

## **African American Creative Arts: Dance, Literature, Music, Theater and Visual Art from Slavery through the Harlem Renaissance**

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### **Abstract**

*The African American creative arts of dance, music, literature, theater and visual art have changed over time since arriving with the slave ships. These changes are a manifestation of political, educational and economic evolution as well as assimilation. As the life experiences of African Americans changed, from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance, their creative activities have reflected it.*

**Keywords:** African American, creative arts, slavery, Harlem Renaissance

### **1. Introduction**

African American creative arts arrived on the slave ships with the African people who brought their ways of expression with them as they landed on the shores of North America, South America and the Caribbean. The creative expression of African American arts has changed over time as life and experiences have progressed, but some elements have remained the same; most notably, the innate African way of expression that was passed from generation to generation and can still be seen today. However, today's generation may not be aware of their heritage and why they do things the way they do. For example, some of the latest dance styles developed by young people: Breaking, Hip Hop, Krumping, Clowning, and Popping are considered street dances, but they not only have their roots from traditional African dance, their basic movement structures are also from traditional African dance. Certain ways of movement and expressing art are cultural manifestations that seem to remain even though they have become intermingled with other artistic attributes through assimilation.

Periods through history have changed, and these changes have brought with them changes in economics, region, the environment, people's status, education, and ultimately their views. As life became radically different, so did the creative expression of African Americans because art mirrors life and is a view into the souls of a people.

### **2. Where it all began**

Africa is where it all began: art, dance, music, and storytelling. Oral expression was an integral part of culture and everyday life. Africans celebrated every occasion of life: birth, coming of age, marriage, harvest, and death. When rain was needed, and when there was illness, music and dance were vital to the outcomes. War as well was celebrated with music and dance both before and after the event.

Africans developed a rich, complex, diverse, and exotic tradition of artistic expression that was passed down from generation to generation. It included not only dance and music but also folk tales (story telling), proverbs, wood and iron working, sculpting, mask-making, pottery, and weaving, both cloth and basket-making. "Music was one of the most highly developed of the arts and the complexities of the African rhythmic structure have yet to be equaled" (Emery, 1988, p. 2).

#### **2.1 Art (Visual)**

Traditional African art was called "primitive," giving the impression it was unskilled or lacked artistry; when in fact, African art was conceptual and based on ideas or the essence of an idea. It was not what it actually looked like, i.e. representational or realistic. Today it is called "abstract," and it does not connote lack of skill or intelligence. Another aspect of African art is that it was functional, meaning it was useful in everyday life and for religious purposes. This tradition continued during slavery.

## 2.2 Dance

Although dance movements could vary in some ways from culture to culture, the basic structure and reasons for dance were similar. Dance was vital to African societies because Africans danced for all the occasions and needs of life mentioned earlier. In both ritual and non-ritual forms, dance marked the important events and served as an avenue to connect them to God as well as for celebration, recreation and self-expression. Dance did everything from evoking the spirit world to portraying a dramatic allegory for historical and entertainment purposes.

The similarities of West African dance lie in the characteristics of it, which are quite different from those of European dance. Africans relate to the earth; therefore, dance is toward the earth, with knees bent, the body bent slightly forward, and feet flat on the ground. It is unlike European ballet which has an upright posture and on the toes. African dance, like music, is polyrhythmic and may use all the body parts to varying rhythms. Other characteristics of traditional African dance are: circle and line formation, improvisation, community participation, competition, and percussion. Since African Americans descended primarily from West Africa, these traits can still be seen in African American dance styles.

## 2.3 Music

“It is in the realm of music that the artistic genius of the West African people reached its highest development,” according to Rublowky (1975). Every culture had highly trained and skilled musicians. These musicians were very important to religious rituals and ceremonies of all kinds. “Music and its corollary, dance, were in a very real sense, the very heart of African life,” (p.2)

The human voice is of significant importance; call and response singing is the most common form of vocal technique. The drum and other percussive devices are the fundamental instruments in traditional West African music. Drums, although their use may vary in importance from culture to culture, are found in most African countries, and there is a wide range of other musical instruments. African musicians are highly skilled at playing rhythms that are so complex that they are often difficult for Western musicians to conceive. “The close alliance of African music and dance..... can perhaps account for the development of rhythmic virtuosity unrivaled anywhere – a virtuosity which, in turn, led to the most detailed and complete development of percussive instruments in the world” (Rublowky,1975, p. 3). Another aspect of the drum is that it also served as a means of communication between tribes and villages.

Like art, African music is functional; it is closely connected to daily living. Music in most cultures had a particular function: to please the gods, to make work easier, for marriage and procreation, for recreation, entertainment and pleasure. For Africans, music was only a greater part of the artistic whole, and there should not be a distinction between it and life.

## 2.4 Oral “Literature” – Storytelling and Theater

Before written language, stories were communicated orally and comprised a tradition that was prolific and of great importance. Storytellers were crucial to the African community because they preserved the history. They were the chroniclers of the tradition and entertainers as well. Storytellers also provided theatrical performances to entertain the community.

In West Africa, the word “Griot” is used to describe an expert in the oral tradition. However, from culture to culture, there are a variety of names for those who keep the oral tradition, and “Jeli” is another. Africa remains a continent in which the spoken word is paramount.

The earliest form of writing in Africa was the hieroglyphs developed by the ancient Egyptians. It consisted of symbols and pictures to express meaning. In the seventh century, the Arabic language and its alphabet were introduced because of the spread of Islam, and European languages and its alphabet came by way of colonization. English, French and Portuguese missionaries began to translate and write African languages using the Roman alphabet by the nineteenth century which marked the beginning of written West African literature.

## 3. On the Plantation

The African American creative arts of dance, music, sculpture, crafts, and oral literature began when Africans arrived as a part of the slave trade in the 1600s. African people were imported through capture and sale to labor in the United States and in the Caribbean for the benefit of plantation owners. Written literature and the visual arts such as landscape, portrait, and some other forms did not exist when the Africans arrived.

As afore mentioned, the Africans brought their culture with them, although it was suppressed and families were separated to maintain an inability to communicate and collaborate, it thrived. The enslaved Africans possessed a religious, mythical, political, historical, psychological, and ontological framework from which the meaning of their lives was drawn “This Framework with its myriad components provided a profound sense of relationship to their ancestor’s nature and the world as they knew it. It constituted their culture” (Dallas Museum of Art, 1989, p.17).

During the transatlantic journey, creative expression was nil. Enslaved Africans could not have had any creative expression during their voyages, or when they first arrived. Artistic expression as we know it today did not exist among the enslaved because they were not free to express themselves other than how their masters deemed. They had been taken away from their home and families, and shipped off to places unknown; the only expression they might have had or shown was probably fear; fear of the unknown, and fear of the unexpected. However, because music and dance were a part of the slaves being, they soon devised a way to engage in it. When the enslaved Africans were suddenly placed into an unfamiliar environment, and attempts were made to dissociate them from memories of the homeland, it was very difficult to do because their heritage was too rich to obliterate. The one thing that slaves had in common was singing and dancing, and although many did not speak the same language because ethnic groups were intermixed, their music and dance prevailed. From slavery until today, African Americans have continued to live in communities among each other, which is the reason that the black experience remains. The fact that African Americans have been forced to remain together has created a bond that is the primary basis for their cultural experiences and is the backbone of their creative expressions. African Americans have had to live with and overcome many limitations placed upon them by racism and the lack of economics.

### **3.1 Art**

Shortly after Africans arrived in North America, they began to create art objects fashioned after those images and styles of the homeland. It was a folk art that they were familiar with in the tradition of functional or religious objects. Art was not something just to be looked at because, in Africa, art had always been a part of living.

The very first distinctions of art in the African tradition could be found in the way the enslaved Africans built their own living quarters since they were already skilled in doing so. Planters bought more Africans than city people, so the isolated community settlements, regardless how small or large, provided an opportunity for enslaved Africans to recreate their African past and produce a dominant African culture, as can still be seen in South Carolina (Patton, 1998). On the plantation, art expressed what was familiar and what was newly learned and experienced.

Folk art consisted of basket-weaving, pottery and quilt making. Basket-weaving is a centuries old tradition in Africa and is practiced by men, women and children. This art form was transported with slaves to the New World and was most prominent in the Sea Island communities around Charleston, South Carolina.

African American potters created vessels in the styles that they were familiar with in their tradition. Pottery-making during the early to mid-nineteenth century consisted of a style whereby slave pottery makers created functional, useful objects which included vessels that depicted the human face. These vessels received demeaning labels from European Americans and were characterized as “monkey jugs,” “voodoo pots,” “grotesque jugs,” and “slave pots.” The facial depictions show all sides of human expression: from smiling, laughing, singing, growling, gazing and sadness, to compassion (Dallas Museum of Art, 1989).

Although there were fewer enslaved Africans in cities and large towns, those who were artisans and craftsmen were very important to the urban industries that catered to diverse markets. Philadelphia was famous in the eighteenth century for its red pottery called “Philadelphia Earthenware.” While enslaved and free African Americans were called “artisans” and produced a type of creative product, their work was mainly produced for economical purposes rather than individual creative expression. Nonetheless, it was a type of art for that period.

Enslaved artisans and craftsmen were very sought after because their skills made them more valuable than untrained slaves. They brought with them knowledge and technology of weaving, woodcarving, pottery and metalwork. Slaves who were artisans had a less harsh life than those who worked the fields because slave-holders considered them an important investment. They became carpenters, joiners and blacksmiths. They built the majority of plantation structures as well as everything associated with them including fancy lattice work and horticultural surroundings.

Enslaved and free African Americans were at a disadvantage of becoming fine artists because of their social and economic status. There is evidence, however, of a few slaves and free blacks becoming “graphic artists, draughts men, and commercial portrait painters” (Patton, 1998, p.43).

Quilt making is not an African craft but is an African American craft that resembles certain aspects and examples of African textiles. Harriet Powers, born a slave in 1837, has a work on display in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which depicts 15 religious and astronomical subjects, each on a square of calico. Although Powers could not read or write, she apparently understood the Bible and other natural phenomena like eclipses. She used animals, natural events, biblical events, and heroes such as Noah and Moses to express the stories on her *Pictorial Quilt*.

For free African Americans who were also free to create as they wanted, recognition and success depended on patronage. There was quite a contrast in artistic genres and aesthetics between slaves on the plantation and slaves or freemen in the urban area. Patrons and consumers were the wealthy planters whose tastes were modeled after the European, so they were dependent on skilled artisans and artists, both European American and African American for the designs and constructions of their desires. This meant that African American artisans and artists had to meet the taste criteria of the upper and middle classes in order to survive on their art alone.

The degree to which African Americans adopted the European style, technique and aesthetic was affected by social and economic differences. Acculturation was more rapid to take place in the cities where more sophisticated consumers wanted European forms. Acculturation was slower to take place in the South, but it occurred in more diverse ways. The African and the American Indian mixture of cultures impacted the European world through architecture, pottery, and quilts.

### 3.2 Dance

In the United States, enslaved Africans had a different experience from those in the West Indies. The predominant religion was Catholicism in the West Indies, so slaves were given more freedom to participate in their native culture. The Catholic Church as well as the French and Spanish rulers did not object to their singing and dancing as long as it did not prevent their souls from being saved. Their drums and dancing were allowed in church, and unlike in the United States, they were regarded as human beings.

On the United States plantations, the Protestants did not regard the enslaved Africans as human. To them, slaves were no more than animals, and their singing and dancing were seen as wicked. They needed to be cleansed of their sins and “heathen practices” (Emery, 1988). The Christian slave masters did not disturb their slaves and were not interested in converting them to Christianity. The reasons were one, they were not sure if baptizing the slaves would mean that they should set them free afterwards; and two, they were afraid to have a large assembly of slaves attending worship. Many years passed before slave owners started to convert their slaves to Christianity. At that time, they were allowed very limited dancing in church. Several accounts speak of the *Ring Shout*; a dance performed in a counterclockwise circle whereby the participants shuffled their feet from side to side without lifting them from the ground (Emery, 1988; Glass, 1999; Haskins, 1990). “The Ring Shout is the oldest continuously practiced African-derived dance in the United States and is still performed in the Georgia Sea Islands today...it is also the oldest African American religious dance”(Glass, 1999, p. 11).

The enslaved Africans would gather to sing and dance at night when the hard day’s work was done, and often they would go into the woods to have freedom of expression. Saturday nights would become a time of celebration to lift their spirits because Sunday was a day of rest. Additionally, if slaves were given permission through a written pass, they could have sometimes visited other plantations for a particular dancing event. Masters still forced dancing after the planting and harvesting seasons for health reasons and for their own enjoyment. The enslaved Africans had also become the popular form of entertainment for whites.

After a time, slave masters started to sense that the drums had more meaning than they first thought. They suspected that the drums were being used to send signals to communicate with each other and with others on neighboring plantations. Masters, fearing that their slaves would conspire and rebel, prohibited the drums from being played. Much of the percussive, polyrhythmic African characteristics of dance developed into the Jig, which is a percussive forerunner of Tap where the dancer creates the rhythmic sounds with his feet primarily. *Master Juba* was the name given to dancers skilled in this style. African American Lewis Davis was one of the dancers who excelled in dancing the Jig.

Dancing started to take on a different form of expression which was created by a change in the type of music. The musical form had gone from drums to other types of instrumentation such as the fiddle and banjo. The difference in the music influenced the way movement was created and expressed. Additionally, blacks started to participate in other forms of European dances such as the *Quadrille*, incorporating some of their way of movement into them. Black and white dance directly affected the aesthetics of each other.

### 3.3 Literature

It was illegal to teach slaves to read and write; however, there were a few plantation owners who defied the law and taught slaves because of a particular fondness for them or a recognition of promising ability.

Phillis Wheatley (1754-84), a slave born in West Africa, is the first documented African American poet in the United States. While still a child, she was taught by the master's wife to read and write and had a book of poems published in London after being denied publication in Boston. Wheatley's book entitled, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773, was financed in Europe by Salima Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon.

Although Phillis Wheatley is credited with being the first published black poet, Lucy Terry, a 16 year old composed a poem in 1746 entitled, "Bars Fight." The poem was not published until 1893 in an article by George Sheldon entitled, "Negro Slavery in Old Deerfield" in the *New England Magazine*. There were no other known writings by her; however, she became widely known in Deerfield, Massachusetts as a storyteller. Jupiter Hammon is another slave who wrote religious poems before Wheatley.

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) was the first widely read autobiography by a former slave. In his work, he wants whites to change their view of blacks as subhuman, and whites as chosen by God. Equiano questions if the God of Christians taught whites to steal human beings and sell them. Phillis Wheatley, in her writings, also questioned the validity of slavery, especially for Christians, because she felt there should be spiritual equality for all Christians, regardless of color. Further, Benjamin Banneker also questioned slavery when he wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson who had slaves himself. Banneker asked why the principals of the Declaration of Independence should not apply to every American since "one universal Father hath given Being to us all." While the writings of Equiano, Wheatley, and Banneker did very little to persuade white America that their views were un-Christian-like and unconstitutional, their writings did prove that African Americans were intelligent enough to learn and think critically, as well as being capable of writing effectively.

The *Slave Narratives* became a very potent weapon against slavery. One of the most prominent writers and orators against slavery was Frederick Douglass. In his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Douglass gave a compelling picture of African American humanity through his personal experiences. *Slave Narratives* were autobiographical literature that gave some of the most memorable and effective written accounts of African American experiences before emancipation.

### 3.4 Music

Music being a very powerful, synthesizing force can connect people and community. As mentioned earlier, the drum was used for communication as well as just music making. Once it was discovered that drums were being used to convey messages, the drum was abolished. However, being a creative people, the Africans found a way to make music. They created music out of anything they could: their hands, feet, sticks, buckets, and pots and pans.

Soon afterwards, enslaved musicians learned to play the banjo. In West Africa, there is an instrument made from gourd and string called a "Cora" which is like a banjo, so they adapted very easily to it. They learned to play the fiddle as well and provided music and entertainment for whites at their dance functions.

### 3.5 Theater

It was unthinkable and unheard of for a black person to play a black role before the 1800s. Until that time, white men, who blackened their faces with burnt cork, played the roles of black men. Before 1750, white men played the roles of all females as well (Haskins, 1982).

When the United States declared its independence from Britain in 1776, African American characters were still being portrayed by whites. White people thought that was all well and good. Although blacks could not afford tickets to attend plays if they had been allowed, they did not like the fact that they were portrayed by whites. Furthermore, they did not like that they were always portrayed as slaves or servants when many African Americans were free and educated.

Blacks were productive in American life, and they contributed to it other than as slaves or servants. African Americans fought and died in the Revolutionary War, but the newly formed constitution did not contain an anti-slavery law. All areas of the creative arts continued to be discriminated against, and in theater black roles continued to be played by whites.

According to Haskins (1982):

By the early 1800s, there were enough freemen in some major cities to join together and create the first recorded black theater. Many blacks, slave and free, had felt the need to express themselves creatively on the stage long before the 1820s, but...theater needs an audience, and usually an audience that can pay at least a small admission. With the founding of the African Grove Theater in New York City in the 1820s, these conditions were finally met. People to write, stage, and act in the plays seemed to appear out of nowhere. In fact, they had been there all along waiting for their moment to come. (p.5)

The African Grove Theater was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett. It opened in September, 1821. The first performance, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, written and produced by Brown took place in 1823. The African American Company "provided the inspiration for the career of the great Negro tragedian, Ira Aldridge.... The theater was apparently harassed continuously by the police and groups of white rowdies, who finally destroyed the building. The African Company appears to have been dissolved in 1823 following this incident" (Emery, 1988, p. 180)

#### **4. Antebellum, Emancipation and Reconstruction**

The antebellum era was a period whereby whites, blacks and certain religious organizations joined forces to protest against slavery. They worked together to highlight and expose the injustices and inequities of slavery.

##### **4.1 Art**

Enslaved artisans were very productive during the antebellum era and created a substantial amount of artistic work. They had been highly trained by their artisan owners or other master artists because they were vital to the economics of the trade. Slaves helped to augment the slave-owner's income, and they did not have to release them like indentured slaves who held contracts. Moreover, teaching slaves their skills prevented these artisan masters from having to retrain apprentices every few years. Having these skills would become beneficial to the slave as well because possessing these skills would ultimately help him provide for a better life for his family.

The artistic skills discussed here are craftsmen skills. For a hundred years, a few slave artisans were creating products of wood, silver, iron, and pottery. By this time, some of them had produced pieces of fine quality furniture, metalwork and stoneware.

Free black artisans and urban slaves became so skilled that they dominated the market. They supplied both white and black patrons. Free black artisans were successful enough to give indenture-apprentice contracts to other blacks, which helped them to develop a future generation of artisans and sustain their own income as well. "Free black artisans were also able to provide manumission for their slave artisans, some of whom were relatives, and in their additional role as money lenders, to supply important financial resources for the African-American community" (Patton, 1998, p.56).

The artistic expression of African American artisans in the craft trades was primarily that of the master teachers who were white and from various European countries. These artists had moved from folk art to European influenced pieces. The artisans did not consider individual expression because the objective of their creations was for economic purposes, and they had to supply what was in demand. The trend of the time was modeled after the styles of Europe. They did not try to add their African expression to the work.

The Civil War (1861-1865) was the war between the North and the South, brought on by the belief in the North that there should not be slaves and the nullification of the fugitive slave laws, the anti-slavery movement, and other things. After Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860, seven southern states seceded from the Union, and the Confederacy was formed. That act precipitated the full-scale War Between the States. The North eventually defeated the South (Confederacy), the Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in the Confederacy on January 1, 1863, and the period known as the Reconstruction (1865-77) began.

The abolishment of slavery by the Emancipation Act certainly had a grave impact on blacks. Because they were free, their economic state changed tremendously. Blacks were no longer supported by their masters and were

forced to take care of themselves. The former slave artisans and other artists alike were at a disadvantage. They were forced to compete with whites and free blacks who already had a clientele base. Another disadvantage was that whites and free blacks also had knowledge and experience with the open market. These drawbacks forced former slave artisans to produce art-work in the realm of folk art primarily for their own community.

The social and economic conditions after the Civil War and the ending of slavery brought about an expansion of middle-class and wealthy African American communities, producing the fine artists. The social and economic change caused black artists to move away from the craft trades and brought aspirations toward other artistic expressions. This occurred mostly with mulattos whose parents could afford their education, and whose color would allow them access to a higher form of training in Europe. Robert Stuart Duncanson (1821-72) was the first major African American landscape artist. The shift caused a dilemma regarding the African American creative aesthetic. Should it be true to self, or move to a European concept?

#### 4.2 Dance

During the Antebellum, Emancipation and Reconstruction periods, many African Americans were moving to urban cities, doubling their population there as more and more enslaved Africans achieved freedom. Despite prejudices against the African Americans, they were living among, working, and socializing in some manner with whites. Acculturation caused dance to cross-fertilize as their association influenced each other.

Dances such as the Jig, Breakdown, and Juba were created by African Americans but were being performed by African and white Americans. Since whites always had the advantage, they found that they could make money by blackening their faces and imitating blacks in a negative, degrading way. During these periods, the form of dance and music called Minstrelsy was very much in demand for entertainment among white audiences, especially in the South.

White minstrel performers were working and making a successful living by portraying blacks as buffoons and slow thinking. In order for African American dancers to share in the highly popular minstrel entertainment, they had to also blacken their faces and paint on big white lips to corner a share of that entertainment market. Once African Americans were able to obtain work, they began to refine and change the stereotypical images of themselves as portrayed by whites.

Black minstrelsy evolved into the traveling shows of black vaudeville. Blacks continued to face segregation, disfranchisement and discrimination brought on by the Jim Crow Laws of Reconstruction. African American traveling performers led very hard and dangerous lives. They faced countless atrocities and threats. Additionally, these performers were being condemned by middle-class African Americans who preferred and focused on more refined classical forms of entertainment. Some of the dances that emerged from the traveling minstrels who gave superb shows were the Jig, Buck and Wing, and the very popular Cakewalk, which originated on the plantation. The traveling entertainment troupes also toured widely through Europe where they were greatly received and accepted without the prejudices they faced at home.

#### 4.3 Literature

Formerly enslaved males were not the only ones to write about their heroic struggles. According to Andrews (1992):

Formerly enslaved women, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet A. Jacobs, spoke and wrote of their equally heroic efforts to preserve their self-respect as women in spite of slavery's attempts to turn them into its helpless, hopeless victims. Female slave narrators joined with women abolitionists to urge white women in the North to take a public stand against slavery, regardless of those who would condemn such public activism as unladylike (p. 139).

The slave woman most famous for her heroics with the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, did not write an autobiographical record. However, many books, poems and plays have been written about her by both black and white writers.

Sojourner Truth (1797?-1883) was illiterate; however, she became one of the most active and eloquent orators of her time. She was an African American who was very important in the antislavery movement and in the struggle for women's rights. Her speech, *Ain't I a Woman*, delivered in 1852 at a Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio became one of the most famous speeches of the time.

In 1853, the first African American novel, *Clotel*, by William Wells Brown was published, and in 1859, two fictional accounts appeared by women, *The Two Offers*, by Frances Harper, and *Our Nig*, by Harriet Wilson.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was the first African American poet to achieve national recognition and had been referred to as the “poet laureate of the Negro race.” His first collection of poems, *Oak and Ivy*, was published in 1893. This work included one of his best known poems, *Sympathy*, from which Maya Angelou took the title of her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was considered the most accomplished literary artist of the time. He excelled in short fiction and became recognized when his story, *The Goophered Grapevine*, was published in 1887.

#### 4.4 Music

During the Civil War, African Americans who served in the armed forces but were segregated into their own troops would sing, as was the tradition of African Americans, in their camps at night. When the war was over, the minstrel’s folk music and syncopated beats gave rise to “ragtime,” which pianists like Scott Joplin and Eubie Blake played in saloons, taverns, and honky-tonks.

African Americans began to form their own communities in the Northern cities. With this, they were also becoming more intellectual in their pursuits. They began to perform and create more classical forms of music. Additionally, black gospel music began to crystalize in the Northern churches.

In the South, slaves generated music stemming from the oral folk tradition: spirituals composed in call-and-response style, work songs, field hollers, etc., all a cappella, unaccompanied by musical instrumentation. The Negro Spiritual, popularized by the African Methodist Church congregations, flourished as the new type of sacred song. Instrumental music was generally played with the banjo, flute, fiddle, bones and was used primarily to accompany dances and festivals.

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of the blues, the descendant of earlier folk songs. Early blues songs were sung by a soloist accompanied by an acoustic guitar. The blues strongly influenced the development of jazz as well as later styles of popular music such as rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues.

#### 4.5 Theater

After the close of the African Grove Theater, black characters continued to be portrayed by white actors in blackface. Some of the characters stereotyped were “Mammy,” “Sambo,” “Jezebel,” and “Uncle.” This type of theatrical performance was preferred in the South and continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. White people filled their theaters to be entertained by minstrels, in blackface, performing parodies or comedic impressions of blacks as happy, dim-witted and contented people. Furthermore, the American social, political and civil rights policy ignited another true to life character that whites could emulate, “Jim Crow.” There was no work for African-American performers. If they were to make a living, they were still forced to portray the untrue white idea of themselves, in blackface.

### 5. Twentieth Century and the Harlem Renaissance

African Americans were free by 1900 and had been responsible for, and providing for themselves for many years under great duress. They faced disfranchisement, discrimination, violence, lynching in the South, and unequal opportunities.

Then, the United States became engaged in World War I which increased the demand for American products; manufacturers, therefore, were badly in need of labor. Furthermore, the war stopped the flow of European immigrants, and this helped the availability of jobs for blacks. The economic situation became better for them.

During and following World War I, there was a great migration of African Americans from the South to the North and to Harlem; New York City was the final destination for many. Harlem was the place to be for all fields of the creative arts. “To those who settled there, Harlem was more than a neighborhood, they called it the Mecca of the New Negro, the Culture Capital of the Black World, the City of Refuge, and the Promised Land” (Wall, 1992, p. 269). By 1920, 150,000 African Americans lived in Harlem. The largest city in the United States now had a new, literate African American population that had come from all parts of the country and the Caribbean Islands. Other artists felt that Europe was the place for them to develop their skills.



Although the artistic endeavors of African Americans were more recognized and appreciated, racism and segregation still existed. For example, black singers, musicians, and dancers performed at the famous Cotton Club, but blacks were not allowed to patronize the club. Further, the black entertainers had to enter the Club through the back door.

### **5.1 Art**

As in the century before, following slavery, the dilemma with the African-American philosophy on its aesthetic was if it should be European or cultural. Scholars such as, W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, and Black Nationalist Leader, Marcus Garvey encouraged artists to be ethnically conscious in their creations. The Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded by William E. Harmon to aid African American artists, also wanted them to be true to their culture and demonstrate it in their productions. Visual artists were able to produce works with grants obtained from the Foundation. The Harmon Foundation sponsored a traveling exhibition that included works by William Artis, Richmond Barthe, Beauford Delaney, Meta Warrick Fuller, William H. Johnson, Lois Mailou Jones, and Hale Woodruff.

Aaron Douglas was one of the leading proponents of the visual arts during the Harlem Renaissance. He was encouraged by his teacher, Winold Reiss, to use his own cultural heritage as his subject matter. Douglas was one of the first American painters to be considered an Africanist. Other prominent artists during the period included Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley, Jr., Augusta Savage, James Lesesne Wells, Alma Thomas and James A. Porter.

### **5.2 Dance**

With the twentieth century came the Cakewalk, a plantation competition dance from the slavery era. It had become very popular by 1900 through its exposure in minstrel and vaudeville shows by blacks and whites. Other dances that became fads in the early 1900s were the Black Bottom, Charleston, Shimmy, Lindy Hop, Jitterbug, Ballin' the Jack, and the Big Apple.

African American musicals and revues opening before and during the Renaissance in New York, and traveling across the country as well as Europe were responsible for black dances receiving unparalleled attention both in the black and white communities. Then, movies and newsreels brought national and international attention to the Charleston and Lindy Hop, which became the rage, even among white *high society*.

The dynamic social activities, nightlife, clubs, and big bands of the Harlem Renaissance era made African American dance a cultural phenomenon, and a part of the American fabric. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Josephine Baker were two dancers who achieved fame in this era. By the "Great Depression" in 1929 and into the 1930s, dance had moved onto the concert stage, producing other great dancers of Modern/Contemporary dance styles.

### **5.3 Literature**

By the turn of the century, Booker T. Washington, of the Tuskegee Institute, had written his inspiring autobiography, for some African Americans, *Up from Slavery*. The essence of the book was that if black people were given a fair chance to obtain an education and productive work, they could provide for themselves. He also suggested that the way to accomplish success, in the South particularly was for blacks and whites to respect each other's desires. He felt that blacks should accept their political situation and try to change it gradually.

However, W.E.B. Dubois, the first black Ph. D. from Harvard University, and then a professor of sociology at Atlanta University, challenged Booker T. Washington's philosophy in his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*. Dubois contended that economic opportunity and power could not be achieved if blacks did not respect themselves enough to fight for the vote and other civil rights that would make them equal to whites.

The Harlem Renaissance was the period "when the Negro was in Vogue," according to Langston Hughes, who is considered the most famous writer of the time. Hughes was a prolific writer of poems, short stories, and a short film as well. Other well recognized writers of the Harlem Renaissance include: Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer, to name only a few.

African American women made contributions, although not as many as men, but were not as recognized due to the double edged sword of being black and female, doubly oppressed.

There were, however, Jessie Fauset, editor of the *Crisis*, and Nella Larsen, author of two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Zora Neal Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937 when the great artistic period was diminishing, but she is considered one of the great writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

#### 5.4 Music

As with the other creative arts, the argument prevailed. Should music remain the same folksongs and spirituals that represented the indigenous traditions of African Americans or should it be elevated to a European compositional style? The advocates of the "be true to self" philosophy, W.E. B. Dubois, Alain Locke, and Marcus Garvey, were joined by many musical artists regarding the question. Because African Americans were still struggling to achieve in the entertainment world, and perhaps to demonstrate that African Americans can produce any type of music, it was felt that European classics should be the way to go. Black classically trained concert musicians and composers began to achieve success and became recognized in this European genre of music. Nevertheless, with the controversy following on the heels of Ragtime, a new genre came forth, *Jazz*, which is considered "America's classical music." Jazz flourished, evolved and sustained, becoming popular throughout the world. Some of the most famous jazz musicians of the time were: Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, William "count" Basie, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum and Chick Webb.

#### 5.5 Theater

With African American artists focusing on black life and philosophy, they began creating representations that would depict both of those aspects. In 1923, the first serious play, *The Chip Woman's Fortune*, written by an African American playwright, Willis Richardson, was produced on Broadway. Other plays followed which included musicals. Two actors who flourished during that period were Paul Robeson and Florence Mills.

### 6. Conclusion

African American creative arts have evolved and undergone many changes since slavery through the Harlem Renaissance. The visual arts, dance, literature, music, and theater have changed along with the civil-rights, American policies, the social climate, and the economic status of African Americans. The last great change came with the Great Depression of 1929 when the Stock Market crashed sending the American economy into a tailspin. The creative arts could not maintain the same fervor; however, the flavors as well as many elements that are distinguishing characteristics have remained. More importantly, American culture has benefited from the integration, infusion and inculcation of African American creative arts into its cultural offering.

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