



Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*, 1936

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Aaron Douglas (born Topeka, KS, 1899–died Nashville, TN, 1979)

## *Into Bondage*, 1936

Oil on canvas, 60 3/8 x 60 1/2 in. (153.4 x 153.7 cm)

Signed lower right: AARON DOUGLAS

Museum Purchase and partial gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr., The Evans-Tibbs Collection, 1996

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aaron Douglas, a major figure of the **Harlem Renaissance**, was one of the first African American artists to draw on contemporary black culture as subject matter for his work. Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899, Douglas recognized his artistic ambition early. He attended the University of Nebraska where he was the only African American student pursuing art. After teaching high school art classes in Kansas City, Missouri, Douglas relocated and immersed himself in the New York City art world. Douglas' first commission was to illustrate Alain Locke's 1925 compilation of contemporary African American prose, *The New Negro*. The success of this project and others established Douglas as a leading artist in the rapidly developing Harlem Renaissance movement. Poet and writer Langston Hughes encouraged other African American artists to aspire to Douglas' example and to convey their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Douglas continued to create inspiring images for African Americans through several series of murals depicting black history. In 1935, Douglas formed the Harlem Artists Guild "to band all the Harlem artists together in a cultural group" and to lobby for African American artists to gain employment under the federal **Works Progress Administration**. Douglas left New York in 1937 to establish the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he remained active until 1976. An inspirational educator, Douglas influenced generations of African American artists.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- If you had not studied history and the enslavement of Africans, could you still interpret the narrative of this work?
- How do you know the people are to become slaves?
- How is the composition affected by the **concentric** circles?
- The painting is composed of flat planes with visible brushstrokes and no shading. How does the artist achieve depth?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- What do think the gesture of the women on the left signifies? Does it indicate hope or despair?
- Why do you think Douglas chose not to depict this scene in a naturalistic manner? How does his style alter the meaning or your impression of the work?
- Look at the star and its ray of light shining in the middle of the canvas. Why do you think Douglas included the star? How would the mood change if the star was removed? What other symbols could the artist have included to give a sense of hope to the narrative?
- This painting was originally part of a four-painting series. If you had three more canvases to complete the series, what scenes from African American history would you choose to convey?

### ABOUT THE ART

*Into Bondage* premiered as one element of a four-part mural series in the Hall of Negro Life at the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas. It was Douglas' intention to create and present fresh, modern images depicting the contributions of African Americans to the state's history and achievements. This painting portrays slavery, as Douglas believed that understanding the past was essential to moving forward in the future. *Aspiration*—the only other surviving mural from the series, which is in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco—depicts Douglas' 20th century contemporaries as an educated urban class. Many white fairgoers at the Exposition refused to believe that the highly accomplished artist who painted these works was African American.

*Into Bondage* exemplifies Douglas' unique compositional style which includes radiating circles, silhouetted forms with few interior details, and **Cubist**-influenced overlapping shapes. The reddish-orange color of the manacles and star contrasts the **analogous** palette of misty blues, mauves, and lavenders. The bound captives descend toward two large ships that are set to transport the Africans across the Atlantic to their future of enslavement. While most of the men's heads are bowed low in despair, the woman on the left looks up and raises her shackled hands above the horizon line. The large central figure's eye slit recalls the masks of the **Dan** people of Africa. His profiled head and chest and twist of the hips demonstrate Douglas' predilection for ancient Egyptian art. Although the man stands on a pedestal referencing the auction block from which he will be sold, a ray of light from the **North Star**, which guided slaves on the **Underground Railroad**, illuminates his face and foreshadows his ultimate freedom.

### VOCABULARY

**Harlem Renaissance:** The period between 1919 and the early 1930s of burgeoning African American culture, which included visual art, theater, prose, and poetry, and was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. These African American intellectuals believed that increasing awareness of black culture through various art forms would reduce racial tensions and barriers in 20th century America.

**Works Progress Administration:** A federal government agency established in 1935 to provide work opportunities to those suffering in the Depression. The administration also set up the Federal Writer's Project and the Federal Arts Project to make jobs available to unemployed arts professionals.

**Cubism:** An artistic movement of the early 20th century led by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Cubism abandoned the traditional fixed viewpoint, and instead explored a multiplicity of viewpoints to develop an accumulated idea of the subject resembling abstract, geometric forms.

**Analogous colors:** Two or three colors which are adjacent to each other on the color wheel. (i.e. orange, orange-red, red)

**Dan:** Ethnic group located in the West African countries of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

**North Star:** Runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad mostly moved at night to avoid being caught in the daylight. They used this bright beacon as a navigational device to find their way north, their intended direction towards freedom.

**Underground Railroad:** A network of both black and white people who aided runaway slaves along their journey to freedom in the North. Fugitives would find shelter and food at these homes or establishments until it was safe to continue traveling and would then move at night in 10 to 20 mile increments.

**Concentric:** Objects or shapes that share a common center.

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## ENDNOTES

Jennifer Wingate, "Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash, et al, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 246-247.

Susan Badder, "Into Bondage" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 200-201.

Susan Badder et al, "Aaron Douglas" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art African-American Art Educators' Resource Pack* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art Education Department, 1999), unpaginated.

Renee Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society'" in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 95-112.