

The Met Announces Harlem Renaissance Exhibition for 2024

Artworks on loan from historically Black institutions will make the show one of the largest surveys of the era in nearly 40 years.



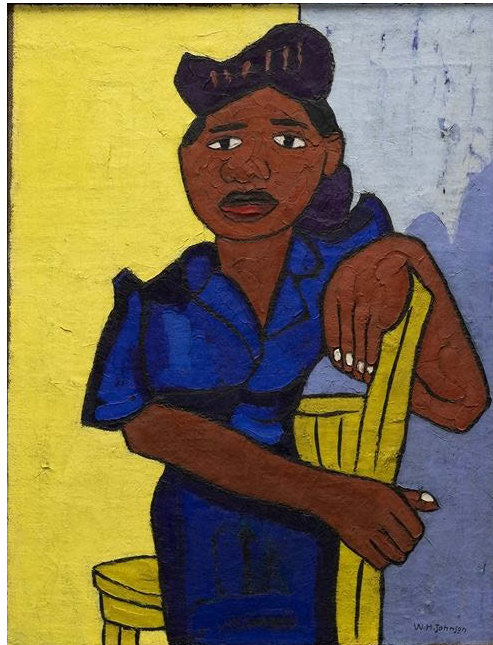
By Zachary Small

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Even before joining the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the curator Denise Murrell was dreaming up an exhibition dedicated to the Harlem Renaissance — one that would unite Black artists dedicated to “radical modernity,” as she described it, from New York to Paris and beyond.

On Tuesday, the museum announced that very exhibition, “The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism.” It will open on Feb. 25, run through July 28 and include a trove of paintings from historically Black colleges and universities around the country. The Met said it would be New York’s first major survey in nearly 40 years dedicated to one of the most influential artistic movements to have originated in the United States during the early 20th century.

“Becoming painters of modern life within their own communities was key to what the Harlem artists were attempting,” said Murrell, who joined the Met in 2020 and is now its curator at large. “It was an act of radical modernity, for example, to make portraits of an elder Black woman who would have been born into enslavement. And to make them in such a dignified way — those images simply did not exist in previous periods.”



“Woman in Blue,” by William H. Johnson, is being lent by the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum for the Met’s exhibition “The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism.” Credit...via Clark Atlanta University Art Museum

Major museums, for the most part, did not begin collecting such works until decades after the Harlem Renaissance, which spanned roughly two decades, from 1918 to 1937. Met officials said the museum’s own collection was spotty, with some acquisitions occurring in the 1940s and again within the past 15 years, though it includes masterpieces by Samuel Joseph Brown Jr. and Charles Henry Alston. Instead, many of these cultural gems went to private collections and to historically Black colleges and universities.

Murrell spent the past two years working with those institutions on conservation and archival research projects; in exchange, significant loans are coming to the “Harlem Renaissance” exhibition from places like Howard University, Fisk University, Hampton University and Clark Atlanta University.

About half a dozen artworks are currently in the Met’s conservation studio, and in preparation for the show, the museum sent photographers around the world to take new pictures of artworks from collections in cities like London and Chicago. That includes significant works by overlooked female artists like Laura Wheeler Waring, whose portraits of women cast their deep interior lives onto canvas.

One standout in the exhibition is the 1943 painting “Woman in Blue” by William H. Johnson, who spent the 1920s and 1930s in Europe learning the techniques of modernism. He headed back to New York in 1947 after having a mental breakdown following his wife’s death in Denmark. He was confined in Central Islip State Hospital on Long Island, unable to paint, until his death in 1970.

Murrell said the portrait of a woman sitting sideways, with one arm draped over the chair, staring pensively, was rarely exhibited, although an earlier study of the picture is at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The painting will be the exhibition’s signature image.

“The colors are striking,” said Danille K. Taylor, director of the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, which has contributed five paintings to the exhibition, including the Johnson painting. “It’s the angle that she looks at you. The colors and texture give it a three-dimensional quality.”

Until recently, the painting had large cracks across its surface and was in desperate need of restoration; the Met financed the portrait’s conservation, allowing it to travel outside the university.

Murrell said she hoped “Harlem Renaissance” would be the start of long-term partnerships between the Met and historically Black colleges and universities to help preserve and exhibit their collections on a national scale.



The Met acquired “Self-Portrait,” by Samuel Joseph Brown Jr., in 1943. via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

But the exhibition also comes with some extra baggage at the Met, whose 1969 exhibition “Harlem on My Mind” drew angry protests because of its exclusion of Black painters and sculptors in favor of newspaper clippings and documentary photography that captured the predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood.

While the new exhibition is not a direct response to that show, Murrell said she would address its legacy by including work from James Van Der Zee, a leading photographer of the Harlem Renaissance whose pictures were included in the 1969 show. Many of the photographs come from an archive that the Met and the Studio Museum in Harlem acquired from the artist’s widow in 2021.

The curator also pointed out that the exhibition would focus on painting and sculpture, mediums that had previously been excluded. That includes the sculptor Augusta Savage, who opened the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in 1931, which trained over 1,500 students including Charles Alston, Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence.

According to the museum, this is New York's first major survey of the Harlem Renaissance since 1987, when the Studio Museum in Harlem staged its own exhibition.

"We want to show the full breadth of thinking," Murrell said. "In terms of historical context, this is the first time in art history where we have a cohort of African American artists depicting modern Black life in a modern way. These artists decided to commit their artistic careers to representing modern Black life in the absence of institutional or market support."

Zachary Small is a reporter who covers the dynamics of power and privilege in the art world. They have written for The Times since 2019. [More about Zachary Small](#)

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