

Harlem renaissance art style and history



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The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is that it redefined how America and the world, viewed the African-American population. The migration of Southern Blacks to the North changed the image of the African-American from rural, undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness; African-Americans became players on the world stage, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally. Some common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were the influence of the experience of slavery and emerging African-American folk traditions on black identity, the effects of institutional racism, the dilemmas inherent in performing and writing for elite white audiences, and the question of how to convey the experience of modern black life in the urban North. Characterizing the Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who through intellect and production of literature, art, and music could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. The creation of art and literature would serve to ' uplift' the race. " New Negro" is a term popularized during the Harlem Renaissance implying a more outspoken advocacy of dignity and a refusal to submit quietly to the practices and laws of Jim Crow racial segregation. The term " New Negro" was made popular by Alain LeRoy Locke. It is my intent to show how Carl Van Vechten, James Van Der Zee, and James Latimer Allen interpret and display the " New Negro" in their work of portraiture.

As white families moved from cities to suburbs, the advent of World War I created a shortage of labor in northern cities. African Americans began to

migrate north from their southern rural homes. During the 1920s, 1.5 million African Americans migrated north in hope of employment and relief from the prejudice that oppressed them so severely in the South. Van Vechten's many portraits of African-American performers, writers, and musicians taken in New York City reflect his interest in African Americans and the arts. They also reflect the growing presence of African Americans in northern cities resulting from the mass migration of the 1920s. More than this, these portraits also document the impact of this migration in popularizing African-American artistic movements such as jazz, the blues, and the Harlem Renaissance. "I am certain that my first interest in making [these] photographs was documentary and probably my latest interest in making them is documentary too . . . I wanted to show young people of all races how many distinguished Negroes there were in this world . . . he adds that the process of making photographic portraits is a magical act." Bessie Smith's notorious private life contributed to glamorizing the self-destructive behavior often associated with jazz, blues, and rock performers of the present day. Smith's excessive drinking, violent temper (and physical strength), and predatory sexual life involving both men and women were boundary breaking, even by the standards of free-living musicians of the Roaring Twenties. A number of Smith's recordings in her later career were frankly pornographic, reflected both her loss of stature as an artist and her first-hand experience in reckless and often abusive relationships. All of this is important to keep in mind while analyzing this piece. We see the subject, Smith looking up and back at a bust of an African statue. While she is physically looking in a backward motion it can also be interpreted as a metaphor for looking into one's own past and heritage. With Smith's dicey

past and morally grey activities Van Vechten portrays her as a beautiful female specimen who is in adoration of her African roots. Van Vechten places Smith below the statue which forces her to look up in its direction which is historically pious in stance. She is in veneration of her ancestors; she has them to thank for her present success as a performer.

The portraits taken by James Latimer Allen were of many men and women who created the Harlem Renaissance exhibit with a purposeful uniformity. Men dressed in a dapper manner in suits and ties, women in their Sunday best. Through this formal statement Allen was underscoring the emergence of what a local magazine, "The Survey Graphic," in 1925 had called the "New Negro." Harlem photographer James Allen's portrait of graphic artist James Lesesne Wells shows his subject intensely engaged with a drinking cup from Central Africa. Wells gazes down on the face carved on the vessel as if communing with an ancestor. The entire notion of this photo is very contrived. It is a bit of a strain to believe that Wells has a deep connection—much less a full understanding—of his ancestral past. The fact is the "New Negroes" was a group that had never known slavery. Therefore they were comfortable with the idea of succeeding in all realms of culture and in any profession. Whether Wells understands or appreciates the artifact— if it is even authentic— doesn't matter. What is really important is his presence and brooding manner. He seems to be engulfed within his own thoughts. His meditative state gives the viewer the idea that this Black man is able to think on a high level proving his intelligence and all around competence within society. His is very neatly put together; though no real emphasis is put on his attire we can still tell that he is not poor. Wells is looking down at

the cup, a contrast to the image of Smith who is looking upward at her African fetishe. In comparison, these two images are similar in that they both are looking to their past and pieces of African art which serve as an affirmation of their heritage and identity. In contrast, Wells is putting himself above and beyond his ties to slavery; he is asserting himself into the image of the "New Negro". Wells may reject the European ideas of primitivism because he himself is an artist who is very influenced by European woodcuts and their makers. Alain Locke happens to be one of his biggest supporters which may also feed into his self assured and confident nature that he is about to portray. Aesthetically the composition is lacking. Our eyes are guided diagonally to the cup so that we too may contemplate and feel the magic that lies within the cup. As contrived as the pictorial space and composition is, it certainly promotes the values of the "New Negro".

A lot of scholars and critics agree that James Van Der Zee documented the 'truth' and he was very creative and realistic in doing so. They feel he used photography to document Black America by creating a vision of success and naturalness. Through his artwork he wanted to show that life for African Americans in Harlem could be better and will be better. He wanted them to have a better, wealthier image showing that they too can be successful he took pictures of them either looking strong, happy, or dominant. Van Der Zee had the ability to construct his compositions so they were visually interesting and coherent. They have an aesthetic dimension that is independent of whatever they depict. Experts explain that the best photographers do the unexpected; they do not just focus on the fantasized world but the real world also Van Der Zee did both. He provided an image for African Americans

showing success and showing what they face in everyday life by creating a natural look so they fit in. Works by Van Der Zee are artistic as well as technically proficient. His work was in high demand, due in part to his experimentation and skill in double exposures and in retouching negatives of children. A theme that reoccurs in his photographs is the emergent black middle class, which he captured using traditional techniques in often idealistic images. Negatives were retouched to show glamour and an aura of perfection. This affected the likeness of the person photographed, but he felt each photo should transcend the subject. His carefully posed family portraits reveal that the family unit was an important aspect of Van Der Zee's life. He photographed the people of Harlem for more than six decades, depicting the life of one of the most celebrated black communities in the world. By providing elaborate costumes, props, and backdrops, in combination with creative double exposures, expert retouching, and airbrushing, Van Der Zee became renowned for the quality of his portraits. Van Der Zee actively worked to manipulate an image through careful composition, use of multiple negatives, retouching, dramatic lighting, and skillfully painted backdrops and props. It is tempting to compare his multi-layered images to photomontage created in the 1920's and 1930's. However, Van Der Zee was familiar with neither the avant-garde photographic practices in Europe nor the modernist photography by Alfred Stieglitz. Although he gained fame for his portrayal of African-American celebrities who passed through Harlem, Van Der Zee made his daily living by taking thousands of photographs of Harlem's residents, including family groups, weddings, athletic teams, and social clubs. In this portrait, *Wedding Day, Harlem*, Van Der Zee was creating an unusual but realistic message. The most important concepts of the portrait are the facial

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expressions on the bride and grooms face. The bride is looking at the camera while the groom is looking at her. Her face has a serious structure, showing that she is dominant, as her body is positioned slanted position but her posture is straight. The groom is admiring her and being a gentleman. The painted backdrop of the fireplace and a superimposed image of a little girl who is playing with a newly available black baby doll all speak of the couple's dream of a middle class status. The architecture of the columns and the ornate chair are visual tropes that have been used throughout history in such other wedding portraits such as the Arnolfini portrait. A domestic family life, and black pride are the ideas all fall into line with the "New Negro" movement these are all concepts that Van Der Zee puts into action in his portraits.

These works portray the peoples of African descent in a positive light- in normal, human situations. Historically and continually, peoples of African descent are often portrayed negatively in the various media, and many mainstream photographers working in areas such as Harlem, have historically highlighted squalid conditions, social problems, or exoticism. Such Western interest in tribal artifacts grew from the colonization of Africa by Europeans, whose takeover of the continent is documented through a colored map. By 1900, few major artists were untouched by the fascination with African and Oceanic "primitive" art. Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and others were drawn to the styles and motifs from these non-Western cultures as a way to challenge traditional aesthetic ideas. They saw western styles as stagnant and irrelevant to modern society. Unfortunately, part of the expectation of African-American artists of this time period was to relate to

and produce images that correlated with tribal artifacts. While Europeans understood African objects through the lens of colonialism, Americans viewed them as representing the legacy of slavery and segregation. Racial biases resulted in the negative perception of African art which persists to this day. But since the Harlem Renaissance is remembered as a fleeting golden age; a contemporary viewer cannot help but read evanescence into these portraits. Van Der Zee, Allen, and Van Vechten did their part to promote African-Americans in a light that they deserve even if they may not have monetarily deserved the title. All humans deserve the right to dream and have the same goals despite racial barriers. It is my belief that these artists truly upheld the image of the “ New Negro” while also continually trying to move forward with that idea and their own artwork.

Carl Van Vechten, Portrait of Bessie Smith

James Van Der Zee, Future Expectations (Wedding Day)1926

James Latimer Allen, Portrait of James Lesesne Wells, c. 1930.