

[Intro Text]

When Langston Hughes Came to Town

This exhibition explores Langston Hughes's history and legacy in Nevada and highlights his vital contributions to the Harlem Renaissance and American culture. James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1901. An author with a distinctive style inspired by blues and jazz rhythms, he documented all facets of the Black experience through multiple forms of writing. He became best known for his incisive poetry that continues to resonate today.

When Langston Hughes Came to Town begins with a unique display of archival photographs, ephemera, and short stories Hughes wrote that were informed by his visits to the Silver State. The writer's first trip to Nevada occurred in 1932, when he investigated unfair working conditions at the Boulder (now Hoover) Dam project. He returned to the state in 1934, making a first, unexpected trip to Reno, which inspired a longer stay later on.

Hughes's time in New York City, where he was a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance, is also a key component of this exhibition. The second gallery features artworks of the period, highlighting the influence of the vibrant cultural period of the 1920s. Artists in this gallery include Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Norman Lewis, and Augusta Savage.

The last galleries explore Hughes's influence on succeeding generations of artists. Artworks are paired with related poems to underscore the relationship between the visual and written art forms. Artists include Benny Andrews, Kwame Brathwaite, Barkley L. Hendricks, Isaac Julien, Gordon Parks, and Deborah Willis.

Hughes continued to write poetry, theatrical performances, stories, songs, and lectures until his death in 1967. Importantly, the exhibition demonstrates that the legacy of the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race" continues today, and his significant contributions augment our understanding of African American culture.

When Langston Hughes Came to Town is organized by the Nevada Museum of Art, by Carmen Beals, associate curator and outreach director.

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Langston Hughes in Southern Nevada

This gallery features photographic documentation, magazines, and other ephemera related to Hughes's visits to Nevada in 1932 and 1934. His first trip to the Silver State was part of a cross-country tour that started in the American South, where he set out to visit Black colleges and universities. This was during the Great Depression, and Hughes directly witnessed how Black people were suffering from poverty and Jim Crow laws.

Hughes visited southern Nevada in 1932, when he and Loren Miller, attorney and editor of the *California Eagle* newspaper, traveled to the region with poet Norman Macleod to visit the federally funded Boulder (now Hoover) Dam construction site in Boulder City. While there, they interviewed two Black men and other laborers trying to obtain employment on the project. The writers later published articles in the *California Eagle* that helped to generate awareness about the racial discrimination and poor working conditions. The photos on display here document their visit to the Boulder Dam project, the Black workers who were eventually hired, and a poem written by Norman Macleod inspired by the visit. The group also traveled to Las Vegas, where Hughes took a photo of his friends.

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Langston Hughes in Reno

In 1934, while Hughes was visiting Carmel, California, labor strikes broke out in ports along the West Coast as longshoremen fought for unionization and better wages. In response to the protests, committees were formed to protect the shipping industry and retaliate against increased political activism in San Francisco and surrounding communities. A defining moment for the writer came amid the escalating tensions, when his support for the strikes led to a threat of being tarred and feathered. As a result, he spontaneously purchased a train ticket to Reno in September, but stayed only a brief time. He enjoyed his experience so much,

however, that he decided to return the following month for what was supposed to be a six-week stay.

While in Reno, Hughes rented a room in a Black boarding house, managed by Helen Hubbard, for \$2.50 a week. He wrote about this time there, describing how he and the other boarders pooled their money to purchase meals since they were not allowed in public restaurants. On view nearby are letters, articles, and manuscripts that he wrote in Reno, including two short stories, “Slice ’em Down” and “On the Road,” that were published in *Esquire* magazine. Hughes also spent time hiking; visiting segregated establishments, like the Dixie Club; and gambling at Chinaman’s, one of the few places in Reno that accepted customers of color. His trip abruptly ended after a month, however, when he received word that his father, who lived in Mexico, was ill and eventually died before Hughes arrived.

Additional research was provided by historians Alex Albright and Alicia Barber, PhD.

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The Harlem Renaissance: “When the Negro was in vogue”

The artwork featured in this gallery highlights Hughes’s deep involvement in the Harlem Renaissance—an arts and cultural movement that began in Harlem, New York, after the Great Migration. Hughes often wrote about the vibrant nightlife of the era after being introduced to it as a student at Columbia University in 1921. The movement promoted literature, music, visual arts, and scholarship as vehicles to uplift the Black community. Legendary artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals who participated are on view here.

In 1926, Hughes worked with Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennet, John P. Davis, and Aaron Douglas on the magazine, *Fire!!*: *A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. Although only one edition was published due to limited funding, a reproduction of it is included here.

The gallery showcases work by Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Norman Lewis, and Augusta Savage. After the Harlem Renaissance and during the Great Depression, artists of the period attempted to find employment with the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project, created under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which funded the Harlem Community Art Center, run by Alston and Savage.

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The Next Generation

The art featured in the following two galleries highlight Langston Hughes's enduring influence on subsequent generations of artists. His writing inspired them to further explore themes rooted in the Harlem Renaissance—identity, social justice, and the Black experience. Each piece is paired with a key poem by Hughes that informed and influenced the artist's vision.

In the 1940s, during World War II, Hughes spent an extended period in Chicago, where he became a leading figure in the Black cultural movement, and met the emerging photographer Gordon Parks. The continuation of Hughes's legacy is evident in the work of photographer Kwame Brathwaite, who, like the poet, celebrated African heritage and working-class Black life. Brathwaite co-founded the African Jazz Art Society & Studios (AJASS), a collective that promoted Black pride, jazz, visual arts, and Pan-Africanism. Although Hughes never publicly identified as gay, scholars have speculated about his sexuality based on unpublished writings, his private life, and the themes explored in some of his poetry. British filmmaker and photographer Isaac Julien reimagines this complex and sometimes overlooked facet of Hughes's identity in his series *Looking for Langston*.

The final gallery presents contemporary works by Benny Andrews, Barkley L. Hendricks, Glenn Ligon, Chase R. McCurdy, David Shrobe, Arvie Smith, and Deborah Willis, that again engage with Hughes's writings and reinterpret his themes in a range of mediums. In doing so, these living artists breathe new life into his voice, ensuring that future generations connect with his profound body of work in innovative and meaningful ways.