

Black Humanity and the Harlem Renaissance
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In part, the oppression of Blacks under the Jim Crow era, during which racial discrimination was legalized under the premise of separate but equal, Blacks relocated en masse from the rural south to the urban north in what was later labeled The Great Migration. That shift was a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance, considered by many to be the most influential creative movement in Black American history as well as a cultural awakening of the same.

The notion of a rebirth suggests a renewed existence that brings with it both activity and growth and, for Blacks in America, I think that's exactly what the Harlem Renaissance was. It can't be overstated the lengths to which white Southerners went to dehumanize Blacks as a means to justify slavery. Coon caricatures reinforced the belief that Blacks were more simian than human, created a hateful association between Blacks and monkeys or apes, and used Darwinism as evidence of Blacks' primitiveness. As animals, whites argued, Blacks were property and not entitled to self-evident rights like freedom. Likewise, minstrel shows, during which white entertainers in black face offered mocking portrayals of Black Americans that reinforced their sub-humanity and intellectual and physical inferiority. Both play a prominent role in the unflattering, anti-Black stereotypes like Uncle Tom and Mammy that were rooted in history of slavery and buttressed America and the rest of the world's skewed perception of Blacks.

So, the Harlem Renaissance as a rebirth makes sense to me. I think it was a reconceptualization not just of Blacks within the Black community but also of Blacks in the eyes of the rest of the world and, in particular, in the psyche of white America. It was a time when Black Americans could shed others' racist stereotypes as well as break free from the Western ideals and standards that automatically relegated them to a lower plane of existence. As part of the Harlem Renaissance, they were able to define their own boundaries, establish their own parameters, and cultivate a decidedly Black consciousness independent of the white majority. Blacks' collective elevation birthed a collective pride centered on their race that catalyzed organization and mobilization focused on the fight for further advancement, reform, and civil rights. I think the Harlem Renaissance was transformative. It created a bridge of sorts between the uneducated, fearful, reticent Negroes of yore and the intellectual, self-assured, bellicose Blacks of the future.

Much of the humanity I see in the art of the Harlem Renaissance is an effort on the part of Black writers, sculptors, lyricists, painters, poets, photographers, musicians, etc. to both honestly portray and memorialize the Black American experience. Take Jacob Lawrence, for instance. He's a Harlem Renaissance painter who used his medium to create the *Migration Series*, a 60-panel narrative of The Great Migration. Langston Hughes' poem "The Weary Blues" portrays the housing and employment difficulties Blacks experienced. Aaron Douglas' mural "Aspiration," depicts Black Americans' freedom from bondage. And Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington helped shape jazz music into a Black American expression of identity within the greater society. Collectively, Black art of the Harlem Renaissance—across all mediums—created an insightful and needed window into Blacks' past and present that disproved and dismantled whites' long-held racist misperceptions about Blacks, helped Black Americans' nascent culture take shape, and facilitated a cogent bond within the Black community worldwide.