

The Harlem Renaissance

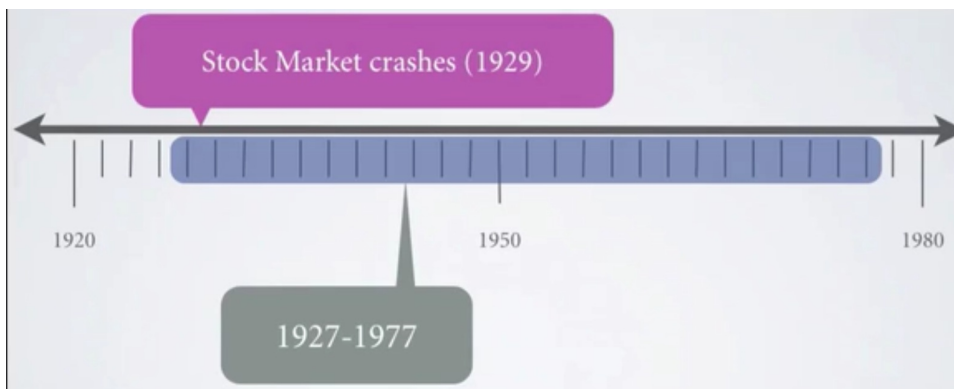
by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about the Harlem Renaissance. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the origins of the Harlem Renaissance in the arts, and identify examples of the Harlem Renaissance in the visual arts. The Harlem Renaissance was originally known as the New Negro Movement. It occurred primarily as a literary movement, but also involved the participation of social reformers, activists, and artists. You will cover:

The artwork that we're looking at today dates from between 1927 and 1977, as highlighted in this timeline:



1. “Noah’s Ark”

The roots of the **Harlem Renaissance** can be traced back to the aftermath of the Civil War, as many freed African Americans made their way north to get away from the discrimination and social pressures they felt in the South. It was a migration that occurred over many generations, and large numbers of African Americans congregated in neighborhoods of large northern cities, such as Chicago, and in the boroughs of New York City, particularly Harlem. Within these neighborhoods, African Americans were able to share common cultural interests and develop new ones that had connections to their ancestral roots.

The Harlem Renaissance was originally known as the **New Negro Movement**. Although its origins were centered in Harlem, its influence spread throughout the country. It even spread overseas into places such as Paris, France, where **jazz** music was also finding a foothold. It was relatively short-lived but incredibly influential for decades after its demise during the Great Depression.

An example of work originating from this period is shown here:



Noah's Ark by Aaron Douglas

1927

Oil on masonite

This renaissance originated primarily as a literary movement but also involved the participation of visual artists, such as Aaron Douglas. His work is exemplary of the Harlem Renaissance and created a visual aesthetic that was highly stylized and unique. He was influenced by the color and abstraction of African art but also by the rhythmic improvisation of jazz music. He fused these influences together into a style that emphasized flattened forms with strong, crisp outlines and repetitive designs.



BIG IDEA

The Harlem Renaissance was originally known as the New Negro Movement and occurred primarily as a literary movement, but also involved the participation of social reformers, activists, and artists.



TERMS TO KNOW

Harlem Renaissance

A dynamic artistic and cultural movement centered in New York City, focusing on black consciousness, civil rights, and racial integration.

New Negro Movement

A term popularized during the Harlem Renaissance encouraging African Americans to have self-confidence, racial pride, and self-expression.

Jazz

One of the most important art forms of the 20th century, a purely African-American music genre.

2. “Black Belt”

Archibald Motley was an interesting figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He was something of an outsider in many respects. He never lived in Harlem but rather grew up in a racially tolerant neighborhood of Chicago.

He was of mixed racial descent, which, given the time, caused him a lifetime struggle with what could be described as a sort of cultural alienation. His own perception, and that of many others, was that he wasn't quite white enough or black enough to fit in with either demographic. This left him in a cultural limbo. It also contributed to his fascination with skin tone and the effect of cultural identity that permeated his work.

Here is an example of Archibald's work and typical subject matter:



Black Belt by Archibald Motley

1934

Oil on canvas

Rather than depict rural African Americans, which was a more common theme in other artistic circles, he chose to depict the vibrant and colorful social lives of urban African Americans. His style recalls the work of Aaron Douglas in the flattened and stylized forms. Notice how each of the figures seems less like an actual individual, a technique that may be his way of emphasizing the collective community rather than the individuals within it.

3. “The Calabash”

Romare Bearden is a descendant of the Harlem Renaissance. His work might have come after, but it was created with the same spirit. He lived during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, which is one of the most important eras in African-American history. During this time, he made a shift in medium from painting to collage, becoming and remaining one of the most important American artists to work in this medium.

His piece “The Calabash” is undoubtedly influenced by the Civil Rights movement.



The Calabash by Romare Bearden

1970

Collage

Bearden incorporates a common artistic motif: that of a nude woman bathing. The nude woman in the foreground seems unaware of, or perhaps simply ignores, the elderly (or maybe prematurely aged) woman in the background holding the child. The title, “The Calabash,” may refer to the name of a particular type of gourd, sometimes called the bottle gourd, which would be dried out and used as a container for liquids.

Historically, the gourd, a sort of nature’s canteen, is associated with human migration, perhaps alluding to the migration of African Americans northward or the figurative migration of the African-American population out of the past and into the present, symbolizing the cultural shift of the Civil Rights movement.

4. Self-Portrait of Jacob Lawrence

Another descendant of the Harlem Renaissance who was important in the artistic community and beyond was Jacob Lawrence.

His self-portrait of 1977 is typical of his style.



Self-Portrait by Jacob Lawrence

1977

Gouache and tempera on paper

This style is something he referred to as dynamic Cubism, in which the forms are flattened and broken up into blocks of color but appear simultaneously independent and cohesive.

Like many figures of the Harlem Renaissance and their descendants, Lawrence turned to education, eventually settling in Seattle to teach and inspire new generations of artists at the University of Washington. His artistic production never ceased, and he continued working until his death in 2000, at the age of 82.



SUMMARY

Now that you've seen the lesson, are you able to identify and define today's key terms? Can you describe the origins of the Harlem Renaissance in the arts? Can you identify examples of the Harlem Renaissance in the visual arts? You saw a couple of examples of artwork from the Harlem Renaissance, **"Noah's Ark"** and **"Black Belt"**, and work by artists that are considered descendants of the Harlem Renaissance, **"The Calabash"** by Romare Bearden and **Self-Portrait of Jacob Lawrence**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell



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