

The Harlem Renaissance

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The Harlem Renaissance

by ReadWorks

The Harlem Renaissance refers to an African American artistic, cultural, and intellectual movement between the 1920s and the 1930s. Although Harlem, New York, was the home to many prominent artists and writers within this movement, the Harlem Renaissance was a national movement.

Likewise, there was not a specific artistic or literary style that defined this movement. Instead, a participant in the Harlem Renaissance was a person who was committed to reflecting the African American experience through art. In fact, some of the most famous writers in this movement created a literary magazine called *Fire!!!* as a means to communicate the diversity of writing within Harlem's literary renaissance.



photograph of Claude McKay

This was clear in the drastic differences in tone, writing style, and subject matter between the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. Hughes wrote colloquially and relied heavily on blues music to create his unique poetic style. McKay, on the other hand, adhered to a traditional poetic form called the sonnet.

Langston Hughes

by ReadWorks



photograph of Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. As a child, Hughes frequently moved with his family, so he was exposed to many different communities and cultures from a young age. By the age of twelve, Hughes had lived in six different cities in America. Before publishing his first novel, Hughes also had the chance to travel abroad to countries including Mexico, Italy, and France. He worked many different jobs, from working as a nightclub doorman to driving a truck on a farm.

These experiences shaped him into a unique writer. His poetry was very open and observant. This writing style was new. The traditional writing style of earlier poets tended to be about abstract ideas. But most of Hughes's poetry was about concrete things in the outside world. Hughes wrote in a way that was understandable and relatable. Hughes wrote about racism in America. He also wrote about the beauty of African American culture.

The writings of Langston Hughes had a significant impact on the Harlem Renaissance. For many people, Hughes inspired a sense of pride and hope. His writing also inspired many people to become artists.

Jazz

by ReadWorks



Photograph of Duke Ellington's band (1943)

Jazz is a famous and beloved style of music that rose with the Harlem Renaissance. It was a very innovative form of music. It was not quite like any music form that came before it. However, it did rely on earlier music styles. African American musicians mixed elements of European music and African music to create jazz.

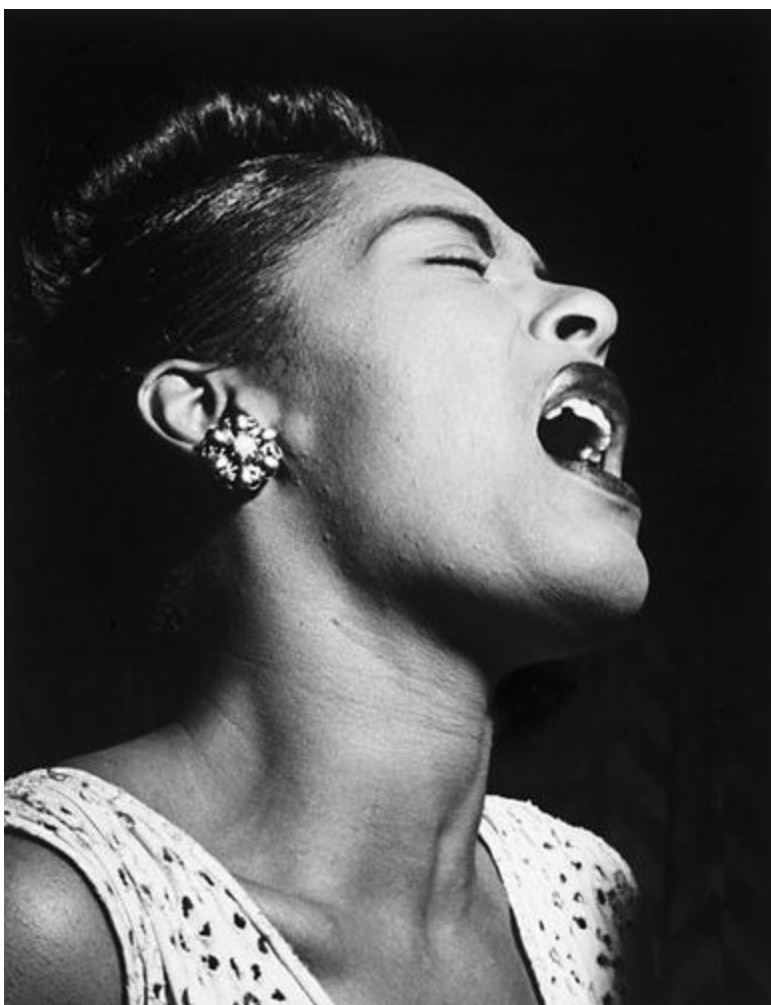
One of the most famous characteristics of jazz music is improvisation. Improvisation is when musicians make up the music as they play it. Since improvisation is a characteristic of jazz music, jazz musicians often have the freedom to change up the music they are playing. In fact, jazz music is free to be changed in the middle of a performance! A strong jazz musician must, therefore, be able to think and create music quickly.



Photo Credit: Herbert Behrens / Anefo (Nationaal Archief), CC BY-SA 3.0

Photograph of Louis Armstrong

There were many jazz musicians during the 20th century. One of the most popular jazz artists was Louis Armstrong. Have you ever heard of the song "What a Wonderful World"? Well, that was once sung by Louis Armstrong! He is also famous for his ability to improvise on the trumpet. Another famous jazz performer was Billie Holiday. She was a singer who could improvise with her voice. She is remembered for singing with emotion and passion.



Photograph of Billie Holiday singing

The Apollo Theater

by ReadWorks



Chris Bastian, CC-BY 2.0

Photograph of the Apollo Theater

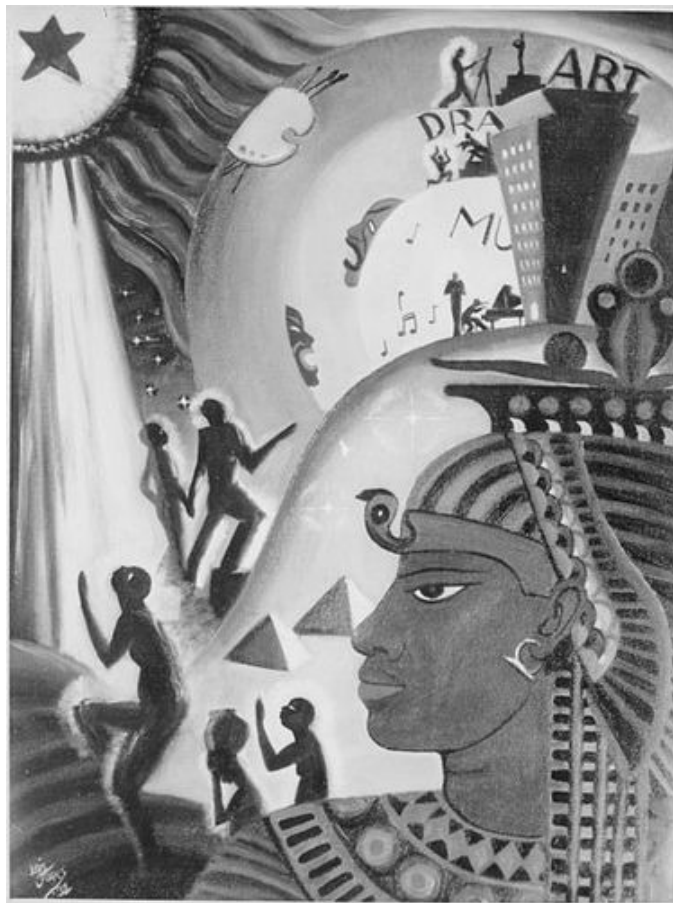
The Apollo Theater was very important in preserving the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. At the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the Apollo Theater opened its doors to black performers. This was a historical moment because the Apollo was the first theater to allow black people to perform.

Some of the best black performers performed at the Apollo. Icons like Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson, both young and unknown at the time, performed on the Apollo's stage. Artists who were famous at the time, like James Brown, also performed at the Apollo. Many black artists liked to play at the Apollo because it had an atmosphere of acceptance and excitement.

As theaters began to desegregate, fewer performers played at the Apollo. This meant that there was more competition between theaters. The Apollo eventually went bankrupt in the 1970s. In 1991, however, New York State bought the theater and turned it into a non-profit. In addition to giving artists the chance to perform, the nonprofit aims to help the local community through education programs.

Visual Art

by ReadWorks



"Ascent of Ethiopia" (1932), Painting by Lois Mailou Jones

During the Harlem Renaissance, visual artists used artistic styles developed in Africa, such as African folk art, as creative inspiration. Ancient Egyptian art was especially influential. Artists often used imagery and iconography associated with this period. For example, mummies appeared in multiple artistic works during this movement.



Photo Credit: Sharon Mollerus, CC-BY 2.0

Aspiration (1936), Painting by Aaron Douglas

The most famous American artist was painter Aaron Douglas. Like the Egyptians, he painted geometric and two-dimensional profiles of human figures. His art also typically reflected a strong sense of religious belief. Another notable artist was sculptor Selma Burke. Her sculpture of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt became very famous and was later used to model his image on the dime.



Photo Credit: Peter A. Juley & Son, Smithsonian Institution

Photograph of Selma Burke in her studio

As a testament to how widespread the Harlem Renaissance was, most painters and sculptors did not live in New York. They lived in Paris! Ideas were still communicated across borders, however. Most artists showed their works in traveling exhibitions, which meant that American visual artists probably had the opportunity to see a few exhibitions of their Parisian peers. There were also international art contests that facilitated dialogue between artists from all over the globe.

Zora Neale Hurston

by ReadWorks



Photograph of Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Eatonville, Florida. Zora eventually left Eatonville to attend Howard University, a historically-black university in Washington D.C. After graduating, she moved to New York. There, she experienced discrimination and racism.

Race and racism became central themes in Zora's writing. One of Zora's most famous quotes discusses her feeling of isolation as a black woman in America: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." She wrote this quote in a personal essay entitled "How It Feels to be Colored Me."

In addition to writing about race in America, Zora wrote about love, personal growth, and freedom. Zora's most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, tells the story of a woman named Janie Crawford, who lives in Eatonville, FL. Janie marries three times before

discovering that loving herself is the most important kind of love. Because Zora set the novel in her hometown, many people believe that the story is autobiographical.

This novel is now celebrated as an American masterpiece. It has also made Zora a world-famous writer. She is now considered to have been one of the most important writers of the 20th century.



Photograph of Zora Neale Hurston (1940)