



Aaron Douglas
American, 1899 - 1979

The Judgment Day

1939

oil on tempered hardboard

overall: 121.92 × 91.44 cm (48 × 36 in.)

Inscription: lower right: A. Douglas '39

Patrons' Permanent Fund, The Avalon Fund 2014.135.1

ENTRY

Aaron Douglas spent his formative years in the Midwest. Born and raised in Topeka, Kansas, he attended a segregated elementary school and an integrated high school before entering the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In 1922 he graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, and the following year he accepted a teaching position at Lincoln High School, an elite black institution in Kansas City. Word of Douglas's talent and ambition soon reached influential figures in New York including Charles Spurgeon Johnson (1893–1956), one of the founders of the New Negro movement.[1] Johnson instructed his secretary, Ethel Nance, to write to the young artist encouraging him to come east ("Better to be a dishwasher in New York than to be head of a high school in Kansas City").[2] In the spring of 1925, after two years of teaching, Douglas resigned his position and began the journey that would place him at the center of the burgeoning cultural movement later known as the Harlem Renaissance.[3]

Douglas arrived in New York three months after an important periodical, *Survey Graphic*, published a special issue titled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*. [4] A landmark publication, the issue included articles by key members of the New Negro movement: Charles S. Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Alain Locke (1885–1954), and James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938). The special issue also included a number of illustrations by German émigré artist Fritz Winold Reiss (American, 1888 - 1953).[5] Introduced to Reiss by Charles S. Johnson shortly after his arrival, Douglas quickly found in him an artistic mentor. Reiss offered the young artist a two-year fellowship to study at his School of Art as well as weekly critiques of his work until the fall term began in September 1925.

Prompted by the overwhelmingly positive response to the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, editor Alain Locke published an expanded version several months later under a new title: *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.^[6] Again, numerous illustrations by Reiss were included as well as several “drawings and decorative designs” by Douglas, Reiss’s new student. Later described as the “bible” of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro* was a breakthrough publication for Douglas. Commissions for book and journal illustrations soon followed. Within months of arriving in Harlem, Douglas had met the key figures of the New Negro movement, found an artistic mentor, contributed to a major publication, and begun to forge a signature style. It was a remarkable debut.

Among the most important of Douglas’s new contacts was James Weldon Johnson, a prominent novelist, poet, lyricist, and political activist who contributed an essay (“The Making of Harlem”) to the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* as well as a poem (“The Creation”) to *The New Negro*.^[7] Johnson had composed and published the poem several years earlier, but he would soon recast the piece as the introductory “sermon-poem” in his masterwork, *God’s Trombones: Seven Sermons in Verse*, published in 1927. In a later autobiography, Johnson recounted the event that had inspired *God’s Trombones*. In 1918, while traveling as field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he had been asked to speak during an evening service at a black church in Kansas City.^[8] A celebrated black evangelist, famous for his oratorical skills, was the featured speaker. The hour was late and when the preacher began speaking from a formal text, his audience started drifting toward sleep. Aware that he was losing the congregation, the preacher “slammed the Bible shut, stepped out from behind the pulpit” and began to deliver, indeed to perform, a traditional Negro folk sermon. As Johnson recalled, “He was free, at ease, and the complete master of himself and his hearers. . . . He strode the pulpit up and down, and brought into play the full gamut of a voice that excited my envy. He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded—he blared, he crashed, he thundered.”^[9] Enormously impressed by what he had witnessed, Johnson made notes on the spot, but he did not translate the experience into a poem until later. “The Creation,” the first of the sermon-poems Johnson would eventually compose, was written in 1918 and published independently as early as January 1920 in *Freeman* and later in *The New Negro* (1925). During the winter months of 1926–1927, Johnson completed the six additional poems and introductory prayer that would become *God’s Trombones*.^[10]

Initially inspired by a gifted preacher's performance in Kansas City, Johnson also drew on his own memories of southern church services and on his skills as a songwriter to translate into verse not only the biblical parables that served as the subjects of the sermons, but also the passion with which they were delivered—the rhythm and cadence of the inspirational language. Identifying black preachers as God's instruments on earth (God's trombones) and their impassioned sermons as an art form, Johnson celebrated a key element of traditional black culture.[11] Upon publication, *God's Trombones* attracted considerable attention not only for Johnson's uniquely original verse, but also for the bold illustrations that Aaron Douglas created to accompany the poems.

Impressed by Aaron Douglas's early illustrations in *Opportunity*, the National Union League's monthly journal, Johnson invited the young artist to create visual counterparts for his sermon-poems. Douglas embraced the opportunity and produced eight strikingly modern compositions [fig. 1] [fig. 2] [fig. 3] [fig. 4] [fig. 5] [fig. 6] [fig. 7] [fig. 8] that were immediately recognized as the visual equivalent of equally important contemporary breakthroughs in African American literature, music, and theater. Reviewing *God's Trombones* for *The Crisis*, the monthly publication of the NAACP, editor W. E. B. Du Bois declared that it "blazes a new path toward the preservation of the Negro idiom in art." He concluded his review by praising Douglas's illustrations as "wild with beauty, unconventional, daringly and yet effectively done." [12]

Among the most dramatic of these illustrations was the image Douglas created for "The Judgment Day," the final poem in Johnson's series.[13] In a preliminary study in gouache [fig. 9], Douglas arranged the key compositional elements. At the center is God's messenger, a powerful black Gabriel, standing astride earth and sea. With the key to heaven in one hand and a trumpet in the other, the archangel summons the living and the dead to judgment. Concentric bands of color mimic the sound of Gabriel's horn.[14] A beam of light and a bolt of lightning direct the viewer's attention to silhouetted figures rising to Gabriel's call.[15]

Douglas's use of a flat, angular, and fractured style (echoing art deco and cubist innovations) reflects the counsel of both Alain Locke and Winold Reiss, who were acutely aware of works by European modernists inspired by African art. Eager to encourage the development of a new visual aesthetic for the New Negro, Locke and Reiss urged Douglas to study the ancestral roots of black America. African sculpture, for example, could be seen at the American Museum of Natural History, the Brooklyn Museum, and in Merion, Pennsylvania, at the home of collector and

art patron Albert C. Barnes.[16] In Barnes's home, the African/modernist link was physically reflected in the installation, with modernist paintings hung side by side with African objects.

As Douglas worked to forge both a personal style and one that would serve the aspirational mandate of his mentors, he drew inspiration from multiple sources. Among the most important of these was Egyptian art. Howard Carter's 1922 discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb had brought increased attention to the distinctive figural style of Egyptian wall painting. Douglas's incorporation of pictorial elements with Egyptian roots is clearly evident in the figure of Gabriel in *The Judgment Day*: the archangel's head is seen in profile, his torso from the front. Perhaps the key component of Douglas's emerging style was his adoption of the abstract and reductive graphic technique favored by Reiss, which included the abandonment of any illusion of three-dimensional space and the use of abstract, hard-edged pictorial elements. Douglas's embrace of Reiss's abstract geometry did not, however, preclude his use of narrative, whether historical, political, or biblical.

James Weldon Johnson was 56 and a distinguished author when he invited Douglas to illustrate *God's Trombones*. Douglas was 28 and still learning his craft. The collaboration resulted in Johnson's most celebrated publication and the emergence of Douglas's signature style. Deftly weaving elements drawn from his study of African sculptural objects, cubist and precisionist paintings, Egyptian wall paintings, art deco geometry, and abstract graphic design, Douglas created a distinctive visual vocabulary.

For reasons that remain unclear, and over a period of more than a decade, Douglas translated the small illustrations (approximately 4 ½ x 6 inches) that he had created for *God's Trombones* into large easel paintings (approximately 48 x 36 inches). Not all the paintings are dated, but *The Judgment Day*, the last in the series, is inscribed '39.[17] Freed from the limited palette of the 1927 illustrations, Douglas employed a broad range of colors in the enlarged paintings. For *The Judgment Day*, he chose tonal variants of green, yellow, and lavender. The compositional elements of the original gouache (see comp fig), created more than a dozen years earlier, remain relatively unchanged. The expanded format and the addition of color, however, allowed Douglas to amplify a key element present in the original illustration but substantially enhanced in the larger painting: sound.

In his poems—his “sermons in verse”—James Weldon Johnson mimicked the rhythm and cadence of black preachers fully engaged in the dynamic call-and-

response form of traditional folk sermons. This pattern is particularly evident in the “The Judgment Day.” The narrative begins with God calling to Gabriel, charging him, in turn, to call the living and the dead to judgment by sounding his horn. When Gabriel asks how hard he should blow his horn, God responds, “Blow it calm and easy,” establishing the call-and-response structure of the poem. As the poem progresses, the preacher assumes the role of questioner, asking the members of the congregation where they will stand on “that day.” The aural quality of the poem is unmistakable. As the chosen illustrator of *God’s Trombones*, Aaron Douglas was challenged with creating the visual equivalent of a poem filled with sound.

Even within the limited tonal range available in the 1927 publication, Douglas’s illustration for “The Judgment Day” pulses with sound and energy. The full force of his design, however, is even more evident in the later painting, in which he enlarged the image and recast the composition elements in vibrant shades of green, yellow, and lavender. Sound—the sound of Gabriel’s trumpet—is the stimulus that sets the composition in motion. Concentric circles of energized color simulate the waves of sound streaming from Gabriel’s horn. The living and the dead rise to the call. Lightning strikes, thunder rolls—deafening dissonant sounds mark the end of the world.

In *The Judgment Day*, Douglas revisited an image he had created not long after arriving in Harlem in 1925. As a young artist, he had skillfully mixed disparate artistic influences with bold experimentation to create a distinctive personal style that also answered the call for a new visual aesthetic reflecting the ambitious cultural, social, and political aspirations of a generation of African Americans. Returning to the original image more than a decade later, Douglas enlarged the scale of the composition, added the dynamic interplay of color, and created an image as rhythmic and powerful as the sermons of the black preachers celebrated in *God’s Trombones*.

Nancy Anderson

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Aaron Douglas, "Listen Lord: A Prayer," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 12, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 2 Aaron Douglas, "The Creation," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 16, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 3 Aaron Douglas, "The Prodigal Son," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 20, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 4 Aaron Douglas, "Go Down Death: A Funeral Sermon," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 26, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 5 Aaron Douglas, "Noah Built the Ark," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 30, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 6 Aaron Douglas, "The Crucifixion," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 38, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 7 Aaron Douglas, "Let My People Go," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 44, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 8 Aaron Douglas, "The Judgment Day," from James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York, 1927), 52, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington



fig. 9 Aaron Douglas, *The Judgment Day*, 1927, gouache on paper, Courtesy of the SCAD Museum of Art, Permanent Collection, Gift of Dr. Walter O. Evans and Mrs. Linda J. Evans

NOTES

- [1] The term “New Negro” dates from the late 1890s but gained wide currency during the first three decades of the 20th century, when Alain Locke and other progressive activists encouraged an assertive push for civil rights and a concerted effort to replace the stereotype of the shuffling, servile “Old Negro” with a self-confident and proud “New Negro” whose cultural and political achievements would signal a new era for African Americans. See Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).
- [2] Quoted in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York,

1979), 96–97. Ethel Nance worked as executive secretary for the Kansas City chapter of the National Urban League during the early 1920s. She moved to New York in 1924 to become Charles S. Johnson’s executive secretary. Nance met Aaron Douglas while working in Kansas City and owned several examples of his work.

- [3] A detailed chronology compiled by Stephanie Fox Knappe documenting Aaron Douglas’s life and career is included in Susan Earle, ed., *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven, 2007), 206–234. Valuable information and analysis may also be found in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson, MS, 1995).
- [4] A facsimile of the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* (March 1925) was published by Black Classic Press, Baltimore, Maryland, in 1980.
- [5] Winold Reiss trained as an artist and graphic designer in Germany before immigrating to America in 1913. A student of Franz von Stuck, one of the founders of the Munich Secession, Reiss arrived in America with an interest in documenting ethnic types—initially Native Americans in the far West. His illustrations for the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* reflect his later interest in African Americans. In 1916 he opened the Winold Reiss School of Art in New York.
- [6] A reprint of *The New Negro*, with an introduction by Arnold Rampersad, was published as a Touchstone book by Simon and Schuster in 1997.
- [7] Johnson’s essay was retitled “Harlem: The Culture Capital” in the 1997 reprint of *The New Negro*. James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871. Like Douglas, he had entered the teaching profession following college graduation. When a disastrous fire destroyed the school where he served as principal, Johnson and his brother, John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954), traveled to New York, where they became a successful songwriting team. As collaborators, the Johnson brothers composed the lyrics and music for “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the song that later became known as the “Negro national anthem.” Although successful as a songwriter and as a member of a vocal trio, Johnson grew weary of constant travel. When offered an opportunity to serve in the diplomatic corps, he gave up his life as an entertainer and accepted consular positions in Venezuela and Nicaragua. It was during this period that he finished writing *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, a novel he had begun while living in New York. Published anonymously in 1912, the novel attracted little notice. Republished 15 years later, with Johnson identified as the author, the book garnered critical praise and brisk sales. In the interim, Johnson had become an influential leader of the NAACP and the editor of several important and well-received books: *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and *The*

Second Book of American Negro Spirituals (1926). The most celebrated of Johnson's publications, however, was the much smaller but enormously influential collection of his own poems *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927).

- [8] Johnson served as national field secretary for the NAACP from 1916 until 1920 when he became executive secretary, a position he held until 1930.
- [9] *Along This Way*, Johnson's autobiography, was published in 1933. The full text is included in *James Weldon Johnson: Writings* (Library of America, 2004), 503–504.
- [10] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (Library of America), 554–555. Johnson titled the poems in *God's Trombones* "Listen, Lord—A Prayer," "The Creation," "The Prodigal Son," "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon," "Noah Built the Ark," "The Crucifixion," "Let My People Go," and "The Judgment Day."
- [11] In the preface to *God's Trombones*, Johnson notes that much had been written about "the folk creations of the American Negro" (music, dance, and stories born of slavery), but that the "folk sermons" Johnson viewed as equally creative and important had not received equal attention. Describing the "old-time Negro preacher" as an important cultural figure, Johnson wrote: "It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity. He was the first shepherd of this bewildered flock. His power for good or ill was very great. It was the old-time preacher who for generations was the mainspring of hope and inspiration for the Negro American." Later in the preface Johnson describes the trombone as "the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude." *James Weldon Johnson: Writings* (Library of America, 2004), 835, 838.

[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Browsing Reader," *The Crisis* (July 1927): 159.

[13] "The Judgment Day"

In that great day,
People, in that great day,
God's a-going to rain down fire.
God's a-going to sit in the middle of the air
To judge the quick and the dead.
Early one of these mornings,
God's a-going to call for Gabriel,
That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;
And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,
Blow your silver trumpet,
And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord,
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Blow it calm and easy.
Then putting one foot on the mountain top,
And the other in the middle of the sea,
Gabriel's going to stand and blow his horn,
To wake the living nations.
Then God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,
Once more blow your silver trumpet,
And wake the nations underground.
And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Like seven peals of thunder.
Then the tall, bright angel, Gabriel,
Will put one foot on the battlements of heaven
And the other on the steps of hell,
And blow that silver trumpet
Till he shakes old hell's foundations.
And I feel the Old Earth a-shuddering—
And I see the graves a-bursting—
And I hear a sound,
A blood-chilling sound.
What sound is that I hear?
It's the clicking together of the dry bones,
Bone to bone—the dry bones.
And I see coming out of the bursting graves,
And marching up from the valley of death,
The army of the dead.
And the living and the dead in the twinkling of an eye
Are caught up in the middle of the air,
Before God's judgment bar.
Oh-o-oh, sinner,
Where will you stand,
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?
Oh, you gambling man—where will you stand?
Liars and backsliders—where will you stand,
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?
And God will divide the sheep from the goats,
The one on the right, the other on the left.
And to them on the right God's a-going to say:
Enter into my kingdom.
And those who've come through great tribulations,

And washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb,
They will enter in—
Clothed in spotless white,
With starry crowns upon their heads,
And silver slippers on their feet,
And harps within their hands;—
And two by two they'll walk
Up and down the golden street,
Feasting on the milk and honey
Singing new songs of Zion,
Chattering with the angels
All around the Great White Throne.
And to them on the left God's a-going to say:
Depart from me into everlasting darkness,
Down into the bottomless pit.
And the wicked like lumps of lead will start to fall,
Headlong for seven days and nights they'll fall,
Plumb into the big, black, red-hot mouth of hell,
Belching out fire and brimstone.
And their cries like howling, yelping dogs,
Will go up with the fire and smoke from hell,
But God will stop his ears.
Too late, sinner! Too late!
Good-bye, sinner! Good-bye!
In hell, sinner! In hell!
Beyond the reach of the love of God.
And I hear a voice, crying, crying:
Time shall be no more!
Time shall be no more!
Time shall be no more!
And the sun will go out like a candle in the wind,
The moon will turn to dripping blood,
The stars will fall like cinders,
And the sea will burn like tar;
And the earth shall melt away and be dissolved,
And the sky will roll up like a scroll.
With a wave of his hand God will blot out time,
And start the wheel of eternity.
Sinner, oh, sinner,
Where will you stand
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?

[14] The sermon-poems in *God's Trombones* include frequent references to traditional Negro spirituals. Three of these, "In Dat Great Getting'-up Mornin'," "Blow Gabe Blow," and "Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel," are songs

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about Judgment Day and are echoed in Johnson’s poem “The Judgment Day.”

- [15] Douglas’s illustration for “The Judgment Day” also served as the cover image for the book *God’s Trombones: Seven Sermons in Verse*.
- [16] In 1928, Douglas received a fellowship to study Barnes’s collection of modern and African art in Merion.
- [17] Other paintings in the series are *Listen Lord—A Prayer* and *The Creation*, owned by Howard University; *Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon* in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art; *Noah Built the Ark* at Fisk University; *The Crucifixion*, privately owned; and *Let My People Go*, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another of the large-scale paintings, *The Prodigal Son*, has not been located. A related work, also called *The Prodigal Son*, is in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on the textured side of a ¼-inch-thick piece of tempered hardboard. The oil paint is layered on top of a brush-applied white priming layer. The priming remains intermittently visible along the edges of the painting support, indicating that it was probably applied by the artist. The painted design extends to the top and bottom edges of the support, but a full quarter inch on both the left and right sides is left unfinished; in these areas Douglas’s paint application process can be discerned. Intermittent lines of chrome green applied against a straight edge are found in these unfinished areas and give the only visible evidence of a drawing. Infrared examination reveals that these same lines extend into the painting along with an extensive drawing that delineates all the major compositional elements. The x-radiograph shows no significant artist’s changes, which comes as no surprise given the comprehensive planning exhibited by the drawing. The pastelike paint varies from smoothly applied passages of nominal thickness that don’t conceal the texture of the panel to vigorous, low-relief impasto. A thick, discolored natural resin varnish and other disfiguring stains were removed in a 2015 conservation treatment and the painting was left unvarnished. Additionally, small areas of loss around the edges, along with a 2.5-inch-long scratch in the upper right corner, were filled and inpainted in the course of this treatment.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1899-1979]. Grace Jones, Nashville, in 1976;[1] sold 1978 to Leonard and Paula Granoff, Providence; purchased 6 November 2014 by NGA.

[1] Jones is listed as lender of the painting in the catalogue for the exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, that travelled to four venues from 1976 to 1977.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1976 *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas; Brooklyn Museum, 1976-1977, no. 99, repro.

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