NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

image not available

Aaron Douglas
American, 1899 - 1979

Into Bondage

1936

oil on canvas
overall: 153.4 × 153.7 cm (60 3/8 × 60 1/2 in.)
framed: 165.1 × 164.47 × 8.26 cm (65 × 64 3/4 × 3 1/4 in.)
Inscription: lower right: AARON DOUGLAS
Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase and partial gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr., The Evans-Tibbs Collection)
2014.79.17

ENTRY

The modernist painter and graphic artist Aaron Douglas heeded the call of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals by acknowledging African cultural traditions as a source of pride and inspiration. [1] He embraced a machine age aesthetic, but also integrated Egyptian and African motifs into cubist, precisionist, and art deco designs. Douglas's illustrations for *The New Negro*, the 1925 anthology of Harlem Renaissance writers compiled by the philosopher Alain Locke, was his first major commission after moving to New York City from Kansas City in 1924. This project established his reputation as a leading artist of the new negro movement. In 1926, the writer Langston Hughes commended Douglas for inspiring younger African American artists to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." [2] A decade later, when the Harmon Foundation was looking for an artist to paint a series of murals for the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas, Douglas was an obvious choice for the commission.

The four large canvases that Douglas made for the lobby of the centennial's Hall of Negro Life welcomed more than 400,000 visitors [fig. 1]. [3] Only two of the

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paintings, however, have been located: *Into Bondage* and *Aspiration* [fig. 2]. Along with *The Negro's Gift to America*, a large horizontal work that hung between *Into Bondage* and *Aspiration* in the lobby of the exhibition hall [fig. 3], these canvases depicted the journey of African Americans from their native land to the 20th-century North American metropolis. *Into Bondage* illustrates the enslavement of Africans bound for the Americas. *The Negro's Gift to America* featured an allegory of Labor as the holder of the key to a true understanding of Africans in the New World. *Aspiration* concluded the cycle by calling attention to the liberating promise of African American education and industry. A fourth canvas portrayed Estevanico, a Moroccan slave who accompanied the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca on his expedition through Texas. [4]

Like Douglas's other murals of the same period, such as *Aspects of Negro Life* [fig. 4], created for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in 1934 (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), the Texas centennial canvases were unified by a subdued palette, silhouetted figures, and repeated motifs that held personal meaning for the artist. In the Gallery's painting, concentric circles Douglas frequently used to suggest sound—particularly African and African American songs—radiate from a point on the horizon where slave ships await their human cargo. [5] Warm earth tones accent a palette of cooler blues and greens, just as the composition's undeniable rhythm competes with an overall timelessness. Silhouetted figures move in a steady line to the distant boats, their rust-colored shackles creating a staccato rhythm echoed by the framing foliage. Patchy brushstrokes activate the surface, imbuing the painting with a texture and liveliness that belie the static precision of crisply delineated forms.

For the pose of the central male figure, whose head is turned in profile but whose square shoulders and torso face forward, Douglas looked to Egyptian art as a source of pan-African nationalism. Similarly, the slit-eye masks made by the Dan peoples of Liberia inspired the man's narrow slash of an eye. [6] Standing on a pedestal that foreshadows the auction block from which he will be sold, he is the only figure in the composition whose shoulders rise above the horizon. The man's elevated form and uplifted head, cut across by a ray of starlight, signal eventual freedom for his race. A woman who raises her face and shackled hands to the same star, her fingers grazing the horizon, also foretells a distant future without slavery. According to Douglas, the star and ray of light, which appear in a number of his paintings, represent the North Star and the divine light of inspiration. [7] Douglas, a member of the Communist Party USA, may also have included this motif

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as a political symbol and to advocate socialism as a means of achieving equality for African Americans. [8]

Regardless of its specific meaning, the star's message of hope is clear. Renée Ater has shown how the Texas Centennial's Hall of Negro Life offered African Americans the opportunity to "re-articulate their racial and national identities" and "reshape historical memory." Similarly, Douglas's murals, she writes, "set out to rethink and to develop alternative narratives of black history and contemporary life that were embedded in visual references to slavery." [9] By the 1920s, historical representation and cultural expression had become important signifiers of black progress in the public spaces of American fairs, serving as "a springboard from which to educate blacks about how their rich American and pan-African heritage would assist them in charting their future." [10] Douglas's forward-looking, modernist aesthetic that paid tribute to an African past was thus a fitting visual complement to the fair building's empowering themes.

On another level, the mere existence of the murals was indebted to ongoing African American struggle. When the Texas legislature originally neglected to allocate funds to allow African Americans to be included in the centennial, African American community leaders in Dallas took it upon themselves to apply for federal money to participate. Most Dallas press coverage was enthusiastic when the Hall of Negro Life opened in 1936 on June 19, or Juneteenth, an African American holiday commemorating the end of slavery. Consistently high attendance figures at the exhibition hall, however, did not succeed in dispelling deep-seated prejudices. [11] Douglas's paintings so impressed white fairgoers that they refused to believe that an African American artist had made them. To help persuade incredulous visitors, administrators posted a sign reading: "These murals were painted by Aaron Douglas, a Negro artist of New York City." [12]

For Douglas, the commemoration of slavery was critical to the rewriting of the history of Texas and to the acknowledgment of African American contributions to the progress of both state and nation. By doing so in a public mural, Douglas was able to reach hundreds of thousands of viewers and, at the same time, proclaim the centrality of African Americans within modern American visual traditions.

Jennifer Wingate

September 29, 2016

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

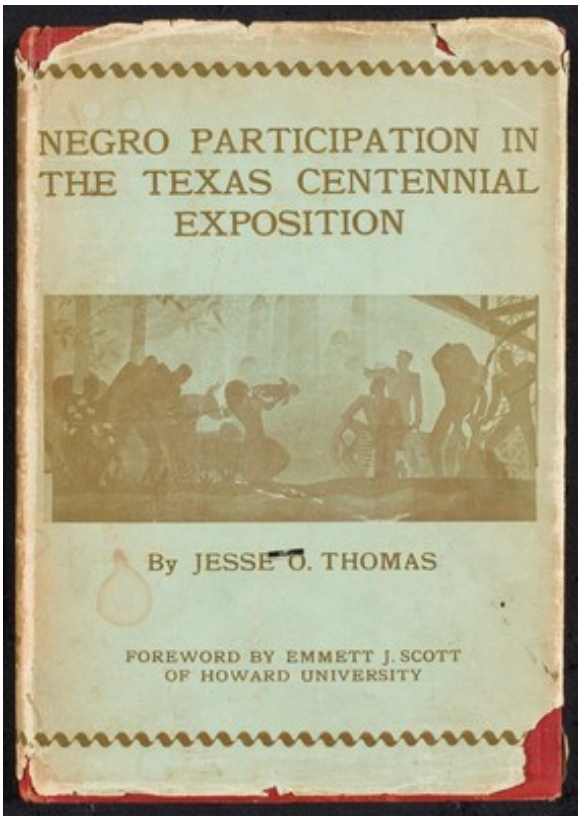

fig. 1 Dust Jacket of Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston, 1938), featuring Douglas's *The Negro's Gift to America*, Collection of Steven L. Jones

fig. 2 Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration*, 1936, oil on canvas, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

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fig. 3 *Texas Centennial Exhibit, Hall of Negro Life*, 1936, photograph, US National Archives

fig. 4 Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934, oil on canvas, The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division. © The New York Public Library

NOTES

[1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).

[2] Langston Hughes, “The Negro and the Racial Mountain,” *Nation* 122 (June 1926): 692–694.

[3] Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston, 1938), 25.

[4] Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston, 1938), provides a description of all four canvases in the cycle, along with an interpretation by the Hall of Negro Life curator, Alonzo J. Aden. For a discussion of *Aspiration*, see Timothy Anglin Burgard, “Aspiration,” in *Masterworks of American Painting at the De Young*, ed. Timothy Anglin Burgard (San Francisco, 2005), 342.

[5] Renée Ater, “Creating a ‘Usable Past’ and a ‘Future Perfect Society’: Aaron Douglas’s Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition,” in *Aaron*

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Douglas: African American Modernist, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, 2007), 107. According to Susan Earle ("Harlem, Modernism and Beyond: Aaron Douglas and His Role in Art/History," in ibid., 31), the circles also contribute to a layered effect that recalls surrealist and art deco fragmentation of form, as well as double exposure photography from the interwar period. The art historian David Driskell has interpreted the circles as the global transmission of black culture by way of radio waves. Driskell, interview by Robert Farris Thompson, in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy; The African Impulse in African American Art* (Dallas, 1989), 136.

[6] Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, 2007), 106.

[7] Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, 2007), 106–107.

[8] See Amy Helene Kirschke, "The Depression Murals of Aaron Douglas: Radical Politics and African American Art," *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 4 (1995): 26.

[9] Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, 2007), 95, 98.

[10] Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley, 2012): 170, 188.

[11] Though much newspaper coverage of the Hall of Negro Life was positive in a general way, both Ater and Burgard cite many examples of headlines that reflect the racial prejudices of the period. Timothy Anglin Burgard, "Aspiration," in *Masterworks of American Painting at the De Young*, ed. Timothy Anglin Burgard (San Francisco, 2005), 535 n. 9, also notes that the Hall of Negro Life was the only building destroyed before the fair reopened the following year as the Greater Texas and Pan American Exposition. Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, 2007), 104–5, 111; see also Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley, 2012):122.

[12] Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston, 1938), 27.

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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, lightweight fabric mounted on a modern replacement, expansion bolt stretcher with no crossbars. The oil type paint was applied over a pre-primed, smooth, opaque, cream-colored ground. [1] Graphite underdrawing is readily visible through the thin paint layer. It appears that Douglas fully outlined the design before painting using a straight edge and some sort of compass or template for the geometric shapes. Other design elements seem to be drawn freehand. Underdrawing is most visible in areas where Douglas did not follow his outline exactly when he applied the paint. The infrared examination confirms the extent of Douglas's underdrawing. [2] The x-radiograph shows no significant artist changes, which is to be expected considering the meticulous planning evidenced by the underdrawing. Douglas used a thin fluid paint that was sometimes so liquid that small downward drips occurred. There is no modeling of forms. Instead, Douglas created interest within the flat shapes by varying his paint application. Sometimes it was thin and transparent, sometimes it was applied with active brushstrokes showing areas of the ground beneath, and sometimes it was applied with textured impasto. There are many inclusions, such as fibers, brush hairs, and lint in the paint.

Renee Ater states that the painting was made on-site at the Texas Centennial hall for which it was commissioned, and this is supported by physical evidence. [3] Around the periphery of the painting there is a 7/8-inch-wide strip in which there are multiple nail holes and the design elements are a different color than in the rest of the painting. This probably indicates that the painting was executed on a fabric mounted directly to the wall, and then wooden strips were affixed over the edges to serve as a frame. The painting's first known conservation treatment was executed by Quentin Rankin in 1987. [4] According to his report, he received the painting stretched on a flimsy seven-member stretcher and the canvas had several tears in it. These tears were found in the proper left leg of the foreground male figure, just above the chain, above the inner tip of the lower palm frond at the lower right edge, on the bottom edge of the same palm frond and below it onto the blue background, at the lower left near the base of the wide frond that touches the foreground women's head and goes through the plant with smaller foliage as well, and at the top left in the dark purple brown foliage in the second leaf from the top. When the painting arrived in Rankin's studio it was also defaced with scratches,

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impact cracks, grime, and pencil graffiti. The conservator cleaned the grime layer from the painting, lined it onto an auxiliary support using Beva adhesive, and mounted the painting on its new stretcher at a slightly larger dimension. Finally, he filled and inpainted the tears and losses, including some of the graffiti, and varnished the painting with a synthetic resin, even though there was no indication that the artist had ever varnished the painting. In a recent treatment in 2016, Gallery conservator Jay Krueger removed this varnish and inpainting, applied new retouching, and left the painting unvarnished as had presumably been intended by Douglas. [5] In both treatments it was impossible to remove the pencil graffiti.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The priming extends over the intact tacking margins, indicating that the ground was commercially applied. The preserved tacking margins show that the current dimensions are very close to original.

[2] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a J astronomy filter.

[3] Susan Earle, ed., *Aaron Douglas: African Modernist* (New Haven, 2007), 105.

[4] Quentin Rankin was a conservator for the Smithsonian Museums at that time; he also had a thriving private practice in Washington, DC. Conservation report in NGA conservation files. Later, Dare Hartwell prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is also available in NGA conservation files.

[5] Report in NGA conservation files.

PROVENANCE

Commissioned 1936 for the Hall of Negro Life, Texas Centennial Exposition, Dallas;[1] possibly Wiley College, Marshall, Texas.[2] Joseph Mack [1920-1986]; sold to Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr. [1952-1997], Washington, by 1987;[3] by gift and partial purchase 1996 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] A letter from Jesse O. Thomas and Alonzo J. Aden (General Manager and

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Curator of Exhibitions, respectively, of the Hall of Negro Life) to Aaron Douglas, dated 5 July 1936, hints that the Harmon Foundation gave financial support for the commission; copy in NGA curatorial files, and the Evans-Tibbs Collection, Vertical Files, NGA Library.

[2] According to Hilda Stewart Proctor, “The Aaron Douglasses Celebrate 25th Year,” clipping from an unidentified newspaper, about 18 August 1951; copy in NGA curatorial files, and the Evans-Tibbs Collection, Vertical Files, NGA Library.

[3] In a Condition and Treatment Report for the painting, prepared by Quentin Rankin (3 April 1987, Corcoran conservation records, in NGA Painting Conservation Department), Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. is specified as the owner.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1936 Texas Centennial Exposition, Lobby of the Hall of Negro Life, Dallas, 6 June - 29 November 1936, no catalogue.

1989 Black Art, Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art, Dallas Museum of Art; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Milwaukee Art Museum; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 3 December 1989 - 24 March 1991, unnumbered checklist.

1997 Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance, Hayward Gallery, London; Arnolfini, Bristol; Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, Coventry; M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 19 June 1997 - 14 February 1999, no. 19.

1999 Celebrating the Legacy: African American Art from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 30 July - 22 September 1999, no catalogue.

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2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 November 2004 - 7 August 2005, unpublished checklist.

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2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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Letters, Jessie O. Thomas and Alonzo J. Aden, Office of the United States Commissioner General, Texas Centennial Exposition to Aaron Douglas, 5 July 1936; Evans-Tibbs Archives, formerly Corcoran Gallery

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of Art Archives, now NGA Library, Washington.

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