

Delegate Magazine 1982

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THE NEW NEGRO

1920-1941

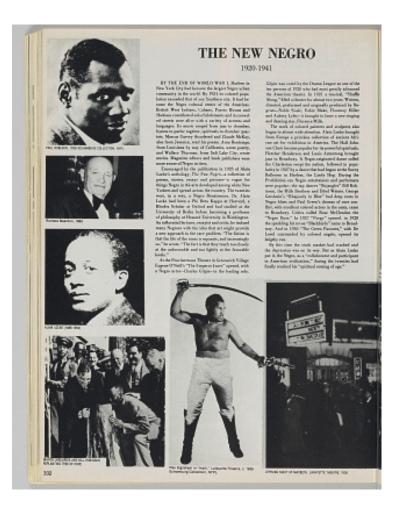
BY THE END OF WORLD WAR I, Harlem in New York City had become the largest Negro urban community in the world. By 1924 its colored population exceeded that of any Southern city. It had become the Negro cultural center of the Americas. British West Indians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Haitians contributed colorful elements and its crowded streets were alive with a variety of accents and languages. Its music ranged from jazz to rhumbas, hymns to parlor ragtime, spirituals to chamber quartets. Marcus Garvey thundered and Claude McKay, also from Jamaica, read his poems. Arna Bontemps, from Louisiana by way of California, wrote poetry, and Wallace Thurman, from Salt Lake City, wrote stories. Magazine editors and book publishers were more aware of Negro writers.

Encouraged by the publication in 1925 of Alain Locke's anthology, The New Negro--a collection of poems, stories, essays and pictures--a vogue for things Negro in the arts developed among white New Yorkers and spread across the country. The twenties were, in a way, a Negro Renaissance. Dr. Alain Locke had been a Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and had studied at the University of Berlin before becoming a professor of philosophy at Howard University in Washington. An influential lecturer, essayist and critic, he imbued many Negroes with the idea that art might provide a new approach to the race problem. "The fiction is that the life of the races is separate, and increasingly so," he wrote. "The fact is that they touch too closely at the unfavorable and too lightly at the favorable levels."

At the Provincetown Theater in Greenwich Village Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" opened, with a Negro actor--Charles Gilpin--in the leading role. Gilpin was voted by the Drama League as one of the ten persons of 1920 who had most greatly advanced the American theater. In 1921 a musical, "Shuffle Along," filled a theater for almost two years. Written, directed, performed and originally produced by Negroes--Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles--it brought to fame a new singing and dancing star, Florence Mills.

The work of colored painters and sculptors also began to attract wide attention. Alain Locke brought from Europe a priceless collection of ancient African art for exhibition in America. The Hall Johnson Choir became popular for its powerful spirituals. Fletcher Henderson and Louis Armstrong brought jazz to Broadway. A Negro-originated dance called the Charleston swept the nation, followed in popularity in 1927 by a dance that had begun at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, the Lindy Hop. During the Prohibition era Negro entertainers and performers were popular—the tap dancer "Bojangles" Bill Robinson, the Mills Brothers and Ethel Waters. George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" had deep roots in Negro blues and Paul Green's dramas of race conflict, with excellent colored actors in the casts, came to Broadway. Critics called Rose McClendon the "Negro Duse." In 1927 "Porgy" opened. in 1928 the sparkling hit revue "Blackbirds" came to Broadway. And in 1930 "The Green Pastures," with De Lawd surrounded by colored angels, opened its lengthy run.

By this time the stock market had crashed and the depression was on its way. But as Alain Locke put it, the Negro, as a "collaborator and



participant in American civilization," during the twenties had finally reached his "spiritual coming of age."

[[image]]
[[caption]] PAUL ROBESON, 1930/SCHOMBURG COLLECTION, NYPL
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[[caption]] Romere Beardon, 1980 [[/caption]]

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[[caption]] ALAIN LOCKE (1886-1954) [[/caption]]

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[[caption]] MAYOR LAGUARDIA AND BILL ROBINSON REPLANTING TREE OF HOPE [[/caption]]

[[image]]
[[caption]] Rex Ingraham in "Haiti," Lafayette Theatre, c. 1936 Schomburg Collection, NYPL [[/caption]]

[[image]]
[[caption]] OPENING NIGHT OF MACBETH, LAFAYETTE THEATRE, 1936 [[/caption]]

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National Museum of African American History and Culture

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