Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*, 1936

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

Into Bondage, 1936

Oil on canvas, 60 3/8 x 60 1/2 in. (153.4 x 153.7 cm)

Signed lower right: AARON DOUGLAS

Museum Purchase and partial gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr, The Evans-Tibbs Collection, 1996

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aaron Douglas, a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, was one of the first African American artists to draw on contemporary black culture as subject matter for his work. Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899, Douglas recognized his artistic ambition early. He attended the University of Nebraska where he was the only African American student pursuing art. After teaching high school art classes in Kansas City, Missouri, Douglas relocated and immersed himself in the New York City art world. Douglas' first commission was to illustrate Alain Locke's 1925 compilation of contemporary African American prose, The New Negro. The success of this project and others established Douglas as a leading artist in the rapidly developing Harlem Renaissance movement. Poet and writer Langston Hughes encouraged other African American artists to aspire to Douglas' example and to convey their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Douglas continued to create inspiring images for African Americans through several series of murals depicting black history. In 1935, Douglas formed the Harlem Artists Guild "to band all the Harlem artists together in a cultural group" and to lobby for African American artists to gain employment under the federal Works Progress Administration. Douglas left New York in 1937 to establish the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he remained active until 1976. An inspirational educator, Douglas influenced generations of African American artists.

SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

• If you had not studied history and the enslavement of Africans, could you still interpret the narrative of this work?
• How do you know the people are to become slaves?
• How is the composition affected by the concentric circles?
• The painting is composed of flat planes with visible brushstrokes and no shading. How does the artist achieve depth?

EXTENDED DIALOGUE

• What do think the gesture of the women on the left signifies? Does it indicate hope or despair?
• Why do you think Douglas chose not to depict this scene in a naturalistic manner? How does his style alter the meaning or your impression of the work?
• Look at the star and its ray of light shining in the middle of the canvas. Why do you think Douglas included the star? How would the mood change if the star was removed? What other symbols could the artist have included to give a sense of hope to the narrative?
• This painting was originally part of a four-painting series. If you had three more canvases to complete the series, what scenes from African American history would you choose to convey?

VOCABULARY

Harlem Renaissance: The period between 1919 and the early 1930s of burgeoning African American culture, which included visual art, theater, prose, and poetry, and was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. These African American intellectuals believed that increasing awareness of black culture through various art forms would reduce racial tensions and barriers in 20th century America.

Works Progress Administration: A federal government agency established in 1935 to provide work opportunities to those suffering in the Depression. The administration also set up the Federal Writer's Project and the Federal Arts Project to make jobs available to unemployed arts professionals.

Cubism: An artistic movement of the early 20th century lead by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Cubism abandoned the traditional fixed viewpoint, and instead explored a multiplicity of viewpoints to develop an accumulated idea of the subject resembling abstract, geometric forms.

Analogous colors: Two or three colors which are adjacent to each other on the color wheel. (i.e. orange, orange-red, red)

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ENDNOTES


