

# HARLEM HEROES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
CARL VAN VECHTEN



A TEACHING RESOURCE



## INTRODUCTION

The photographs in this booklet capture a few of the leaders and personalities of the New Negro Movement, commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. This flowering of creativity took place in the early part of the twentieth century in response to three major historical forces: the migration of millions of African Americans from the South to cities such as Chicago and New York, feeding new black communities in the North; the return

of more than 350,000 black men to a segregated United States after World War I; and a growing black middle class whose patronage supported writers, musicians, and artists of color.

While the New Negro Movement engaged cities throughout the northern United States, the photographs here will focus on Harlem because of the photographer: dance critic, socialite, and novelist Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964). He took up photography in 1932 and documented people, black and white, in his expanding social circle. As a white patron of the arts in New York City, Van Vechten’s interest in Harlem’s creative class reflected a growing awareness of black culture within the white community.

Scholar Alain Locke praised the New Negro Movement as a “definite enrichment of American art and letters and . . . the clarifying of our common vision of the social tasks ahead.” Open an early copy of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), however, and it becomes clear: there was an ongoing debate about the definition and presentation of black identity. At the time these photographs were made, many of Van Vechten’s sitters were engaged in this conversation.

This booklet is roughly divided into two discussions: early debates about black identity, and how black history was recorded in contemporary writings and novels, as well as the performing and visual arts. These selections offer a glimpse of the cultural richness and breadth of the Harlem Renaissance, and the contributions each figure made in shaping issues of identity and articulating black culture.

*O, write my name, O, write my name*

*O, write my name . . .*

*Write my name when-a you get home . . .*

*Yes, write my name in the book of life . . .*

*The Angels in the heav'n going-to write my name.*

—SPIRITUAL, UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

### READING A PORTRAIT

Encourage your students to read the portraits in this booklet as carefully as they would other historical texts. Have them consider each portrait individually, using the following guidelines:

Focus first on what you see, thinking of all elements of the photograph as symbols that, added together, tell a larger story:

- What items has the photographer and sitter included in the photograph?
- In what order do you notice those items?

Consider the sitter’s clothing and accessories. What do these items tell you about the person’s life? Status? Self-concept?

Consider the sitter’s body language and facial expression. How might this person be feeling toward the photographer? What do these add to the unfolding message of the artwork?

What questions do you have about the photographer? The sitter? The context?

William H. Johnson, *Harlem Street* (detail),  
ca. 1939–41.

## DEBATING BLACK IDENTITY

*“One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”*

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk*

**W. E. B. DU BOIS** (1868–1963) was one of the most important voices of his generation and helped shape the New Negro Movement, of which the Harlem Renaissance was one slice. From his privileged early life in Massachusetts and throughout his career, he valued education: his own and that of black Americans.

In 1895, at age twenty-seven, Du Bois became the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University, in the study of history. That same year, another prominent thinker, southern-born Booker T. Washington, delivered a speech in which he described the future of the race as being founded on vocational training. He introduced a philosophy about race relations called accommodation: “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly.” At the time, Du Bois saw value in Washington’s approach; a decade later, Du Bois’s thinking had changed.

Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. In it he argued that industrial education and accommodation were insufficient for the advancement of African Americans. Instead he called for higher education for the “Talented Tenth” of black male citizenry. Rather than trying to prove their worth to the white population through manual labor, as Washington suggested, Du Bois argued that “Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys.”

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois also introduced the idea that African Americans should measure their successes against their own standards rather than that of the white world. He later expanded upon this idea as editor of the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*. In an essay entitled “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois argued that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be.”

*The Crisis* was a forum for debate about black identity during the New Negro Movement. In 1926 the magazine invited Harlem tastemakers to weigh in on the



W. E. B. Du Bois, 1936 (left)

Langston Hughes, 1939 (right)



topic “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed.” In his article submission, Carl Van Vechten pushed against Du Bois’s argument for publishing consistently positive depictions of African Americans. He called the poverty and vice in Harlem “novel, exotic,” asking: “Are Negro writers going to

write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?”

Du Bois undoubtedly found the question frustrating, as that same year Van Vechten published a highly controversial novel about Harlem called *Nigger Heaven*. Van Vechten seemed to think his friendships with luminaries of the New Negro Movement gave him special permission to write unflattering depictions of black life. In *The Crisis*, Du Bois condemned the novel as “an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white.”

Interestingly, the photograph above is proof that the men stayed in contact for years, despite that scathing review. Ten years after asking the public to drop Van Vechten’s book in the garbage, Du Bois visited the photographer’s home studio to sit for this portrait. A decade later still, Van Vechten wrote Du Bois a letter praising Du Bois’s skill in helping people of all races “[see] with your eyes.”

**LANGSTON HUGHES’s** (1902–1967) roots reached back to grandparents born free in North Carolina who had achieved political and educational heights in their own time. Hughes himself was born in Missouri and attended an integrated high school in Ohio where he began developing his voice as a poet. Hughes showed early mastery of the written word when, despite his father’s discouragement, his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was published when Hughes was just nineteen years old. A promise to

## LOOKING QUESTIONS

W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes have been called the fathers of the New Negro Movement. How do their portraits differ? Given what you know, to what might you attribute these differences?



## LOOKING QUESTION

Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten were close friends. What evidence of this relationship, if any, can you find in his photograph of Hughes?

*“... no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.”*

—LANGSTON HUGHES, *“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”*

study engineering brought Hughes to Columbia University in New York; two semesters later, a desire to see the world prompted him to set sail for Europe and Africa.

Hughes held Du Bois in high regard, remembering: “My earliest memories of written words were those of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Bible.” He agreed with Du Bois that African American artists and writers should set their own standards and claim their place unapologetically. He played off of this idea with his poem “I, Too” (at right), which reframes Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing.”

Hughes collaborated with writer Zora Neale Hurston on a variety of projects before a fiery falling out. They worked together on the first and only issue of *Fire!!* magazine, for which Carl Van Vechten was a patron. The short-lived magazine helped draw a line in the sand between established New Negro Movement philosophers and a younger generation. Hughes’s fresh perspective proved successful, as he made a living entirely through his writing (although not always comfortably).

Hughes mined all parts of black life in his writing—especially what he called the common element—in an effort to find a distinctly racial voice. This worried more conservative elements of the New Negro Movement who felt art should be used for racial uplift. They argued that by showing the unseemly side of everyday “folk” along with their nobility, Hughes was celebrating vulgarity and pandering to white readers. Hughes shot back: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”

Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten met at a party in 1924, but their friendship really took shape in 1925 when they began a correspondence that would last four decades. In their letters they shared gossip, exchanged ideas about the blues and jazz, debated the power of art to change minds, and advised each other on their writing. Some people—like W. E. B. Du Bois and Allison Davis—saw Van Vechten as an undue influence on Hughes. In his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes rose to Van Vechten’s defense: “The bad Negro writers... would have been bad anyway, had Mr. Van Vechten never been born.”

*I, too, sing America.*

*I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the  
kitchen...*

*Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes...*

*They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—*

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “I, Too”

## RECORDING BLACK HISTORY



Bessie Smith, 1936

*Nobody knows you, when you down and out  
In my pocket not one penny,  
And my friends I haven't any  
But If I ever get on my feet again,  
Then I'll meet my long lost friend  
It's mighty strange, without a doubt  
Nobody knows you when you down and out  
I mean when you down and out*

—“Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out,”  
BLUES STANDARD WRITTEN BY JIMMY COX, 1923

**BESSIE SMITH** (1894–1937) was born into poverty in Tennessee. She began her career as an entertainer at sixteen when she joined a minstrel show that travelled the American South. Later she was discovered by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who set her on a course for stardom. With her booming, swooping voice and outsize personality, Smith won over audiences, making her the highest-earning black entertainer of her time. She made her first recording with Columbia Records in 1923, a song called “Downhearted Blues,” which sold more than a million copies.

It was Rainey who claimed to have discovered the blues as a new type of music in 1902. The roots of the genre, however, are much older than that. The blues likely grew out of work songs and spirituals sung by enslaved people in the Mississippi Delta and neighboring areas. These original songs shifted to tales of slavery, sharecropping, and struggle, serving as an oral history of sorts.

Langston Hughes, a tremendous fan of Smith's, traced the evolution of spirituals into blues to the Great Migration. In a 1941 essay, he wrote: “The Spirituals are group songs, but the Blues are songs you sing alone. The Spirituals are religious songs, born in camp meetings and remote plantation districts. But the Blues are *city* songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against the lonely walls of hall bedrooms where you can't sleep at night.”

With its themes of racial injustice and oppression, and sometimes sexually explicit lyrics, the blues broke taboos on subjects unwelcome in the parlors of “proper”



Romare Bearden, *Empress of the Blues*, 1974, collage. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase in part through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

people, black and white. For Hughes, a man searching for a black identity in the lives of common folk, the music was deeply appealing and influenced his manner of writing. For women like Bessie Smith, the blues gave them a voice and a chance to make an independent living. For listeners, the music offered a way to build community through shared experience. In fact, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston sang the blues as a way to win the hearts of her interviewees while collecting folklore in the roughest parts of the Deep South.

W. E. B. Du Bois similarly held music in high regard as a way of articulating black culture. He did not, however, value the blues in the least. He saw spirituals as the purest form of African American musical expression, heading each chapter of his book *The Souls of Black Folk* with a verse. He extolled “the rhythmic cry of the slave—[which] stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.” He viewed the blues as a version of spirituals “debased” by the influence of vaudeville and blackface minstrels.

As a musical style, the blues craze lasted through World War I and had faded by 1929 with the crash of the US stock market. The Great Depression dampened enthusiasm for songs about the downhearted, initially damaging Smith’s career. Eventually her style





Romare Bearden, 1944

*“I paint out of the tradition of the blues, of call and recall. . . . Even though you go through these terrible experiences, you come out feeling good. That’s what the blues say and that’s what I believe—life will prevail.”*

—ROMARE BEARDEN

changed with the times, and in the 1930s she began incorporating jazz sounds into her work. It was at this time that she sat for her portrait (see p. 5).

Carl Van Vechten met Bessie Smith at the height of her popularity. He wrote an article about her for *Vanity Fair* in 1926, introducing her version of the blues to the magazine’s mostly white readership. Bessie Smith wasn’t terribly impressed with Van Vechten, as the story goes, but apparently they stayed in contact. His photograph of the singer was taken a decade later, just a year before her untimely death in an automobile accident.

Other pictures of Smith in his series show her, in the same silky dress, singing against a dark botanical backdrop. Still another features her standing, in a sleeveless dress and smiling playfully at the camera. Van Vechten was proud of this series of shots, stating that these photographs were, perhaps, “the only adequate record of her true appearance and manner that exist.”

How do Van Vechten’s images of the singer compare to those by other artists? *Empress of the Blues* (see p. 6) is a much later portrait of Bessie Smith by the artist **ROMARE BEARDEN** (1911–1988). Born into a middle-class family in North Carolina, Bearden wound up a social worker in New York City from the mid-1930s through the 1960s. He made art throughout his life and, like his friend Jacob Lawrence, was a younger artist whose early practice coincided with the end of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, Bearden recalled that, as a child, figures of the New Negro Movement regularly visited his family’s home in Harlem.

Bearden’s style was influenced by the cubists, among others, but he tapped into his personal and community history for subjects. His version of Bessie Smith depicts

## LOOKING QUESTIONS

How do Carl Van Vechten’s and Romare Bearden’s portraits of Bessie Smith differ? What does each portrait tell you about the sitter that the other does not?

Consider each portrait’s medium, photograph and painted collage. What impact does the medium have on the message? Which medium best depicts the following elements of Smith’s career: professional success, bold voice and personality, “Empress of the Blues”?

Romare Bearden’s portrait was made thirty-eight years after Van Vechten’s. What does Bearden’s work tell you about Bessie Smith’s legacy? About the evolution of black identity?

*“She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.”*

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

her in a nightclub, backed by swaying musicians. The Empress of the Blues, as she was called, stands just off-center, transfixing the audience with her fabulous voice and imposing presence.

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON** (1891–1960) began life in Eatonville, an all-black town in Florida. After her beloved mother’s death when Hurston was thirteen, the future writer and novelist struggled for a decade to find time between menial jobs to finish school. When she could finally dedicate herself to her education, at twenty-three, she had aged out of the public school system. Her solution: shave ten years off of her age!

Upon completing high school, Hurston paid her way through her first year at Howard University. The next year she earned a scholarship to Barnard College in New York City, where she earned a degree in anthropology. It was during her time at Barnard that Hurston began gathering the folktales and dialect of the American South. She drove through rural communities and captured the voices and beliefs of the everyday people she met there. These recordings, made in the birthplace of the Great Migration, would influence her writing for the rest of her life.

By writing her fictive characters’ speech in dialect, Hurston wanted to demonstrate a distinct African American culture, a choice that stirred debate among her contemporaries. In 1937, Richard Wright—who was also photographed by Carl Van Vechten and who would later write *Native Son*—declared that Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was in the minstrel tradition. Alain Locke, on the other hand, praised it as contemporary folklore.

Hurston was well aware of discussions of race and the role of the writer in the articulation of black identity. In 1928, Hurston reflected on her experiences as an African American woman in an essay called “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” In it, she disputed W. E. B. Du Bois’s idea of “two-ness”: “I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.”

## LOOKING QUESTION

During this same photo session in 1935, Van Vechten took a picture of Hurston, hatless and smiling. The image on page 9, however, is the one most often published with Hurston’s work. Given what you know, why might that be?



Zora Neale Hurston, 1935 (left)  
Jacob Lawrence, 1941 (right)



She simply wanted to strike out on her own. In her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston recalled: “From what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a

woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color.”

Hurston crossed paths with Carl Van Vechten during her first years in New York City. They seemed to share a lust for life, and became fast friends. Van Vechten helped get Hurston published. For her part, Hurston thought highly of Van Vechten. In fact, she wrote to friend and employer Fannie Hurst that “If Carl was a people instead of a person, I could then say, these are my people.”

**JACOB LAWRENCE** (1917–2000) was born into a newly transplanted family in New Jersey. Having moved north in search of opportunity unavailable to them in Virginia and South Carolina, Lawrence’s parents soon separated. In an effort to support her family, Lawrence’s mother left her three children in foster care in Pennsylvania while she worked in Harlem, New York.

At thirteen, Lawrence joined his mother in Harlem. For the first time Lawrence had access to an art education through after-school programs meant to assist working mothers. He took full advantage. Like Zora Neale Hurston, however, Lawrence struggled to find time between school, art making, and his job as a delivery boy. Eventually, he dropped out of high school to focus on his art.

Artists like sculptor Augusta Savage and writer Claude McKay took interest in Lawrence’s work and, together with the events of the day, influenced not his style so much as the content of his painting. Lawrence embraced social realism, depicting the lives and histories of everyday African Americans.

*“I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive.”*

—HURSTON, on her portraits by Carl Van Vechten



Jacob Lawrence, *The Library*, 1960, tempera on fiberboard. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

In 1941, when he was just twenty-four, Lawrence completed a sixty-painting series called *The Migration of the Negro*. The works tell the stories of African Americans moving from the rural South to northern and midwestern cities beginning in 1900. Lawrence later reflected: “I wanted to show . . . how the Negro had participated and to what degree the Negro had participated in American history.” This posed a particular challenge, as the history of African Americans was not readily available. Lawrence therefore based his work on the oral histories of his family and community, as well as research conducted at the Schomburg Center in New York, the setting of the painting shown above.

Lawrence’s work gained critical acclaim and wide acceptance within the white community. It was at this time that Claude McKay introduced Lawrence to Carl Van Vechten. McKay had attended Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and made his way to New York in 1914. Born in Jamaica, he and Lawrence shared a desire to tell the stories of common people, uprooted and in search of a shared identity.

McKay urged Van Vechten to photograph Lawrence, writing: “He has done the most marvelous paintings of Harlem types and scenes.” Van Vechten shot the picture (shown on p. 9) and crafted a reply to McKay: “I liked Jacob Lawrence and found him very handsome to look at, with very beautiful brown skin.”

*“They never taught Negro history in the public schools. . . . It was never studied seriously like regular subjects.”*

—JACOB LAWRENCE



Self-portrait of photographer  
Carl Van Vechten, 1932

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER

*“I think it was my original intention to photograph everybody and everything in the world!”*

—CARL VAN VECHTEN

**CARL VAN VECHTEN** (1880–1964) was a financially independent arts enthusiast who had moved himself from his hometown in Iowa to university in Chicago, newspaper reportage in Europe and then New York, taking photographs all the while. Van Vechten was introduced to Harlem’s nightlife in the mid-1920s. In 1932 he began making photographic portraits, beginning with close friends like NAACP undercover agent Walter White.

His writing, opinions, and sometimes mere presence influenced the debates of the 1920s and ’30s in New York. People like W. E. B. Du Bois saw his interest in Harlem and its artists and poets as exploitative and patronizing. Others like Langston Hughes saw Van Vechten as a symbol of creative freedom and, by siding with this outsider, a way to differentiate themselves from the “old guard.”

Van Vechten was a well-connected patron of the arts in addition to his passions as a photographer. He maintained correspondence with the publishers of the day as well as the central figures of the New Negro Movement in New York. He collected books, record albums, musical scores, and manuscripts, and donated these (along with his photographs) to archives at Yale, Fisk, and Howard Universities. Given that Harlem Renaissance-era thinkers, writers, and artists were focused on cultivating black identity and claiming a place in American history, Van Vechten was controversial in his day, and his legacy remains ambiguous.



### LOOKING QUESTION

How does Jacob Lawrence’s portrait on page 9 fit with his own efforts as an artist?

### ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Carl Van Vechten took the photographs in this booklet as part of a larger project to document the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance. What story or stories do these photographs tell, when taken together?

How would this story or stories be different if they were a single, group shot instead of individual portraits?



Opening image  
 William H. Johnson, *Harlem Street*, ca.  
 1939–41, tempera with pencil on paper.  
 Smithsonian American Art Museum,  
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#### CREDITS

All portrait photographs by Carl Van Vechten:

Images of Bearden, Du Bois, Hughes, and Lawrence: from the portfolio 'O, Write My Name': *American Portraits, Harlem Heroes*, photos printed 1983. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the National Endowment for the Arts, © Van Vechten Trust and Eakins Press Foundation

Images of Hurston and Smith: from the unrealized portfolio *Noble Black Women: The Harlem Renaissance and After*, photos printed 1983. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the National Endowment for the Arts, © Van Vechten Trust and Eakins Press Foundation

Carl Van Vechten (self-portrait): Prentiss Taylor papers, 1885–1991. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photograph © Van Vechten Trust

Page 4: Excerpt from "I, Too," from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1994). Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes

Page 5: Excerpt from "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" by Jimmy Cox, 1923; recorded by Bessie Smith for Columbia Records, 1929.

Romare Bearden, *Empress of the Blues*  
 (detail), 1974



