

# Art as Black and White: Examining Interactions Between Race in the 20th Century Through Black Artist Experience

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between African-American art throughout the 20th century and mainstream art critics' perspectives of the African-American community. Aaron Douglas', Jacob Lawrence's, and Jean Michel Basquiat's experiences as artists spanned the 20th century. The study examined approximately 40 primary documents written by White individuals who played a role in the mainstream art world during the 20th century. The analysis determined that there was no change in the perspectives of the White majority towards the African-American community in response to Aaron Douglas', Jacob Lawrence's, and Jean Michel Basquiat's art. Two main themes emerged regarding White response to these artists. First, the White majority seems to have felt threatened by the African-American community and utilized its power to keep African-American art confined to its own community. Second, the White majority commodified African-American art in order to keep it outside the mainstream. Therefore, the key contribution of this study is to document one important way that racism seeped into the arts. Not only can the findings be applied to other methods of cultural production, but the construction of this study can provide a model for other studies dealing with similar qualitative materials.

## SUMMARY

The goal of this paper is to answer the question of how did African-American art throughout the 20th century impacted the perspectives of the White majority on the African-American community? This question is addressed through the examination of what White reviewers and art writers had to say in regard to African-American artists, and their art. This is more closely audited through the experiences of Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Jean Michel Basquiat are examined in the present study. It is in their experiences with this White-majority that it can be seen if there was a change in their perspectives on African American art as a whole, and, thus, the African American community. It is in this specificity of the topic and the case studies that makes the present study unique. For this type of study can be examined with a narrow focus (racism in art) but yet it can provide insights into how the overall issue of racism in the United States can be examined.

## **Introduction**

"I have a statement, I have something I want to say in my work," states Jacob Lawrence during an interview with Clarence Major in 1977 (p.16). Every artist usually has "a statement" and it is in this statement that gives art power. It is with this power that gives art the ability to change the way people feel. It provides social commentary that can change the way individuals view certain issues due to the types of emotions that it can bring out within the people viewing it. Harriet Walker (1996) states that, "Protest art came about after World War II with the impatience for social

change.” (p. 95) furthering the idea that art is used by many, especially minority groups to exact change. How can art change the perception of a group of people? Specifically, it is examined whether African-American art during the 20th century changed the perception held by the White, mainstream art world (i.e. the gallery curators, owners, and art critics) toward the African-American community. I evaluate this relationship between the African American art community and the mainstream art world by focusing intensively on three African-American artists as case studies: Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The study looked at how the artwork of these three African-American artists was received and whether and how their work impacted the views of the White majority that makes up the mainstream art world.

Douglas, Lawrence, and Basquiat were among the most notable African-American artists of the 20th century. Aaron Douglas, through his role as a teacher and his style of painting, granted him the title of “the Father of African-American art” (DeLombard, 2014). Jacob Lawrence, the painter of *The Migration Series* (1941), used text in conjunction with his art and was notable for portraying the stories of African-American people. Finally, Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the most famous artists in the world. He is notable for the controversy associated with his style of art, along with the raw stardom that he amassed over his short career. These three case studies provide insight into the extent to which African-American art throughout the 20th century changed the perspective held by the White mainstream art community towards the African-American community.

A qualitative content analysis of documents written by and about the three artists was conducted using NVivo. The present study found that there was no change in the perspectives and opinions of the White majority as a result of the contributions of Douglas, Lawrence, and Basquiat. Thus, the key contribution of this study is to examine why there was no change in the perspectives of the White majority in the art world during the time that Douglas, Lawrence, and Basquiat were producing their work.

## Background

Art during the 20th century was and still is all about who people knew and finding ways to get one’s artwork shown to as many people as possible. Gibbon (1987) stated that, “To be recognized as art, and, further, to be recognized as good art, works must pass through a series of gatekeeping institutions” (p. 112). These institutions are the “high-art galleries” which are able to bring in art which has a high economic value, but also a high artistic value as well. The art world during the 20th century was highly political and was dominated by White people (Gibbon, 1987). As one would think, this led to racism dictating which art made into these “high-art galleries.” As a result, the singular influence of White people running the artistic community led to the social norms of the 20th century to impact the way that the mainstream art community examined the artwork of African-Americans.

With this singular influence, the practices that the White majority used to marginalize Black artists, and the overall community, are nothing new. Charles Tilly (1998) states that “two mechanisms we may label exploitation and opportunity hoarding cause durable inequality” (p. 9). These two aspects which lead to inequality were directly seen in the research done in this study, as seen in the themes indicated in the introduction section. Tilly also goes on to say that “emulation and adaptation” are two other mechanisms used to further inequality. This can be immediately observed in an example like the creation of “Primitivism” as a genre of art that only African-American artists were able to create due to their racial background (Vincenti, 2001). This “genre” was created by the White majority as a way to keep African-American artists in a box.

John Davis (2003) while writing on the vast amount of “voices” heard within American art, as a whole, states that the “proliferation of voices has moved from the margins inward” (p. 544). This continues to push the point that the issues of those “outside of the mainstream”, I am assuming minority arts and views, are being brought to the center of attention. Furthermore, it can be assumed that over the course of the 20th century African-American artists did receive more acknowledgement from the mainstream art community, as a result of the constant progression of the civil rights movement. However, even while some artists, like Jean Michel Basquiat, were able to reach a certain level of stardom they still were not given the same amount of respect that White artists were given.

In the following sections, the present paper the three artist's experiences within the mainstream art world as case studies. Within each section the themes that were prevalent throughout the 20th century that prevented any possibility of major change in the perspectives of the White majority are documented.

## Case Studies

### Aaron Douglas (Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century)

Aaron Douglas began his career in Harlem, New York, in 1924 where he studied under the portraitist Winold Reiss at the peak of the "New Negro Movement" (Bey, 2011). Douglas quickly became a sought out artist in Harlem and received "many commissions in Harlem". He was also well-known for teaching art at Fisk University from 1939 to 1966 (Bey, 2011). As a result of his successes he became known as the "Father of African-American art" (Delombard, 2014). While he was a major influence in the African-American art world, and given the general popularity of his art, there was still very little written about him by the mainstream, art world. Much of the primary sources that were found depicting his experiences within the mainstream art world came from either secondary sources or correspondences between himself and, either, his wife or another Black artist, or a White person within the mainstream art world (i.e. a gallery owner, collector, person commissioning a mural).

One reason that may account for why there is less about him than the other two artists in this study might be the fact that during this time historically, African-Americans and their history were ignored by White America. In an interview Jacob Lawrence states, "But up until that time, as late as a few years ago in the 1950's the Negro had not been included in the general stream of American history" (Greene, 1968, p. 39). However, while this quote from Jacob Lawrence acknowledges that there is a shift in the civil rights of African-Americans, it provides an explanation for why Aaron Douglas did not have as much written on him during the peak of his success. It is also here where the first theme found in this study arises. The fact that there is not as much written on him by mainstream art-news outlets, shows that the White majority was actively trying to minimize his contributions to the art world. This exclusion kept him and his work confined to the African-American community, even though he and his art was well-known.

In addition, Aaron Douglas' experience highlights the idea of patronage within the art community, specifically White-patronage. In most of the experiences of each artist, there is always at least one White mentor or patron who "brings" the Black artist into the sphere of mainstream art. In many cases this relationship placed the Black artist in a position of subordination in which the White artist would mitigate what that artist was able to paint, or what types of jobs they could paint. In the case of Aaron Douglas, he writes the racism of this system more directly in his letters to his wife, Alta Douglas. "No one knows better than a Negro the real power of a smile" (Bey, 2011, p. 116), he writes in one of his letters, which regarded his time with his, then, mentor Winold Reiss. This moment alludes to the subordinate position that he, and many other African-American artists, had to take during this point in his career.

Thus, while Aaron Douglas was a major influence in the African-American art world, and given the general popularity of his art, the fact that very little that was written about his art, coupled with the fact that many African-American artists had to work with a White artist or gallery owner to achieve a broader audience, shows that African-American art was controlled by the White majority and not able to gain a sphere of influence within the mainstream art community.

### Jacob Lawrence (Mid 20<sup>th</sup> century)

Jacob Lawrence's career took off toward the tail end of Aaron Douglas' career. However, during the height of Lawrence's career, the shift and beginnings of the Civil Rights movements begin to take hold. One indicator of the change in times during this time is the fact that Lawrence begins to paint for federal arts programs, like the Federal Arts Project (Greene 1968). Lawrence plays a key role in this study because he is seen as "the first American painter of his

race to find wide public acceptance for portraying the black experience” (Donohoe, 1987, p. 46). With this, out of the three case studies his experience is most likely the most positive one.

Regardless, this does not necessarily mean that his experience was free from the racism that has been found within the mainstream art world, and it should be noted that one possible reason for his success was due to the fact that the White majority did not feel as intimidated by his art. Referring back to the previous quotation used, the rest of the quotation states that he portrayed the “black experience free of sentimentality and without hackneyed mannerisms” (Donohoe, 1987, p. 46). Thus, his painting did not disrupt the flow of the White majority’s control. This quotation is also in reference to Lawrence’s Migration Series which is one of his most popular series of paintings and it depicts the migration of African-Americans from the south to the north.

While his experience is different from Douglas’ in this regard, this also resulted in his works being written about by more White art writers and gallery critics. It is in this moment when words like “primitive” or “simple” are really seen being used in reference to Black art. Lawrence’s work is referenced to show a “primitivistic mannerism” (Adlow, 1947) and to be “expressive of the race that is primitive in its feeling for color and rhythm” (Rainey, 1942, L4).

White patronage was important within Jacob Lawrence’s career. However, the relationship with Edith Halpert, his patron, was much more positive, it still shows that he had to move through the system set up by the White majority. Lawrence, in an interview, speaks on the process through which he met Edith Halpert in which artists were selected to be put on her galleries; “She [Edith] selected me” (Greene, 1968, p. 14). Lawrence had to go through Edith Halpert or some other member of the mainstream art community in order to be so successful.

### Jean Michel Basquiat (Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century)

Out of the three artists, Jean Michel Basquiat’s experience is quite unique, but yet very much the same as the other two artists. It is unique because his career began through accumulating buzz in the streets of New York through graffiti art under the name of SAMO (Rodrigues, 2011). Through this buzz he was able to get the attention of collectors, who then allowed him to paint for them. Soon, he was painting alongside Andy Warhol, who acted as a mentor for him, and his career reached near levels of super-stardom. Jean Michel Basquiat’s case, unfortunately follows similar patterns as the previous two cases, however his stardom might have heightened the racism that he experienced. Much of his work was racialized regardless of the content by media and his experience shows how the White majority, through commodification was able to keep African-American art marginalized.

Of Basquiat’s mentors or patrons, Warhol is the most noted and interesting. This partnership showed an interesting relationship, but most of all clearly outlined the presence racism in art. Warhol, in an article regarding his collaboration with Basquiat, states, “He’s the greatest. It was his hair-do” (Brumely 1985, p. N13A). The question posed was why he wanted to work with Basquiat. This is just one example which shows that Warhol was only looking to work with Basquiat because he was the Basquiat was Black and was selling.

Moreover, Basquiat was confronted with entirely overt racism. Many of the articles written about his work state phrases like, “Primitively drawn skulls” and “primitive figures”. A more direct case where Basquiat’s work as an artist is racialized, occurs during the interview, the interviewer states that Basquiat is a “primal expressionist” rather than refer to him simply as an expressionist (Tschinkel and Miller, 1983). The interviewer goes on to ask if Basquiat has paintings of “natives” at his home, as well. Regardless, this shows a distinct example of the type of racism Basquiat experienced.

## Methods

The purpose of this paper is to look at whether the mainstream art world, especially White art critics’ interpretation of what was high art, was impacted by Douglas, Lawrence, and Basquiat. How did a group of powerful people (both

racially and in their cultural group) interact with a minority group? How were their views impacted by the artwork of the minority group? To answer these questions, I performed a qualitative content analysis of primary sources about the three artists. The bulk of the sources used in this study were newspaper articles and journal articles written by predominantly White art critics about people within the African-American art community. Scholarly journals, not necessarily written by White writers, were used to provide a context for which to frame the primary sources used. For example, a journal article by Vera Zolberg (2015), titled “Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Center”, was used to provide a general context for how less popularized art can move into the center of mainstream culture. Some primary sources did come from African-American news outlets, like The New York Amsterdam News and The Chicago Defender, and were included in this research to understand both sides of this question. Overall, approximately 40 sources were obtained from online databases and archives, like Proquest, JSTOR, The Archives of American Art (online and in-person), and the Library of Congress online database.

NVivo was used to conduct the qualitative analysis. However, prior to entering the primary sources into NVivo, most of the sources had to be converted from PDF format into Optical Conversion Scans (OCR). Once each of the sources were OCR scanned they were entered into NVivo. At the beginning of the uploading process to NVivo each source had to be read through in order to find any common themes throughout the sources. Once these themes or general ideas were decided upon they were set as nodes within NVivo. These nodes simply allow for words or phrases from each source to be “coded” or categorized into whatever category the node stands for. For example, words like “primitive” would be coded (categorized) into the node titled “racism”.

Following the coding process, the study examined which nodes had the most references and sources associated with them. Out of the nine total nodes, racism, commodification, African-American art, and White-patronage were the ones with the most codes attached to them. By examining a connection between the nodes, I was able to conclude that there was no change in the views of the White majority on the African-American community.

## Results

The results from the qualitative analysis outline how stability in the perspective of the White majority on the African-American art community. That is to say, there was no documented evidenced of a change in the White majority’s perspective on the African-American community as whole. Thematic analysis revealed nine initial nodes, revised through focused coding to be two final themes: Marginalization and Commercialism/Commodification.

### Marginalization in the Art World

#### *Racism*

Racism, either resulting from individual critics’ attitudes or the mainstream art system, defined the cultural response to Basquiat, Lawrence, and Douglas. Racism explains why and how the White majority was able to marginalize and control the process of keeping African-American art outside of the mainstream. The White majority allowed only a few African-American artists into the sphere of mainstream art at a time, highlighting their uniqueness as African-Americans. For example, Wines (1988) noted that, “Mr. Basquiat was the most famous of only a small number of young black artists who have achieved national recognition” (p. 14). These artists were marginalized, which meant that the White majority could utilize its power to keep African-American art confined to its own community and could commodify African-American art in order to keep it outside the mainstream. To provide an example to this claim Lawrence himself says in an interview with Carrol Greene (1968) that, “the white art community was beginning to see that this was a source, the Negro artist was a source which had never been tapped nationally” (p. 13). While this might be seen as positive step toward African-American recognition in the mainstream art world, this quote came about following the Harlem Renaissance which should have already increased Black artist representation in mainstream art.

### *White Patronage*

Another way that the White majority used its power to further marginalize African-American art was through White patronage. White patronage was a way to marginalize Black artists by controlling the labelling and content of Black art as “primitive”. This allowed for the White majority to specifically control how successful each African-American artist’s experience was within the mainstream art world. They acted as gate keepers, but in order to keep control of the artist, as seen in Douglas’ case, the patrons would assign the Black artist with the commissions they did not want to do. Douglas states, “if these fellows should give me work, it would be the sort they don’t want or can’t do” (Hodari, 2008). Douglas goes on to state that he shall not submit anything else to magazines, except for the *Opportunity* and the *Crisis* (Hodari, 2008). *Opportunity* and the *Crisis* were both popular African-American art journals during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. It is at this point where it can be seen how the patronage system worked. As a result of being treated as a lesser artist by the White patrons and other White art outlets, Douglas is forced into deciding to only provide his works to outlets within his own community.

Furthering the notion that White artists were the “gatekeepers” to the mainstream art scene, the image of the African American community is being reproduced by these White artists.

In an anthology piece titled “Up Till Now” (1921-1973), it is noted that “the Negro artist had helpful allies... such non-Negro artists as Thomas Eakins, Robert Henri, George Luks, ...and others who were raising the Negro subject from the level of trivial or sentimental genre to that of serious type study and socially sympathetic portrayal” (Aaron Douglas papers). These artists might have been helpful in changing the perspectives held by the White majority on the African American community, but it raises the question of why, then, couldn’t African American artists further this change in perspective? By utilizing the African American “image” these White artists were placed above the Black artists by the White majority. Thus, this arrangement created the precedent that African American artists needed to go through White artists or patrons in order to reach a mainstream audience.

### *Commodification*

Marginalization isolated African-American artists such as Basquiat, Douglas, and Lawrence; racism within the mainstream system prevented their works from being valued and White patronage controlled their reach. A connected theme is that of commodification. These artists were commodified by the mainstream art community for their own financial gain, while undermining the influence of the artists as artists within the community. This can be explored more fully with the case of Jean Michel Basquiat who is one of the poster-children for selling art. Approximately 45% of the racist phrases found in the primary sources were in reference to Basquiat or his art. This racialization of Basquiat as an artist and person carries over into the writings about his art. In one write-up Basquiat is referred to as a “tough street-vooodoo artist” (Wilson, 1982), and in another he is simply called, “the primitive artist” (Retrospective, 1982). While his artistic style may have been untrained, the content of his art is quite profound. Regardless, the content of Basquiat’s art is consistently disregarded by critics and referred back to his race or the “primitive” appearance of the piece.

By racializing Jean Michel Basquiat the White majority was able to make money off of his stardom, but also keep his art a status tailored to the box that is labeled African-American art. This commodification is also, and was driven, through the presence of White patrons in mainstream art. As seen in the case studies, each of artist had at least one patron through which they were able to operate with and interact within the mainstream art world. Furthermore, the White majority was able to utilize the “genre” of “primitivism” to commodify and simplify African- American art. This is especially prevalent in Basquiat’s case, as exemplified above. “Primitivism” is the idea that “blacks were believed capable of expressing a basic, human vitality long lost to whites” (Vincenti, 2001, p. 8). This idea was popular during Aaron Douglas’ career, but arguably maintained relevant throughout the 20th century. This can be seen especially through the language and adjectives used toward the art works of each artist. As seen in an article on Jacob Lawrence’s *War Pictures*, Ada Rainey (1947) refers to his work as containing, “primitive simplicity”. Furthermore, Jacob Lawrence’s experience outlines the commodification of African American art through his art’s ability to not make the White-majority uncomfortable.

The fact that the success of Lawrence's Migration series is noted in this way indicates that the White-majority was only able to accept his work due to the fact that it did not upset the status quo. Thus, it did not pose a "threat" to their control of the mainstream. Basquiat on the other hand was accepted, but it was due to the fact that the White majority could make a lot of money off of his. In an article Robert Hughes states that, "Late American Art Industry felt a need to refresh itself with a touch of the 'primitive'" (Hughes, 1988, p. 35). So, it should be noted that there are these two forms of the White-majority's commodification and acceptance of African American art. Both of these instances keep the Black artist trapped in a box by changing how "success" is obtained: creating art that doesn't disrupt the status quo or play into the "primitive" framework constructed by the White-majority. As a result, other Black artists watching these successful African-American artists would likely begin to create art similar in style. Thus, the White majority could utilize this commodification "process" to further marginalize the African-American art community.

## Discussion

The importance of this study lies primarily in the idea that this is only a small window into a larger issue. The fact that there was no change in the perspectives of the White majority in the mainstream art world shows that there also was little change in the perspectives of the White majority in almost every aspect of the American experience.

This was seen within the two major themes that came to fruition throughout the process of the research. The first of these major themes being that racially charged misunderstandings, shown by the lack of an attempt to understand, caused for the White majority to commodify African-American art. As mentioned previously, Jacob Lawrence in an interview pointed out that "the white art community" had begun to see Black artists as a "source which had never been tapped nationally" (Greene, 1968, p. 13). This shows how, while African-American artists were able to gain attention from major galleries, they were still assumed as artists who could only produce "primitive" pieces. The second theme which was found throughout this study shows that in addition to this commodification of African-American art, the White majority was able to utilize its power to keep African-American art confined to its own community. By doing so, the influence which African-American art community might have had on the general White population, was minimized. This can be seen by the fact that there is little scholarship written on Aaron Douglas during the time of his artwork. This is so despite the fact that much of his work was influential in the Harlem Renaissance and he is given the title of "The Father of African American art" (Delombard, 2014). Thus, it is extremely difficult for any minority to express themselves in a way that would impact the thinking of the White majority within the world, as seen in the mainstream art world.

As seen in these examples, the results quite clearly the racism present within the mainstream art world. This is not a surprise, but the methods and themes used to implement this institutionalized racism should be noted as they can be found elsewhere be it from fashion to political infrastructure. Fashion parallels with the themes found this study immensely. As Hoskins (2014) states, "Several decades on all-white catwalks, all-white advertising campaigns and all-white fashion shoots are still the norm" (p. 130). Some people might think that it would be no surprise that painting and fashion share such similar racist themes due to the fact that both fall within the category of "The Arts". Thus, these racist themes are simply confined to this category. However, herein lies the statement of this study which is to identify that no one realm of life is dismissed of racism. This can be seen in the fashion industry, especially with modeling, where Black women are immensely underrepresented. Matthew Schneier (2017) points out how at a Lanvin fashion show there were only two Black models, the show took place March 2017. This exclusion further causes for continued marginalization of the African American community across art medium and keeps this group in the constant realm of "other". This provides an example for how the White majority can utilize commodification to further African-American art, regardless of the platform and form of expression.

One limitation to this study is the lack of a full historical context. The primary sources for each artist could be placed along a timeline starting in the 20s and moving into the late 80s. This timeline would show the progression of the Civil Rights movement and how that impacted how the White majority altered their influence in mainstream

art. The present study primarily outlines the change in time with the case studies, with the addition of a deeper historical context the study could have provided more connections to the broader history of African American representation in the United States. The present study holds a broader importance by providing a precedent for other studies within other realms of the arts. Similar studies could be constructed for other areas of the arts like, fashion industry and film, and not just dealing with African-American people, but other minority groups within the United States.

Prior to the current study it was surmised that there would be limited change in the perspectives of the White majority, but there would still be a small degree of a shift in views based on how artists like Basquiat and Lawrence reached critical acclaim. However, as seen in this study their fame can be attributed to the White majority only allowing a few Black artists into the mainstream focus at a time, and still with a limited amount of power. Yet, while the present study does lack a broader historical context, it still contributes to the development for understanding how inequality is implemented and how this issue is examined. By providing a snapshot of this inequality within the specific world of mainstream art, this study can provide an example for other similar specified studies of other fields of study to be examined in order to contribute to the big image of racial inequality within the United States. As seen in the film and fashion industry. Hopefully, the case studies examined in the present study would allow for people to grasp the deeper understanding of the racial inequality that is present in this country. For as Tilly (2009) writes on the idea that inequalities in the economy parallel inequalities in other institutions, like the justice system; therefore, inequalities in art should also parallel the same issues found in economics, legal systems, and government. It is within this relationship between providing a specific image within the broader picture that this present study aids in the progression toward understanding and combatting inequality.

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