

## New York City: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond

When the **Great Migration** began, rural African Americans came to Northern cities to better their circumstances. The hardships and abuses they had endured in the South propelled them to seek a better future in the North, one of economic prosperity and freedom from persecution and **Jim Crow** laws. These Southern migrants joined established African American communities, strengthening church groups and fraternal societies. By 1920, the bulk of the African American population in northern states was concentrated in the cities of Cincinnati, Chicago, Columbus, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York; all industrial centers of production. In New York City, African Americans flocked to the city's Harlem neighborhood – sowing the seeds for what would come to be known as the **Harlem Renaissance**, a cultural, social, and artistic revolution that flourished in the 1920s.



[\*Empress of the Blues\*](#), 1974, Romare Bearden, Smithsonian American Art Museum

During the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem was a haven, a place of self-discovery, cultural awareness, and political activism for African Americans. It nourished an artistic flowering of unprecedented richness. It was literature, painting, and music; it was movies, poetry, and jazz. This concentration of talented and socially-conscious African Americans produced immense talent – writers **Langston Hughes** and **Zora Neale Hurston**, artists **Jacob Lawrence** and **Romare Bearden**, musicians **Bessie Smith** and **Duke Ellington**, and activists like **Marcus Garvey** and **A. Philip Randolph**.

The apartment blocks and brownstones of Harlem were opened to black residents in 1905. Between 1900 and 1940, the black population of the five boroughs of Manhattan rose from 60,000 to more than 400,000. Black soldiers returning from World War I flocked to Harlem – perhaps initially as a midway point on their way back home. In their travels abroad they had experienced the freedom offered in European cities and had seen the popularity of American jazz in Paris and London. The excitement of this new life was unimaginable in the small towns of the South, so many remained in New York. This largely transplanted community redefined the black experience in the United States.



[The Library](#), 1960, Jacob Lawrence, Smithsonian American Art Museum

By the 1920s Harlem had become the most famous African American community in the world. The concentration of black men and women in Harlem produced a lively scene. The accumulation of books, journals, and ideas sparked interest in African music, images, and history. The **135<sup>th</sup> Street Library**, depicted in Lawrence's [The Library](#), became the cultural linchpin of Harlem. It was a resource for artists and thinkers, a meeting place, the site of fierce intellectual debates, and a venue for plays and musical performances. In a cosmopolitan community people expressed their enthusiasm for this

new life through jazz, dance, theater, art, and writing. The Harlem Renaissance coincided with the **Roaring Twenties** and the **Jazz Age**. The impact of these movements had a drastic impact on an individual and collective level in both the African American community, as well as America's cultural industries. The contributions of African Americans greatly benefited the film, music, and theater industries.

Some, like the poet **Countee Cullen**, were Harlem-born; others like Langston Hughes migrated. A nineteen year old Langston Hughes, born in Joplin, Missouri, arrived in Harlem in 1921 and vividly recalled his excitement of seeing Harlem for the first time:

*I can never put on paper the thrill of that underground ride to Harlem. I had never been in a subway before and it fascinated me – the noise, the speed, the green lights ahead. At every station I kept watching for the sign: 135<sup>TH</sup> STREET. When I saw it, I held my breath. I came out onto the platform with two heavy bags and looked around. It was still early morning and people were going to work. Hundreds of colored people! I wanted to shake hands with them, speak to them.*

Hughes would become one of Harlem's most famous residents, a literary giant whose poems chronicled the struggles and joys of early twentieth century African Americans. He and other young writers and artists would take ownership of the Harlem Renaissance movement, giving a voice to the African American experience.

When **Alain Locke** published *The New Negro* in 1925, Harlem's political and cultural facets gained a sharper focus. Literary contributions by Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston spoke of the black experience, but Locke's book offered far more than a record of daily life with its joys and sorrows. Locke sought to reestablish art as the core of black life. He argued that African Americans should express an African art uncontaminated by the industrial age, rooted in pure ethnic craft and tradition. Through *The New Negro*, he called on African Americans to accomplish this task.



[Evening Attire](#), 1922, James VanDerZee,  
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Photographer **James VanDerZee** was the semiofficial photographer of Harlem's life and people. His images traveled throughout the country in magazines and book illustrations. VanDerZee had a portrait studio, but he also worked on the street, recording the details of everyday life, both political and personal. His images helped disseminate sociological concepts on race articulated by African American leaders **W.E.B. Du Bois**, Alain Locke, and Marcus Garvey. Sculptor **Augusta Savage** produced images that ranged from street urchins to idealizations of the African muse, and ran a series of schools for budding artists.

The artists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to explore and represent the African American experience in their work. They fostered a new sense of pride in the black community and provided a voice to the desire of African Americans to at long last achieve a measure of equality in American society. The influence of these artists resonates far beyond the place and time in which they worked; it has been felt throughout the century and the whole of American culture.

## A Changing City

In the nineteenth century, the city of New York had been characterized by a variety of land uses which separated people of different ethnic groups and economic classes. But as more and more people poured into urban centers in the early twentieth century, the spatial arrangement of people and economic activities became altered by innovations in mass transit and [building construction](#). In New York City, the first subway opened in 1904, its tunnels excavated out of clay and rock by the vast numbers of largely Irish, Italian, and German immigrants. Between 1900 and 1920, New York built 100 miles of subway tunnels. Thanks to the subway, people

were no longer segregated to one part of the city. Those who had migrated to this evolving urban environment from the South experienced a vastly different world than the one to which they had been accustomed. Hungarian-American artist Lily Furedi's painting *Subway* typifies this lack of segregation on the New York subway. Passengers of different races, classes, genders, and national backgrounds ride together with no sign of friction – a marked contrast to the institutionalized racial segregation which was the case at this time in the southern United States.



*Subway*, 1934, Lily Furedi, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Furedi's clean, pleasant depiction of the interior of a subway car is a particularly optimistic view of a new train car running on the new Eighth Avenue Line, built in 1932. She painted *Subway* in 1934 for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the first of the New Deal national art programs of the Great Depression. The PWAP suggested that artists depict aspects of "the American scene." Furedi, like many New York City artists, chose to show a familiar aspect of urban daily life that would have been familiar to millions of New Yorkers. People from all economic backgrounds could afford to ride the subway because of the traditional 5 cent fare. Newspaper articles from the 1920s note that people of all different national backgrounds rode together on the New York subway, often reading newspapers in wide range of languages, and casually reading over one another's shoulders as we see happening at the left in Furedi's painting. Though the New York City subway system was not segregated, there had been some discussion of setting aside special cars for women – mostly to avoid issues of harassment. At this time, women had begun entering the work force in large numbers. The women we see in Furedi's painting may be commuting to work.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, women occupied jobs as domestic servants or in factory work – especially during the World War I years. When the war ended, many of these enterprising women moved on to sales jobs in department stores, or clerical and secretarial work. In 1920, the New York Times ran a headline that read, "the American Woman . . . has lifted her skirts far beyond any modest limitation." This commentary went beyond fashion – it was an observation of the profusion of liberated women in the workforce. The Manhattan borough of New York City employed 10,000 office workers in the 1930s, most of whom were

women. Office work was seen as a place where a woman could improve both her employment and her personal status. The change in women's roles, as well as the massive African American migration to the North, identified a shift that was taking place in America from a rural, production-oriented economy to an urban, consumption-oriented economy. Much of the work previously carried out within the home – food preparation, care of the sick, production of clothing – was now being performed by workers in restaurants, hospitals, and factories. In artworks similar to Furedi's *Subway*, depictions of independent working women were closely aligned with the development of cities and the spaces of modernity. Black women especially took advantage of this changing environment and the wartime need for workers. In 1910, 30 percent of black women in New York worked outside the home in occupations that ranged from seamstress and dressmaker, to factory worker and secretary. Before the war, the only jobs open to black women would have been those in the domestic and personal-service categories.

## Glossary

**135<sup>th</sup> Street Library:** a branch of the New York Public Library, it opened in 1905 and became a cultural epi-center of the Harlem Renaissance. It hosted the first exhibition of African American art in Harlem, and was the only branch to employ blacks in the 1920s.

**A. Philip Randolph:** (1889-1979) leader of the African American Civil Rights Movement, Randolph organized the first African American labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

**Alain Locke:** (1885-1954) African American writer, philosopher, and educator. He has the distinction of being the first African American awarded the Rhodes Scholarship.

**Augusta Savage:** (1892-1962) African American sculptor and educator active during the Harlem Renaissance. Her studio became the place where the careers of many future generations of African Americans artists started.

**Bessie Smith:** (1894-1937) American Blues singer. Nicknamed "Empress of the Blues," Smith was the most popular and successful female Blues singer of the 1920s and 1930s, influencing many musicians of the Harlem Renaissance era.

**Countee Cullen:** (1903-1946) African American poet and leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He is best known for his poem "Heritage," which reflects an urge to reclaim African arts.

**Duke Ellington:** (1899-1974) American composer, pianist, and Jazz band leader. He was the originator of big band Jazz music. A pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance, Ellington came to national prominence with performances at the Cotton Club in Harlem, a famous “whites only” New York City nightclub which featured the most popular African American entertainers of the day.

**Great Migration:** (1910-1930) the first wave of African American migration to the North from the South.

**Harlem Renaissance:** a renewal and flourishing of African American literary, artistic, and musical culture during the years after World War I. Though it was concentrated in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, the movement expanded throughout northern cities with large African American populations.

**Jacob Lawrence:** (1917-2000) American artist known for his portrayal of African American life, including his epic “Great Migration” series.

**James VanDerZee:** (1886-1983) African American photographer, best known for his images of African American New Yorkers.

**Jazz Age:** a period during the 1920s before the Great Depression where Jazz music and associated dance styles became popular in the United States. The Jazz Age, which originated in New Orleans, Louisiana, glorified the new urban life that many Americans were now leading.

**Jim Crow:** state enforced segregation and disenfranchisement laws against African Americans; enacted after the Reconstruction era. The term ‘Jim Crow’ originated in vaudeville-type traveling stage plays where Jim Crow was an African American stock character, a stereotypically shiftless buffoon designed to elicit laughs with his dancing ability and avoidance of work.

**Langston Hughes:** (1902-1967) American poet, novelist, and playwright. His themes of African American life made him a leader of the Harlem Renaissance movement.

**Marcus Garvey:** (1887-1940) Leader of the Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanism movements, he founded the controversial Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was dedicated to racial pride and the formation of an independent black nation in Africa.

**Roaring Twenties:** a term used to describe Western culture in the 1920s – a period of great social and political change.

**Romare Bearden:** (1911-1988) African American artist best known for his brightly-colored collages and subjects of African American life.

**W.E.B. Du Bois:** (1868-1963) African American civil rights activist, sociologist, and historian. He is best known for his role as co-founder of the NAACP and for his work *The Souls of Black Folk* – a seminal work in the history of sociology and African American literary history.

**Zora Neale Hurston:** (1891-1960) American novelist and short story writer, she was a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance era, and is best remembered for her work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.