Museums

The dazzling Harlem Renaissance that flowered nearly a century ago celebrated in Ohio

By Sebastian Smee
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COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Harlem Renaissance kicked off after a summer of bloody race-related riots in 1919. It flourished in the 1920s and ’30s, a mere half-century after the abolition of slavery, amid a nationwide revival of the Ku Klux Klan.

The context suggests immediately how absurd it would be to divorce the Harlem Renaissance from questions of sociology and — most obviously — race. And yet it’s worth insisting that what makes the Harlem Renaissance special — what makes it such a shining moment in American history — is its legacy of literary, artistic and musical brilliance.

That’s why it matters that “I, Too, Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100,” a wonderful show at the Columbus Museum of Art, is named for a poem by Langston Hughes. (“Besides,” the poem concludes, “they’ll see how beautiful I am/ And be ashamed,–/ I, too, am America.”)

That’s why it matters that the first works in the show are portraits of artists and writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas and W.E.B. Du Bois: They were among the bold, creative spirits who made the Harlem Renaissance happen.

And that’s why it matters that, displayed throughout the exhibition, are dozens of original editions of the magazines and books they created. Among them: “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” the March 1925 issue of Survey Graphic magazine compiled by Alaine Locke; and “The New Negro,” the expanded anthology it spawned later that year. No publications did more to shape what became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

“I, Too, Sing America” was put together by Wil Haygood, who, at 64, is a first-time curator. He’s been busy at other things: The author of seven nonfiction books (including biographies of several figures linked to the Harlem Renaissance), he was born and raised in Columbus in the historically African American district of King-Lincoln Bronzeville, adjacent to the Columbus Museum of Art.

Haygood has worked for both the Boston Globe and The Washington Post (his 2008 Post story about Eugene Allen, an African American who worked in the White House under eight presidents, was made into the film “The Butler,” starring Oprah Winfrey, Forest Whitaker and Cuba Gooding Jr.) His journalistic background shows: The catalogue, focused on facts, personalities, and events, is a pleasure to read.

What's more, he and his fellow curators, all from the Columbus Museum of Art, avoid the pitfalls the Metropolitan Museum of Art fell into in 1969 when it mounted "Harlem on my Mind." That show, intended as a progressive-minded celebration of the black community, was a fiasco for reasons hard to sum up in a sentence. (Susan E. Cahan offers a riveting account in "Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power.")

Suffice it to say that it was a show about the culture of Harlem that failed to include original art by African American artists; that it was organized by a well-meaning but overly controlling white curator, Allon Schoener, who tried to deploy respected African Americans for window-dressing; and that the catalogue's introduction, by a 17-year-old high school student, contained an extraordinary claim linking African Americans with anti-Semitism.

The Met show broke attendance records. Many people loved it. But in terms of PR, everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. Artists picketed the show. Art critics condemned the Met's move away from art toward leftist sociology. The American Jewish Congress took out a full-page ad in the New York Times condemning the Met.

In Columbus, things have been done differently. The artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance are front and center. Their achievements are not celebrated just in the abstract; they are on the walls and on pages bound between beautiful book covers.

We see in the first galleries, for instance, Edwin Augustus Harleston's 1930 portrait of Aaron Douglas, palette and brushes in hand. "I create," it calmly announces. Nearby, offered as proof, are Douglas's stylized images in gouache of Harlem jazz clubs; his woodblock prints illustrating a Eugene O'Neill play; his dusk jacket illustration for James Weldon Johnson's "God's Trombones"; and his cover designs both for FIRE!!, a single-issue magazine of lasting impact; and the May 1928 issue of The Crisis, the most widely read and distributed magazine of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Crisis was (and still is) put out by the NAACP. In operation since 1910, it was edited until 1933 by Du Bois, whose 1925 portrait, by the German artist Winold Reiss, we see in the second gallery.

Reiss was a big influence on Douglas. The German's pastel portraits were commissioned by Locke for "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." Among them was a double portrait of two young public school teachers that is as freshly beautiful today as it was confronting to racist mind-sets then. (At a reception for Reiss, one man declared that the two teachers would have scared him had he encountered them on the street. Galleries wouldn't show them, Anastasia Kinigopoulo writes in the catalogue, "out of fear they would attract black clientele.")

Reiss also made a study, in three-quarter profile, called simply "Harlem Girl," with affinities to a nearby face, "Mask of a Girl," sculpted by Sargent Claude Johnson. Made from hammered copper and enhanced with gilding on the girl's braided hair, Johnson's small piece came out of an impulse he articulated 10 years later: He

wanted, he said, to show “the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip and that characteristic hair, bearing, and manner; and I wish to show that beauty not so much to the white man as to the Negro himself.”

Some might be embarrassed by such sentiments today, taking their premise for granted. But, at the time, few people could. “It is fair to say,” wrote Arnold Rampersad, a biographer of both Hughes and Ralph Ellison, in his introduction to a 1992 edition of Locke’s “The New Negro,” “that, in the face of racial ‘science,’ most of the [black] contributors to the volume accepted the notion of black racial and cultural inferiority compared to the highest standards of European civilization.”

Yet these writers and artists also believed passionately that things were changing. They believed they were part of a transformation that would lead to political agency and a broad-based cultural flourishing.

And so it did. The Harlem Renaissance began soon after 200,000 black soldiers returned from Europe at the end of World War I. The U.S. Army was still segregated. Most black soldiers had served as support troops. But some African American regiments — most notably the 369th Infantry Regiment, the so-called “Harlem Hellfighters” — fought and were recognized for their bravery.

In France, they had been treated with a level of respect they were rarely afforded at home. Now, returning victorious, they demanded equality with renewed urgency.

Meanwhile, during the four years of the war in Europe, half a million blacks had left the American South for northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Columbus, Cleveland and New York, where they settled in Harlem. Racial tensions were inflamed both in the South, whose white farm owners resented the departure of cheap black labor, and in the North, where whites felt uneasy about the changing face of their cities.

Lynchings remained common in the South, but attempts to pass an anti-lynching bill in Congress were repeatedly frustrated. White racial supremacy, widely accepted, was reinforced by influential books and movies, including D.W. Griffith’s landmark film, “Birth of a Nation,” based on “The Clansman,” by Thomas Dixon, Jr., a close friend of President Woodrow Wilson. Labor disputes increased in frequency. And in summer 1919 — known as the Red Summer — bloody confrontations between blacks and whites broke out across the nation.

How did a so-called “renaissance” — what one of its leading figures, Arna Bontemps compared to “a foretaste of paradise” — emerge from so much strife? Sociology explains only so much. It cannot plumb the deeper reasons for creative flourishing, which might have less to do with statistics and social movements than with friendships, rivalries, love affairs and the strange sparks sent off by souls in turmoil. “A blue haze descended at night,” Bontemps wrote, “and with it strings of fairy lights on the broad avenues.”

“I, Too, Sing America” tells the story of the central figures in the Harlem Renaissance. But it also takes a wider look at the movement’s legacy. It shows great art made in the ’40s and ’50s, for instance, by Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis. All three were stars of the next generation, but they were taught by the sculptor Augusta Savage, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

The show takes us beyond Harlem, too. Allan Rohan Crite painted black life in Boston, but very much under the influence of Harlem Renaissance figures. Several of his pictures are here, along with sculptures by Meta Fuller, who studied with Rodin in Paris and was close to Du Bois and Savage but who never lived in Harlem.

Accusations of intellectual snobbery have long hovered around the Harlem Renaissance. Locke was the first black Rhodes scholar, a graduate of Harvard and Oxford, and a philosopher who had studied in Paris and Berlin. Du Bois, despite his misguided impatience with art that was not overtly propagandistic, could seem cautious compared with Garvey, whose more radical, Pan-African rhetoric and entrepreneurial energies were also part of the story of Harlem in the 1920s.

Locke may have papered over some sociopolitical realities in favor of vaguer conjectures in the realm of culture. But what his energies helped make possible should not be underestimated: a truthful, respectful and authentic depiction of black humanity and recognition for burgeoning black creative brilliance. The message — essentially, that black culture matters — should never have been required; but it was as important then as it remains today.

I, Too, Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100, *through Jan. 20, at the Columbus Museum of Art, 480 E. Broad St., Columbus, Ohio. columbusmuseum.org.*

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