

# Aaron douglas' crucifixion

Philosophy



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Aaron Douglas' Crucifixion Throughout much of Modernism many artists were influenced and informed by the work of exotic regions throughout the world, more specifically Africa. African Art would influence much of the Modern Movements from the latter part of the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Centuries. Much is said of the artists within the Harlem Renaissance, and how it directly reflects the influence of Africana upon their art. Often times, this work is neglected to be considered Modern if not in specialized selections of course throughout many of today's higher institutions of learning.

However, thus being said, Aaron Douglas, often considered the pioneer of African American Modern Art, would bring this notion to the forefront of Modern Society. With Douglas' " The Crucifixion," illustrated in " God's Trombones" in 1927, he would shatter all notions of work within the Harlem Renaissance as not being Modern, but more viably Modern than most work produced at this time. He would give tremendous validity to African American Art as Modern in any context by not only incorporating modernist concepts, but truly making social criticism about the plight of the African Americans and the struggles of becoming important.

In Douglas' " The Crucifixion," he draws from Western academia and his African roots, not only to place his work among Modern fine art, but would make the Black voice a viable and acceptable as any other movement within Modern Art. It is important to point out the formal qualities of " The Crucifixion. " The piece is made of oil on canvas. However, with the delicate treatment and translucency of the paint it is not hard to imagining it watercolor or gouache. The color palette is limited and specific. The use of a

very monochromatic purple tonal range sets the mood for the piece as a whole.

Purple denotes a heavenly or royal handling of the subject matter. The use of purple within the Western canon, oftentimes symbolized the holy. With the piece aptly titled “ The Crucifixion,” it is no wonder that Douglas is setting the scene of Gospel related subject matter. In addition to the aforementioned, “ The Crucifixion” was originally illustrated in James Weldon Johnson’s book of poems, “ God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse” (Driskell, 110). However, with the subject matter and the painterly quality it is not hard to place them among fine art painting.

For the vast majority of Douglas’ work, as with “ The Crucifixion,” black history, religion, and myth provided the substantive sources for his stylized subjects (Driskell, 111). The composition is highly composed with a designer’s eye for detail and stylistic elements. Furthermore, the central figure of Jesus, which is washed-out, flattened white, surrounded by geometric forms and interpenetrating circular shapes, possibly signifying a halo or representation of thereof, and also moves the composition outwardly from the central Jesus; hinting towards the modern use of interpenetrating lines that occurred within Cubism (Pinder, 107).

Douglas layers Cubist design elements to create a highly fragmented, yet cohesive composition that reads more designed and symbolic through imagery. To add, the use of very directional/graphic arrows pointing upwards and outwardly, it is not hard to read this as something taking the importance away from the central Jesus figure to the overshadowing black man and to the heavens. Additionally one cannot begin to confront the issue of <https://assignbuster.com/aaron-douglas-crucifixion/>

Modernity and Modern Art movements without mentioning the influence of African art objects on Modern Artists.

One only has to look at Picasso and Braque to see the influence of African masks and twisted perspective as in Ancient Egyptian sculpture with “ Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. ” It is not hard to imagine Modern artists who implemented these sort of design elements into their work to be considered new and cutting edge. If one is to take that same mentality and apply it to any number of artists within the Harlem Renaissance, especially Douglas, then their use of African imagery must of set them worlds apart at the time.

Who better understands this art, then those whose heritage is deeply involved with such art? Aaron Douglas understood this, and was able to draw upon African ideals concerning art and incorporate them into this specific piece. Additionally, the Jesus figure is overshadowed by a large darkened African man carrying the cross for Jesus: possibly marking the weight of the world on his shoulders and carrying the burden that one must go through society as African Americans.

As Driskell said in Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America, “ Jesus the savior is also Jesus the bearer of everyman’s burden, particularly the black man’s burden. ” Of course, the large African American man carrying the cross represents that man. This may also represent the hardship of the black man at the beginning of the Twentieth century. As Kymberly Pinder suggests in her article, Our Father, God; our Brother, Christ; or are We Bastard Kin? : Images of Christ in African American Painting, “ in the black under-standing of Christ and Christianity from the beginning.

The analogy between Christ's persecution and the racial oppression of blacks past and present is essential within this piece. " Symbolically, Douglas is relying on the suggestion that Black is Christ-like to forward his artistic expression. Truthfully speaking, without these elements " The Crucifixion" would not carry the lofty message it elicits. Douglas paints in a hard-edged style that defined the figure, borrowing of course from the Synthetic Cubists (Driskell, 111). The figures themselves are angular and exaggerated borrowing from ancient Egyptian sculpture.

This work exemplifies design with the way Douglas plays with design motifs, such as arrows and interpenetrating geometric shapes, to give the composition a highly stylized and polished feel while still portraying the figure to produce a highly designed and spatially related composition (Driskell, 111). Any of the abovementioned would suffice in the consideration of Douglas' " Crucifixion" as Modern. One only has to look to Cubism and German Expressionism to consider his work modern. His use of religious symbolism hints towards the same practice within German Expressionism.

In addition, his use of very angular figures pointing to works by Otto Dix and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Furthermore, with the concept of interpenetrating planes and geometry one only has to look to the work of Picasso and Braque to see that this has similarities with Synthetic Cubism. According to Susan Earle in Aaron Douglas: African American Artist, " in Modern art, Douglas saw the potential for abstracting two-dimensional form, eliminating surface detail, fracturing line, and using color harmonies, almost mirroring that of works by Synthetic Cubists (Earle, 107).

Additionally, with Douglas' use of agile line work and his economic usage of recognizable symbolic features, it is evident that Douglas borrows from Art Deco (Driskell, 129). However, he takes clear advantage of Art Nouveau and the movement it brought to the fine arts. Douglas incorporates this with the rhythm and movement of Harlem Renaissance music. Additionally, one could look towards the Futurists and their uproar and social commentary to inform Douglas' crucifixion; albeit, "The Crucifixion" is not overcrowded with color and direct movement.

However, his use of angular figural representations and his comment on the situation of African Americans makes a social commentary about the lives of African Americans. Bibliography Brigham, David R. "Bridging Identities: Dox Thrash as African American and Artist." JSTOR. The University of Chicago Press, 1990. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108983>. Earle, Susan and Renee Ater. Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. Print. Driskell, David C. , David L. Lewis, and Deborah Willis. Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America.

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