

Romare Bearden

1911–1988, American

The Blues Has Got Me

1944

Color ink, watercolor and
India ink on paper

SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, gift of Walter O. Evans and
Mrs. Linda J. Evans

Harlem native Romare Bearden was introduced to many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, artists, and advocates through his mother, Bessye, a social worker, political activist, and New York editor for the *Chicago Defender*. She often entertained prominent figures of the era at their home. This environment influenced Bearden's artistic expression, career as an artist, and love for jazz music. His mentors were Charles Alston (his cousin by marriage) and Augusta Savage.

Before Bearden's collage period, he practiced abstraction, as shown in this work, where he depicted a musical trio performing around a table. The bold green, orange, brown, yellow, and purple colors, as well as fragmented figures and instruments, suggest movement to syncopated rhythms, visually translating the power of the blues into a mixture of struggle, joy, and resilience.

William H. Johnson

1901–1970, American

Jitterbugs V

1941–42

Oil on board

Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA

Born in South Carolina, William H. Johnson moved to New York when he was just seventeen. His journey was part of the Great Migration, which saw a mass exodus of African Americans leaving the South to seek greater opportunities in other parts of the United States. He earned enough money, working several jobs, to attend the National Academy of Design in New York City in the 1940s.

Working as a screen printer and artist instructor at the Harlem Community Art Center, Johnson developed his signature style utilizing flat forms and simplified shapes that he applied to bright planes. This painting shows a couple participating in the titular swing dance that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, known for its high energy, twirls, and fast-paced movements. The orange and red trumpets and yellow drums visualize the loud, energizing rhythms that would have inspired the man as he swung his partner into the air.

Hale Woodruff

1900–1980, American

Untitled (With Dove)

1935

Oil on board

Collection of the Clark County-Las Vegas Library District

Hale Woodruff was a painter, printmaker, and muralist known for depicting powerful compositions of historical subjects. He grew up in Nashville and began his career in high school as a cartoonist for the *Pearl High Voice*. He moved to the Midwest to study at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1927, Woodruff went to Paris to study European modernism. In 1929, at the start of the Great Depression, he returned to the United States to teach in Atlanta. *Untitled (With Dove)* was painted when he traveled to Mexico to study with the renowned Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. There, Woodruff learned fresco painting. Rivera's social realist style is reflected in this representational work, which shows men and women gathering in a relaxed, communal setting while a dove perches above—a symbol of peace, solidarity, and collective strength.

Griffith J. Davis

1923–1993, American

Pocket Book Edition Cover for *The Ways of White Folks*

1947

Inkjet print

Collection of the Griffith J. Davis Photographs and Archives

Photographer, journalist, and U.S. Foreign Service Officer Griffith J. Davis was introduced to photography at Atlanta University Laboratory High School. After serving in World War II, he attended Morehouse College and took Langston Hughes's creative writing class at Atlanta University. In 1948, Davis enrolled in Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism on the recommendation of Hughes. While there, he rented a room in the writer's home. This iconic photograph of the author at his typewriter was used on the Vintage edition of Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*.

Benny Andrews

1930–2006, American

I, Too, from the series **Langston Hughes**

2005

Oil on joined paper with
painted fabric and cut paper

Collection of the Andrews-Humphrey Family, courtesy Michael
Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

Just as Langston Hughes ended every reading and lecture with a recitation of “I, Too,” this exhibition ends with Benny Andrews’s titular painting, paired with the inspirational poem. Both the poem and painting express a desire for an inclusive future and racial equality. The figure in the artwork optimistically looks toward the sky while stretching his arms out wide. Andrews exaggerated the figure’s reach by elongating his arms across the composition. Similarly, the subject’s orange tie lifts into the air in a symbolic gesture that embraces the potential of the American Dream.

Benny Andrews

1930–2006, American

Harlem, from the Langston Hughes Series

2005

Oil on joined paper with
painted fabric and cut paper

Collection of the Andrews-Humphrey
Family; courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

Benny Andrews was an educator, activist, and artist who illustrated African American life in the context of broader social and historical narratives. In his *Langston Hughes Series*, he visually animated the world Hughes described with words. In this work on paper, Andrews emblemized the collective struggle and fatigue of people standing at a bus stop—an everyday urban setting on a cloudy day. He depicted people of various professions, who all possess expressions of exhaustion as they wait for change and progress.

Archibald J. Motley Jr.

1891–1981, American

Black Belt

1934

Oil on canvas

Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA; gift of the Harmon Foundation

Archibald J. Motley Jr. studied painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating in 1918. In 1929, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled him to travel to France to study classical art. Although Motley was based in Chicago, his works communicated the Harlem Renaissance's celebration of Black progress.

In *Black Belt*, Motley used a rich palette to portray a bustling evening in Bronzeville, a Black community in Chicago during the jazz era. In his effort to depict African American society of the 1930s, Motley populated the scene with a variety of people: a policeman, taxi driver, man buying a newspaper, and finely dressed nightlife patrons wearing bright dresses and neckties, all of which suggest upward mobility in the community. The exaggerated facial expressions of the members of the bustling crowd in the foreground convey the activity in the air, while lights illuminate the store, club, and hotel behind them.

David Shrobe

Born 1974, American

Surveyors of Stars

2021

Oil and acrylic on canvas, acrylic on wood, wood furniture parts, acrylic on flocking, linoleum floor tile, printed silk, wool chambray and acrylic fabric, and wood mounted on carved wood

The Speyer Family Collection

David Shrobe, a fourth-generation Harlemites, creates assemblage paintings made partly from repurposed everyday materials. He combines these elements to form multilayered compositions that blend portraiture with abstraction, while paying homage to his ancestors.

This painting depicts a father and son on a mythical journey of flight. Their intertwined bodies signal their familial connection as they soar over a toppled white Confederate statue. The severed head implies a poignant shift in power, while an ancestral figure stands behind the father and son, silently protecting them in their endeavor.

Hugo Gellert

1892–1985, Hungarian American

Langston Hughes

1935

Charcoal, gouache, and
graphite on paper

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery,
New York

Hugo Gellert was a Hungarian American artist and social activist known for his Marxist and Communist subjects. He made illustrations for the *New Masses*, a leftist magazine that circulated from 1926 to 1948. He and Hughes, who wrote for the magazine, met through social networks that supported the Communist Party and labor movements.

Gellert created this drawing to honor their shared commitment to workers' rights and racial equity. He sketched the author in a social realist style that heroized the working class in the 1930s. Hughes's facial expression, defined by dark, angular lines, conveys his intense focus on human adversity.

Aaron Douglas

1899–1979, American

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

1941

Pen, India ink, and graphite on paper

SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, gift of Walter O. Evans and Mrs. Linda J. Evans

Aaron Douglas, a painter, muralist, and illustrator, is often referred to as the “Father of Black American Art.” He received his fine arts degree from the University of Nebraska in 1922 and moved to New York in 1925. There, he worked with other figures of the Harlem Renaissance and was mentored by painter Winold Reiss, who encouraged him to embrace African American culture in his work. Douglas created illustrations to accompany the writings of Black scholars and artists from the period.

This drawing was inspired by Langston Hughes’s famous poem of the same name. Douglas portrayed his subject stretched out, reclining along the bank of a river, which is defined by elongated black lines.

Chase R. McCurdy

Born 1989, American

(left)

Emergence

(right)

(entering) HER Universe

from the series **Journey**

2022

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the artist and
Thirty-Three Gallery (33.G)

Chase R. McCurdy is a third-generation Las Vegas native whose art explores Black futurism through the visualization of highly abstracted, imaginary terrains. The two works here from his *Journey* series are rendered in a similar palette. Each contains an ovular form in the center of the composition that represents a feminine presence who encounters a male one rendered in silhouette in the foreground. Each canvas thus signifies two beings in the process of forming a harmonious union. The paintings were inspired by Langston Hughes's poem "College Formal: Renaissance Casino," about burgeoning love in Harlem.

Beauford Delaney

1901–1979, American

Portrait of Ella Fitzgerald

1968

Oil on canvas

SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, gift
of Walter O. Evans and Mrs. Linda J. Evans

Originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, modernist Beauford Delaney moved to Boston after high school to study classical art. There he met writer and civil rights advocate James Weldon Johnson, among others, and learned about Black activism and politics. The artist relocated to Harlem in 1929, eager to participate in the cultural renaissance occurring there.

Delaney's paintings and drawings range from representational to abstract styles and are notable for their vibrant yellows and rich textures. Here, focusing solely on the visage of Ella Fitzgerald, he celebrated the "First Lady of Song." He depicted her face surrounded by a sea of yellow, as if she were a bright light capable of transforming her surroundings. The bold application of color underscored the warmth of Fitzgerald's voice and how it illuminated concert halls and jazz venues. The luminous quality of Delaney's works was noted by his friend, writer and civil rights activist, James Baldwin, who wrote, "Perhaps I am so struck by the light in Beauford's paintings because he comes from darkness—as I do, as, in fact, we all do."

Arvie Smith

Born 1938, American

Fine Sugar Hill

2023

Oil on canvas

Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, gift of Barbara and Stephen Heyman

Although Arvie Smith was introduced to art as a child, when his grandfather gave him a book about the Sistine Chapel, it was nearly fifty years later before Smith graduated with a BFA from the Pacific Northwest School of Art. He later earned an MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art and was a studio assistant to Abstract Expressionist painter Grace Hartigan (1922-2008). About his work he states: “my paintings are tableaux of metaphors, icons, and popularized tropes to address contemporary racial politics. I address my viewers with a warm, vibrant palette, humor, rhythm, and movement punctuated by the derogatory stereotypes created to define Black bodies.”

This work relates to Langston Hughes’s 1942 poem “Harlem Sweeties.” The artist interpreted this poem with female dancers of various complexions who wear dance costumes while stretching and relaxing on the stairs of a brownstone in Sugar Hill. A historic neighborhood in Harlem, Sugar Hill is known for its Victorian-era mansions that were once the homes of prominent African American residents who lived there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Augusta Savage

1892–1962, American

Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)

1939

Cast silver oxide

Melvin Holmes Collection of African American Art, Burlington, NC

Born in Florida, Augusta Savage began sculpting as a child, using the red clay found in her neighborhood. She moved to New York in 1921 and graduated from the Cooper Union, completing her four-year degree in just three years. She also won a full scholarship to study near Paris at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts but was not able to attend when the award was withdrawn because she was Black. A pioneering woman in the arts, she was appointed the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center in 1937, where she would have a great influence on younger artists like Norman Lewis.

In 1937, Savage was commissioned to craft a large-scale plaster sculpture for the 1939 New York World's Fair—the only African American woman to receive this distinction. The resulting work showed Black singers dressed in choir robes—their bodies, arranged in descending height, forming the shape of a harp. The title was inspired by the poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900) by James Weldon Johnson, which was later set to music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. Savage created the monument (later dubbed *The Harp*) to symbolize the significant contributions African Americans had made to music. This maquette, fashioned as a souvenir for the fair, is a small replica of the larger work. The original was destroyed after the exposition because there wasn't enough funding to move and preserve it.



Augusta Savage with unfinished sculpture,
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1939

Norman Lewis

1909–1979, American

Langston Hughes

1938

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Norman Lewis Estate, courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

Norman Lewis was a Harlem native, of Bermudian descent, and primarily a self-taught artist. He received private lessons from sculptor Augusta Savage at the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts and later continued his education at Columbia University. In the 1930s, Lewis worked in a socially-conscious figurative style (or social realist), which he favored in order to draw attention to contemporary issues. He is widely known, however, as a nonobjective painter. Indeed, he was one of the original Abstract Expressionists who met in the legendary Studio 35, and the only one of the so-called Irascibles who was Black.

Prior to becoming an Abstract Expressionist in the late 1940s, however, he experimented with Surrealism, Cubism and geometric abstraction in his compositions, as seen in this portrait of Langston Hughes. Here, Lewis portrayed the writer almost sculpturally, as if he were painting a bust or an African mask—the influence of African art on Cubism is, of course, well-documented. The painting serves as an important link between Lewis and Hughes, suggesting the respect Lewis had for the “people’s poet,” whom he would have read along with other giants of the Harlem Renaissance, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke.

Deborah Willis

Born 1948, American

Downtown Baptist Church on Lenox Street, 2021

Sundays in Church, Ruth's (Mom), 2020

Church on 145th Street, 2012

A Visit to Langston Hughes's Harlem Residence, 2019

Untitled, 2019

The Upper Room, 2012

All, from the series, **Sundays in Harlem**

Chromogenic print

Courtesy of the artist

American visual artist and educator Deborah Willis chairs the Department of Photography and Imaging at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Her groundbreaking book, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*, was the first scholarly examination of African American photography in the United States.

Willis's *Sundays in Harlem* series was inspired by the fictional Harlem resident Jesse B. Semple, created by Langston Hughes in his *Chicago Defender* newspaper column. Willis writes about her work:

I attempt to weave Hughes's narrative of an imagined past into my contemporary photos, to evoke the beauty and spirituality of cultural memory. My photography in Harlem on Sunday afternoons revisits the Langston Hughes world of Jesse B. Semple's Harlem. I am intrigued by Hughes's ability to describe his love for the Harlem community and to express it through the voice of an imagined character. As was the case with Jesse B. Semple, the contemporary reality that I find—a complex web of politics, race and identity—is not so simple at all. My camera unravels these complex tales, offering a visual response to

Hughes's narrator that focuses on public art found on Harlem streets.

Charles Alston

1907–1977, American

Seated View

1970

Pastel on paper

SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, gift of Walter O. Evans and Mrs. Linda J. Evans

Charles Alston migrated from North Carolina to Harlem in 1913. He graduated from Columbia University in 1929 with a degree in fine arts, becoming a muralist, illustrator, sculptor, and painter. Alston worked in many organizational roles at community centers across Harlem and became a foundational figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He cofounded the Harlem Art Workshop in 1934, a program funded by the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project that helped create employment opportunities for Harlem artists. Some of his mentees included Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, who was his cousin by marriage. In 1963, Alston became a founding member of the artist collective Spiral, active during the civil rights movement and instrumental in increasing the representation of Black artists in galleries and museums.

Alston's seated portraits are known for their serene yet powerful presence. As was typical in his work, this drawing demonstrates his shift between abstract and figurative styles, as the subject appears both solid and ethereal in space. Alston sketched his model's upright posture in angular lines and with architectonic shapes that recall Cubism and underscore the multidimensionality of the Black man he depicted.

Kwame Brathwaite

1938–2023, American

Untitled (Model who embraced natural hairstyles at AJASS photoshoot)

c. 1970

Archival pigment print

Collection of the Kwame Brathwaite Estate, courtesy Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles

Kwame Braithwaite began studying photography as a teen. In 1956, he cofounded the African Jazz Art Society & Studios (AJASS). The organization extended the Harlem Renaissance's promotion of Black pride with the development of the Black Is Beautiful movement. Braithwaite's photography, and the movement in general, sought to challenge white ideals of beauty with a celebration of the characteristics of African American identity, such as natural hairstyles and dark skin.

The campaign gained momentum in Harlem and the Bronx in the 1960s to embrace Black culture and inspire dignity in Black heritage and achievements. As Hoyt Fuller wrote: "Across this country, young black men and women have been infected with a fever of affirmation. They are saying, 'We are black and beautiful.'" In 1962, AJASS established the Grandassa Models, ambassadors of the cause. The name refers to Africa and was inspired by the term "Grandassaland," invented by the Black nationalist Carlos Cooks. Significantly, the crusade offered a new definition of American beauty.

Glenn Ligon

Born 1960, American

(left)

Untitled (America/Me)

2022

Inkjet print with ink

(right)

Untitled (America)

2015

Screenprint

Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, purchased with funds from the Hoppe/Deming Art Acquisition Endowment

Glenn Ligon often incorporates literary and historical text in his compositions to express subjects relating to race, power, language, identity, and sexuality. The prints shown here feature different images of the artist's iconic neon work *America* (2008). His starting point for *Untitled (America)* was an installation image of the neon sculpture, which he then subjected to low-tech copying and transferring techniques, resulting in a degraded image of the original work, whose tones were reversed. In *Untitled (America/Me)*, Ligon cleverly drew X marks over the majority of the letters so that only the word "Me" is visible. This distortion and fragmentation highlights tensions between the ideal of freedom and lived racial and social inequities and questions what it means to belong to this country. These works are paired with an excerpt from Langston Hughes's seminal poem "Let America Be America Again."

Isaac Julien

Born 1960, English

Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Inkjet print daisec face-mounted
to acrylic

The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

British filmmaker and photographer Isaac Julien explored Black and queer life in *Looking for Langston*, a body of work that centers on a black-and-white 16mm film made during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Through a combination of archival footage of Harlem in the 1920s and scripted scenes, Julien imagined Hughes's life with friends, lovers, and fellow artists during the Harlem Renaissance. The impressionistic reenactments conjure the era's artistic and literary vitality and pay homage to the experiences of Black, gay men, who lived in the shadows of the time. Throughout the film, the characters look for the poet but never find him, which honors Hughes's private lifestyle. The photographs shown here are stills from the film. Scholars believe Hughes alluded to his homosexuality in the "Poem (To F. S.)," originally published in *The Crisis* in 1925, and "Café: 3 a.m." from 1951, where the writer criticized the behavior of anti-gay police during an age when same-sex activity was illegal in the United States.

Barkley L. Hendricks

1945–2017, American

(left to right)

Grand Master, from the Langston Hughes Series

1983

Watercolor, graphite,
oil stick, and seal on paper

Vanessa's Blue Dress, from the Langston Hughes Series

1983

Graphite and colored pencil on paper

Promised Land Man #2, from the Langston Hughes Series #2

1983

Graphite and pastel on paper

Collection of the Barkley L. Hendricks Estate, courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Barkley L. Hendricks is known for his life-size portraits that depict everyday African Americans exuding confidence and style. His mixed-media works on view here differ in their approach. The *Langston Hughes Series* shows framed television sets that signify how Hughes's writing is filtered through an evolving media landscape.

In *Grand Master*, Hendricks rendered silhouettes of rappers and abstract red and yellow dots to suggest how Hughes's pioneering, syncopated writing continued through rap into the 1980s. At the bottom of the composition, the words "Ask Your Mama" appear, referring to a 1961 Hughes poem that contemporary musicians have used for inspiration.

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Isaac Julien

Born 1960, English

(left)

Film-Noir Staircase (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Inkjet print Diasec face-mounted
to acrylic

Collection of Brooke Hartzell and Tad Freese, courtesy Jessica
Silverman Gallery

(right)

Hommage Noir (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery,
San Francisco

Chase R. McCurdy

Born 1989, American

(left)

Emergence

(right)

(entering) HER Universe

from the series **Journey**

2022

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the artist and
Thirty-Three Gallery (33.G)

Chase R. McCurdy is a third-generation Las Vegas native whose art explores Black futurism through the visualization of highly abstracted, imaginary terrains. The two works here from his *Journey* series are rendered in a similar palette. Each contains an ovular form in the center of the composition that represents a feminine presence who encounters a male one rendered in silhouette in the foreground. Each canvas thus signifies two beings in the process of forming a harmonious union. The paintings were inspired by Langston Hughes's poem "College Formal: Renaissance Casino," about burgeoning love in Harlem.

Griffith J. Davis

1923–1993, American

**Langston Hughes Interviews Dizzy
Gillespie Backstage at the Apollo Theater
in New York City**

1949

**Langston Hughes Signs Autographs for
Students at the David T. Howard Jr. High
School in Atlanta, Georgia**

1947

Inkjet print

Collection of the Griffith J. Davis Photographs and Archives

(clockwise from top left)

Gordon Parks

1912–2006, American

Langston Hughes

1941

Gelatin silver print

Gordon Parks developed a love for photography in 1937 after viewing pictures taken by Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and other employees of the Farm Security Administration, a U.S. government agency that documented impoverished workers. He began his practice by purchasing a camera from a pawnshop in Seattle and teaching himself how to use it. Throughout his career, he utilized his lens to fight poverty and racism.

In 1940, Parks began working at the South Side Community Art Center, a key institution in the Chicago Black Renaissance, and met Langston Hughes, who cofounded the Skyloft Players theater group at the center. Parks took this photograph while the writer was developing his play *The Sun Do Move* (1942).

P-40 in Line for Takeoff, Selfridge Field, Michigan

1943

Gelatin silver print

In 1942, Gordon Parks was hired as the first African American correspondent for the Office of War Information. He was assigned to photograph the training of the first Black fighter pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps (332nd Fighter Group) at Selfridge Field, Michigan. These images show the men training and enjoying well deserved time off. In Parks's autobiography he states, "We sat about the ready huts telling jokes and playing blackjack or poker, sniffing now and then at the sky; then, when the clouds lifted enough for takeoff, we would hurry to the ships and fly until chow time."

Pilots Gambling, Selfridge Field, Michigan

1943

Gelatin silver print

**Department Store,
Mobile, Alabama**

1956

Archival pigment print

Collection of the Gordon Parks Foundation,
courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

