AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS
AFFIRMATION TODAY

FROM THE SERIES
AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

MASKING MATTERS
The Harlem section of New York City became the mecca for artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals from all over the United States and the Caribbean in the years between the two world wars. This period of intense creativity in the visual arts, music, literature, theater, and dance is often called the Harlem Renaissance. The excitement and energy there attracted international attention. In 1925 an entire issue of a popular magazine, *Survey Graphic*, featured articles about life in Harlem as well as poetry by well-known writers. Edited by the philosopher and art critic Alain LeRoy Locke, the magazine also included African-inspired illustrations by noted artists.

Locke continued to write extensively on art and culture. In another essay, “The Legacy of Ancestral Art,” he admonished African-American artists to stop denying their heritage and to find inspiration and subject matter in the ancestral arts of Africa. He recommended that they consider creating works based on African sculptural forms, especially masks, and he also made his private collection of African sculpture available for artists to study.

Many artists accepted Locke’s advice and explored ways to express ethnic consciousness and cultural pride through their work. Some reinterpreted the geometric, angular forms found in sculptural works. Others embraced the elegance of rhythmic patterns and surface designs. Still others chose to depict themselves and their life in America with dignity and pride.
STEEPING OUT

BACKGROUND

And in the . . . night clubs between 125th and 145th, Eighth Avenue and Lenox, you met everyone from Buddy de Silva to Theodore Dreiser, Ann Pennington to the first Mrs. Eugene O’Neill . . .


Many of Harlem’s best-known nightclubs were found on Lenox Avenue. The Cotton Club was located on Lenox at 143rd Street. The entertainment was black—Duke Ellington’s orchestra or Cab Calloway’s Missourians and a high-stepping chorus line that featured light-skinned dancers—but the club was for white patrons only. The Savoy Ballroom on Lenox between 140th and 141st Streets was the club for Harlemites.

The spectacular Savoy, located on the second floor of a building that occupied an entire block, was the largest ballroom in Harlem. Four thousand people could be entertained there at one time. Promotional ads described the club’s magnificence:

When one enters the building he finds himself in a spacious lobby set off by marble staircase and cut glass chandelier. The hall itself is decorated in a color scheme of orange and blue. One half of the floor is heavily carpeted. There are tables, settees, etc., where guests may rest between dances. There is a soda fountain at one end of the hall . . .

The dance floor is about 200 feet long and about 50 feet wide. It is made of the best quality maple flooring, polished to the highest degree.

Sargent Johnson, 1888-1967
Lenox Avenue, ca. 1938
lithograph
31.7 x 21.8 cm (12 1/2 x 8 9/16 in.)
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, transfer from the D.C. Public Library

Two bandstands and a disappearing stage are in the rear. Above are vari-colored spotlights. The Savoy will be open every evening. Admission: 50 cents, week nights; 75 cents, Sundays and holidays.

The club was internationally known. Ebony magazine reported that “Royalty from Europe and other
foreign lands make the Savoy . . . a must on their lists when visiting New York.”

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT
Among a confluence of straight, curving, and angular lines, several interlocking and overlapping forms appear. A masklike face is seen in semiprofile. The closed eyelid forms the flag of an eighth note, while the back of the head merges with the keyboard of a graceful, wing-shaped grand piano. A shaded arch overlaps and intersects with a black area topped by an alternating pattern of white and black horizontal lines. The wavy lines emanating from this shape create a form resembling that of smoke curling from a cigarette.

COMMENTARY
Sargent Johnson was born in Boston. He was orphaned as a child and lived with relatives for a while in Washington, D.C., and in Alexandria, Virginia. As a youth he attended a public school in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he studied music, art, and mechanical drawing. Johnson considered a career in music, but eventually became more interested in the visual arts. He received formal art training at the Worcester Art School. Johnson later moved to California and settled in San Francisco in 1915. He worked at various jobs and attended two art schools, the A. W. Best School of Art and the California School of Fine Arts.

Although he lived on the West Coast, Johnson was aware of the ideas and activities associated with the explosion of the arts in Harlem. He created Lenox Avenue at a time when blues and jazz artists such as Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Louis Armstrong were popular household names throughout the country. Newspaper articles, traveling shows, and recordings made their accomplishments well known. Johnson’s image represents an allegorical tribute to those performing artists, many of whom received their start at the popular nightspots that lined Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

Langston Hughes also paid homage to the music and musicians of Lenox Avenue in his poetry.

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway . . .
He did a lazy sway . . .
To the tune o’those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody,
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION
1. Using the excerpt from Langston Hughes’ poem The Weary Blues, discuss the similarities and differences in the poet’s description of events on Lenox Avenue to those in Sargent Johnson’s image.

2. Form debate teams to discuss the pros and cons of Alain LeRoy Locke’s statement that many artists, during the Harlem Renaissance, had gone “jazz mad and cabaret crazy instead of being folkwise and sociologically sober.”

3. Discuss the sentiment that much of the literature and visual art produced during the Harlem Renaissance did not portray the workaday life of most
Harlemites and that it was dissociated from the masses of black people in Harlem.

4. Jazz associated with the Harlem Renaissance is called big-band music. Conduct research on musicians such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Fletcher Henderson.

5. Listening to a recording by one of the musicians listed above, create an abstract image evocative of the mood the music creates.

REVISITING AFRICA

BACKGROUND

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To Thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh, the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask.

Sargent Johnson, 1888–1967  
*Masks, ca. 1930–1935*  
copper on wood base, painted and gilt traces  
39.4 x 34.3 x 15.3 cm (15 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 6 in.)  
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, gift of International Business Machines Corporation

Masks are found in cultures throughout the world. They can be constructed from many materials, such as wood, metal, cloth, clay, stone, feathers, leather, fur, and paper. Masks range from the simplest hand-held face coverings to elaborate devices with movable parts. The treatment of the surface can also vary from plain and unadorned to intricately carved multimedia constructions. Typically, masks depict animals or objects found in nature, though some represent fantasy creatures and supernatural beings.

Masks can be worn over or in front of the face.
either to hide the identity of the wearer or to establish the identity of another being, spirit, or moral concept. Masks, therefore, can conceal or reveal personalities.

The actual meaning or use of a particular mask is often impossible to discern by its appearance alone. Some masks incorporate such grotesque and fierce features as jagged teeth, protruding eyes, horns, yet their function may be to amuse rather than to terrorize or frighten. Other masks appear innocuous and benevolent though their function may be to admonish and reprimand.

In African societies, the wearing of a mask is a conscious, socially accepted act. The masked individual is able to transcend the confines of his reality and enter a higher realm of consciousness through rituals and ceremonies involving the mask. In Western societies, people often adopt nonmaterial, emotional “masks” or personae to conceal aspects of personality for unconscious reasons, to hide insecurities, to present false identities, or to disguise their true feelings.

It is the pure American Negro I am concerned with, aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip and that characteristic hair, bearing and manner; and I wish to show that beauty not so much to the White man as to the Negro himself.

—Sargent Johnson, San Francisco Chronicle, 6 Oct. 1935

Although the artist titled this work Mask, its three-dimensional form resembles the superb bronze heads crafted in Ife and the kingdom of Benin, West Africa, during the middle of the sixteenth century. Benin artists are noted for producing elegantly stylized busts with braided hair and ringed necklaces that fit closely around the neck. Evidence of Johnson’s knowledge of Benin’s sculptural tradition is apparent in the warm copper tones, the human scale of the work, the figure’s serene facial expression, and the characteristic neck rings of the base.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Describe Johnson’s use of line—eyes, nose, mouth, hair—to capture the girl’s facial features.

2. Benin sculptures often were associated with royalty and the concept of ancestral worship. Discuss how Johnson suggests this young woman might be of royal blood.

3. Research the metal sculptural traditions of West Africa.

4. Use the poems We Wear the Mask by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and For My People by Margaret Walker to contrast the various ways writers attempt to instill racial pride and self-respect through their works.
For My People by Margaret Walker

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and play and drink their wine and religion and success, to marry their playmates and bear children and then die of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 57th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people’s pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied and shackled and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies, associations and councils and committees and conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches, preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the adams and eyes and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.


SELF-IDENTITY

BACKGROUND
At the beginning of the twentieth century, several European artists, including the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso and the Italian Amedeo Modigliani, began to look to non-Western and especially African art for
In America, the era also saw a revival of interest in Africa among black intellectuals. W. E. B. Du Bois organized a series of Pan-African Conferences after World War I to help safeguard the interests of African peoples. A revaluation of Africa’s place in the world was witnessed during the 1920s by the impact of Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa movement, which sought to reaffirm Africa’s past glories and future hopes.

Encouraged by the writings of Alain LeRoy Locke, Du Bois, and Garvey, African-American artists aspired to reclaim their cultural past by incorporating motifs and African-inspired designs in the artworks produced during the 1920s and 1930s. For many, the use of African themes validated their heritage.

**LOOKING AT THE OBJECT**
The figure of the artist occupies the center of the composition. He sits in a relaxed pose with his right hand resting on his right thigh; he leans slightly and thrusts his right shoulder forward. His left hand holds a wide-brimmed black hat, and he wears a striped, close-fitting turtleneck shirt. Behind him, hanging in a frame, is the painting *Negro Masks*, completed by Johnson two years earlier.

**COMMENTARY**
Malvin Gray Johnson was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. During the 1920s he studied painting at the National Academy of Design in New York. Indeed, most of his artistic career was spent in New York where he worked as a commercial artist and at menial jobs to support his art. His work received recognition and awards in several exhibitions of the Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organization that promoted the artistic efforts of blacks. His work was generally praised for its use of African-American subjects, which included Harlem street scenes and imaginary works drawn from spirituals. Some critics
found fault with his paintings because of their lack of finish and their abstract qualities. However, Johnson consciously embraced these expressive devices.

*Self-Portrait* appears deceptively simple, yet it is a complex composition. The figure's direct and serious gaze immediately engages the viewer. Behind the sitter is a painted still-life composition of two African masks. The placement of the painted masks near the artist's face appears intentional. Johnson established a sense of kinship between himself and his ancestral heritage by painting his own eyebrows to echo the dominant brows of one of the masks in the painting. He indicates that his self-image as a black artist is incomplete without this symbolic reference to African culture.

**ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss objects or items that help establish cultural or racial identity. Include such things as clothing, hair styles, and jewelry.

2. The concept of transformation or rebirth was a common theme during the Harlem Renaissance. Writers such as Claude McKay used the theme in poems and short stories. Even the term associated with the renaissance, "New Negro," implied this sense of self-transformation. Discuss the concept as it relates to Johnson's image of himself in this painting.

3. Self-identity was a theme in Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement. Research the movement, discuss its successes and failures.

4. Have students create works about themselves: poems, stories, paintings, musical compositions, or dance.

**BACKGROUND**

The title of this painting, translated from the French, means fetishes, which are inanimate objects endowed with magical powers. While some masks are revered as consecrated objects imbued with supernatural power, not all of them are regarded in this way.
Les Fétiches reveals Lois Mailou Jones’s fascination with the inventiveness, variety of materials, and facial types found in African masks. These differences are indicated by her grouping that combines large face masks with abstract human features, a medium-size horned mask, and the small amulet that could be worn around the neck. The complexity of materials is denoted by the brown and ochre tones suggesting wood, a medium selected for many masks. She also alludes to the use of vegetable and cloth fabrics, animal horns, and metals by her use of silver grays and lavenders.

Jones fuses masks from various geographical regions spanning western and central Africa. Her ingenious composition, however, does not depict specific masks. Instead, she distills qualities found in several types of masks. Only the example with black striations, in the lower left, resembles actual masks made by the Songye people in Zaire.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT
Five African masks are juxtaposed against a dark background. The central mask, punctuated by slits that form the eyes and mouth, is crowned with regalia that appear to be made of fabric or raffia. From behind this elaborate ornamentation, a horn is exposed. The polychromed mask with black striations in the left corner is a helmet mask. A horned mask occupies the lower right corner, in front of a shieldlike mask. Overlapping the masks are a standing red zoomorphic figure with a beaklike nose and a white pendant.

COMMENTARY
Lois Mailou Jones was born in Boston, where she won annual scholarships to attend the High School of the Practical Arts. As a teenager she worked as an apprentice to a well-known designer who produced costumes and masks for a local dance company. Through this experience, Jones was introduced to African sculpture, especially masks. Following graduation from high school, Jones attended art classes at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She accepted a job in Sedalia, North Carolina, at Palmer Memorial Institute, a college preparatory school for African Americans, where she taught art classes as well as dance and basketball and played the piano for Sunday services. In 1930 she joined the faculty at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she taught until she retired in 1977.

Although her early paintings followed the French post-impressionist style popular in both Europe and America during the early twentieth century, Jones heeded the advice of Alain LeRoy Locke, a colleague at Howard, and became one of the first female African-American painters to depict African imagery in her work. While in Paris on a fellowship in 1937, she studied African art objects in galleries and museums. Inspired by the bold expressiveness of African sculptural objects, Jones developed a stylistic language reflecting that quality.

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree
What is Africa to me?

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION
1. Using the excerpt from Countee Cullen’s Heritage, discuss reasons why many African-American
writers and artists turned to Africa for inspiration.

2. Research the lives and writings of Alain LeRoy Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Discuss the similarities and differences in their views toward ancestral heritage and black consciousness.

3. After watching the video *African-American Artists: Affirmation Today*, discuss Lois Mailou Jones's statement "I am not an African. I have to do research to capture the feeling and mood of Africa."

4. Find out more about the Harlem Renaissance, particularly the role of the Negro History Clubs that were common at the time.

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


