



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)

Born in Topeka, Kan., in 1899, Aaron Douglas was an intellectual and distinguished artist during the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas's mother encouraged him to express his creativity at a young age, and his interest in art continued to grow throughout his childhood.

Douglas attended college at the University of Nebraska where he received his B.A. in Fine Arts in 1922. He then returned to Kansas City for a brief time to teach art to high school students and received a B.A. from the University of Kansas in 1923. However, he felt compelled to further his education and explore his cultural heritage in New York City.

While in New York City, Douglas met and studied with Winold Reiss, a German illustrator who encouraged Douglas to use African-American themes and cultural heritage for inspiration in his works. Douglas reigned as an elite artist sought by many writers and intellectuals to produce illustrations for prominent books and magazines. He was a frequent contributor to popular journals including the NAACP's "The Crisis" and The Urban League's "Opportunity." Douglas's illustrations were featured in reputed Renaissance works such as Alain Locke's classic anthology of black writers "The New Negro" (1925) and James Weldon Johnson's "God's Trombones" (1927).

Aaron Douglas earned a Masters in Fine Arts from Columbia University, and received a grant to study art in Paris for two years. Upon his return to New York, he and his wife, Alta, entertained Harlem's cultural elite. He became known for his synthesized Cubist illustrations in black and white, as well as his murals that celebrate African-American achievement. One of his most notable pieces is a four-series mural titled "Aspects of Negro Life" that was created for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library.

In 1928, Douglas was named the first president of the Harlem Artists Guild, an organization that propelled the celebration of African-American Visual Artists' creations. It also allowed African-American artists to get work under the U.S. Government's Works Progress Administration.

Douglas and his wife moved to Nashville, Tenn., in 1939, where he founded the Art Department at Fisk University. He served as chair of the Department of Education until he retired in 1966 and was later hailed as the "Father of Black American Art." Douglas died in 1979.

