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Theory and History of Art and Design

## How “Building More Stately Mansions” by Aaron Douglas Shows the Erasure of African American Contributions to Society

Aaron Douglas’s piece titled “Building More Stately Mansions” is a 16” x 20” oil painting on canvas depicting a group of men in the foreground working and holding a variety of tools. Behind the figures, Douglas painted an array of famous monuments that are representational of an industrialized utopia, including monuments such as arches, sky scrapers, and the pyramids. These structures represent developed civilizations that are representational of industrialized utopias. For example, the pyramids are representational of ancient Egypt, which is seen as an industrialized utopia. “Building More Stately Mansions” was created in 1944 as a study work for a later, larger piece, yet still holds as a finished work by Douglas. This piece was created to demonstrate the erasure of African American influence and contribution to the world. Aaron Douglas demonstrates this expunging of creation in “Building More Stately Mansions” through his use of color, lighting, and stylistic simplicity. It is painted stylistically the same as paintings created between the Harlem Renaissance and the Modernist Movement.

“Building More Stately Mansions” uses muted colors and tints of green, red, and purple to make up its composition. Aaron Douglas uses a limited color pallet, and also keeps his work stylistically simple. He does this through painting both the monumental structures and figures in

silhouettes. The reason for this stylistic and color choice is to not distract the viewer with details (like faces on the men or bricks on the buildings), so that the viewer can focus more on the message of the work. The message of the work is that the African American people are creating history. This can be seen by the figures working on an array of famous monuments from throughout time. By the elimination of detail and usage of desaturated colors, Aaron Douglas is making the piece easier to read and analyze in its simple forms and textures. Additionally, by using a very dark color for one of the lines moving across the piece (from bottom left to middle right), Douglas draws the viewer's attention to the bottom of the piece. Coupled with the dark colors of the ground and working men, the color choice also serves to make the piece bottom heavy, as to cement the eye of the viewer on the characters.

The art work further develops its visual interest through the use of texture. The texture is both a means of detail in the piece, but when also linked with the chaotic strokes, done by the artist throughout the piece, it also serves to restate that "Building More Stately Mansions" was a prototype. The chaotic strokes are present throughout the entire piece when one looks closely at it. In no place does Douglas paint in the same direction, coherently; The paint strokes throughout the piece indicate that the piece was made quickly, which reinforces the artwork's status as a prototype. Texture is executed through thickness and thinness of paint. For example, the paint is thicker in the sky and focal points- being the workers and the globe- but not as thick in the grey areas of the painting. The texture works as an overall detail in an otherwise stylistically simple piece.

Aaron Douglas used the darkest color present in the piece to create a line leading from a hole in a crumbling architectural structure to over the heads of the workers and the globe. This line extends from the bottom left corner of the piece and moves wobbly to the edge of the right side (about midway up). Beside this line, Douglas created another line using the same muted green tones present in the sky. Both lines serve to frame the workers, and break up the composition of the piece. The dark band leading from the bottom left to the middle right is Douglas's way of linking the workers to history. The light green band that moved from the middle left to middle right is a representation of knowledge. The bands of color suggest waves of history and knowledge, as they are used to link the workers from historical monuments to current structures that the workers are working on. The dark band is painted to literally and figuratively connect the buildings to the workers. By creating two lines that hint at continuing off the piece, Aaron Douglas also insinuates that this knowledge and influence in history will continue into the future. This is even more concreted by the specific architectural structures in the background.

In the background there are churches, temples, and a pharaoh's burial mask with a distinct king cobra silhouette. This pharaoh symbol, along with the pyramid in the far background, serve to represent ancient Egypt, its royalty, its culture, and its history. Along with the indistinct arches and skyscrapers, the piece shows far away history, shown through Egypt, and the present, shown through the skyscrapers. The range of monuments show that the buildings are meant to represent history as far back as Egypt and as current as today. In having the builders work around the literal globe, it demonstrates that their work will continue to affect society. For example, the second worker from the left holds a glowing bag, which is representational of knowledge. This

means he will carry the knowledge of history and his artistic ability into his current and future work. This is seen through the use of color, as the band that represents knowledge is the same bluish-green that the bag is.

The globe in the bottom right corner is the emphasis of “Building More Stately Mansions”.

Aaron Douglas uses a series of techniques to direct the eye of the viewer to this prominent symbol. The techniques that Douglas used includes texture, lighting, shape, and color. The piece, though flat, uses thickness of paint to emphasize the form of the globe. The area to the right of the globe is the thickest concentration of paint in the art work. Additionally, Aaron Douglas uses color to convey this. The globe, though it is purple, it emits a reddish pink light that tints many of the surrounding architectural monuments. Through being the sole object that is surrounded by this reddish pink hue and also the only object that emits said color, the globe is unique from the coloration of the rest of the composition and therefore stands out. The globe is surrounded by one of the brightest and lightest colors in the piece, both in saturation and literal lightness. The orb is surrounded by rings of light radiating from it, illuminating the monuments around it and also the green and purple bands of knowledge. It is first surrounded by an extremely pale, creamy pink, followed by a, comparative to the rest of the work, saturated band of magenta. After that, the globe gives off two rings of faint white that introduces two interesting circles to the composition. The pink is the only warm color in the composition. Both the green and purple are cold tones, giving another layer of contrast to these light bands. The globe on the table is the only discernible light source, as well, adding another layer of emphasis. The purpose of all of this contrast is to draw the viewer’s eye to the globe, as it is the central piece of this work. The

light reflecting on the objects around it, including the band of knowledge, act to give more detail to the structures as well as solidifying them. The bodies of the workers are used to draw the eye of the viewer to the globe through variation of size. The worker in the far back is the smallest, and they get progressively bigger as the figures come closer to the foreground. Not only does this make the viewer look at the globe, it also gives the piece a sense of depth without shading. By emphasizing the workers and the globe, and using strings of color to connect the workers to history and show their knowledge, Douglas is hinting that the African American artists created the works. The emphasis on the globe is done to reinforce the artist's idea that African Americans created the great wonders of the world and will continue to exhibit an artistic influence.

Aaron Douglas created "Building More Stately Mansions" as a study for a larger work, however it holds as a powerful and finished work in its own right. Through the use of color, lighting, and stylistic simplicity Aaron Douglas demonstrated the erasure of African American influence in the creation of great monuments. Not only have they contributed to the past, they contribute to the present, and will contribute to the future. This is demonstrated through the dark band linking the workers to all the historical buildings, and the light band showing that their knowledge has travelled through history.