

## Symposium Review

# African-American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now

Anne Meis Knupfer

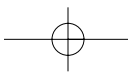
A Symposium, February 5, 2000,  
DuSable Museum, Chicago

Not all scholars agree with literary critic Richard Bone that the Chicago Black Renaissance began in 1928 and ended in 1960.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have argued that there was no “flowering” of the arts, but rather a grafting of creative endeavors from the early twentieth century. However, there is little disagreement that Chicago was a major, if not *the* major, urban locus for African-American art, theater, poetry and fiction, blues and jazz, and intellectual energy during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Indeed, by 1930, Chicago had the largest African-American urban population in the country. Confined to the city’s southside by restrictive covenants and realtors’ red-lining tactics, most African Americans, regardless of their social class and occupation, lived together. Despite deteriorating mansions, and crowded tenements and kitchenettes on the southside, African-American Chicagoans took great pride in their communities, especially their social and educational institutions.

Among these institutions were the South Side Community Art Center, the first African-American-owned art center to showcase African and African-American artwork. There also was Parkway Community House, a prominent social settlement established by University of Chicago-trained sociologist, Horace Cayton. The George Cleveland Hall Library, the first public library in Chicago’s African-American community, was one of the intellectual centers in Bronzeville, the most prosperous African-American business district in the city. Under the capable directorship of Vivian Harsh, the library showcased African-American art, poetry, stories, and music. Along with librarian Charlemae Rollins, Harsh organized reading circles, writing clubs, debates, children’s story hours, performances, essay writing contests, and art exhibits. In short, there was vibrant intellectuality and artistry, informed by a pan-African consciousness, as well as the syncretization of southern migrant and northern urban traditions.

Although scholars only recently have begun to analyze the music and literature of Chicago’s Black Renaissance, there has been little examination of its fine or design arts.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the symposium “African-American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now Symposium,” held at the DuSable Museum on February 5, 2000, was especially noteworthy in showcasing schol-

- 1 Robert Bone, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 9 (Summer 1986): 446–468.
- 2 See, for example, William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History 1904–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music. Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). One book which does feature the arts, literature, and music, as well as the political and social activism of Chicago’s Black Renaissance is Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, eds., *The Chicago Black Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).



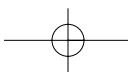
ars' work in design art from this period, as well as the accomplishments of first and second generations of African-American design artists in Chicago. This symposium, organized by Victor Margolin, professor of Design History and Fellow of the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was sponsored by the University of Illinois at Chicago, along with DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, the Illinois Humanities Council, and various corporations and foundations.

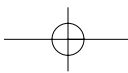
Keynote speaker Floyd Coleman of Howard University's Art Department, began the program by speaking on "The Broader Context for African-American Design." Although aesthetics often is the focus of design art—be it graphic, industrial, or interior—Coleman emphasized its political and social intentions. Accordingly, he focused on African-American craft design in the historical contexts of the Middle Passage, slavery, and migration, with particular reference to issues of power and patronage. Using kente cloth as a one example, Coleman elaborated on the aesthetic and spiritual significance of its various designs, as well as African Americans' renewed interest in celebrating a pan-African identity.

Indeed, the primacy of African retentions was one of the hallmarks of African-American craft design, evident in house structures, basketry, furniture, pottery, and metalsmithing. For example, the architecture of slave houses in South Carolina in the late 1600s replicated that of houses in Western Africa. Likewise, the slaves' shotgun houses in Virginia drew from ancestral Yoruban traditions. In their silversmithing and pottery, slaves utilized African motifs and designs. Despite the unearthing of many such African-American artifacts, Coleman stressed that more historical work needs to be done. Then, as today, the analysis of the production of such art design needs to be informed by race, gender, and social class, as well as issues of power and patronage.

Charles Branham, Director of Education with the DuSable Museum, covered 150 years of African-American history in Chicago in his brief presentation. Beginning with the African-American founder of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, Branham underscored the institutional basis for the promotion of cultural and community expansion. Especially during the 1890s, the African-American elite established political organizations, women's clubs, and businesses, many of which survived the Depression. This infrastructure supported the arts, music, and other cultural events, laying the groundwork for the Chicago Black Renaissance.

Victor Margolin, in "African-American Designers in Chicago: Themes and Issues," continued Branham's discussion of the rich tradition of African-American design and its support by African-American businesses and institutions in Chicago. However, because of politics, economics, and race, many doors of opportunity remained closed to African-American artists in commercial art,



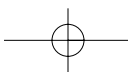


display design, cartooning, letter and sign painting, interior design, architecture, the design of industrial products, and advertising. To answer the critical questions of where African-American design artists worked and how they developed their own voices, Margolin elaborated on three types of discursive spaces: autonomous spaces, where African-American design artists could fully develop their artistic ideas; negotiated spaces, where they had to fight for a voice; and predominantly white discursive spaces, where they were allowed little or no voice.

African-American newspapers including the *Chicago Defender*, *The Chicago Whip*, *The Chicago Bee*, and *The Chicago Enterprise* provided autonomous spaces where artists could display their talents and polemics through advertisements, graphics, and cartoons. African-American magazines, especially those published by the African-American-owned Johnson Publishing Company were other outlets. In some cases, individual artists established their own business enterprises. Charles Dawson, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, started his own commercial art studio in the 1920s. Two other African-American commercial artists, C.E.J. Fouche and George Davenport, also established their own companies for illustration and sign painting during the same decade.

Perhaps the most salient examples of negotiated spaces in Chicago were the WPA and Illinois Art Projects, where African-American design artists were commissioned to create murals, sculptures, paintings, and other design art. Similarly, art exhibits, particularly the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition and the Diamond Jubilee Exposition of 1940, required African-American artists to negotiate the artistic and political expressions of their work because of white co-sponsorship and audiences. The original South Side Community Art Center was another cultural site of negotiated space. Originally funded as a federal arts project, the center eventually became an indigenous community center through its own fundraising efforts. Under the directorship of Rex Gorleigh, an African-American artist in his own right, the center became especially known for its African and African-American art exhibits.

The predominantly white discursive spaces which Margolin discussed were the prominent art schools in Chicago, including the New Bauhaus, the American Academy of Art, and the School of the Art Institute. Despite their training at these institutions, African-American artists often had difficulty finding employment in design art. Some did, however, break through the color line, such as cartoonist E. Simms Campbell. Designer Eugene Winslow, too, found work in the white community, but later established his own firm. Charles Harrison, who did his undergraduate and graduate study at the Art Institute, freelanced at Sears Roebuck. In 1961, he finally was offered a full-time job there. Clearly, Margolin noted,



these African-American artists' career paths were not continuous, but rather moved back and forth between various discursive spaces.

Adam Green, an historian at Northwestern University, continued Margolin's theme of discursive spaces, focusing upon African-American Chicago cartoonists during the 1940s. Green argued that cartoons were, perhaps, more expressive of African-American art than other genres. Of special note, he argued, was the work of *Chicago Defender* cartoonist Jay Jackson, known for his editorial cartoons with themes of social justice at home after WWII and the "Double V" campaign. (The latter theme highlighted issues of transnationalism and colonialism.) By capitalizing on the new action comic strip, Jackson was able to effectively combine his political viewpoints and aesthetics with cinematic techniques. Green concluded by emphasizing the need for scholars to more closely examine cartoons and other graphics in African-American newspapers because of their large readerships.

Pamela Franco, a lecturer in Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, next spoke about popular depictions of African Americans in Harlem during the 1920s. In particular, she examined the illustrations of Aaron Douglas, who "sold" a particular ideology about Harlem then. Douglas was encouraged by his teachers to explore "that inner thing of blackness." As such, Douglas utilized themes of spirituality to portray the difficult, yet rich, lives of migrants in Harlem. For example, in his painting *Prodigal Son*, the motifs of gin, loose women, cards, and trombones signified that Harlem was a kind of Babylon. However, in *Play the Blues*, Douglas looked at jazz clubs from another perspective. By focusing on the music, not the dancers' "immoral" behavior, he presented a kind of "sanitized" portrait. These visions may have been created in part to counteract the stereotypical negative images of Harlem, such as Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. As Franco rightly noted, most Harlemites did not participate in black and tans, but rather organized rent parties to offset exorbitant rents.

The afternoon sessions shifted to presentations by the designers. Two panels featured the new and first generations of design artists in Chicago. Given emerging technologies today, there certainly are significant differences in the medium and design of the work of both generations. Likewise, there are more professional opportunities for African-American design artists today in both community and mainstream institutions. Two of the younger generation, Vernon Lockhart and Angela Williams, who worked for the Museum of Science and Industry and other institutions in Chicago, discussed how they created promotional materials, as well as exhibit designs, with an Afrocentric focus. Another panel member, Vincent Bowman, whose father was an offset printer, worked with a variety of materials in his designs of telephones, a film processor, x-ray machine, packaging, and bottles. The final speaker, Deborah Bennett, employed at a community development bank, adminis-

Figure 1

Offering thanks to those who came before them and a perspective on what it's like coming up in the profession today, a panel of four representatives of the new generation of Chicago's African-American designers was a highlight of the February symposium, African-American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now. Shown here with panel moderator Philip Royster (far left), professor, departments of African-American Studies and English, and director, African-American Cultural Center, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), are (from left to right) panel members Vernon Lockhart, president, Art On The Loose, Inc.; Angela Williams, senior graphic designer, Chicago Museum of Science and Industry; Vincent Bowman, director of structural/industrial design, Lipson-Alport-Glass and Associates; and Deborah Bennett, director of cultural development, Shorebank Neighborhood Institute, and business manager, Studio Air.

All photos: Sisi Mosby



tered programs for children and youth in computer graphic design, business management, and entrepreneurial skills. Similar to the discussions of historians from the morning sessions, she emphasized how art and culture could contribute to social progress.

Perhaps the highlight of the symposium was the panel of first-generation African-American designers in Chicago. Victor Margolin moderated the panel with the following design artists: Vince Cullers, a graduate of the Art Institute, who established one of the first Black-owned advertising agencies in the United States; Charles Harrison, another graduate of the School of the Art Institute and the Institute of Design, who had been a senior industrial designer at Sears Roebuck for more than 30 years; Andre Richardson King, also a graduate of the School of the Art Institute, as well as the University of Chicago, who specialized in environmental design; Gene Winslow, a graduate of the Institute of Design, who had his own firm and also worked for various Chicago firms; Tom Miller, a graduate of Virginia State University and Ray Vogue School of Art, who worked at Morton Goldsholl and Associates for more than thirty years; Herbert Temple, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute who has been the senior art director at the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago for almost fifty years; and LeRoy Winbush, who apprenticed with a sign painter after high school, and is known even today for the window displays in Chicago created by his firm, Winbush and Associates.

Several themes emerged in the first-generation artists' conversations. Despite their professional training and expertise, most experienced discrimination and difficulty in finding gainful employment. Cullers had begun as a fine artist when he was younger, then decided to be a commercial artist and pursued advertising. But at that time, there were no African Americans in advertising, and so there were no opportunities. Miller was one of the few African-American students at the Ray Vogue School of Art; he was also one of the few students who graduated without a job. Nonetheless, he pointed out, that didn't stop him, and eventually he

Figure 2

Seven of the city's African-American design pioneers. Shown here (from left to right) are Herbert Temple, art director, Johnson Publishing Company; Charles Harrison, retired industrial designer and design manager, Sears Roebuck and Company, and adjunct professor of industrial design, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC); Leroy Winbush, Winbush Design; Eugene Winslow (seated), retired graphic designer; Andre R. King, Andre Richardson King Designers, Inc.; Vince Cullers, ceo and chairman, Vince Cullers Advertising, Inc.; and Thomas Miller, retired graphic designer.



found employment. Temple had noticed that his School of the Art Institute instructors only gave job leads to their white students. An administrator at the school, however, assisted him and gave him a listing of agencies on Michigan Avenue to which to apply. But all told him that he was “just a little too qualified.” The administrator then sent him to a place where several former students of the School of the Art Institute worked and they enthusiastically supported the management’s hiring of Temple.

Because of these discriminatory experiences, the first generation talked about providing opportunities for the next generations. Cullers spoke about how he not only fought for employment for himself, but to help open the door for other African Americans. Winbush agreed, pointing out that they, as professionals, had an obligation to the next generation to get them involved in design art. “We are just still in the beginning, even with what we have here,” he emphasized. His hopes, however, were otherwise: “[I] want to see us get a real force together.”

Most of the first generation talked about how they had gotten their own start from standing on the shoulders of other African-American artists in their communities. Temple became interested in the South Side Community Art Center, where he met many artists, including William McBride and LeRoy Winbush. When Temple saw McBride’s cartoons, it was the first time he had seen work by an African-American cartoonist. He tried to adapt his style to these cartoons, as well as to the magazine illustrations of African-American artists. King, too, met artist and cofounder of the South Side Community Center, Margaret Burroughs, and was greatly influenced by her. When Winslow discovered that “Black artists had nowhere to go,” he started a series of portraits of well-known African Americans, which he sold to the southside schools. He also designed cards for barbershops and other community businesses that supported him. Eventually, he became vice-president of



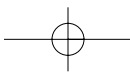
Figure 3

A call for all African-American designers in attendance to take the stage at February's African-American Designers Symposium: The Chicago Experience Then and Now resulted in this historic photo.

a new publishing company, AfroAm, which sold educational materials to the schools. These featured drawings and biographies of famous African Americans. Given the discrimination in mainstream society, Winslow and members of the African-American communities of Chicago created opportunities for the design artists to develop their autonomous discursive spaces.

Even as the first-generation design artists spoke of their experiences of racism and segregation, they emphasized the rich cultural experiences of their childhood and youth. As a young man, Winbush had worked at the famous Regal Theater's shop under the stage. He remembered it as "an exhilarating kind of experience." There, he met many famous African-American musicians including the Nat King Cole trio, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Cab Calloway. One of the highlights of his career, he told the audience, was when Ella Fitzgerald sat on his lap. Temple spoke of "coming up" in a segregated society, where most African Americans had no contact with white society. Everything, he noted, was segregated: buses, streetcars, cabs, and businesses. As he explained, "You didn't go downtown. You had everything on the southside."

For some of the first generation, their first full exposure to racism was during WWII. As Temple explained, "[You] didn't understand the difference until you went into the army. Officers were white." King, too, spoke of how the painful memories of war gave him the motivation to do something for society. His war experience, he remembered, "affected his psyche." His father advised him to go back to Europe until he figured out "what to do with his life." For King, Temple, Harrison, and others, veterans' assistance provided them with an opportunity to seriously study design art. Such study provided a whole new way of thinking for these first-generation artists. Temple described his classes at the School of the



Art Institute, in contrast to his previous degrading job at the stockyard: "It was a new environment, talking about Will Durant, Machiavelli. I was introduced to new ideas." King, too, discussed his love of the study of architecture: "Architecture became something you could put your arms around. And fall in love with it." He eventually was involved in starting the new signing department at Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, one of Chicago's leading architectural firms. Certainly, these artists were poised between the pain of discrimination and the determination and passion to create design art. Their conversations poignantly revealed the ways in which they navigated the discursive and public spaces in their professional lives.

To hear the life experiences of the first generation was a rare opportunity for the audience. As historians, scholars, artists, and community members, we have much to learn from them: from their words, their artwork, and their memories. On a larger note, all of the participants and organizers of the symposium should be commended for illuminating the complexities of this neglected history. Hopefully, there will be other opportunities to learn about such noteworthy lives and accomplishments.

