

You are looking at a high resolution digital reproduction of a painting made by the American artist Aaron Douglas in 1939, titled *Judgment Day*.

What influenced Aaron Douglas' art?

Born in Kansas in 1899, Aaron Douglas started drawing and painting as a young boy. He would go on to become the first African American to earn a degree in art from the University of Nebraska. He taught high school art, and then, in 1925, made the bold decision to move to Harlem, the cultural capital of black America in the early 20th century. There he joined a movement that would become known as the Harlem Renaissance—an explosion of cultural activity by black scholars, writers, artists, poets, and musicians—that included W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Augusta Savage, Duke Ellington, and many others. These artists were eager to experiment with new ways of expressing themes of racial pride, African roots, the American South, and social and political equality—and Douglas was excited to join them.

Douglas developed a unique style, emphasizing strong lines, flat colors, and silhouetted forms. He combined these features with motifs from traditional African art, the rhythms of jazz music, and elements of New York's Art Deco architecture and design.

Douglas said: "My work impacted the art world by just being different. When I first went into the arts, I had the intentions of doing classical art, something that everyone knew well. But [my teacher] helped me find my own artistic style. Something that was personal and that nobody had seen before. Something like modern and African mixed together to create a new experience out of the old."

Douglas believed in the power of education as a force for change in African American life. In 1938, he began teaching at Fisk University in Nashville, where he founded the art department. He continued teaching at Fisk faculty for nearly 30 years, training several new generations of African American artists.