



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Aaron Douglas papers

1924-1939

Sc MG 308

Home to Harlem Project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Summary

Creator: Douglas, Aaron

Title: Aaron Douglas papers

Date: 1924-1939

Size: 0.21 linear feet (1 box)

Source: Gift, Edgecombe Avenue Tenants Association

Abstract: Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1898, Aaron Douglas became the most celebrated artist-illustrator to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance. He attended the University of Nebraska (F.B.A.), Columbia University Teachers College (M.A.) and l'Academie Scandinave in Paris. Douglas' career spanned sixty years of painting, drawing and illustrating. He created numerous murals, usually of allegorical scenes on the historical life or cultural background of African Americans. In 1937 Douglas became a professor of art and chairman of the Art Department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he remained until 1966, when he retired as professor emeritus. Fisk University bestowed an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts upon him in 1973. Douglas died in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1979. The Aaron Douglas papers consist of personal correspondence, letters of introduction, invitations, programs, and printed material. Of particular interest are the eighty-three undated letters, which make up the bulk of the collection, that Douglas wrote to his future wife, Alta Sawyer. Most of the letters were written during an approximate two-year period while she was still married to her first husband and before she and Douglas were married in 1926. Douglas wrote Sawyer endearing letters that were also philosophical in tone and discussed his artwork, aspirations, and the social scene in Harlem. Included are two letters to Douglas from writer Arna Bontemps and an open letter from Douglas on the letterhead of the short-lived magazine "Fire!!".

Conditions Governing Access:

Researchers are restricted to photocopies of correspondence.

Preferred citation: [Item], Aaron Douglas papers, Sc MG 308, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Creator History

Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1898, Aaron Douglas became the most celebrated artist-illustrator to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance. He attended the University of Nebraska (F.B.A.), Columbia University Teachers College (M.A.) and l'Academie Scandinave in Paris. Douglas' career spanned sixty years of painting, drawing and illustrating. He created numerous murals, usually of allegorical scenes on the historical life or cultural background of African Americans. In 1937 Douglas became a professor of art and chairman of the Art Department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he remained until 1966, when he retired as professor emeritus. Fisk University bestowed an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts upon him in 1973. Douglas died in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1979.

Scope and Content Note

The Aaron Douglas papers consist of personal correspondence, letters of introduction, invitations, programs, and printed material. Of particular interest are the eighty-three undated letters, which make up the bulk of the collection, that Douglas wrote to his future wife, Alta Sawyer. Most of the letters were written during an approximate two-year period while she was still married to her first husband and before she and Douglas were married in 1926. Douglas wrote Sawyer endearing letters that were also philosophical in tone and discussed his artwork, aspirations, and the social scene in Harlem. Included are two letters to Douglas from writer Arna Bontemps and an open letter from Douglas on the letterhead of the short-lived magazine "Fire!!".

Key Terms

Subjects

African American art
African American artists
African American painters
African Americans in art
Artists -- United States
Black author
Ethnic art -- United States
Harlem Renaissance

Names

Bontemps, Arna, 1902-1973
Douglas, Aaron
Douglas, Alta Sawyer, -1958

Container List

Correspondence

Outgoing

- b. 1 f. 1-8 Aaron Douglas to Alta Sawyer 1924-1926
- b. 1 f. 9 "Fire!!" Open Letter 1925
- b. 1 f. 10 Charles S. Johnson 1937

Incoming

- b. 1 f. 11 General 1924-1939
- b. 1 f. 12 Aaron and Alta Sawyer Douglas 1927
- b. 1 f. 13 Rosenwald Study Grant - Haiti Trip 1938
- b. 1 f. 14 Alta Douglas to Aaron Douglas 1938
- b. 1 f. 15 Camille L'Herisson 1938
- b. 1 f. 16 American Artists' Congress 1938
- b. 1 f. 17 Alta Sawyer Douglas 1924-1939
- b. 1 f. 18 Alta Sawyer Douglas Miscellaneous 1925

Printed Material

- b. 1 f. 19 Programs 1927-1939
- b. 1 f. 20 University of Nebraska Catalog 1932
- b. 1 f. 21 Miscellaneous