

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Bonus Episode  
**Celeste Headlee and James Van Der Zee's Couple, Harlem**  
National Gallery of Art

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee. When we engage with art, it kick starts our five senses.

We hear music or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food.

Sometimes you can smell the carved wood or the smeared oil paint, but when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brushwork in a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram. In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery, and you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* delves into our personal relationship with art and the unique response we have to beautifully made things.

[CHEERY CLASSICAL MUSIC]

In this special episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we're diving into the work of Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee. Beginning Sunday, November 28, 2021, the Gallery will host a special exhibition of Van Der Zee's photographs, including some 40 pieces of his work. Each piece is a kind of love letter to Harlem in the 1920s and '30s—the colors, the music, the fashion, the parties.

In this collection, one photograph in particular caught my eye. It depicts a man and a woman, a couple, standing just outside their car. The focal point of the photograph is as much these people as it is what they're wearing—thick, luxurious fur coats. Looking at this picture, you can almost feel what it would be like to run your fingers through that material.

When I saw this photo, what I heard was the blues played on an upright piano, much like the shuffling tune that William Grant Still wrote in 1937 for the CBS Symphony Orchestra. William Grant Still is my grandfather, and he wrote the suite *Lenox Avenue* to honor the neighborhood north of Central Park where he lived, naming it after the thoroughfare that Langston Hughes called "Harlem's heartbeat." Still describes, using melody and rhythm, the feel of this New York street as the sun begins to set.

We see men throwing dice, here a church choir singing hymns, step back as the police break up a fight, and step inside a crowded apartment to attend a rent party. Back in the early 20th century,

Black tenants in Harlem used to invite people over, book a band to play, and then pass the hat to try and get enough money to cover their rent.

When I saw Van Der Zee's photo, I imagined this finely dressed pair stepping out of their car and heading upstairs to pay their \$0.25 to eat pork chops and dance until the small hours. So for this special episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we want to introduce you in more depth to the world of early 20th century Harlem, both its people and its music.

[BLUESY PIANO]

The photograph is in black and white, of course. In it, you see a really handsome couple standing—the woman is standing just outside their Cadillac. It's a Cadillac V16. I mean, this is an expensive car, clearly. Shining—the chrome is shiny.

She's wearing a hat. They're both wearing luxurious, thick raccoon coats. He's sitting just inside the passenger seat with the door open. They look like they're just getting ready to get out of the car. It looks as though the car is parked on a street of brownstones in Harlem, and they're just getting ready to step out for the evening.

They both look a little bemused. The woman has kind of almost a *Mona Lisa* smile. It's just a little bit of a smirk tilting the corners of her mouth up a bit, and her right eyebrow is raised. They are interested, and they're not unhappy. But they're on their way somewhere, also. You can tell that they're getting ready to move.

So to me, this photograph is very noisy. I mean, you look at this photograph, and you can imagine the sounds, right? Car horns and automobiles zooming by. You can imagine people outside on the steps of their brownstones calling back and forth to one another. You can imagine this kind of—the day winding down, and kids coming home, and Harlem streetlights beginning to light up as people get ready for whatever it is they're going to do in the evening. I mean, this photograph is full of sound.

For more on the Harlem couple and Van Der Zee, we're joined by the curator behind the Gallery's special exhibition titled *James Van Der Zee's Photographs: A Portrait of Harlem*. Diane Waggoner is curator of 19th-century photographs at the Gallery.

DIANE WAGGONER: The subtitle of the exhibition is *A Portrait of Harlem*. And for me, it's really about Van Der Zee's relationship with the community of Harlem and the way that he both produced these aspirational, cosmopolitan portraits, but also he was such a vital member of the community. He was the photographer who was often hired to photograph funerals. He was the photographer who was hired to photograph parades, photograph many community groups, athletic groups, social groups, fraternal organizations. So he was a very active member of Harlem for several decades and chronicled the life of Harlem during those decades.

So his prime years were the 1920s, and '30s, and '40s, but he had an incredibly long career. He opened his studio in the late 1910s in Harlem, and he operated a very successful business

through the 1950s. And then he kept his studio open into the 1960s and so on, even though, as he described himself, his sort of portraiture business had dried up.

But then in 1969, his work was rediscovered for the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, which was this very controversial exhibition that included a multimedia display of documentary photographs of Harlem over the decades and excluded African American painters and sculptors. But it really rediscovered Van Der Zee.

Van Der Zee had kept his entire archive of glass plate negatives, and film negatives, and proof prints, and so on. And so Van Der Zee's work really formed the core of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition.

That's why we even have this print of the couple from Harlem that we're looking at today because this was part of a portfolio that was published in 1974, a few years after *Harlem on My Mind*, really to kind of capitalize on the interest in Van Der Zee's work. And it was a portfolio of 18 prints. It has photographs stretching back to the 1900s actually, even before Van Der Zee moved to Harlem, and then several photographs from his time in Harlem, including of course, the couple with the raccoon coats.

[CHEERY CLASSICAL MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Van Der Zee didn't say what street this is, but Lenox Avenue—it's now known as Malcolm X Boulevard as well. But Lenox Avenue is the main road heading through Harlem. It goes north to south. Lenox Avenue has always had a little bit of romance around it, and Langston Hughes wrote this great poem called "Juke Box Love Song" about Lenox Avenue. And he said,

Take Harlem's heartbeat,  
Make a drum beat,  
Put it on a record, let it whirl,  
And while we listen to it play,  
Dance with you till day—

Lenox Avenue has always had sort of this rhythm to it. And so many of the musicians, and artists, and writers of the Harlem Renaissance mention Lenox Avenue in their work. And so I imagine this couple stepping out of their car on Lenox Avenue and getting ready to go to a party.

DIANE WAGGONER: It seems to be so much about the couple wanting to document themselves with their shiny automobile, which probably was a very new purchase. The Cadillac V16 was only in production from 1930 to 1940. This is 1932. I find it fascinating that this is right at the beginning of the Great Depression, and here you have this couple just showing off their prosperousness with the fur coats and the car. And you have to wonder what happened to them.

Van Der Zee is so much about portraying the people who came into his studio. He also photographs the Harlem urban environment, Harlem storefronts, the life of the community, but the sort of bread and butter of his work was his studio portraiture. And he took such great care with all of his subjects that came into his studio. And he talks about that. He says that he put his heart and soul into them.

And what he wanted to do was really portray people as their best selves. And he produced these photographs that are so—they're so aspirational, but they're also very cosmopolitan. They're very elegant. He really made sitters look the best that they could. He did a lot of photographic manipulation on his prints. He took so much care with them.

He did a lot of retouching to improve appearances. Van Der Zee did a lot of etching onto his negatives. And what he would do was he would add jewelry to his sitters. Once you know what to look for, you can see places where he's added a ring to one of his sitters or he's added a bracelet. We have a portrait of a bride in the exhibition where there's a beautiful teardrop necklace. So he was always about trying to adorn his sitters to make them look even better than they did in real life. He was giving them an ideal version of themselves, which is what you want when you go to a studio and you're sitting for a formal portrait.

Here's this couple just posing so proudly with their Cadillac V16. It's so shiny, it's so highly polished. And so it's all about their pride and their possessions. But at the same time, it's also about Van Der Zee's composition, the way he's so beautifully composed it.

It's anchored by the wheels on either side. The range of tones is beautiful. And then I love the way that he has bisected sort of the brownstone archway behind with the hood of the car. And it's just that—it's that geometry in a way, the horizontal lines of the car working against the vertical lines of the woman and the brownstones behind.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's an extended excerpt of William Grant Still's *Lenox Avenue* as performed for broadcast in 1938 by the Columbia Symphony Orchestra.

[MUSIC: WILLIAM GRANT STILL, *LENOX AVENUE*]

(SINGING)

So *Lenox Avenue* is an orchestral suite. It's odd because William Grant Still occupies a pretty unique place in 20th-century music. He just didn't fit anywhere. First of all, he was a Black man writing classical music, and that was not acceptable—to white audiences, particularly.

You're talking about a time, an era in American history, when you had Count Basie, and Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday performing, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk. Dizzy Gillespie was at the very beginning of his career. Miles Davis, I think, was born in the 1920s. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington. The country and the listening audience was very familiar with and comfortable with African Americans playing jazz music or the blues.

They were not comfortable with African Americans writing music that would be played alongside Mozart because classical music was thought of as "art music." It was thought of as intellectual music, and so it was very difficult for many white people—frankly, still, many white people—to imagine that a Black musician could be educated enough to write classical music. But at the same time, the type of music that people were writing in the 1920s, the 1930s when James Van Der Zee was taking many of these photographs, even in the classical world, was not the kind of music William Grant Still was writing.

He was a melodist, and at this time, some of the most important composers were writing atonal music. They were focusing on dissonance. And many people in the classical music field as well criticized William Grant Still's music as being too melodic. There was one critic who sneered that the audience would probably be able to walk out of the concert hall humming the tunes from the music, as though that were an insult.

Grandfather had people telling him that if he was going to write classical music, he needed to focus on what were known as "Negroid themes." So there's all these people saying if you're going to write classical music, it should sound like Duke Ellington. But then there were others who were saying, well, he's just writing Negro spirituals as classical music. So there's just no winning.

I mean, and I'm sure the same was true for James Van Der Zee. It's just someone else is writing the rules. Someone else is literally defining your identity as an artist. And that has to be frustrating—that your success is blocked because no matter what you do, you cannot fit into this mold someone has created for you.

DIANE WAGGONER: Van Der Zee wanted to be a musician, and he started out that way. He was pretty much self-taught on the piano, and with the violin, he also—he had lessons and studied briefly at the Carlton Conservatory of Music in New York. And he wanted to make a living as a musician when he first arrived in New York. And he did play music gigs quite extensively. At the same time, he was always working other jobs because he couldn't make enough playing these music gigs.

He worked as an elevator operator, a waiter, various other jobs, none of which ever lasted very long. Commercially, he got his start by working as an assistant to a department store photographer in New Jersey. The story is that when that photographer went on vacation, he started taking some of the portraits, and eventually, the people who came in started asking for him instead of the main photographer.

He still was doing some music gigs on the side, including even briefly playing with Fletcher Henderson. But he just started making a really good living at photography. And so he switched gears at that point and knew that his sort of future lay with photography and not with music. He also never really embraced jazz or blues, which, of course, was what was coming to prominence at that time. He primarily played ragtime, and waltzes, and that sort of thing, which would have become old fashioned by the 1920s and 1930s.

He certainly thought of himself as an artist, but he wasn't in the art world as we would have defined it. And also photography itself was not considered a fine art for a long time. There were certainly photographers who were working to make that different from the early 20th century with Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Steichen, and so on.

But Van Der Zee wasn't even aware of these photographers' work. To his mind, he was an artist in terms of what he was doing, but he was also somebody who was making a living doing this thing and very successful at it for quite a while. But he didn't have ambitions to be exhibiting his photographs in art exhibits or anything like that.

He really wasn't working in that kind of orbit the way some other photographers were at the time, and he just didn't—he didn't think of his photographs in that way. I think he did later on, and then, of course, he became part of that art market after 1969. But that, too, is also a time in the 1970s when photography was really coming into its own.

The market for photography was just developing at the time. That's when you sort of had your first collectors of photography, a lot of museum collections. Some of them started earlier, but others got started in the 1970s. So in a way, his timing was sort of perfect when he was catapulted up into the national spotlight with *Harlem on My Mind* because this was a time at which photography itself was becoming just much more interesting and much more well-known to the broader public and to the art world.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Harlem at that time—and my grandfather lived there during this period. Harlem at that time was just street after street of successful Black Americans. I mean, the who's who of Harlem in the 1920s and '30s is unbelievable. There was Selma Burke, the sculptor, Augusta Savage, also a sculptor.

There was Bessie Smith lived there, James Johnson, Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, who wrote *Shuffle Along* and lots of other things, Cab Calloway. Fats Waller lived there at this time. Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Bill Robinson—Bojangles. The writers were unbelievable. Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen—I mean, we are talking about Black Americans at the height of their powers in this era, who had all the joy of being born free.

In my grandfather's position, he was not the child of a slave, he was the grandchild of a slave. And that brings enough distance to also inspire some confidence, some brashness, and to speak up—to begin to speak up about what your rights are. I can look at the era of the Harlem Renaissance, and you begin to see the roots of the civil rights era that we all think of from the 1960s and into the '70s.

Langston Hughes began to talk about the unfairness of the treatment of the Black Americans versus white Americans. Many of the writers did. Zora Hurston, Countee Cullen were writing about this. My grandfather's writing music about this. And so this is the beginning of a generation of Black Americans who are far enough from the Civil War that they felt they had the right to speak up for themselves, and they had the right to be successful and to flaunt that success if that's what they wanted to do.

I'm not saying they were safe. I'm not saying that they didn't suffer at the hands of both the criminal justice system and pretty much every system in our country. They absolutely did. It is both true that Black Americans, especially in Harlem at this age, were experiencing success like they never had before, and also they were experiencing poverty, and financial instability, and violence. But there was some defiance to the way that they lived their lives and their insistence that they be joyful.

DIANE WAGGONER: Yes, he was very much photographing Black inhabitants of Harlem, but his photographs are very universal as well. So anyone from any background can look at them and see themselves in them. Because there he is capturing so many different life milestones, all the various life rituals that we go through: weddings, graduations, having a family, photographing your children. So they are both specific and universal at the same time.

(SINGING)

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more information about *James Van Der Zee's Photographs: A Portrait of Harlem*, visit the NGA's website, [nga.gov](http://nga.gov). The special exhibition runs from November 28, 2021, through May 30, 2022, in the Gallery's West Building. Admission is, as always, free to the public.

And you'll hear more from *Sound Thoughts on Art* very soon. Make sure you're subscribed wherever you get your podcasts. If you take a moment to leave us a review or share the show with your friends, we thank you.

*Sound Thoughts on Art* is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. To support the show, please share *Sound Thoughts on Art* and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.