in contemporaneous works by Winold Reiss, such as *Harlem at Night* (1924) [Fig. 4]. However, the facial features in Douglas’s figure are noticeably different, marking the artist’s deviation from Reiss’s style and the


29 Kirschke, 13.

30 Aaron Douglas to Alta Sawyer, n.d. (ca. 1925), Box I, Folder I, Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
beginning of his own visual language to articulate racial identity. The combination of a
straightened eyelid and furrowed brow bestows his figure with a serious, contemplative
countenance. The two lines of tonal gradations emanating from the figure and the city behind
him add three dimensionality to his otherwise flat, abstract form. The reverberations echoing
from his neck and shoulders – as well as from the city – recede into the stark white background,
extending toward the viewer and moving toward the bottom of the composition. This adds a
holistic, subtle sense of energy and movement to the work’s initially static, abstract forms.
Douglas’s approach is softer than Reiss’s, as he uses tonal gradations that radiate smoothly from
the center in a less visually arresting way than the black/pink dichotomy employed frequently by
Reiss (see, for example, Harlem at Night).

Kirschke describes the cityscape in the background of the Opportunity cover as possibly
being a “rising star with an Arab or Middle Eastern city contained in it.” She proposes that the
cover is an illustration of the entire Opportunity issue itself, stating: “The cityscape is clearly not
an average American city. It was probably a reference to Bethlehem or Jerusalem because this
was a Christmas issue.”31 I propose that instead, this city might be a symbol of Harlem in the
guise of a silhouetted representation of Mecca, the holy city that became intricately tied (and
nearly synonymous) with Harlem earlier that year in Survey Graphic. The half star in which it is
nestled could be read as the star of Bethlehem, but it could also be seen as a fateful star
illuminating Mecca and, thus, illuminating Harlem (which, as Locke declared, was the “Mecca
of the New Negro”). Further, that the only black elements in the composition are the figure itself
and the city behind him – including the hill on which the city proudly sits – demonstrates a

31 Kirschke, 74.
deliberate visual pairing. Douglas’s figure visually and metaphorically carries the city on his shoulders through this visual rhyme.

Douglas’s time with Reiss was undeniably instrumental in his growth as an artist. I believe, however, that his time spent later at the Barnes Foundation was even more so. This was the first time in Douglas’s artistic career during which he was subject to a sustained engagement with African art – examples of which were considered among the finest in the United States. He was able to look at works that he had only seen in two-dimensions (such as the photographic reproductions of the Barnes’s Baoulé and Bushongo masks featured in the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*) [Fig. 5]. This two-dimensional exposure might account for why pre-Barnes Douglas’s work was flat and stylized, lacking the spatial complexity of his later works from the 1930s.

Despite not having seen many African works firsthand before his time at the Barnes, Douglas still attempted to incorporate stylized elements of African sculpture in his works before 1928. One example of such a work is *Sahdji (Tribal Women)*, completed for [Richard] Bruce Nugent’s eponymous short story. Nugent’s work, included in *The New Negro*, tells the story of an East African woman, Sahdji, mourning the loss of her husband. Nugent’s writing capitalizes on the Western stereotypes of African “tribal” society, and Douglas’s illustration provides a visual corroboration.³² Douglas’s *Sahdji* almost completely ignores the narrative aspects of its

³² I would like to note that my use of the word “tribal” is meant to coincide with descriptions of Nugent and Douglas’s understanding of African culture. The anthropologist and cultural critic James Clifford discussed the highly politicized nature of this term in his essay, James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): “The term ‘tribal’ here is used with considerable reluctance. It denotes a kind of society (and art) which cannot be coherently specified. A catchall, the concept of tribe has its source in Western projection and administrative necessity rather than in any essential quality or group of traits. The term is now commonly used instead of ‘primitive’ in phrases like ‘tribal art.’” (Footnote 1, p. 191)
literary partner; it only draws direct guidance from Nugent's descriptions of the story’s characters. For instance, Nugent begins by writing: “That one now….that’s a sketch of a little African girl…delightfully black…I made it while I was passing through East Africa…her name was Sahdji…” Nugent continues, “…with her beautiful dark body…rosy black…graceful as the tongues of flame she loved to dance around…and pretty…small features….large liquid eyes…over-full sensuous lips…she knew how to dance too…better than any…” The text directs readers’ attention to its paired image, immediately cloaking Douglas’s work with authority. Serving as the “sketch” that Nugent’s narrative describes, Douglas’s work features a female figure with almost all the exact qualities described by the narrator. This figure is the only demonstration of Douglas adhering to Nugent’s description; the only exception is the lack of her “large liquid eyes,” as they are covered by her hair. The “tribal” marks on her face provide a (false) sense of authenticity, allowing viewers to read the female figure as “African” or “tribal,” and therefore “masked.” She becomes either vulnerable to the viewer’s gaze or, conversely, protected from it.

Instead of supporting the story’s narrative, Douglas places his figures in the midst of a chaotic abstraction. Nugent conveys a very straightforward, specific setting in his writing of Sahdji, and Douglas deviates from this with a geometrically abstract, multi-perspectival approach. The women descending from the central figure’s body in a downward left diagonal lend a gentle suggestion that this composition may visually depict the moment of Sahdji’s crisis (when her husband, Konombju, does not return home from the hunt):

...Sahdji jangled her bracelets...it was so still and warm...she’d wait at the door...standing there...shifting...a blurred silhouette against the brown of the hut...she waited...waited...
maybe...
she saw the long steaming stream of natives in the distance...she looked for Konombju...
what was that burden they carried...why were they so solemn...where was Konombju...
the column reached her door...placed their burden at her feet...Konombju...an arrow in
his back...

If Douglas used Nugent’s story as inspiration for this work (or if this work was commissioned by
Nugent himself), Douglas clearly chose to point Nugent’s vision in another direction, for
Douglas blatantly ignores the story’s specific East African setting in favor of geometric
abstraction. The descending women might be a reference to the “long steaming stream of
natives” Sahdji saw in the distance, but there is no brown hut against which her silhouette blurs,
let alone a doorway in which she is able to stand. The women’s arms might be raised to carry the
slain body of Konombju, but the pyramidal shape above them, with a base comprised of bold,
inwardly jutting peaks, makes one question what exactly this is meant to depict. Douglas could
be referencing ancient Egypt (as Konombju is an East African chieftain) by representing the final
resting place of Egyptian royalty and aristocracy. The absence of the column described in the
story, however, as well as the absence of Konombju’s actual body, complicates the work’s
relationship to Nugent’s vision.

Douglas’s use of the African “tribal” style in Sahdji’s face racializes his figures,
demonstrating that Douglas borrowed the visual language of modernist primitivists to depict
stylized African subject matter. More specifically, he comes closest to Reiss’s work here.
Douglas actively employs what art historian Rosalind Krauss might refer to as Black Deco, a

34 Nugent, “Sahdji.”
term describing the increasingly popular and very generalized stylizations of African sculpture in service to the fashionable trends of Art Deco in the 1920s (and which, for Krauss, betray only a superficial engagement with the structures of African aesthetics). This is most present in the scarification across Sahdji’s exposed cheek, which makes use of an invented, stylized design influenced by the reproductions of African masks Douglas saw in publications like Survey Graphic and Opportunity [Fig. 5]. Sahdji’s face (depicted in three-quarter profile) is flattened even further through this process. The vertical lines stretching across this particular band echo the lines stretching across the skirts of the women to the viewer’s left. Although these women were probably placed behind her to indicate depth, the lack of tonal differences allow them to equitably occupy the foreground as part of a hieroglyphic hierarchy. Douglas’s bold lines also do very little to complicate the space or create a sense of three-dimensional depth. The only moment in which this capability shines through is in the bottom right corner. What first appears to be a slight jutting of the ground actually becomes a dynamic miniature mountain range, a space which Douglas controls more than any other part of the work. Its solid black triangles crash against white ones demarcated by thin lines that successfully convey three-dimensionality. The lines defining the points of convergence make this interaction more realistic and spatially

35 Rosalind Krauss, “Giacometti” in “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. Krauss writes: “…what these applications of random and transformed detail produce is a generalized character of the Afro-Primitive in the absence of any specific sculptural source. The stylizing attitude that allows for the resultant playful recombination and transmutation of the original examples [of African masks and sculpture] unites these performances … to the wider field of what could be called Black Deco…creating the experience of what Roland Barthes might call ‘Africanity,’ without preserving much of the structural integrity of the [sculptural] models.” (507)

36 These publications, especially the Survey Graphic issue of March 1925, featured sculpture from the Barnes Foundation collection of African art. Further, Douglas would have also been very familiar with the work of Picasso and Matisse, as he was exposed to their work in publications like The Conception of Art (1913) by Henry Poore and in various publications Reiss encouraged him to read.
complex than the others. The other lines, in their boldness, actually flatten the composition, overwhelmingly cluttering the space.

The three women mimicking Egyptian relief sculpture are a reference to ancient Egyptian art, a trope Douglas employed fondly and frequently throughout his oeuvre. W.E.B. DuBois urged Douglas to use Egyptian art as a “common vocabulary” to catalyze and inspire his Black audiences to pursue learning about their ‘common heritage.’

Douglas explained his inspiration to look to Egypt in a 1971 interview:

The head was in perspective in a profile flat view, the body, shoulders down to the waist turned half way, the legs were done also from the side and the feet were also done in a broad … never toward you … perspective simply because at that you don’t understand things, we don’t view things that way. We understand if I present my hand to you that way, you wouldn’t understand that that was a hand. It’s only when it’s done this way, when the fingers spread out that you understand. So you see that I spread the hand out with the fingers out and the hand was done in a way that I concocted. I used that hand all the time … got it from the Egyptians.

The women in the background closely match this description. Their heads are in profile and their bodies are turned to the side for legibility, just as Douglas describes. The detail Douglas uses to describe their hands and limbs, however, might indicate that Sahdji was created before Douglas developed this approach. This is because their limbs either melt into each other or dissolve into the borders confining them, which flattens them even further and renders them essentially illegible. The figures are linked, but they remain static and confined to their space through the tonal similarities they share with certain structures in the background. These figures also call attention to Douglas’s potential to portray individualized expression in each of his figures.

37 Kirschke, 76–77.

38 Aaron Douglas, Interview with Leslie M. Collins.
Although the women have the same striped skirt “uniform” and strike the same pose, their individual facial features slightly vary. Their lips are different sizes, their eyes consist of various shapes, and their hairstyles fluctuate in both size and shape. Despite having different features, however, they all share the same blank expression and they each focus on an unidentifiable end beyond the frame.

Although Douglas was not quite successful in conveying individualized expression in *Sahdji*, one can see that his efforts began shifting toward this goal. Douglas effectively used the widely accepted Black Deco symbols of Black bodies – “tribal” markings, black shading, enlarged facial features – but these signs were informed mainly by Reiss’s depictions of Black bodies, not from his own developed artistic language. Douglas needed to borrow these signs to enter the conversation artistically before honing in on his own way of indicating racial identity.

Douglas’s use of Black Deco demands closer consideration. Douglas employed racial signifiers to not only signal the specific race of his figures to viewers, but also to participate in a larger fashionable trend that captivated his European and American contemporaries of all races. This was the visual language with which Douglas was familiar, but, like many modernist primitivists, he was limited to the examples of African art selected primarily by Western collectors. Helen Marie Shannon devoted an entire chapter in her doctoral dissertation to the ways in which the tastes of Western collectors limited the kinds of objects and visual traditions from which Douglas could draw influence:

From the time of the ‘discovery’ of African art, attention was placed on the collectables of masks, sculptures, textiles, pottery, and other forms of decorative arts. But the corpus of “African art” at any moment is defined by the exigencies of physical limitations and the tastes of Western collectors. Painting on architecture and petroglyphs on stone could not be collected; painting on masks and other three-dimensional objects had frequently
worn off or had been deliberately removed by dealers and collectors to emphasize their sculptural qualities; figurative textiles such as appliqués were bypassed in favor of the more technically demanding woven Kuba cloth. And even if African graphic traditions had been well-known, their subjects were primarily geometric and zoomorphic, not anthropomorphic.\textsuperscript{39}

When asked about his designation as being among “the first of the Africanists” during an interview much later in his career, Douglas acknowledged a lack of African resources to study: “I wished I had been. I could have made it more specific, but I didn’t know how to then. I tried to read and get up on this thing, but there wasn’t much that you could get a hold of…What I was interested in was the contribution of Black people throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{40}

Douglas’s classes at the Barnes Foundation provided him with a concrete opportunity he needed to “get up on this thing.” He spent hours on end in the galleries, learning from African sculptures that eventually made cameo appearances in later works. Only then was Douglas able to approach his work with more spatial complexity; only then did he begin to incorporate subtle nuances in tonal range, as well as draw out individualized expressions in his figures. Only then did Douglas begin to convey a specific narrative in his work, using modernist approaches (flattened, geometric shapes; embracing the two-dimensionality of the canvas, etc.) to convey the history of the African diaspora and providing a means of “touch[ing] upon the experience of black people in America.”\textsuperscript{41} Douglas’s time at the Barnes was not a ‘selling out’ moment in which he began to copy from the works of European masters meticulously arranged on the walls; neither was it a moment in which Douglas successfully connected to his perceived “ethnic

\textsuperscript{39} Helen Marie Shannon, “From ‘African Savages’ to ‘Ancestral Legacy’: Race and Cultural Nationalism in the African Modernist Reception of African Art,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999.)

\textsuperscript{40} Aaron Douglas, Interview with Leslie M. Collins.

\textsuperscript{41} Id.
roots.” Rather, his study at the Barnes allowed him the necessary time and freedom to intellectually engage with works that had consistently piqued his interests by virtue of being either West African or European modernist.

One of the works that clearly announces the origins of Douglas’s more individual artistic vision and deviation from Reiss’s influence is the painting *Congo* (c. 1928) most likely made during Douglas’s time at the Barnes [Fig. 6]. This work was an illustrated accompaniment to French author Paul Morand’s *Magie noire (Black Magic)* (1928). *Congo* is one of the first works in which Douglas employs what would become his signature iconography: concentric, multi-tonal circles symbolic of different levels of racial experience and consciousness. The concentric circles might symbolize inner- and outer-body experiences, moving both toward and away from the figures (and the viewer) simultaneously, but they might also be seen as a shorthand for sound waves produced by music. Although Douglas does not reference specific sculptures from the Barnes in this particular composition, he progresses from the directly stereotypical, racialized figures featured in his previous works. The figures have evolved: eyes now resemble narrow rivers, rhythmically flowing through the figures’ faces while both receiving and omitting light, and movements are dramatically more animated than those of previous works, as they dance in anatomically impossible ways to emphasize energy.

Each figure has a sense of individuality. A select few have thick, wavy hair flowing as rhythmically as their eyes, while others have no hair at all. This might be a signifier of gender, but the figures have been so heavily abstracted that gender becomes more negotiable and less determinable (a theme he would explore after a great deal of exposure to African sculpture). Each figure occupies at least one of the concentric circles; they each also overlap different ones.
Douglas might have done this to deliberately highlight the fact that race is a subjective experience in many different ways, and that some people encompass overlapping categories of coloration and racial experience (one such example is the ability – or inability – to “pass” into white social circles). That the figure literally bending over backwards is the figure closest to the whitest, most central circle might not be a coincidence: his contorted body not only flows alongside most of one particular circle – it penetrates a brighter one, even coming close to touching the unattainable.

The only obvious reference to Congo in this eponymously named work is Douglas’s depiction of neck rings wrapped around a figure on the bottom right. Neck rings were featured in sculpture, as a signifier of beauty, in traditions throughout modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo. Ndengese sculpture, for example, feature neck rings as symbols of royalty and significance [Fig. 7]. The painting’s scenery, however, is abstracted and largely empty, with virtually nothing except the concentric circles permeating the composition. With no geographic references (and with the presence of animated, expressive figures), this scene seems as though it could be pulled directly from a modern American nightclub rather than ancient Africa. The figures’ expressive movements, in fact, echo the swing dances known as the Lindy Hop and the jitterbug, both of which originated in the Manhattan-based Savoy Club and would have been familiar to Douglas. This is an excellent demonstration of Douglas rediscovering the “primitive” roots in his own modern culture, a temporal collapse that, as we will see, will remain at the heart of Douglas’s modernist primitivism.

The beige, ghostly body floating above the dancing figures might be a reference to one or two other modernist works known to Douglas at the time. It alludes to a work by his mentor
Reiss, entitled *July* (1919) which was created as part of a calendar series [Fig. 8]. The female figure not only faces the same direction as Douglas’s figure, but is rendered with similar hair that pulls her head back in the same vulnerable, yet animatedly expressive, way. The figure also bears striking resemblance to the female figure in Paul Gauguin’s primitivist painting *The Loss of Virginity* (1890–91) [Fig. 9]. Douglas was already familiar with Gauguin’s works, and the popularity of this particular image paired with the fact that Gauguin was generously represented on the walls of the Barnes Foundation, might have brought this work to Douglas’s attention. Gauguin’s starkly contrasting hues make the young girl’s body poignantly noticeable, as she lies lifeless in a rural setting that could be anywhere but an industrial, modernized city. In attempting to recall a “tribal,” or timeless setting, Douglas may have used these women’s primitivist bodies as inspiration for marking the pastoral to his own ends. The meaning of Douglas’s floating figure is not directly known. She may represent an ancestor, as she floats above the dancing figures in a wave of either clouds or light. Likewise, she may represent a being who experiences life on a different wavelength, as the figures below project a focused light onto her body that widens as it envelops her in ever lighter tones.

Although Douglas would not yet reach the height of his artistic career for a few years to come, his early development in Harlem was crucial to expanding his artistic vocabulary and his eventual approach to articulating racial identity on his own terms. His mentorship under Winold Reiss laid the principal foundations for rigorous artistic study and practice. Reiss prepared Douglas for later sustained engagement with African sculpture at the Barnes while giving him the confidence to move beyond depicting stereotypical minstrel-types in favor of more nuanced, geometrically abstract silhouettes. Douglas’s open-mindedness to more spatially complex
compositions, attention to individualized expression, and effective use of tonal contrasts allowed him to hone his ideas and visually articulate his own racial experience for multiple audiences. These early works were crucial to establishing Douglas’s reputation as a Black artist capable of illustrating the experience of the “man in the street,” in 1920s America, and prepared him for the most important phase of his artistic development: study at the Barnes Foundation.
While Douglas worked diligently to produce a prolific body of work, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, founder of the Barnes Foundation in suburban Merion, Pennsylvania, built his own reputation by amassing the first collection of African art presented as “art” in the United States.\textsuperscript{42} Douglas and Dr. Barnes met through Douglas’s employer Charles S. Johnson (the sociologist and editor of \textit{Opportunity}) one afternoon in 1926, when Barnes and his personal advisor, the French dealer Paul Guillaume (1881–1934) visited the office of \textit{Opportunity}.\textsuperscript{43} Barnes and Johnson were already closely working together as colleagues in their shared quest to increase the valuation of Black art in the United States. Johnson praised Barnes for his progressive views on African art, relatively rare for a wealthy white American collector of European art, and believed they would contribute to the appreciation of contemporary Black culture:

\begin{quote}
Those who know Dr. Albert C. Barnes treat him as a valuable secret….He was the first and is distinctly the last word in Primitive African Art and his pieces, the rarest of their kind—exquisite, exotic, distinctive,—once casually valued at fifty thousand dollars, are becoming invaluable….Soon primitive Negro art will invade this country as it has invaded Europe…And there will come with it a new valuation of the contribution of Negroes, past and yet possible, to American life and culture. It is on this certainty that Dr. Barnes has quietly combed Europe for the choicest of the specimens brought from
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{43} Douglas to Alta Sawyer, n.d. (1924–1926?), Letter 78, Box 1, Folder 8, Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York: “I shall soon have the privilege of meeting Dr. Barnes and Paul Guillaume two of the world’s greatest art collectors. Mr. Johnson is having them up to his office. I’m really wild to meet them.”
Africa, and is even now urging serious study and exclusive research into the field, still uncharted, by competent and interested Negro students.\textsuperscript{44}

During Barnes’s visit, Dr. Johnson recommended that Barnes look at Douglas’s work, which resulted in the collector enthusiastically inviting the artist to visit the Foundation for a day. A letter to his significant other, Alta Sawyer, captures the enthusiasm Douglas felt after his visit:

Did I tell you that Dr. Barnes invited me down to see the pictures at the Barnes Foundation? I spent yesterday out there. It is at Marion [sic] a suburb of Philadelphia. Dr. Barnes advanced my transportation and so it cost me nothing […] but it is a marvelous place. He undoubtedly has the largest single collection of modern paintings in America and certainly has the finest collection of Negro sculptures.\textsuperscript{45}

Douglas knew of the collection and its significance through more than just Johnson’s praise of Barnes. Examples of African sculpture from the Barnes accompanied Douglas’s own works in the pages of \textit{Survey Graphic} and \textit{The New Negro} [See Fig. 5]. Douglas would have also been aware of Barnes’s sympathy toward the cause of strengthening Black artists’ careers. If the collector’s appearance at the infamous Civic Club Dinner on March 21, 1924 failed to demonstrate this, his article, “Negro Art in America” (1925) in Alain Locke’s \textit{The New Negro} publicized the collector’s views, however problematic they were.\textsuperscript{46} “We have to acknowledge not only that our civilization has done practically nothing to help the Negro create his art but that our unjust oppression has been powerless to prevent the black man from realizing in a rich


\textsuperscript{45} Aaron Douglas to Alta Sawyer, n.d. (1924–1926?), Letter 72, Box 1, Folder 8, Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.

measure the expressions of his own rare gifts,” Barnes wrote. “We have begun to imagine that a better education and a greater social and economic equality for the Negro might produce something of true importance for a richer and fuller American life.” Although the self-made philanthropist’s progressive views stemmed from his difficult upbringing in the racially diverse, blue-collar Philadelphia neighborhood of Kensington, his belief in a singular Black aesthetic placed a series of racial expectations on Douglas that confined his work to an essentialist – and ultimately racist – framework. Here, for example, is Barnes describing his view of “the Black artist”:

His insight into realities has been given to us in vivid images loaded with poignancy and passion. His message has been lyrical, rhythmic, colorful… This mystic whom we have treated as a vagrant has proved his possession of a power to create out of his own soul and our own America, moving beauty of an individual character whose existence we never knew.

Barnes’s statement reflects a widely held assumption that passionate Black artists possessed an innate, direct link to their African ancestral past. Douglas was expected to draw out whatever Barnes thought he saw in African sculpture. Barnes was looking for “vivid images loaded with poignancy and passion…[that were] lyrical, rhythmic, colorful…” Thus, Douglas’s work needed to match this preordained aesthetic in order to be considered authentic and valuable, both artistically and financially.

Dr. Barnes clearly prioritized African art in his collecting practices. In 1923, he wrote “when the Foundation opens, negro art will have a place among the great art manifestations of all

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48 Ibid., 669.
times.” His definition of art, reinforced in the Foundation’s lessons and lectures, was based on the premise that art should reflect the experience of seeing nature rather than simply replicating it. African art, he felt, was an example of this, and was the “purest expression of three-dimensional form.” The classes Douglas took between 1928–1929 were not based in traditional art historical study and did not incorporate contextual information. The Barnes Foundation, the collector said, was intended to “promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts,” for all classes; it was not to function as a museum for patrons or scholars. The Foundation’s focus on direct visual study was a democratic attempt to make modern art more accessible to those who were not privileged with a (literally) formal education.

Douglas would have also been familiar with Barnes’s ideas through the pioneering text *Primitive Negro Art* (1926), considered the culmination of Barnes’s extensive interest in African art. Written by Thomas Munro (1897–1974) (one of the institution’s first educators) and Paul Guillaume, under the guidance and urging of Barnes himself, this book introduced the “Barnesian method” – the strict analysis of the formal characteristics of African art as opposed to the eulogization of “fetish objects.” The text’s reading of African art as having autonomous, internal designs was heavily influenced by modernist theories of abstraction, and may have encouraged Douglas to embrace African art as the origin for much of modern art:

> One comes to regard the statue not as a distorted copy of a human body, but as a new creation in itself, recalling the human form in a general way, but independently justified by its own internal logic […] a Negro mask is not simply a design, or simply a face: it is

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49 Albert C. Barnes to Paul Guillaume, November 5, 1923, the Barnes Foundation Archives, Merion, Pennsylvania. Cited in Clarke, *African Art at the Barnes Foundation*, 81.

50 Clarke, *African Art at the Barnes Foundation*, 84.

51 Charter of the Barnes Foundation (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: 1922).
a face made into a design…[it] has a direct effect, independent of all associations, by the
shapes and combinations of its parts….African sculpture must have had its individual
geniuses, for its most powerful creations are unique….It lacked the differentiating force
of conscious individualism, but also the crystallizing force of rigid social order.\textsuperscript{52}

Douglas engaged directly with this kind of formalist analysis, as it comprised the classes he
eventually took at the Foundation. While he learned from Barnes’s careful arrangement of more
than one hundred masks, figural sculptures, and utilitarian objects, he internalized this method of
analysis and sought to incorporate it in his own artistic practices.\textsuperscript{53}

Barnes applied his strict, calculated aesthetic standards onto Douglas’s work even before
the artist began his studies at the Foundation, overlooking the fact that Black American art is not
innately connected to West African sculpture simply because of the artist’s race. In 1927, after
Douglas completed and unveiled his first commissioned mural for Harlem’s Club Ebony, which
reportedly consisted of dancing figures in front of a dualistic urban/jungle-like setting, Barnes
harshly told him to do it over again.\textsuperscript{54} He remarked, “You have painted the mural. Now do it in
color,” elaborating later that while the mural was pleasing to look at, it lacked depth and
richness. Douglas, attempting to carefully heed Barnes’s advice in his future art, wrote that he
spent an “enormous amount of sweat and labor” to adhere to Barnes’s standards.\textsuperscript{55} This pressure
to not only embody Locke’s “New Negro” principles but to also produce innovative works that

\textsuperscript{52} Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, \textit{Primitive Negro Art} (Merion: The Barnes Foundation, 1926), pp. 33, 49, and 51.

\textsuperscript{53} Clarke, \textit{African Art at the Barnes}, 81–82.

\textsuperscript{54} There are no reliable photographs of this mural available for reproduction in this paper; Aaron Douglas, “Harlem Renaissance,” p. 14, \textit{Aaron Douglas Papers}, Special Collections, Fisk University. Quoted by Mary Ann Meyers in \textit{Albert Barnes and the Science of Philanthropy: Art, Education, and African-American Culture} (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 143.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
satisfied Barnes’s modernist taste may have motivated Douglas to look more closely at the works in the collection that informed these preferences to begin with.

Not long after his visit, Douglas received a personal invitation to study at the collection for one year, with living and travel expenses provided by the philanthropist himself.\footnote{Kirschke, 108.} He and fellow Harlem-based artist, Gwendolyn Bennett (1902–1981), were the first Black artists to receive such a fellowship from the institution, and in 1931, Douglas’s funding expanded into a scholarship enabling him to study in Paris at the École de Scandinavie.\footnote{Ibid., 108.} During his year at the Foundation, he commuted between New York and the Philadelphia suburb, leaving Harlem on Tuesdays and returning on Fridays. The fellowship paid him $125 monthly (the present equivalent of approximately $1,700) for, as Douglas said, doing “nothing, just go[ing] down there and looking at pictures and so on.”\footnote{Interview of Aaron Douglas by Ann Allen Shockley, November 19, 1975, Black Oral Histories, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee. Cited in Kirschke, 108.} It was not just “looking at pictures,” however. Clearly, Douglas was enthusiastic at the prospect of learning from arguably one of the most prominent collections of modern and African art in the United States.

Douglas barely wrote about his time at the Barnes except to express his dissatisfaction, stating that his time there was filled with “cramped, pressured studies.”\footnote{Ibid., Quoted in Kirschke, 109.} Kirschke attributes this deliberate autobiographical omission to an uncomfortable request by Barnes, in which the collector wanted Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett to write a “statement or essay attacking Alain Locke” for “plagiarizing” his ideas.\footnote{Ibid., 109.} All drama aside, Kirschke’s claim that Douglas never

\footnote{\textit{\textcopyright} 2023, The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.}
mentioned the Barnes as a major influence on his career “because Douglas’s style was already firmly developed” is worth re-examining. Douglas’s oeuvre post-Barnes incorporated formal elements of the modern paintings and African sculpture he saw there, such as increasingly geometrically abstracted figures, compositional and spatial complexity, and an exploration of the relationship between dimensionality and artistic materials, as will be demonstrated in this chapter. Barnes’s experimental installations – which drew visual parallels between modern painting and African sculpture – as well as Barnes’s encouragement of Douglas to push his formal exploration of African sculpture further can be seen in Douglas’s development after his yearlong study.

The Aspects of Negro Life mural series (1934), executed after Douglas’s time at the Barnes, demonstrates an ideological perspective that was reinforced by his studies at the Barnes, especially via the gallery installations. The installations in galleries 20, 21, and 22 insist that Africa – more specifically, West Africa – is the origin site of initial creation and pure, unadulterated expression from which modernism was born. The visual affinities drawn between those traditions at the Barnes could be seen as a museological precursor to William Rubin’s 1984 MoMA exhibition, “Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” which, as James Clifford observed, “Presents [modernism] as a search for ‘informing principles’ that transcend culture, politics, and history…the tribal is modern and the modern more richly, diversely human.”61 Although the Foundation’s classes did not adhere to a set curriculum, the exclusive emphasis on drawing

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connections between works of art on the basis of visual form may have been a primary motivator for Douglas to join European modernism together with the artistic traditions of Africa.⁶²

For instance, the mural’s first panel, *The Negro in an African Setting*, draws distinct formal parallels with one of the arrangement of the South Wall of Room 22 in the Barnes [Figs 10, 11]. The display case of West African sculptures and masks featuring works from the Lagoons (Ebrié), Pende, Baule, Lega, Fang, Bamana, Dan, Guro, Punu, and Senufo peoples provides an eclectic – yet still highly structured – display that suggests their collective impact on the European modernists whose work hangs above them [Fig. 12]. The palette of paintings installed in this same gallery is generally cool-toned; blues, purples, and light greens swirl around the room either in Cubist blotches or soft, Impressionistic strokes, which is seen in the palette employed by Douglas in *The Negro in an African Setting* [Fig. 13].

The direct influence of paintings surrounding the case find their way into Douglas’s canvas as well. Charles Demuth’s *In Vaudeville: Acrobatic Male Dancer with Top Hat* (1920) mirrors the dancing figures at the panel’s center, while Amadeo Modigliani’s *Portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne* (1918) normalizes the cone-shaped head by way of coiffure and disproportionate features [Figs 14, 15]. In their location at the Barnes, these two abstract approaches to the human figure found resonance with the African sculptures installed directly beneath them. *The Negro in an African Setting* is much more about Douglas welding these visual hierarchies together, through embracing the plastic qualities celebrated in African sculpture by European modernists and stylistically suggesting the sculpture itself in shadowy, silhouette form in the center of the composition. Barnes’s decision to hang European and American modern art next to

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African sculpture encouraged a reading that placed the original “roots” of abstraction in the hands of African traditions. Douglas’s mural series, therefore, is ideologically compatible with Barnes’s installations, as both collapse the “modern West” with “timeless Africa.” Douglas does more than simply read and incorporate visual themes from the Barnes: he acquires the means to construct a history in his murals.

The sculpture featured at the heart of the panel does not reference a specific African sculpture in the Barnes collection. Some of the sculpture’s formal attributes (an elongated face and torso, wide shoulders and hips, truncated legs) can be found in several sculptures throughout the collection, but an exact match, per se, does not exist within the walls of the Foundation. Douglas borrowed features from many of the African sculptures he saw in print and in person, and recombined those features in his work. The closest sculpture that resembles the one Douglas depicted is featured in the display case of the South Wall in Room 22: *Female Figure (Nkopasopi)* by the Lagoons (Ebrié) peoples from Côte d’Ivoire. Its long face and neck are more definitively carved out than those belonging to the sculpture in Douglas’s canvas, but they share the same broad shoulders, short rectangular top, and same secure fitting for their legs on a base. The hands on *Female Figure* are curved inward (rather than outward, as Douglas depicts) and its legs are not curved at all, but these deviations might have been stylistic choices made by Douglas, or could be due to the fact that he was working from memory. There is no evidence that Douglas had a photograph of *Female Figure* (or a similar sculpture) while creating these canvases, but he might have taken the formal characteristics he absorbed after a year’s worth of study and applied it to this canvas to generally represent Africa.
Douglas’s canvases demonstrate his progression toward more compositional complexity. Additionally, his figures have become more expressive and individualized: their facial expressions, however abstract and slight, are their own rather than generalized stylizations. After a sustained engagement with both African sculpture and European modern works, he learned from the modernist movement’s declared interest in the formal complexities of non-Western art. Ultimately, however, the multidimensionality and material plasticity of West African sculpture—an overtly apparent influence seen in the work of European modernists like Braque, Matisse and Picasso—is not as apparent in Douglas’s approaches. Douglas adapted his approaches to form, as well as complexity of space and composition, from the modernists in a superficial way rather than strictly learning from West African sculpture. African sculpture, thus, had more of a secondhand influence via modernist proxies rather than a direct impact on Douglas’s working process. Modernists like Matisse and Picasso also learned from each other’s appropriations, but the sculptures in Douglas’s canvases functioned in an entirely different way: the sculptures present in his works operate more as symbolic emblems of the “New Negro” approach to conveying African American history as a discourse that prioritizes an assumed innate ancestral connection shared among all Blacks.

Aspects of Negro Life traces a highly generalized history of African American experience by visually narrativizing Blacks’ struggle to shed the chains of slavery and racial bias in order to achieve the “American Dream.” When later describing the WPA-sponsored mural series in 1949, Douglas wrote that these works were intended to give a “symbolic representation of certain aspects of Negro life.” The first mural, The Negro in an African Setting, begins with Douglas

63 Aaron Douglas, “Notes,” October 27, 1949, Box 1, Folder 21 (Miscellaneous), Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.
placing the African American body in its imagined and historical place of origin. The second, entitled *Slavery Through Reconstruction*, as its name implies, is a three-part panel visually tracing the historical progression from slavery to the Reconstruction Era (the era of nation-building in the United States shortly after the Civil War) [Fig. 16]. The third panel, a subtle yet visually gripping canvas entitled *An Idyll of the Deep South*, is described by Douglas as “portray[ing] Negroes toiling in the fields, singing and dancing in a lighter mood, and mourning as they prepare to take away a man who has been lynched” [Fig. 17]. The fourth and final panel, *Song of the Towers*, is another three section piece that visually articulates the struggle of living in modern, industrialized America as a Black man [Fig. 18]. These four panels, long celebrated as the pinnacle of Douglas’s career, need to be unpacked further and examined as part of the discourse of modernist primitivism, regardless of the project’s political intention to serve as a model of racial empowerment. While these panels narrativize African American history in a way that challenges the predominantly white hegemonic understanding of United States history and posits that Black bodies can own their own history, it does so through the use of a language developed and cultivated by people belonging to the hegemonic, colonizing power: European modernists. Ideologically, the series conflates different historical episodes that equate the modern African American experience in the United States with that of a perceived timeless, ancient Africa.

The “African setting” in the first canvas, *Negro in an African Setting*, is never explicitly geographically specified. Douglas relies on common signifiers portraying an exotic land (thick, almost arabesque fauna, traveler's palms framing the background, and cuff-like tribal markings

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64 Id.
around the figures’ ankles, wrists, and arms) to convincingly represent and convey Africa. When describing his attempt to convey this setting for his work, Douglas wrote:

The first of the four panels…emphasizes the strongly rhythmic arts of 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 informal language of space and color, recreate the exhilaration, the ecstasy, the rhythmic pulsation of life in ancient Africa.65

Douglas’s last observation – about his re-creation of “the exhilaration, the ecstasy, the rhythmic pulsation of life in ancient Africa” – immediately reveals a Western perspective informed by fantasies projected onto an African “Other” by an artist who had already consumed heavily constructed images of Africa and its ‘exotic’ peoples, land, and culture. Further, the idea that this panel would convey a sense of life in ancient Africa reveals something much deeper: that Douglas was participating in a conversation heavily rooted in the notion of time. Although Douglas writes that his goal was to depict an ancient setting, his dancing bodies could just as easily evoke a scene in a Harlem nightclub (cf. Gjon Mili’s LIFE Magazine photographs of professionals dancing to the modern, contemporaneously invented swing dance called the Lindy Hop [Fig. 19]). This reference to contemporary dance had already been evident in earlier works, such as Congo [See Fig. 6]. Douglas’s conflation of an “ancient” scene and a snapshot of a nightclub dance floor melds the “ancient primitive” and its modern-day descendent into interchangeable beings who transcend temporal and spatial boundaries.

Douglas also projected his exoticizing fantasies onto the Lindy Hop as a dance form itself. His out-of-context portrayal of the dance in a vague African location rather than an American nightclub stems from his belief that harmonized and rhythmic expression were innate

65 Id.
capabilities for Blacks everywhere. Douglas, who thought the dance – invented in 1927 by Blacks in the Savoy Ballroom – was “remarkable” wrote:

“[it] was not created by a single dancer nor a couple working in isolation, but was rather a kind of instant miracle of poetic movement achieved like many other Negro dances through the efforts of many dancers humbly striving to harmonize, to synchronize into a perfect form the various movements of man, bird and beasts, always struggling, often unconsciously, to reflect, to interpret the black man’s notion of life, joy and oneness with all of God’s created things.”

To place this dance in the middle of a generalized African scene suggests that this dance had origins farther back than 1927. More importantly, it posits that contemporary Black culture is directly traceable to its African roots.

Douglas’s conflation of contemporary Black culture and an imagined ancient Africa is an example of a concept the anthropologist Johannes Fabian introduced in his book Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Subject (1983): “the denial of coevalness,” or the denial of shared Time. Fabian describes the denial of coevalness as “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.”

Douglas, in The Negro in an African Setting, presents Africa as a place that will never be able to occupy the same chronological/temporal space, or Time, as his modern-day viewers. The “African setting” – by lacking any of the same signifiers of modernity or industrialization known to those in the West – is perpetually thrust as backwards and cast as suggestive of an “ancestral origin.” The close resemblance between contemporary Black dance

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and the imagined expressiveness of the African Other results in contemporary Blacks being
denied the same coevalness as white America, reinforcing the perception that Blacks were
inherently unequal to their white Euro-American counterparts and incapable of progress.

Signifiers of “primitivism” in this canvas are not limited to the jubilant dance of
Douglas’s figures. The “fetish object” Douglas mentions in his description is central to the
composition, placed almost entirely in the center of the lightest of the concentric circles (with the
exception of the three prongs at its top). It captures the attention of Douglas’s viewers and the
figures depicted within the scene. Only two figures (in the background, at viewer’s left) look
away from the object, while the others bend their necks to revere it. This deliberate artistic
choice imbues the object with powers by default: the figures’ sustained focus on this one object
implies that their actions have become dependent on it. Their movements and positions are
directly linked to its radiating power.

That Douglas should describe this sculpture as a “fetish” object is particularly revealing.
This indicates that he knew very little about the history of these objects (which was not unusual
in his historical moment), since he uses the catch-all colonialist term for African sculpture typical
of his era. The term “fetish” stems from a centuries-long dialogue exchanged between the Dutch
and the Portuguese; it is derived from the term feitiço (differently spelled variations of the term
include feitisso and, later, fetisso). These objects were perceived by Portuguese colonialists as
dangerous and ideologically threatening cult-based deviations from Roman Catholicism. The
term feitiço was practically interchangeable with the formally specific idolo, a term that is meant
to delineate the difference between free-standing objects and those that were made specifically
for purposes of worship. Douglas’s limited understanding of African sculpture – of its function as a mysterious object of worship – gives *The Negro in an African Setting* a blatantly modernist primitivist foundation. His use of the term “fetish” suggests a belief in these sculptures possessing the magical ability to anchor Blacks back to their “ancestral roots.”

The second panel, *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, deviates entirely from the compositional structure Douglas establishes in the first panel. The canvas is horizontal, longer, and larger; it initially looks more like a history painting (which has generally excluded Black history from its frames). Further, Douglas separated this panel into three sections – although, the boundaries between them are not entirely clear. Douglas explained the iconography accordingly:

The second panel is composed of three sections covering 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;
   in the second section, the figure standing on the box 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.

In separating the panel in this way, Douglas disrupts the usual visual model of chronological progress by moving from right to left rather than from left to right. In doing so, Douglas asks his viewers to question what they qualify as “progress”: the chronological order might be correct from right to left, but should progress really take the shape of slaughter at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan? Douglas is strategic in this order reversal – the viewer is placed in the middle of a

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69 Aaron Douglas, “Notes,” Aaron Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center.
temporal and ideological conflict, as the chronological progress depicted (the rise of the Klan) denies a guaranteed future for Black bodies in America. The figures representing Klan members are significantly more abstract, differing both in tone and form.

Douglas connects this second panel to its predecessor through framing it in a jungle setting, carefully introducing a new symbol associated with the African American at this point in the historical narrative: cotton. Douglas also repeats the concentric circle motif, this time employing two clusters of them in order to bridge a document guaranteeing freedom (the Emancipation Proclamation) to a document demonstrating the right to exercise such freedom (a manifesto proclaimed by a figure representing a rising Black leader). Formally, there is no direct reference to African sculpture in this panel. However, the use of silhouetted figures establishes consistency, even if they are slightly different than those in the first panel. While the Black figures are equally as androgynous as they are in The Negro in an African Setting, they have adopted much more ovoid shapes and most have lost their open-mouthed expressions.

The fact that the figures of the second panel barely differ from those in the first demonstrates a visual pairing of the perceived African “ancient primitive” and African Americans of the late 1800s. The figure carrying a basket full of cotton on the left side of From Slavery Through Reconstruction is related to the drummer on the left of The Negro in an African Setting, if not through the fact that they are both carrying what essentially historically emblematizes their identity (the African his drum, the slave his picked cotton) then at least through their similar unique features (slightly agape mouth and exaggeratedly jutting shoulders).

The palm fronds of the first panel have slowly transitioned into cotton crops in the second, and one figure’s flowing, tattered clothing has been replaced by another’s drooping
cover-alls. Douglas relocates the fetishized setting of the African jungle to the equally indeterminable location of an arbitrary Southern slave state, while positioning the three most expressive figures (the protesting Black leader in the middle of the composition and the trumpet player and dancer on the far right) as products of the new freedoms announced by the figure standing between them. Perhaps most importantly, the document he reads aloud replaces (and becomes) the fetish in this panel. Both objects are seen to empower the figures in each scene.

Douglas insists in the same restructuring of time by reversing chronological order in the third panel as well. *An Idyll of the Deep South* is less dense, featuring only one cluster of concentric circles and incorporating elements from each of the two preceding panels. Douglas described the third panel as follows: “‘An Idyll of the Deep South,’ portrays Negroes toiling in the fields, singing and dancing in a lighter mood, and mourning as they prepare to take away a man who has been lynched.”70 The artist positions the central figure’s banjo as an update on the African sculpture in the first panel, suggesting that the compulsion to play music is still innate despite the literal absence of the “fetish.” Furthermore, the figures dancing behind the group in the middle of the composition evoke the same expressiveness as those who danced in *The Negro in an African Setting*. The panel speaks to the power Douglas saw in music and dance, as a universal sign of Black life. Most importantly, Douglas positions the Deep South as interchangeable with the fantastical African setting he constructed in the first panel.

According to Douglas, *An Idyll of the Deep South* is meant to be read as a combination of three separate parts. Visually navigating this composition is difficult, mostly because of the diagonal that cuts across the concentric circles against the direction in which Douglas constructs

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70 Id.
the narrative. Two kneeling figures, one on each side, look upward toward the North Star’s light emanating from the top left corner, suggesting an important source of direction and guidance for escaping slaves. Together, these two figures effectively lead the viewer’s eyes, but not in the direction of the constructed narrative. This tension and difficulty may have been deliberate, as Douglas attempted to collapse multiple dimensions of both space and racial experience at the composition’s center. The figures in the front seem closer because their bodies are fully visible and unobstructed, while the lighter-toned figures in the back echo the dances of their ancestors.

The *Aspects of Negro Life* mural series comes full circle with the fourth and final panel, *Song of the Towers*. Of all the panels in the mural series, this one seems to be the most disjointed from Douglas’s description, since it reads more like one seamless composition rather than three separate sections. As Douglas explained:

> 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 migrations of Negroes from the South and the Caribbean into the urban and industrial life of America during and just after World War I;
> the second section represents the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the late 1920’s, which spread vigorously throughout all of the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people;
> the last section of this panel attempts to re-create the confusion, the dejection, and frustration resulting from the depression of the 1930’s.\(^1\)

The figures located on the right and left triangulate a slightly lighter, more expressive figure looking upward, who raises his hands and plays the saxophone while lifting it in the air. The figure on the right, “fleeing from the clutching hand of serfdom,” carries no signifiers of the

\(^1\) Id.
South or the Caribbean, but rather clutches a suitcase the same color green as the ominous, threatening hands. The solemn figure on the left, whose head leans forward and is consumed by its hand, does seem to embody the “confusion, dejection, and frustration” felt by most in the Depression.

When assessed together, a few key themes naturally bring *African Setting* and *Towers* into conversation with each other. *Towers* makes use of the same stylized, silhouetted figures from the preceding panels, and its square compositional structure makes it nearly identical to the first panel, *African Setting*. Significantly, behind the central figure’s saxophone stands the Statue of Liberty, looming in the distance where an African sculpture stands in the earlier panel. It lacks individual detail, just as the sculpture in the first panel did, but it remains a recognizable symbol. It is treated the same stylistically and serves as a modern American update on the “fetish” that, just a few panels ago, made Black bodies move so passionately and expressively. Further, that the figure “represents the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness […] which spread vigorously throughout all of the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people” links the saxophone he holds to the sculpture featured in the center of *The Negro in an African Setting*.

The incorporation of the Statue of Liberty is not new for Douglas. In a drawing most likely dated a few years earlier (and featured on the cover of Nathan Irvin Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance*), he used a similarly flat, stylized silhouette of the Statue of Liberty explicitly paired with a stylized African sculpture [Fig. 20]. What is new in this iteration, however, is that it follows so closely behind a panel that used a similar structure for a silhouette of West African sculpture. This replacement suggests these two highly symbolic statues as one in the same; both
are motivating sources for the movement of Black bodies (the former for ritualistic, “primitive”
dance, the latter for physical, financial, and political security). The raised hand of the Statue of
Liberty mirrors that of the figure playing the saxophone, and also seems to help lift the
saxophone higher.

The figure on the bottom right “escaping from the clutching hand of serfdom” seems to
be stretching himself as impossibly as the dancers did in the first panel, but more for the sake of
survival rather than the “natural expression” of the dancers, as Douglas implies. The dance and
sculpture Douglas once described as vital contributions from African Americans have now been
intercepted by America’s Lady Liberty and promises for a better future through hard work.
Whether or not one reads the same elements that Douglas describes in his canvas, it is important
to note that Douglas continues to include symbols of the “American dream” – as part of the
African American historical narrative: the Emancipation Proclamation and political manifesto
evolve into the Statue of Liberty.

This series also shares in a modern primitivist fascination with gender ambiguity.
Douglas’s figures bear a striking resemblance to one another: the lips are slightly parted, the eyes
are elegant and narrow, and the heads are conical. While these figures’ faces might have been
modeled after a Punu mask featured in the Barnes which represents idealized female ancestors’
faces, their genders are rendered ambiguous [Fig. 21]. The two central figures in The Negro in
an African Setting, for instance, can only be told apart by the clothing and tribal markings they
wear. Even then, the figures’ androgyny make these signifiers confusing. The figure on the left
might be female because of its skirt and longer hair, just as its counterpart on the right might be
male because of the conveniently placed staff protruding from its hips and short hair. Neither
figure has any biological indicators of gender. Thus, viewers see a culture that has essentially been rendered genderless, and therefore powerless, as it becomes divorced from a power spectrum informed by sexual politics. This fluidity of gender and sexuality was a staple of early twentieth century European race theory, promoted vigorously by the French anthropologist Gabriel Martial Soularue, who determined in 1900 that “the less ‘civilized’ the race, the less distinction between the sexes.”

This theory was also perceived as reflected by African sculpture (which was thought erroneously to represent actual African bodies) through figures that had both masculine and feminine characteristics. Perhaps this theory was internalized by Douglas and informed his method of representing both “ancient” and contemporary Black bodies.

Douglas’s panels also engage directly with the primitivist discourses of travel literature, in which writers and artists documented their encounters with what they perceived as exotic places during their travels abroad. This is especially true for the first panel. Although it is not a document of his own travels (Douglas never traveled to Africa), it engages with a preconceived idea of what Douglas thought he would find if he were to travel there or travel back in time to observe his ancestors. Art historians Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten have written on travel literature, touching specifically on the meanings conveyed by tropical forests:

Fundamental to such literature is a binary opposition between home and abroad, couched in terms of a journey from the realm of a civilization typified by order and ennui to a native culture synonymous with a fecund but chaotic and uncontrolled natural condition. In the gendered language of the travel account, the tropical forest – the archetype of

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fecundity – is invariably contrasted with the patriarchal technology of Western industry that threatens to violate the feminized ‘virgin land.’ For any Westerner who abhorred this encounter, escape into the realm of the primitive was frequently cast as a quest for a mythical reunion of mind and body, intellect and instinct, which were supposedly torn asunder with the development of civilization.73

The murals themselves act as an unfolding of a journey “between home and abroad,” and through space and time, beginning with the “feminized ‘virgin land’” in the first panel and ending with its antithesis, modern industrialized America. Douglas depicts the flora and fauna to establish the fecund scenery in The Negro in an African Setting, so that his viewers will step into this “escape into the realm of the primitive.” As the viewer moves farther and farther from “Africa,” the “mythical reunion of mind and body” that were presented through dance and music in the subsequent panels are quickly “torn asunder with the development of civilization” as depicted in Song of the Towers.

Ultimately, the Aspects of Negro Life mural series is a culmination of Douglas’s formal and ideological lessons from the Barnes. While not every panel relates as closely to an installation or specific room in the Foundation, the formal influences of European modernism – flatness, spatial complexity, deviation from established perspectival or compositional conventions – are demonstrated consistently throughout the series. From an ideological standpoint, the series is essentially an illustration of Douglas’s exposure to Barnes’s precisely structured arrangements that place African sculpture as an origin source of artistic innovation and material plasticity, with European modernism as its inheritor. This series grounds the stylistic

and narrative trajectories that will guide Douglas’s future works, while revealing the lessons he learned at the Barnes to be a major influence on the rest of his career.
Although Douglas did not produce a large body of work in the years following the Harlem Renaissance, he taught Fine Art at Fisk University and produced work at a slightly slower pace. Despite this, Douglas sustained the ideological and formal approaches he embraced during his time at the Barnes and throughout the rest of his career. This sustained engagement with modernist primitivism and the evolution of his own afrotropes can be seen in two particular works, *Haitian Mural* (1942) and *Untitled (African Ritual)* (1948) [Figs. 22, 23]. Douglas continued the conflation of African artistic origins and European modernism through flattening his figures into stylized silhouettes; incorporating and highlighting West African sculpture out of their socio-cultural contexts to reconstruct the “correct” historical narrative that features Africa as an origin source; and applying afrotropes and racialized stereotypes to adhere to the essentialist proposal that all African American art is inherently connected to a “Black aesthetic,” in the same way that all modern art is related to African sculpture.

Douglas maintains the same visual signifiers for Africa – abstract, geometric features framed by generic jungle leaves in the presence of stylized silhouettes of West African sculptures – in order to evoke the fantastical sense of a “common origin” for the worldwide African diasporic community. In the case of *Haitian Mural*, Haiti is depicted in the same way as Africa and the deep rural American South from earlier panels; in the case of *Untitled (African Ritual)*, Douglas places us in the middle of an “African location” that references ancient Egypt and
Greece, with a seemingly contemporary, geographically vague Africa. The consistent use of these signifiers demonstrates that what Douglas learned at the Barnes had longterm implications. It is in these later works, when we see this deepening of the afrotopes he employed earlier in his career, that the viewer gains a better understanding of Douglas’s modernism. We understand that he did not just leave the Barnes with more modernist techniques tucked inside his artists’ toolkit, nor did he simply regurgitate what he saw in others artists’ work. We see Douglas celebrating Black life and artistic achievement, but he does so through the same denial of coevalness perpetuated through the modernist primitivist visual vocabulary he acquired along the way.

The *Haitian Mural* was commissioned by Dr. W. W. Goens of Wilmington, Delaware, a patron of Douglas who also commissioned two residential murals and numerous portraits from the artist. The mural, located in Detroit, Michigan, was completed after a Julius Rosenwald Foundation grant-funded trip to Haiti and the rural American South. The *Haitian Mural* (and its study [Fig. 24]) bear a striking resemblance to *The Negro in an African Setting,* (the first panel of the *Aspects of Negro Life* series) through both its composition and narrative, despite being painted nearly a decade later. Most importantly, it demonstrates the deepening of Douglas’s modernist primitivist practices. *The Negro in an African Setting* and *Haitian Mural* are both fictive representations inspired by Douglas’s own projections of Africa and Haiti, respectively;

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74 Kirschke, 116; Christopher Harter, "Julius Rosenwald Fund (1917-1948),” Amistad Research Center. The Rosenwald Foundation, chartered by Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Company wealth, supported Black intellectual and artistic ventures. Douglas received a travel fellowship to the rural American South and Haiti in 1938.

75 *Haitian Mural* still remains in sitù, but has sustained a considerable amount of water damage (a leaking roof in the building has led to gradual disintegration). A non-profit organization called the Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware plans to open an African American art gallery in the Goens’ home, but the roof of the house needs to be repaired in order to preserve the mural. Currently, there is a campaign to save the mural led by local organizer Harmon R. Carey. [http://www.gofundme.com/savehaitianmural](http://www.gofundme.com/savehaitianmural)
some of the only differences between the two rests in the figures in *Haitian Mural* being less active as well as Douglas’s more intense collapsing of space (the composition built around a central figure is dismantled and separated into two sections, leaving the foreground and background flattened).

There are two sets of radiating concentric circles in *Haitian Mural* rather than just the one in *The Negro in an African Setting*. One of these sets focuses on a mule in the upper right side of the canvas while the other, barely resting on the center-left edge, closely focuses on the silhouette of an unidentified stylization African sculpture. Radiating waves that undulate through the soil connect both sets to unify the composition’s background with its foreground. Another clear difference is in the warmer palette of yellows and siennas Douglas employs, rather than cool blues and purples. This warmth makes the set of concentric circles focusing on the donkey read as a setting sun, and could indeed represent one.

Douglas, once again, positions his viewers behind relatively large fern leaves. These leaves dwarf the drumming figure to the left – a figure that, if one looks closely enough, actually reappears from the bottom left corner of *The Negro in an African Setting* [see comparison of both compositions in Fig. 25]. The recurrence of this figure is a subtle – yet significant – detail that quietly demonstrates Douglas’s Westernized understanding of communities born from the African diaspora. Douglas carries this Black body across one canvas to another, creating his own diaspora in the process, and its recurrence signals a continued use of afrotropes in Douglas’s works. The silhouette of an African sculpture floats just beyond the drumming figure, but is a variant of the sculpture in *The Negro in an African Setting*. The figure’s head sinks into its broader, slightly raised shoulders and it lacks the coiffure of its predecessor. There is no way to
account for this variation, but its closest plausible resemblance is a Fang sculpture from Equatorial Guinea or Gabon in the Barnes Foundation, Female Figure, which he might have remembered from his time there [Fig. 26].

There are several key differences between the silhouette and the Fang sculpture: namely, its hands and feet do not extend outward, and its legs do not buckle inward to create a circular negative space. Still, the rectilinear negative space between its torso and arms, paired with its broad shoulders and rounded hips, are enough to posit this sculpture as a likely source of inspiration. These subtle differences are almost negligible, as the sculpture rendered in this work, as well as those of Douglas’s earlier canvases, are cast as impetuses for ritualistic worship and compel the surrounding figures to either dance, play music, or do both.

Works from the Fang groups of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon have a long history of inspiring modern artists, as it was a Fang mask that was shared among (and heavily inspired) the Parisian avant-garde artists Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in 1907; we know that Derain turned to Fang sculptures in addition to masks. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, now a key work in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is one such example [see Fig. 1]. These artists typically stripped the sociocultural meanings from the works they depicted and drew influence from; the way in which Douglas incorporates this figure remains consistent with these modernist primitivist practices. Rather than providing signifiers that specify the type of ceremony for which this sculpture would have been used, Haitian Mural implies that it is just another “fetish” object that compels those around it to play music and dance. In reality, this sculpture (known to the Fang as eyima bieri singularly, beyima bieri plurally) would have been used to protect ancestral skulls and bones as
reliquary guardians. These remains were kept in cylindrical barrels made of bark (nsuk) with the figures attached via back post or projection to complete the reliquary, which would then be placed in the corner of the ancestral cult’s leader’s home.\textsuperscript{76} That Douglas would position this sculpture in the corner before a drummer is a continuation of the modernist fantasy of African sculpture as impetuses for musical celebration. It is yet another imaginary projection devoid of socio-cultural specificity.

Further, and perhaps most significantly, this sculpture is not Haitian. This is not an anomaly in Douglas’s work, however: in keeping with Douglas’s modernist primitivist approaches, \textit{Haitian Mural} reduces Haiti and its people to the cultural projections the West has placed on it as a third-world country born of the African diaspora. The “African setting” of the first panel of the \textit{Aspects of Negro Life} mural series, although geographically ambiguous and problematically generic, was still intended to represent Africa and was rendered with well-known, commonly used signifiers. Despite his intention to specifically represent Haiti, \textit{Haitian Mural} deviates very little from the stylized “African setting” Douglas employed a few years earlier. Nothing immediately announces itself as geographically specific to Haiti at all, save for the tropical fern and palm trees – but even these are recycled from earlier panels and remain generic, ambiguous signifiers of Africa. Nothing declares itself as contemporary to 1942. Although Douglas had just visited the island country, he denies its modernity and prevents its ability to evolve or change, casting Haiti as anterior and primitivizing its culture and people in the process.

In his Rosenwald Fellowship application, Douglas wrote of his desire to “record on canvas…people of all classes with an eye to revealing racial, social and economic patterns; and pictures of scenes and landmarks, old and new.” Very little about the Haitian Mural, however, identifies with these prerogatives. The body of work he produced and subsequently exhibited in Haiti reveals a painter who was more focused on “character types” rather than on historically or politically significant moments (the Haitian Revolution of 1804, the lasting American-owned economic stronghold that lasted until 1945, etc.), which should be expected of an artist focused on prioritizing Black history and the struggle for equality. Instead, Douglas chose to depict the Caribbean nation through soft watercolors of contemplative sitters and island scenes. Douglas exhibited work from his trip twice in Haiti (once at the Cercle Port au Princien in Port-au-Prince; another time at, in his own words, in an “informal exhibition”) and once in New York City at the ACA Gallery upon his return in April 1939. Although many of the works he exhibited are no longer available for public view, the exhibition pamphlet from the ACA Gallery reveals the titles (and, presumably, the subjects) of many works: Harbor Port au Prince, Champs de Mars, Courtyard, Ex-slave, Going to Market, Haitian Cathedral Scene, Kenskoff, Mango Tree, Mountains in Haiti, Shadowed Courtyard, The Street Urchin [See Fig. 27], and Waterfront Park. These watercolors are even more formulaic and filtered than Douglas’s modernist murals. Another differentiating factor is that they were painted on site en plein air (unlike Haitian Mural, which was done post-visit).


78 Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti,” 92.
That *Haitian Mural* should act as a return to his “signature style” of geometrically abstracted silhouettes and afrotropic elements might reveal that Douglas was still navigating and negotiating the different ways in which one could depict Black subjects in an elevating way. Art historian Krista Thompson explains that Douglas fell in line with other contemporary Black artists, such as William E. Scott (1884–1964), a Black artist known for his Haitian scenes and whose goals generally aligned with Douglas in his attempt to depict Blacks in a more uplifting way: “More generally, Douglas’s representational focus on the activities of Haiti’s peasant class, market women, mountains, harbor, and waterfront echoes [William E.] Scott’s visual idealization of the island. The [ACA] catalogue description of his ‘scenes and portraits of Negro types’ also seems in keeping with Scott’s artistic project.”79 *Haitian Mural* does not prioritize character types in the same way as his watercolors do: Douglas chooses to incorporate the modernist primitivist stylizations from earlier canvases in order to deviate from these depictions and locate the Caribbean nation back to its “African origin.”

The framing devices Douglas employs in the mural is another way in which he expresses this “African origin.” The primitive jungle setting cloaks Haiti in the same Westernized perceptions of fecundity, savagery and incivility often associated with Africa; the visual synonymity of the two representations results in Haiti being pushed backward along the Western-constructed linear timeline of “progression,” and his privileging of the African source within the mural further reinforces this. He enforces the very same denial of coevalness as in the *Aspects of Negro Life* series, but does even more in the process: the Caribbean nation is forced to hide

79 Id.
behind its perceived continental “source,” and is unable to occupy the same time or space as modern Western viewers.

The three women walking across the terrain read as more mature versions of the three women who flank the large female figure in *Sahdji*. Although they are moving forward by placing one foot in front of the other, their tonalities suggest an incontrovertible two-dimensionality that renders them static. Their bodies share the same hues as their baskets, which are the same colors as their fruit; they are objectified, free of agency, and lack freedom of movement. The absence of automobiles, industry, or any other indicators of modernity further strip this representation of Haiti of its ability to be seen as equal to a twentieth-century Euro-American perspective.

Douglas continued this denial of coevalness even more clearly just a few years following *Haitian Mural*. *Untitled (African Ritual)*, in many ways, is the most explicit rendering of the historical and formal conflations between African sculpture and European modernism informing all of Douglas’s work. The late nineteenth / early twentieth-century Senufo-influenced sculpture (which might have been loosely based on a sculpture in the Barnes) [Figs. 28, 29 and 30], Venice’s Hellenistic *Horses of St. Mark* [Fig. 31], and Egyptian *Great Sphinx* and *Pyramids of Giza* [Fig. 32] are brought together in the same universe through Douglas’s collage-like layering. The sculpture standing front and center reads as a common source, explicitly stating that this piece of African art is not only as great as the artistic triumphs that came before it but also belongs in the same artistic family. The works overlap, are historically sequential, and have similar formal attributes (the long profile of the sculpture is similar to the long profile of the

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80 The horses could also be a quotation from the Parthenon frieze depicting the Panathenaic Procession.
rearing horse, which shares a headpiece and similar facial structure to the *Sphinx* behind it). The concentric circles that emanate from the bottom of the sculpture act as a source of energy, collecting the formal lessons learned from its ancestors and encouraging the viewer to look throughout art history to learn about what the sculpture has descended from.

*Untitled (African Ritual)* is, from a technical standpoint, drastically different from the other works discussed thus far, and is different from most of the earlier works within Douglas’s *oeuvre*. This work is among the first in a series of drawings and sketches rendered in conté crayon, and marks a noticeable technical shift. No longer does Douglas emphasize two-dimensionality and render his figures as silhouettes: his figures are now rendered with much more detail and his references to art historical figures are seamlessly woven together for a dynamic, harmonious composition. Narratively speaking, *Untitled (African Ritual)* reinforces many of the same afrotropes from canvases past, reiterating the same linear historicization of Black bodies that runs alongside its European conception of “progress.” The densely layered, explicit references to the artistic achievements of the Old Kingdom of Egypt and Hellenistic Greece are all in visual conversation with one another. This work is possibly the most explicit statement on how Douglas viewed Africa in relation to the West, as it deliberately aligns African art with Western art in an attempt to argue that it should be seen as equal to Western artistic traditions through their projected common source.

The variant of the Senufo sculpture proudly stands front and center. Its head is turned to the left, its coiffure is spherical, and its stand has reappeared (but has since flattened). Given its position within the composition, it reads as a more recent cousin of ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic artistic greatness. Just as the head of only one of four horses aligns with that of the
Great Sphinx as harmonious echoes, the Senufo sculpture confronts the male figure to the left as if they were meant to mirror each other. This similarity in pose and hue reads in either one of two ways for Douglas’s viewers: it humanizes the sculpture, thereby demonstrating a likeness to its human counterpart/creator; or, it objectifies the human, as the male figure might read too similar to its object counterpart to be perceived as human any longer. Douglas might have intended for this sequence of relationships to come together through the central sculptural figure, transforming it into a nexus between the art historical greatness that came before it and the gaze of the African male who may have created it.

The emphatic two-dimensionality of both the work of art itself and the Senufo sculpture depicted within it seems to entirely miss the point of the complex three-dimensionality for which African sculpture tends to be celebrated. This flatness might be due to the conté crayon Douglas chose to utilize, as its light application flattens the composition in the same way his tempera paint does in earlier canvases. As is typical of his approach, Douglas uses the same hue for each ring of the concentric circles. One key difference, however, is that his color choice is slightly more realistic. He uses dark brown skin tones to indicate his human figures and makes a generous use of dark green in the surrounding foliage.

*Untitled (African Ritual)*, contrary to its parenthetical subtitle, does not depict a ritual. Further, it neither conveys a specific historical allegory nor depicts a fictionalized scene subject to the voyeuristic gaze. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate the shared heritage of Western works and African works. Whether it is successful in this endeavor is up for debate. The Senufo sculpture’s position as a nexus between the great cultures of past and present means that it stands as the most recent example of a choice work of art from Africa, according to the standards of the
Western artist who rendered it. If Douglas chose this work as representative of an entire
continent’s artistic capabilities, it follows that he participated in the dialogue the Barnes
Foundation (namely, its founder Dr. Barnes) put forth in stating that their collection of African
works were the choicest examples available. Douglas perpetuates the same standards of beauty
(and the same characteristics needed to qualify as “art”) established by early twentieth century
Euro-American collectors in depicting a work that closely resembles those which grace the
Foundation’s display cases.

The arrangement of African sculpture as directly descendant of ancient Egyptian art (and
thus directly related to Hellenistic art and the Western tradition) is all too familiar in discussions
of African art. In Matisse’s Sculpture: The Pinup and the Primitive, Ellen McBreen describes the
early twentieth century concept of a souche unique (common origin) – the idea that African art
was connected to Western classicism through its clear common denominator, Egypt:

*L’art negre* provided a ‘missing link’ to an alternative evolutionary theory of art history, a
progression traditionally stated as: Egyptian begat Archaic Greek begat High Classicism.
It conjured another path that was not necessarily classicism’s opposite, but which
preserved classicism’s principles, imaginatively projected back to its purest beginnings.
This imaginative leap depended in large part on cultural attitudes toward the contested
relationship between ancient Egypt and Africa. That the arts of Africa shared direct
kinship with those of ancient Egypt was a commonplace assertion in the literature of the
period, although how that kinship happened exactly was a matter for debate.⁸¹

Souche unique was proposed by French collector André Level and decorative arts specialist
Henri Clouzot, who first argued for it in their 1919 catalogue essay, *Première Exposition d’Art
Nègre et d’art Océanien*. They wrote, “…the surprising conclusion […] is undoubtedly that

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there is no such thing as a truly savage art, but that we find ourselves in the presence of an inheritance, descended from ancient civilizations, branches from a common origin [souche unique] from which ours evolves as well.”

Douglas unabashedly engages in this same art historical “evolutionary theory” and takes that “imaginative leap” on behalf of his viewers, confident that Egypt was a source not only for African sculpture and ancient Greece, but for contemporary Black artistic greatness. Douglas’s direct reference to both Egypt and Hellenistic Greece in Untitled serves as an illustration of the ideological assertion that became a foundational bedrock for modernists.

It should be noted that the exhibition for which Level and Clouzot wrote, 

Première Exposition d’Art Nègre et d’art Océanien

at Galerie Devambez, was organized by Dr. Barnes’s collector and resident “expert” on African art, Paul Guillaume. As McBreen mentions, the exhibition was “groundbreaking in terms of size (147 pieces), visibility, and its ideological attempts to forge a doctrine of universalism.”

That this was reiterated in the U.S. and expanded upon to include modern art in the Barnes is almost to be expected, as making such claims to a common origin based on formal “affinities” could not be complete without the newest wave of works influenced by Africa. Untitled (African Ritual) can be read as an explicit revisiting of Level and Clouzot’s earlier argument for a common origin.

Because of Douglas’s use of concentric circles and the resulting flattening of spatial distance, Untitled (African Ritual) serves as an illustration of the process of naturalizing spatialized Time, as discussed by Fabian:


83 McBreen, 86.
It is not the dispersal of human cultures in space that leads anthropology to ‘temporalize’ (something that is maintained in the image of the ‘philosophical traveler’ whose roaming in space leads to the discovery of ‘ages’); it is naturalized-spatialized Time which gives meaning (in fact a variety of specific meanings) to the distribution of humanity in space.\textsuperscript{84}

To enforce the idea that African art came from a long tradition of Western greatness, it must necessarily occupy the same space (and, for the viewer, the same time). Douglas collapses the idea that two cultures cannot occupy the same time by forcing them to do so in his work. By putting these works in relation to each other in historically sequential order, Douglas demonstrates the differences among them in order of diminishing size, and quickly dissolves the differences by virtue of their similarities in shape and profile.

This process of deconstructing temporal relationships can be seen through Fabian’s lens of temporal construction (and the ways in which objects are denied shared temporalities):

We must necessarily express whatever knowledge we have of an object in terms of temporal categorization. This is emphatically not only the case when we give ‘historical’ accounts; Time is involved in any possible relationship between anthropological discourse and its referents. The referent shared by various subdisciplines of anthropology is strictly speaking not an object, or a class of objects, but a relationship (I would prefer \textit{contradiction}). In any \textit{given} piece of anthropological writing the referral usually is a particular aspect of the relationship between elements or aspects of a culture or society; but all particular ethnography is ultimately about general relationships between cultures and societies [parenthetical insertions Fabian’s].\textsuperscript{85}

In any given piece of anthropological writing, there is no discussing a subject or object without establishing them in terms of its temporal relationship to the viewer or writer. This same


\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 28.
discourse is reinforced in Douglas’s artistic interpretation of Africa and Haiti as well as in Barnes’s installations of African sculpture and European modernist works, visually reinforcing the temporal relationships they share with and perceive of their “African Other.” The Barnes Foundation’s installations were thus not only a direct reinforcement of the idea of *souche unique*, but were also a source from which Douglas could begin to deconstruct the temporal boundaries enforced by the prevalent surrounding discourse regarding African art and European modernism.

The artistic influence of ancient Egypt can also be seen in Douglas’s flattening of the Senufo sculpture and in the profile of the male figure standing to the left. They read much more like an Egyptian relief sculpture rather than as exact representations. In an interview with Leslie Collins in 1971, Douglas discusses this approach when asked if he created a “signature graphic phasing of the black man”:

Yes. There’s a certain artistic pattern that I follow…I used the Egyptian form, that is to say, the head was in perspective in a profile flat view, the body, shoulders down to the waist turned half way, the legs were done also from the side and the feet were also done in a broad perspective…The only thing that I did that was not specifically taken from the Egyptians was an eye … so you saw it in three dimensions. I avoided the three dimension and that’s another thing that made it sort of unique artistically.\(^8^6\)

Using the “Egyptian form” demonstrates that Douglas not only wanted to depict the influence of Egypt, but wanted to incorporate it into his working process and marry the three dimensional plasticity celebrated in modernism. Although the figures in this work are flattened, Douglas employs a greater sense of spatial complexity: the figures to the right recede into the background and file out diagonally, and the figures to the left possess differing perspectival views. Both

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Haitian Mural and Untitled (African Ritual), while different in both content and medium, exhibit a sustained engagement with European modernism and African art, and demonstrate Douglas’s imaginative endeavor to relate those traditions to one another. Ultimately, these later works reinforce the notion that Douglas’s continued interest in revisiting and re-illustrating African diasporic communities’ histories were inextricably linked to his manipulation of primitivist approaches and themes.
When I first began this project, I held a number of assumptions that have since been redirected throughout the course of my research. First of these was the expectation of a marked visual distinction between Douglas’s work and those of European modernists, especially given how the historical and current literature discusses Douglas, as an artist in tune with his African “ancestral legacy,” to use the words of Alain Locke. The closer I analyzed Douglas’s works, however, the more I realized that Douglas was no more knowledgeable about African art than the white European modernists from whom he learned. His appropriations from African sculpture were equally shaped by contemporary racial discourse. I also did not anticipate the celebratory—and often uncritical—nature of Douglas scholarship. What does this ultimately mean for how viewers today receive Douglas’s artwork? This thesis aimed to avoid simply championing Douglas’s many cultural achievements. Instead, it aimed to critically engage his appropriations from African art to examine how these appropriations allowed Douglas to reclaim a visual aesthetic and narrative that undoes the limitations placed on the Black bodies he represented.

There were several research dilemmas. I was especially interested in examining how Douglas’ time at the Barnes shaped his understanding of African sculpture and its relationship to European modernism. However, there is no documentation of the set curriculum available from Douglas’s time at the Barnes, so there is no definite answer as to what specific paintings were incorporated into the lessons Douglas took. This lack of particular information, as well as the fact that these classes were object-based lessons in formal analysis at its core, pushed me to think
more about the ideological implications of Barnes’s installations and how they were made apparent in Douglas’s work.

There are a number of potential paths for future research that could (and hopefully will) stem from this thesis. One path in particular is analyzing Douglas’s synthesis of parallel modernisms. The influence of European modernism was consistently explored throughout this project, but the influences of New York modernism – with which Douglas would have been familiar with – have been largely excluded. Another potential path is the influence of Art Deco via Douglas’s use of Black Deco – Art Deco’s foundation as a twentieth-century visitation of the decorative motifs within ancient Egyptian art and Classical antiquity can be connected in a much, much stronger way.

This thesis also, unfortunately, largely excludes the influences of other Harlem Renaissance artists like Gwendolyn Bennett, Marsden Hartley, Romare Bearden, Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley, and Augusta Savage (to name but a few). The Harlem Renaissance encompassed multiple sets of ideologies (not all of which were in agreement), and Douglas should not be seen as its sole artistic representative. Douglas understood and attempted to demonstrate the fluidity of human experience while working within and against the limitations of racial discourse; this is perhaps the best way to mark and study his individuality, but we cannot view him as solitary among the Harlem Renaissance’s circle of artists, writers, and musicians. There is also the need to contextualize his work within Garveyism (the brand of Pan-Africanism attributed to Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) which encouraged the return of diasporic peoples to their ancestral locations) as well as the visualizations of Africa by his literary, musical, and artistic contemporaries. A discussion of the concept’s connection to Afrofuturism is also in
order, as this movement also deals directly with temporalities and aesthetic signifiers of diaspora. Such explorations might require a separate project as they are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this project.

Another idea that demands to be revisited in the future is the concept of the “afrotrope.” This concept was a vulnerable one, as it was made known to me relatively late in the process of writing this thesis (around early March, with the release of the 2016 CAA Call for Papers). There were very few references to other works or figures that could be considered “afrotropic,” and I have not yet been able to engage with other art historical discussions of the concept, as it is a relatively new one. It is my belief that this term signifies a “reclaiming” of images that still effectively function as markers of colonialism, the process of Othering, and the stripping down of another’s autonomy. To reiterate a crucial point: Aaron Douglas never visited Africa and his appropriation of certain visual signifiers of Africa were deeply fantasy-driven. That the “fetish” figure (one of the recognized afrotropes, under Copeland and Thompson’s current working definition) has no one specific model is significant.

Likewise, the term “afrotrope” is not code for “visual signifier of Africa” – the banjo, basket of cotton, Emancipation Proclamation, and silhouette of the Statue of Liberty (all of which are depicted and strategically used in *Aspects of Negro Life*), are all considered afrotropes. These figures replace the silhouette statue from the first panel of the mural and transform into fetish figures themselves as the panels’ narrative progresses. This brings to light a larger conceptual issue: what role does fetishism play within this new discourse? Douglas was motivated by ethnographic fetishism, as he still negotiated traditions that were, to him,
fundamentally “Other.” Was he motivated by the same fear to fix the differences made visible to him between himself and the African Other he depicted?

There are many questions that would provide fruitful paths for future research, especially with regard to afrotropes. Some of these questions include: Where does, in Douglas’s work, modernist primitivism no longer become just that, and start becoming an afrotrope? When does one model of discussing the appropriation of African works become more appropriate than the other? Is it just a matter of political intention of the artist? Are we more able to attribute to an African American artist this “afrotropic” idea more than a Euro-American artist, and do we excuse these artists in the name of political emancipation? What do we wish to see in certain artists’ works, especially when factoring in their racial identity? It is my hope that this project – and the pertinent questions that have subsequently resulted from it – have contributed to further exploring the complicated discourse of visualizing Africa. There is a great deal to continue discussing, including Douglas’s work, the works of his fellow Harlem Renaissance artists, the works of contemporary Black artists inheriting their powerful legacies (and who also participate in and operate within the larger discourse of racial identity), and the concept of the “afrotrope.” Douglas’s works have allowed for this discourse to already begin, and it is my hope that the art history community will continue this relevant conversation.
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Fig. 4 — Winold Reiss. *Harlem at Night*. 1924. Ink on paper. 50.8 x 38.1 cm. Collection of Renate Reiss.
The Art of the Ancestors

From one of the best extant collections of African art, that of the Barnes Foundation of Merion, Pennsylvania, come these exemplars of the art of the ancestors. Presenting African wood and bronze sculpture is now universally recognized as "a notable instance of plastic representation." Long after it was known as ethnological material, it was artistically "discovered" and has exerted an important influence upon modernist art, both in France and Germany. Attuned influences are to be found in the work of Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Archipenko, Lipchitz, Lempicka, and others, and in Paris centering around Paul Guillaume, one of its pioneer exponents, a coterie profoundly influenced by the aesthetic of this art has developed.

Masterful over its material, in a powerful simplicity of conception, design and effect, it is evidence of an aesthetic endowment of the highest order. The Negro in his American environment has turned predominaently to the arts of music, the dance, and poetry; in emphasis quite different from that of African culture. But beyond this is evidence of a fundamental artistic bent and versatility, there comes from the Negro" a new interpretation of the artistic development of the African Negro the influence that it has already had upon modern European artists. It may very well be taken as the basis for a characteristic school of expression in the plastic and pictorial arts, and give to us again a renewed mastery of them, a mine of fresh motifs, and a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression. Surely this art, once known and appreciated, can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants than upon those who inherit by tradition only. And at the very least, even for those not especially interested in art, it should definitely establish the enlightening fact that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without an inheritance.

A. L.
Fig. 6 — Aaron Douglas. *Congo*. 1928. Gouache and pencil on paper board. 36.5 x 24.1 cm. North Carolina Museum of Art. Raleigh, North Carolina.
Fig. 7 — Ndengese peoples. *Seated Male Figure*. 19th–20th century. Wood, metal staple. 21 3/4 x 7 7/8 x 6’ (55.2 x 20 x 15.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, New York.

This is not a work that Douglas is confirmed to have seen, but it serves as an example of the type of sculpture widely produced by the Ndengese peoples.
Fig. 8 — Winold Reiss. *July*. 1919. 8” x 8”. Collection of the Winold Reiss Partnership. New York, NY.
Fig. 9 — Paul Gauguin. *The Loss of Virginity*. 1890-91. Oil on canvas. 90 x 130 cm. Chrysler Museum of Art. Norfolk, Virginia.
Fig. 11 — Room 22, South Wall. The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 12 — Display case of African sculptures and masks in Room 22, South Wall. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 13 — Room 22, Three-quarter turn, right side. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 14 — Charles Demuth. *In Vaudeville: Acrobatic Male Dancer with Top Hat*. 1920.
Watercolor, graphite, and charcoal on wove paper. 13 x 8 in. (33 x 20.3 cm). The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 15 — Amadeo Modigliani. *Portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne*. 1918. Oil on canvas. 29 1/4 x 25 1/2 in. (99.7 x 64.8 cm). The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 16 — Aaron Douglas. *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* (Panel 2 of the *Aspects of Negro Life* series). 1934. Oil on canvas. 5 x 11 ft. (152.4 x 353.1 cm). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.
Fig. 17 — Aaron Douglas. *An Idyll of the Deep South* (Panel 3 of the *Aspects of Negro Life* series). 1934. Oil on canvas. 5 x 11 ft. (152.4 x 353.1 cm). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.
Fig. 18 — Aaron Douglas. *Song of the Towers* (Panel 4 of the *Aspects of Negro Life* series). 1934. Oil on canvas. 5 x 11 ft. (152.4 x 353.1 cm). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.
Fig. 19 — Gjon Mili. *Professional dancers Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker dancing the Lindy Hop.*
Fig. 20 — Aaron Douglas. *(Unknown title)* Cover for Nathan Irvin Huggins’s *The Harlem Renaissance.* Ca. 1925. Ink on paper. Collection unknown.
Fig. 21 — Punu peoples. *Face Mask (Mukudj).* Late 19th–early 20th century. Gabon. Wood, pigment. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 22 — Aaron Douglas. *Haitian Mural*. 1942. Oil on canvas. 8 x 12 feet. Home of Dr. W.W. and Grace Goens, Wilmington, DE.
Fig. 23 — *Untitled (African Ritual).* 1948. Conté crayon on paper. 11 3/4 x 9 1/2 in. (29.8 x 24.1 cm). P. Bruce Marine and Donald E. Hardy Collection.
Fig. 24 — Aaron Douglas. *Study for Haitian Mural*. Oil on canvas. 13 1/2 x 14 1/2 in. (34.3 x 36.8 cm). Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland. Detroit, Michigan.
Fig. 25 — Comparison of drumming figure in *Haitian Mural* (pictured left) and *The Negro in an African Setting* (pictured right).
Fig. 26 — Fang peoples. Female Figure. 19th–20th century. Equatorial Guinea or Gabon. Wood. The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Dear Friend:

Please join us at a reception on Sunday, April Second, at Four o’clock, on the occasion of the opening of Mr. Aaron Douglas’ exhibition of Haitian paintings.

The honor guest, who is now at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, will be present at the Gallery at this time to discuss with us his exciting paintings and relate several of his interesting experiences while in Haiti.

An admission fee of fifty cents will be charged, which will be used for the benefit of the Spanish Refugee Relief work of the Negro Peoples Committee of the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.

Cordially yours,

Alma Hazlitt
E. Dennis Campbell
William Gropper
Curtis Cullen

Aaron Douglas
EXHIBITION OF HAITIAN PAINTINGS
April Second to April Fifteenth
Nineteen Hundred Thirty-Nine

ACA GALLERY
52 West Eighth Street
New York City


This is an example of one of the handful of watercolors Douglas produced during his time in Haiti.
Fig. 28 – Senufo peoples.  *Seated Female Figure*.  Late 19th–early 20th century.  Côte d’Ivoire. 43.8 x 14.3 x 15.6 cm.  The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
Fig. 29 — Barnes Foundation, Room 21 Case (West Wall), featuring *Female Figure* on the bottom shelf, fourth from left.
Fig. 30 — Barnes Foundation, Room 21, West Wall (without middle case).
Fig. 31 — Undetermined Artist. *Horses of Saint Mark*. 4th century BC. Copper. St. Mark’s Basilica. Venice, Italy.
Fig. 32 — *The Great Sphinx and The Pyramid of Khafre*, Ca. 2558–2532 BC. Limestone. Giza, Egypt.