

Art With Kids Portfolio: An Art With Kids Slide Presentation based on the Art of Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) by Trish Maunder, Creative Programs Director 2005/2006

Aaron Douglas is often thought of as the “Father of Black American Art.” He was the first African American artist to look back to Africa for influence and inspiration in his work. Visiting Harlem, in 1924, he became caught up in the creative energy of the art and literary world. He met and spoke with important scholars and leaders such as Alain Locke (1886–1954) W. E. B Dubois (1868–1963). He remained in Harlem where he became renowned as the most prominent artist of the Harlem Renaissance. He is well known for his large mural paintings, which tell the African American story from life in Africa to the years of slavery and then freedom in the United States.

Aspects of the Negro –A Mural Series

The Negro in an African Setting 1934

Mural panel, oil on canvas. 72 5/16 x 78 5/8 inches.

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This mural shows powerful images of African life. A shaft of light highlights the two silhouetted figures in the center as they perform a lively and energetic dance. African drum players appear in the foreground with other tribes people standing in the background. You can almost hear and feel the drum beat through the dancers' angled bodies. Floating in the uppermost center of the mural is an African sculpture; this shows the importance of spiritual symbolism in African culture.

Slavery through Reconstruction 1934

Mural panel, oil on canvas. 139 x 60 inches.

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This is a very large mural measuring 11' 7" x 5'. In this painting Douglas sends a strong message of hope to fellow African Americans. It is divided into three sections each set

within a series of concentric circles. At the center of each circle Douglas has painted something he really wants you to focus on.

Starting from the extreme right of the painting we see a trumpet player, a symbol of the music and jazz era and a person with his arms held high in triumph. To his left is a man wearing a hat with his back to us. He is reading a very important document, It is the Emancipation Proclamation, which was read on January 1, 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States of America at that time. It laid out new laws proclaiming freedom for the slaves and making it possible for African Americans to be employed by the U.S. Army and Navy, as well as find jobs in other areas of their choice. To read the transcript of the Emancipation Proclamation go to:

<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/24.htm>

In front of the speaker stand people who are joyous at the news. You can see their fists raised high in triumph. This gesture, a symbol of freedom and success was to be a well known image during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s.

In the center of the mural we see another man holding the Proclamation in his left hand while pointing to the Capitol Building (the seat of power and politics in Washington, DC) as if to say, "Look, this is what we have achieved and you must now take notice and uphold it." In the foreground we see people in the fields picking cotton, a typical chore for Southern slaves. They turn as they hear news of the Proclamation. It promises to make a great change to their lives and gives them and all African Americans the right to vote.

To help us understand the serious problems for African Americans in the South and what the new freedom really meant, Douglas painted mounted Ku Klux Klansmen and the departure of Unionist soldiers to the far left of the painting. All are aware of the new Proclamation and although troubles continued, it was a pivotal moment in the history of the United States, heralding a new beginning for African American citizens.

An Idyll of the Deep South 1934

Mural panel, oil on canvas. 139 x 60 inches.

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The third panel continues to show the difficulties African Americans were facing and has been painted with one large set of concentric circles in the center. Silhouetted black figures are shown singing as they work the fields and mourners surround the body of a lynched man. A powerful beam of starlight streams down across the canvas and one man's head turns directly towards it, perhaps as a symbol of hope and change. White silhouettes as well as black ones are shown in this mural, possibly illustrating the difficulties between the Black and White races at this time. Douglas was not afraid to show these images of what was really taking place in the Southern states and his work serves as an important and true account of American history.

Song of the Towers 1934

Mural panel, oil on canvas. 108 x 108 inches.

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This mural is filled with symbolism. It shows the frustrations of African Americans after the Great Depression of 1929 and the industrialization of the 1930s. There is a cogwheel of industry in the foreground, and towering skyscrapers in the background. Chimneys belch black smoke to the right of the painting. A man with a briefcase is trying to climb the cogwheel, while another sits with his head in his hands filled with frustration and dejection. The clutching hands of enslavement appear behind both men, while plumes of industrial smoke drift across the painting. Concentric circles lead your eye into the center of the piece, to a jazz musician, a symbol of creativity and representative of the music of the era. An image of the Statue of Liberty is just to the left of the saxophone player; it appears as a symbol of hope, despite all that has gone wrong and the difficulties that lie ahead.