GATHER OUT OF STAR-DUST
The Harlem Renaissance & The Beinecke Library

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THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A CHRONOLOGY

A timeline of African American culture from 1910-1940, while far from comprehensive, offers a sense of the abundance, variety, and texture of documentation for this period available in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection. The chronological arrangement gives rise to interesting juxtapositions, such as the appearance in the same year—1917—of Ridgley Torrence’s “Negro plays” on Broadway and the N.A.A.C.P.’s Negro Silent Protest Parade, or the emergence of Jean Toomer with Cane in the same year—1923—as the Charleston. Well-known events are placed in relation to lesser-known ones: ten days after appearing as an usher at Countée Cullen’s wedding to Yolande Du Bois, Langston Hughes escorted Gwendolyn Bennett to prom at Lincoln University.

Scholars have debated the beginning and ending events or dates of the Harlem Renaissance, though most agree that momentum for African American culture began sometime in the 1910s or early 20s, and had evolved into something quite different by 1939. This timeline suggests a variety of beginnings and endings, as well as a middle with numerous identifiable events of momentum: the 1924 Civic Club Dinner hosted by Charles S. Johnson, the publication of a special Negro issue of Survey Graphic in 1925, the rise of Josephine Baker that same year, and the publication of The Weary Blues in 1926. By the time Langston Hughes published his first memoir, The Big Sea, in 1940, he could make a decidedly retrospective assessment of what was by then called “the Negro Renaissance.”

1. The Crisis. Volume 1, Number 3.
7. Window card for national tour of The Emperor Jones, 1921.
22. Survey Graphic, March 1925.
THE MAKING OF A RENAISSANCE

Scholars have debated the conditions for the explosion of African American cultural production in the 1920s and 30s, with some crediting changes in American intellectual life at the turn of the century and others pointing to the consolidation of African American political power with the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909 and the National Urban League in 1910. Most historians agree that the tremendous demographic shift known as the Great Migration, in which African Americans began moving from the rural South to northern urban centers in droves beginning in the 1910s, concentrating in enclaves in Harlem, New York, U Street in Washington, D.C., and Bronzeville in Chicago, made the cultural collaborations of the Renaissance possible.

The Harlem Renaissance was also made by the individuals involved, whose partnerships, sponsorships, and friendships were the engine of cultural production. Aesthetic debates led to manifestoes from many corners about the purpose, style, and proper subject matter of African American art. Meanwhile, a culture of prizes, publishers newly amenable to black writing, and patrons eager to support budding artists made for previously unseen economic support for young artists.

The Push for Art


What is Negro Art?

How shall he be portrayed?

Nigger Heaven and Home to Harlem

Publishers, Patrons, and Prizes

Collaborations
49. Photograph of Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston beside Lifting the Veil, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1927. Langston Hughes Papers.
**Friendships**

51. Photograph of Langston Hughes standing on a pier, ca. 1925. Langston Hughes Papers.
52. Photograph of Claude McKay in Petrograd, 1923. Claude McKay Collection.

**Portraits by James Van Der Zee**

1. James Van Der Zee. [Self-portrait wearing a bathing suit], 1949.
   III. The Van Der Zee Men (James, brother Walter, father John, and brother Charles), Lenox, Massachusetts, 1908.
   IV. Kate and Rachel Van Der Zee, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1909.
   V. Miss Suzie Porter, Harlem 1915.
   VI. Nude, Harlem 1923.
   VII. Marcus Garvey and Garvey Militia, Harlem, 1924.
   VIII. Garveyite Family, Harlem, 1924.
   IX. Dancer, Harlem, 1925.
   X. Portrait of an Actor, Harlem, 1929.
   XI. Swimming Team, Harlem, 1925.
   XII. Wedding Day, Harlem, 1926.
   XIII. Black Jews, Harlem, 1929.
   XIV. Atlantic City, 1930.
   XVI. Couple. Harlem, 1932.
   XVII. The Heiress, Harlem, 1938.
   XVIII. Daddy Grace, Harlem, 1938.

**Geographies of Harlem**


**VISUAL ARTS**

Just as in literature, music, theater, and dance, the Harlem Renaissance saw expanded interest in visual art by African Americans: dealers, patrons, curators, and schools of art were newly invested in promoting and collecting painting, sculpture, drawings, and prints by artists largely based in New York, Chicago, and Paris. In 1919, the Knoedler Gallery in New York hosted an exhibit of the paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner, then based in Paris. In 1921, the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library exhibited painting and sculpture by Tanner, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, William Edward Scott, and Laura Wheeler Waring. Perhaps the greatest single impact on the fortunes of African American artists came from the Harmon Foundation, founded in 1922, which in 1926 began awarding prizes for visual arts as well as literature; in 1928 it began hosting a juried exhibition, bringing artists like Palmer Hayden, Hale Woodruff, Sargent Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Malvin Gray Johnson, and Archibald Motley to widespread attention.

African American artists in this period drew from a wide range of subjects, but most celebrated African American culture and the heritage of the African Diaspora, often creating portraits of notable historical figures. The arts also drew heavily on African themes: when Aaron Douglas arrived in New York from Topeka, Kansas, to study with Bavarian artist Winold Reiss, Reiss instructed him to visit the African masks at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Douglas would go on to blend African statuary with modernist abstraction. Douglas's ubiquitous magazine and book illustrations and murals would create the visual vocabulary most closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

FROM BLUES TO “THE EMPEROR JONES:” AFRICAN AMERICAN PERFORMING ARTS

The Harlem Renaissance marked an explosion of African American performing arts into mainstream American culture. From blues and jazz music to dances like the Charleston and the Lindy Hop, from musical theater to serious drama, commenters noted that suddenly African American performers seemed to be everywhere one looked. Langston Hughes would later write disdainfully of the persistence of blackface performance – Ethel Barrymore appeared on Broadway as the title character in *Scarlet Sister Mary* in 1930. But Broadway stages were also newly open to African American performers, with plays like *Porgy* (1927) and *Run Little Chillun* (1930) employing enormous casts.

African American participation in the performing arts was perhaps even more fraught with racialized power dynamics than the publishing or art worlds, but performers like Bill Robinson, Josephine Baker, and Paul Robeson were still often able to dictate the terms of their engagements, refusing to perform for segregated audiences. From the chorus line that was reinvented by Shuffle Along to the influence of blues and jazz on American popular music, African American performance of the Harlem Renaissance period had perhaps the most lasting impact.


7. Mamie Smith, “Goin Crazy with the Blues” (Victor 20210), 1926.


GATHER OUT OF STAR-DUST: COLLECTING A RENAISSANCE FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

From the anthologies gathered by James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke, to the folkways captured by Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, and W. C. Handy, to the legendary library collections founded by Jesse Moorland, Arthur Schomburg, and Carl Van Vechten, the Harlem Renaissance was characterized by the act of collecting. African American cultural production in the aggregate would, according to Johnson, show the world that African Americans were not intellectually inferior. The collected work of writers of this period impressed onlookers enough to name the movement a “Renaissance.”
The Harlem Renaissance remains one of the most studied periods in American history; this tremendous output of scholarship has been enabled in no small part because Renaissance contemporaries championed archiving African American history, from the advocacy of Carter G. Woodson to the pioneering librarianship of Dorothy Porter Wesley.

2. ----. Book of American Negro Poetry, revised edition
30-35. Selected Harlem studies, 1972-2011.

MORE STAR-DUST: SONG AND DANCE FROM THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Except where noted, all sound recordings from the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of 78rpm records donated by Carl Van Vechten, in the Historical Sound Recordings Collection of the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library.

1. Ethel Waters, “Oh Daddy” (1921)
2. Marian Anderson, “Go Down, Moses” (1924)
3. Alberta Hunter with Perry Bradford’s Mean Four, “Take That Thing Away” (1925)
4. Ethel Waters, “Shake That Thing” (1925)
5. Butterbeans and Susie with Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, “He Likes It Slow” (1926)
6. Mamie Smith, “Goin’ Crazy with the Blues” (1926)
7. Rent Party Blues Dance (c. 1920s,) From Early Hot Jazz, Song and Dance From Rare Original Film Masters 1925-33. Yazoo, 2000
11. Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1927)
12. Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra, “I’m Coming Virginia” (1927)

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15. Josephine Baker, “Then I’ll Be Happy” (1927)
17. Gladys Bentley, “Ground Hog Blues” (1928)
18. Gladys Bentley, “Worried Blues” (1928)
19. Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, “Ain’t Misbehavin’” (1929)
20. Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, “St. Louis Blues” (1929)
21. Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, “(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue” (1929)
22. Butterbeans and Susie, “Elevator Papa, Switchboard Mama” (1930)
23. Hall Johnson Negro Choir, “Ezekiel Saw De Wheel” (1930)
24. Hall Johnson Negro Choir, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (1930)
25. Jimmy Johnson Orchestra, “Go Harlem” (1931)
26. Bill Robinson, “Keep a Song in Your Soul” (1931)
27. Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, “Minnie the Moocher” (1932)
28. Bill Robinson, Step Dance from the film Harlem Is Heaven (1932)
29. Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, “Stormy Weather” (1933)
31. Ivie Anderson and Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, from the film A Day at the Races (1937)
32. Lindy Hop, from the film A Day at the Races (1937)
33. Shorty George and Big Bea, from the film Ask Uncle Sol (1937)
34. Cab Calloway and His Orchestra & the Nicholas Brothers, from the film Stormy Weather (1943)
35. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, “ Shuffle Along Medley” (1969), in Eighty-Six Years of Eubie Blake

**PORTRAITS BY CARL VAN VECHTEN**

1. Marian Anderson, January 14, 1940
2. Josephine Baker, October 20, 1949
3. Albert Barnes, October 20, 1937
4. Richmond Barthé, September 23, 1939
5. Gladys Bentley, February 27, 1932
6. Arna Bontemps, August 13, 1939
7. William Stanley Braithwaite, March 27, 1947
8. John W. Bubbles, December 27, 1935
9. Cab Calloway, January 12, 1933
10. Miguel Covarrubias, October 30, 1932
11. Countée Cullen, June 20, 1941
13. Aaron Douglas, April 10, 1933
15. Max Eastman, October 31, 1934
16. George Gershwin, March 28, 1933
17. Taylor Gordon, March 18, 1933
18. W. C. Handy, May 24, 1932
19. Georgette Harvey, May 23, 1932
20. Roland Hayes, January 29, 1954
21. Nora Holt, October 26, 1934
22. Langston Hughes, March 8, 1939
23. Zora Neale Hurston, April 3, 1935
24. Harold Jackman, September 11, 1932
25. James Weldon Johnson, July 15, 1936
27. Charles S. Johnson, April 25, 1947
28. J. Rosamond Johnson, April 22, 1933
29. Hall Johnson, May 14, 1947
31. Blanche Knopf, April 4, 1932
32. Nella Larsen, August 17, 1932
33. Alain Locke, July 23, 1941
34. Rouben Mamoulian, November 7, 1935
35. Fania Marinoff, April 18, 1932
36. Rose McClendon, November 19, 1935
37. Claude McKay, July 25, 1941
38. Richard Bruce Nugent, February 16, 1936
39. Eugene O’Neill, September 5, 1933
40. Paul Robeson, January 10, 1936
41. Bill Robinson, January 25, 1933
42. Augusta Savage, July 9, 1938
43. George S. Schuyler, July 2, 1941
44. Noble Sissle, November, 20, 1951
45. Bessie Smith, February 3, 1936
46. Arthur Spingarn, January 26, 1940
47. William Grant Still, March 12, 1949
48. Carl Van Vechten, April 3, 1934
49. Ethel Waters, June 8, 1932
50. Elisabeth Welch, January 19, 1933
51. Walter White, July 12, 1938

**CARICATURE ASSASSINATION: MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS MURDERS NEW YORK**

Nancy Kuhl, Curator of Poetry, Yale Collection of American Literature

Artist Miguel Covarrubias was not yet 20 years old when he arrived in New York City from his native Mexico in 1923. He was soon introduced to popular and well-connected writer and cultural critic Carl Van Vechten, who was immediately taken by the young artist’s gift for portraiture—he’d later describe
Covarrubias’s talent as a kind of clairvoyance. With the help of this mentor, Miguel Covarrubias was soon sketching the most famous faces in New York City—writers, actors, editors, athletes, and politicians. For the next two decades, Covarrubias’s caricature portraits appeared regularly in the most popular magazines in the City. Covarrubias’s drawings were so much a part of the cultural moment that they came to shape New York’s image of itself even as they documented it. His witty, memorable drawings were widely celebrated—but their sharp critical edge did not go unnoticed. Covarrubias himself called attention a darker aspect of his work when, in 1925, he titled his own self-portrait “The Murderer.” In a review of his work Katherine Anne Porter considered this epitaph: “in all of [Miguel Covarrubias’s caricature portraits, there is] something that belongs to metaphysics: a feeling that he has exposed the very outer appearance of a sitter that is the clue to an inner quality the sitter has spent most of his life trying to hide, or disguise. If that isn’t murder, what is it? And what is?”