Harlem Renaissance’s Impact On African American Culture

Part 1: My Questions

Art in the United States developed greatly between World War I and World War II. I’ve studied Regionalism in rural America at the time, and I know of Grant Wood’s work at the time. I’ve viewed his works such as AMERICAN GOTHIC at the Art Institute of Chicago, and I loved learning the depth of how his pieces depicted the good and the bad of the midwest. I am also aware of Dorothea Lange's influential photography that the effects of the Great Depression, as I’ve studied that in photography classes. I’m curious however to know more about art that came just before Regionalism. I understand The Harlem Renaissance in particular was a very influential time for artists in America, and especially in African American culture. I have always been curious to know why this was. So, for my I-search paper, I will be focusing on how exactly the Harlem Renaissance impacted African American culture. I would like to understand the history of this time for African Americans. I hope to discover what caused this movement, understand why it was so influential to African Americans, and find out why Harlem became the focal point. I would also like to learn about influential pioneers and artists were during this time, and what sort of arts they produced.

Part 2: My Search Process

To begin my research, I looked into finding out more about the history of this time. I went to our class textbook, Revel Art History (6e, volume 2). Chapter 32: Modern Art in Europe in the Americas (1900-1950) had a section, 32.5 on Art Between the Wars in America. Here, I found a brief description on what caused the Harlem Renaissance and learned about several influential artists at the time. To further my understanding of the history at this time I searched google for more information. I found that a website called CityLab had a deeper explanation for why African Americans were relocating to the North. I then moved on to research the pioneers and influential people at the time. The website Encyclopaedia Britannica provided lots of information and background on these individuals and mentioned a few of the ones that they touched on in the textbook. I sought to learn more about other individuals who weren't necessarily artists but were also influential, I found that history.com and biography.com provided valuable material on this.

Part 3: What I Have Learned

Initially named the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance redefined African American cultural identity for the years to come. Spanning from the 1920s to the 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was a literary and intellectual following that brought upon preeminent changes in American society that still impact us today. With oppression at its peak, African Americans were trying to establish themselves in society. They did this by creating a business for art from African Americans. Through this art, African Americans were able to express themselves and take further steps towards a greater equality by redefining and influencing the popular opinion on African Americans in the United States (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art

History).

Just prior to 1920, slavery was slowing down. The great migration was underway, African Americans were relocating up north where jobs were available and there was promise of a better life. Even though slavery was abolished in the country, oppression was still prominent in the south. Many whites felt that African Americans were not ready or did not deserve to be freed. They believed that due to the fact they had been enslaved for so long, they would not know how to sustain themselves on their own (Mock, Brentin, and CityLab. “The 'Great Migration' Was About Blacks Escaping Terror, Not Seeking Jobs.”). Hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated from rural parts of Southern agricultural parts of America to urban, industrialized parts of Northern America. They migrated to escape racial oppression and to find greater social and economic opportunities. The First Great Migration prompted the formation of the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance in New York (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History).

There were many brave pioneers that helped pave the way for the Harlem Renaissance, and made it as successful and effective as it was, and is today. George C. Wright, once stated that important African Americans in the Harlem Renaissance inspired others through their love of the arts (Hutchinson, George. “Harlem Renaissance.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.). This emphasizes how one lone person can make such an outstanding impact on society. An example of someone who did this during the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes was a popular poet, novelist, playwright, and columnist, who wrote on African American freedom, and equality, and a plethora of other pressing issues and topics of the time. He was one of the most inspirational role models of this era, he composed the image of cultural identity and pride for their heritage (Hutchinson, George. “Harlem Renaissance.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.). Charles S. Johnson was an American sociologist, and a very strong advocate for the advancement of the African American Civil Rights Movement also encouraged Blacks in the Harlem Renaissance. Charles S. Johnson mainly influenced blacks during this time through a magazine called Opportunity: a Journal of Negro Life. He used this magazine to encourage young aspiring black writers and artists to better themselves and to achieve their dreams (Editors, History.com. “Harlem Renaissance.”). Rudolph Fisher, who was known for a number of things but mostly for being a radiologist and a writer who was influenced through the arts during the Harlem Renaissance. Fisher was substantially significant in the Harlem Renaissance for being the first black writer to publish a literary work in The Atlantic Monthly; his work was called, The City of Refuge (Hutchinson, George. “Harlem Renaissance.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.). Alain Locke (1886-1954), a critic and philosophy professor, was another prominent intellectual leader. He argued that black artists should seek their artistic roots in the traditional arts of Africa rather than assimilate within mainstream American or European artistic traditions (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History). These influential individuals were influenced by other important pioneers as well. For example, in a speech in 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois encouraged African Americans to become successful in this classist society and that they should pursue a higher education. African Americans took this speech into consideration and used it to their advantage (Blatty, David. “W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement.” Biography.com). Black advocates, activists, and pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance like Langston Hughes, Charles S. Johnson, Rudolph Fisher, and Alain Locke used what W.E.B. Du Bois said and educated other blacks in the community to be the best they could be. Not only did they show it but they said it through their actions. They proved to the community, and the world what they could accomplish if given

the chance.

The Harlem Renaissance called for greater social and political activism among African Americans. This era gave them opportunity to do so by expressing themselves through the arts and provide a sense of self. A few prominent artists at the time were James Van Der Zee, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, and Jacob Lawrence (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History).

James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) was a studio photographer who took portraits of the Harlem upper-middle classes. He opened a studio in 1916, and worked as both a news reporter and a society photographer. His photography revealed the glamour of Harlem at the height of the Great Depression, and the center of African American cultural life (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History). Among his many acclaimed subjects were poet Countee Cullen, dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. Van Der Zee worked mostly in his studio and used a wide range of props to achieve stylized tableaux vivants in keeping with late Victorian and Edwardian visual styles. He re-touched his negatives and prints to attain a feeling of glamour (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “James VanDerZee.” Encyclopædia Britannica).

Aaron Douglas (1898-1979) was a painter and graphic artist. He had moved from Topeka, Kansas, to New York City in 1925. His artistic style focused on silhouettes. The works he made owe much to African art and had a lasting impact on later African American artists. His piece titled ASPECTS OF NEGRO LIFE: FROM SLAVERY THROUGH RECONSTRUCTION perfectly exemplifies why this was the case. To the left side of the painting, union soldiers are depicted leaving the South after Reconstruction, while Ku Klux Klan members, hooded and riding on horseback, are charging in. This symbolizes to viewers that the fight for civil rights is only just beginning. At the center, a speaker is gesturing to the United States Capitol in the background, as if to urge all African Americans to exercise their right to vote. And then to the right, there are slaves celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, with circles of light radiating from them (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History). This particular piece was very meaningful and is a great example of social and political activism in art. Douglas received several commissions from magazine illustrations, one major one being that he illustrated Alain Locke’s book The New Negro (1925) (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Aaron Douglas.” Encyclopædia Britannica).

Augusta Savage (1892-1962) was a sculptor. In her work she reflected on the countless difficulties faced by African Americans in the art world. She had applied to study in Europe but was turned away because of her race. In a letter of protest she wrote, “Democracy is a strange thing. My brother was good enough to be accepted in one of the regiments that saw service in France during the war, but it seems his sister was not good enough to be a guest of the country for which he fought.” Shortly after, she was able to study in Paris. When she had returned from her studies and came back to the United States, she sculpted portraits of African American leaders, including Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois. She was inspired by the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Her sculpture LA CITADELLE: FREEDOM of a female figure balancing on one foot with her hand in the air, was how she hoped to represent the possibility of promise, freedom, and equality. Savage later established the Harlem Community art center. Today, hundreds of these centers have been established all over the country. One of best known artists that emerged from the Harlem Community Art Center was Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). His early works often depicted African American history in series of narrative paintings accompanied

by text. He followed similar themes to Savage being that he touched on the Haitian Revolution. His most expansive series was THE GREAT MIGRATION SERIES. It was made up of 60 panels that narrated the Great Migration. On the first panel African American immigrants are streaming through doors of a train station on their way to Chicago, New York, and St. Louis. His daringly abstract silhouette style made him stand out (Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. Art History).

Part 4: What This Means to Me / My Growth

The Harlem Renaissance is still in effect, it is not as obvious but it is still impacting our culture and influencing our day to day lives. Literature, and art that are relevant today largely stemmed from the role models of the Harlem Renaissance. Main influences have rolled over into today's society. Throughout this era, major role models opened up opportunity, and business for African Americans worldwide. If it was not for the people that pioneered the way for African Americans, a lot of the meaning behind the American arts would be absent. This was the era that truly sparked the drive where artists painted meaningful or major things occurring around them. This was the time that redefined what it meant to be an African American, and the pride behind the title that still stands true today.