KANSAS TO HARLEM

Aaron Douglas was a leader of Harlem Renaissance

By Jan Biles
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LAWRENCE — "Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South" is stark in message and look.

At first, one sees a man playing a guitar and another strumming a banjo, as a couple dances in the background. The eye is drawn to the idyllic scene by concentric circles perfectly crafted by the mural's creator, Topeka native Aaron Douglas.

But another look at the edges of the painting reveals the reality of the life of slaves in the Deep South. On the right, a man digs at the ground, perhaps creating a grave to bury the body hanging from the tree. Surrounding the tree's trunk is a circle of Africans, some on their knees but all looking upward toward a bright shining star. Perhaps it's the North Star, which was used as a compass by escaped and freed slaves journeying northward.

Susan Earle, curator of European and American art at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, said Douglas addresses issues like lynching and slavery in his paintings, but "conveys it in a way that has a spirit of optimism."

"He was able to combine arts and politics," Earle said.

"Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist," an exhibition of more than 90 works by Douglas, is on display through Dec. 2 at the Spencer Museum. The exhibit is the first nationally touring retrospective to celebrate the art and legacy of Douglas.

After its run at the KU museum, the exhibition will travel through 2008, making stops at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville; the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City.

Douglas is considered the leading painter and illustrator coming out of the Harlem Renaissance, a creative movement that involved music, visual arts, literature and dance and inspired African Americans to be proud of their heritage.

More than painting

Douglas, who was born to laborer parents on May 26, 1899, in Topeka, earned bachelor degrees at the University of Nebraska in 1922 and The University of Kansas in 1923. He taught art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, but soon headed to Columbia University Teachers College to work on his master's degree.

"He always had the fire, but New York City and the activity there fueled the fire," said Stephanie Fox Knappe, exhibition coordinator.

Douglas studied with Windol Reiss, a German illustrator who encouraged him to explore African images and incorporate them into his works. He consequently developed a style of painting that combined stylized African and Egyptian images, cubism and Art Deco styles, repetitive designs and the movement of dance and jazz music.

"Douglas just wasn't interested in painting," William J. Harris, professor of English at KU, said. "He was interested in dance, music and politics and wanted to put all of this stuff into his painting."

During the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas and his wife, Alta, enjoyed giving parties for artists, writers and musicians. Among their guests were Lawrence-born poet Langston Hughes, poet
“Self-portrait,” 1954, charcoal and conte drawing on paper.

“Dinners,” $150.

“Charleston,” circa 1920, gouache and pencil on paperboard.

“Rise, Shine for Thy Light Has Come,” circa 1927, opaque watercolor and black ink on paperboard.
Art: Douglas inspired community-based trend

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James Weldon Johnson, writers Zora Neale Hurston and Wallace Thurman, founding NAACP member and editor W.E.B. DuBois and writer-artists Gwendolyn Bennett and Richard Bruce Nugent.

“There are so many things that I had seen for the first time, so many impressions I was getting.” Douglas said in a 1971 interview recalling his first impressions of Harlem. “One was that of seeing a big city that was entirely black, from beginning to end you were impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things and here was a black city and here was a situation that was eventually to be the center for the great in American culture.”

Going public

In 1934, Douglas was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration to create a series of murals for the New York City Public Library. The murals follow the journey of Africans from their
Douglas "dared to take his paintbrush beyond the studio," Saralyn Reece Hardy, director of the Spencer Museum of Art, said. He also painted murals for Fisk University and the Harlem YMCA.

Dave Loewenstein, a muralist based in Lawrence, said Douglas influenced the community-based muralist movement because he combined different styles and technical elements with narrative storytelling that dealt with historical issues and contemporary political issues.


His works also appeared in many magazines, including Vanity Fair. In 1937, Douglas created the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., and was its chair until 1966. He died in 1979.

"Aaron Douglas was one of the most accomplished of the interpreters of our institutions and cultural values," said Walter J. Leonard, president of Fisk University, during Douglas' memorial service in 1979. "He captured the strength and quickness of the young; he translated the memories of the old; and he projected the determination of the inspired and courageous."

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