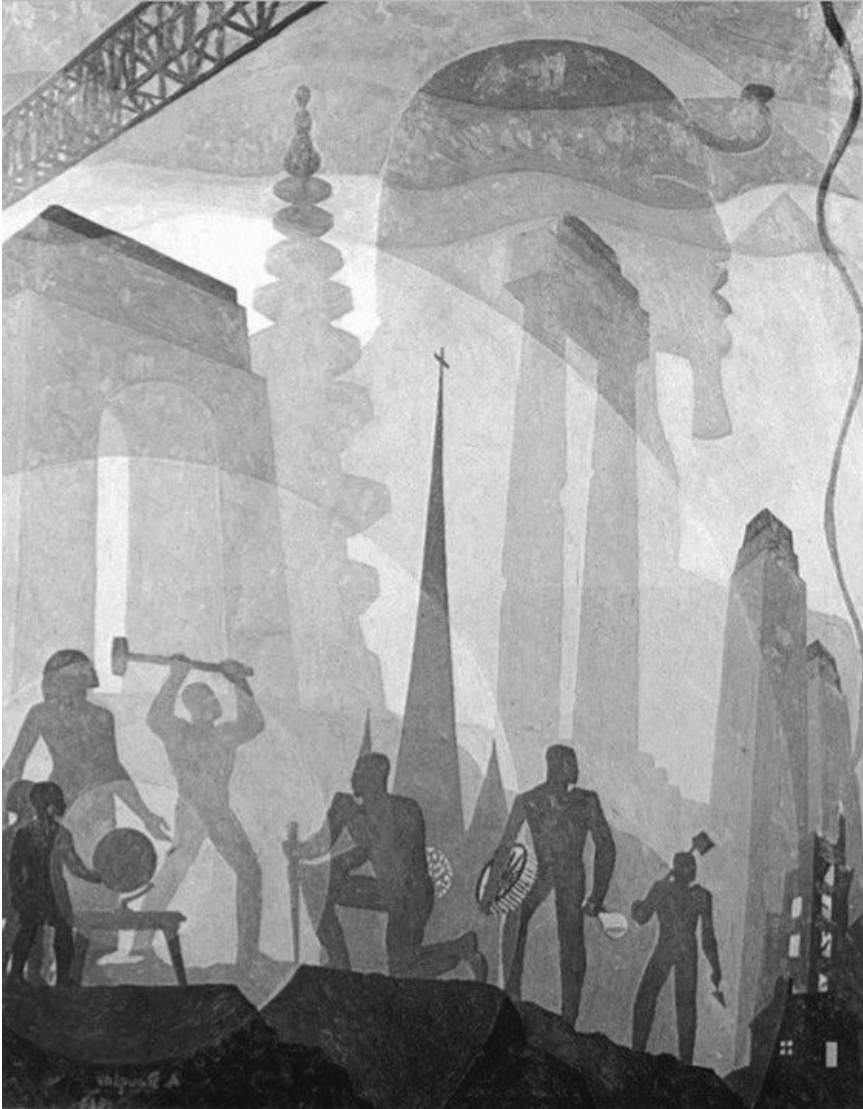


National Identity in the Arts



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12. Blue Notes, Black Ink

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Blue Notes, Black Ink

THE HARLEM REVOLUTION OF THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES involved all the arts in an amazing outpouring of creativity by Black Americans. But if we were to highlight only two, they would surely be jazz and poetry, hence my title for the class. I included some Jazz in last week's class; there will be some more today—but also some concert music by Black composers. In looking at the poetry, painting, and sculpture of the period, we shall consider many of the same questions we applied two weeks ago: What makes the art American? What specifically reflects the Black experience?

In the second hour, we shall look at three artists from outside America. Each works in a different medium—poetry, sculpture, and song—each comes from a different country, and each responds in a different way to his colonial past. *rb.*

A. The Poet Speaks

Two leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance, **Langston Hughes** and the slightly-older Jamaican-born socialist **Claude McKay**.

- ♫ **Hughes:** *The Weary Blues* (read by the author)
- ♫ **Hughes:** *Mother to Son* (read by Viola Davis)
- ♫ **McKay:** "If we must die" (read by Kevin Young)
- ♫ **McKay:** *America* (reader unknown)

B. History in Color

As we discussed in Class 10, one way an artist can celebrate National Identity is by painting national history. But how does a Black artist depict a history in which he has largely been marginalized?

Colescott: *Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975, NY Met)

Lawrence: *We crossed the River* (1956, NY Met)

Lawrence: *American Struggle* series (1954–56), selected panels

Douglas: *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934, Topeka)

C. Lift Every Voice

Another anchor of Identity is religion, which is one element in which minorities may retain and even proclaim their own voice.

♪ **Motley:** *Holy Rollers* (1929, Whitney)

♪ **James Weldon Johnson:** *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (Kirk Franklin)

♪ **Johnson:** *The Creation: a Negro Sermon* (read by Wintley Phipps)

♪ **Countee Cullen:** *Simon the Cyrenian Speaks* (reader unknown)

♪ **Ailey:** "Take me to the Water" from *Revelations* (1960)

D. It Don't Mean a Thing

Three aspects of music in the Harlem Renaissance: the first all-Black musical, an icon of the Big Band swing era, and a slightly later piece in the classical tradition, based on the work of Black sculptors.

♪ **Blake & Sissle:** *Shuffle Along*, 2016 revival

♪ **William Grant Still:** *Suite for Violin and Piano* (1943), excerpts

♪ **Ellington:** *It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing!*

E. An Old Sound, New

The first movement of a concert work by a composer you probably won't know, illustrating the difficulty of discussing Black artists today.

F. A Caribbean Colorist

The late Nobel laureate **Sir Derek Walcott** wrote about his mixed-race heritage, the complexities of his colonial background, and the beauties of his native island, Saint Lucia—which he also depicted in paint.

♪ **Walcott:** *Love After Love*, read by Linton Kwesi Johnson

♪ **Interview** with Bill Moyers

♪ **Walcott:** *Far Cry from Africa* (read by the author)

♪ **Interview** with Donald Friedman

♪ **Documentary:** *Poetry is an Island* (trailer)

G. In Colonial Costumes

Yinka Shonibare CBE, born in London of Nigerian parents but raised in Africa, has become an internationally-known artist, whose output includes sculpture, painting, film, and choreography. We shall confine

ourselves to his use of so-called African fabrics to interrogate the histories of colonialism and class, still relevant to an African artist even given his position of honor within English society.

♪ **Shonibare:** *How to Blow up Two Heads at the Same Time*, 2006

♪ **Video:** *FABRIC-ATION* (Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2013)

♪ **Shonibare:** *Woman Shooting Cherry Blossom*, 2018

♪ **Video:** *Brilliant Ideas* (Bloomberg ShortTakes, 2015)

♪ **Shonibare:** *Wind Sculpture in Bronze 1* (2022, Stockholm)

H. Nothing's in Vain

Twenty years ago, the singer-songwriter **Yousou N'Dour** was a giant of the popular genre of World Music. We shall hear two tracks from his 2002 album *Nothing's in Vain*, sung in a mixture of Wolof and English, and made into montages by me. The first includes the work of three contemporary African artists of a later generation: **Aboudia**, **Boafo**, and **Crosby**. The second will speak for itself.

♪ **Yousou N'Dour:** *Li Ma Weesu* (In a mirror), with African artists

♪ **Yousou N'Dour:** *Africa, Dream again*, montage

Artists, Composers, and Writers

[NOTE: For various reasons, the word "African" is omitted before all the artists labeled "American" below.] **Aboudia** Diarrassouba (b.1983, Ivorian painter), Alvin **Ailey** (1931–89, American choreographer), Richmond **Barthé** (1901–88, American sculptor), Eubie **Blake** (1887–1983, American musician), Amaoko **Boafo** (b.1984, Ghanaian painter), Robert **Colescott** (1925–2009, American painter), Njideka Akunyili **Crosby** (b.1983, Nigerian American painter), Countee **Cullen** (1903–46, American poet), Aaron **Douglas** (1899–1979, American poet), Duke **Ellington** (1899–1974, American musician), Langston **Hughes** (1901–67, American poet), James Weldon **Johnson** (1871–1938, American poet), Sargent **Johnson** (1888–1967, American sculptor), Jacob **Lawrence** (1917–2000, American painter), Claude **McKay** (1890–1948, Jamaican American poet), Archibald J. **Motley** (1891–1981, American painter), Yousou **N'Dour** (b.1959, Senegalese singer-songwriter), Nkeiru **Okoye** (b.1972, American composer), Joel A. **Rogers** (1880–1966, Jamaican American writer), Augusta **Savage** (1892–1962, American sculptor), Yinka **Shonibare** (b.1962, British Nigerian sculptor), Noble **Sissle** (1889–1975, American musician), William Grant **Still** (1895–1978, American composer), Derek **Walcott** (1930–2017, St Lucian poet)