



QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY

QPL CELEBRATES BLACK HISTORY MONTH



**AFRICAN AMERICANS
AND THE ARTS**

— **JOURNAL** —

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS: JOURNAL

Queens Public Library joins the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) in dedicating this year’s Black History Month to a celebration of African Americans and the Arts.

And whether your medium is paint, film, song, dance, poetry, or something else, these prompts can also help you think about the big and small ways that you can create and view art in your daily life.

The influence of African American art spans various cultural expressions, from visual and performing arts to literature, fashion, music, and more. African American artists have used their creativity to preserve history, empower communities, and set global trends.

Despite historical denial of their contributions, there’s a continuous legacy of Black artistry from ancient times to the present day, evident across all continents. The African American impact on art and culture encompasses significant movements like the creation of Blues and Jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, Hip Hop, and Afrofuturism, just to name a few.

INSTRUCTIONS

This journal focuses on five areas: Authors & Literature, Film, Performing Arts, Visual Arts, and Fashion & Design.

REFLECT ON BLACK ART AND BLACK ARTISTS

Each day in February, use our prompts to think about the past, present, and future of Black Art and Black Artists. If you’re not familiar with Black Art and Black Artists, these prompts will help motivate you on your journey of learning.

Remember: when we talk about Black Art and Black Artists in these prompts, unless we specify otherwise, we mean Black Art of all kinds—writing, visual art, music, film, everything!



MILESTONES IN BLACK ART HISTORY & ICONS OF BLACK ART

Black Art history is rich and diverse, and filled with milestones that have significantly impacted our nation, our culture, and our world.

From the earliest beginnings of the United States, to the cultural, social, and artistic explosion of the Harlem Renaissance; from the Civil Rights Era and its portrayal of African American strength and resilience, to the modern-day achievements that are constantly reinventing global culture, learn how pioneering Black artists have used their talents to express themselves, speak for their communities, tell their stories big and small, promote activism, truly make change, and improve the lives of others.

AND DON'T FORGET: JOIN US FOR BLACK HISTORY MONTH PROGRAMS AT OUR LIBRARIES!

Each genre of Black Art History that we have highlighted in this Journal will also influence special programs and activities at several QPL locations during Black History Month!

To see all our upcoming Black History Month programs, book recommendations, resources, bonus biographies of Black Art icons, and more, visit [QUEENSLIB.ORG/BHM2024](https://queenslib.org/bhm2024).

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS TIMELINE

AUTHORS & LITERATURE

These are just some of the important icons and milestones in the history of Black Authors & Literature. To learn more, visit your local library during Black History Month—and beyond!

1773: Phillis Wheatley publishes *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, becoming the first published African American female poet.



Phillis Wheatley

1829: David Walker publishes his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, advocating for racial equality and the end of slavery.

1853: William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* is considered the first novel by an African American.

1859: Harriet E. Wilson publishes *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, considered the first novel by an African American woman.

1901: Booker T. Washington publishes his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, a significant work discussing his life and thoughts on race relations.

1910s-1930s: The Harlem Renaissance emerges, showcasing a flourishing of African American art, literature, and culture.

1950: Gwendolyn Brooks becomes the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, for her book of poetry, *Annie Allen*.

1952: Ralph Ellison publishes *Invisible Man*, a seminal work exploring racial identity and social invisibility.

1959: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is the first play by an African American woman to be performed on Broadway.

1960s-1970s: The Black Arts Movement surges, emphasizing racial pride and political activism in literature.

1988: Toni Morrison wins the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved*, addressing slavery's legacy. Five years later, in 1993, Toni Morrison becomes the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

1993: Maya Angelou reads "On the Pulse of Morning" at the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton. Angelou becomes the second poet to read a poem at a presidential inauguration, and the first African American and woman to do so.



Maya Angelou at the 1993 presidential inauguration.

2019: Bernardine Evaristo becomes the first Black woman to win the Booker Prize for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*.

2021: Amanda Gorman gains widespread acclaim for her poetry, and reads "The Hill We Climb" at the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden.

Thursday



FEBRUARY 1, 1960:

the Greensboro sit-ins began, a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement when four Black college students sat at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, sparking a wave of nonviolent protests against segregation.

Write about the early influences of a Black artist—what shaped their artistic journey?

Friday



Highlight a lesser-known Black artist, in any genre, and talk about their contributions to the world.

Saturday



FEBRUARY 3, 1870:

The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified, granting African American men the right to vote.

Reflect on the relationship between Black visual artists and Black literature or poetry, or Black musical artists and Black literature or poetry.

Sunday



FEBRUARY 4, 1913:

Rosa Parks, a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement, was born. Her refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Explore a Black artist who broke significant barriers in their field. What impact did they have on the world? What impact did they have on you?

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS TIMELINE

FILM

These are just some of the important icons and milestones in the history of Black Film. To learn more, visit your local library during Black History Month—and beyond!

1898: *Something Good – Negro Kiss* is a short silent film of a couple kissing and holding hands. It is believed to be the earliest on-screen kiss involving African Americans.

1910: The Foster Photoplay Company is founded by William D. Foster. It is considered to be the first film production company established by an African American, featuring all African American casts. The Company’s first film, *The Railroad Porter* (circa 1913), was the first film produced and directed by an African American.

1919: Oscar Micheaux, “the most successful African American filmmaker of the first half of the 20th century” and the producer of nearly 40 films, releases his first film, *The Homesteader*.



Oscar Micheaux

1929: The “talking picture” *Hearts in Dixie* was the first feature film produced by a major studio with an all-Black cast, and the first African American musical. It was followed months later by *Hallelujah*, another major studio musical with an all-Black cast.

1940: Hattie McDaniel wins the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, becoming the first African American to win an Oscar.

1964: Sidney Poitier is the first African American to win the Academy Award for Best Actor.

1972: Isaac Hayes is the first African American to win the Academy Award for Best Original Song (“Theme from *Shaft*”), and the first African American to win a non-acting Oscar.

1987: Herbie Hancock becomes the first African American to win

the Academy Award for Best Original Score, for *Round Midnight*.

1992: John Singleton is the first African American (and the youngest person ever) to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director, for *Boyz n the Hood*.

2002: Halle Berry is the first African American to win the Academy Award for Best Actress.

2010: Geoffrey Fletcher becomes the first African American to win an Academy Award for screenwriting (Best Adapted Screenplay), for *Precious* (based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire).

2014: Ava DuVernay becomes the first African American woman to earn a Golden Globe nomination for Best Director, for the Martin Luther King Jr. biopic *Selma*. In 2018, DuVernay became the first African American woman to direct a film with a \$100 million budget (*A Wrinkle in Time*).

2017: Barry Jenkins becomes the first African American to direct an Academy Award winner for Best Picture (*Moonlight*). *Moonlight* is also the first film to have an African American duo (Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney) win the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay.



2018: Jordan Peele is the first African American to win the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

2018: Ryan Coogler directs the Marvel superhero movie *Black Panther*, one of the highest-grossing films of all time and the highest-grossing film by an African American director.

Monday



Reflect on the lasting legacy of a pioneering Black artist. How have they influenced contemporary creators? How have they influenced you?

Tuesday



How have Black artists used their art as a tool for activism and social change?

Wednesday



Explore a significant work of art by a Black artist. What makes it impactful or unique?

Thursday



How have Black artists navigated intersectionality (the interconnected nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality) in their work?

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS TIMELINE

PERFORMING ARTS

These are just some of the important icons and milestones in the history of Black Performing Arts. To learn more, visit your local library during Black History Month—and beyond!

1619: During the **early days of Colonial America**, most enslaved Africans were not allowed the use of drums, which led to the development of hand claps and stomps as percussive tools. Work songs, call-and-response tunes, and spirituals employed syncopated rhythms that evolved to form the basis of what is known as African American Music.

1775: Born to free parents, **Barzillai Lew** enlisted in the 27th Massachusetts Regiment during the Revolutionary War. He was a soldier and musician who played the drum and fife. He played the tune “There’s Nothing Makes the British Run Like Yankee Doodle Dandy” at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

1810s–1840s: **Francis Johnson** was the first African American to have his compositions published as sheet music, the first African American bandleader to conduct public concerts, and the first Black musician to perform in racially integrated concerts in the United States.



Francis Johnson
Photo Credit: Music Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

1871: The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) choral tradition began with the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville, Tennessee, who left campus to begin a fundraising tour for their fledgling college. By the end of 1872, they were invited to perform at the White House by President Ulysses S. Grant. By the early 20th century, HBCU performing arts evolved to include **Marching Bands** that became known for their incorporation of African American music, precision, showmanship, choreography, and elaborate formations.

1870s-1940s: W. C. Handy, known as the “Father of the Blues,” first published and popularized the genre, a fusion of work songs, spirituals, field hollers, and chants expressing the African American experience in the deep South, and later in Northern industrial cities. Artists including **Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith**, and many others further developed this artform, which gave birth to jazz, rock, R&B, and most other modern American music styles.

1910s-1930s: The Harlem Renaissance was a flourishing of Black art, literature, and culture, including performance art. This period saw the rise

of iconic figures like **Langston Hughes, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday**.

1920s-1950s: Renowned for her captivating performances in Paris, **Josephine Baker** challenged racial stereotypes through her art and activism—and was even a French spy during World War II. Known for his powerful voice as a singer and his roles in theater and film, **Paul Robeson** was also a prominent activist for civil rights.

1940s-1960s: Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Bud Powell created bebop, which developed into modern jazz. Following this lead, **Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk**, and others transformed jazz from popular music into a new artform, profoundly influencing world culture.

1950s-1970s: During the **Civil Rights Movement**, artists like **Nina Simone** and **Harry Belafonte** used their music and performances to advocate for social change.

1958: Alvin Ailey founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, showcasing African American cultural experiences through dance.

1965: James Brown released his song “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag,” which became his first Billboard Top Ten hit and won him his first Grammy Award.

1960s-1970s: The **Black Arts Movement** and the **Black Theater Alliance** emerged, promoting Black cultural expression in theater and performance.

1973: During a back-to-school party in the Bronx, a new genre of music was created. Over the next fifty years, **Hip Hop** expanded into a billion-dollar industry and a global force for music, dance, fashion, civil rights, and more, transforming the lives of millions of fans across the world with its Five Elements, including MCing, DJing, breakdancing/hip hop dance, graffiti/street art, and an emphasis on historical knowledge and activism.



QPL Hip Hop Coordinator Ralph McDaniels is an important figure in the history of hip hop.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS ICONS

VISUAL ARTS

These are just some of the important icons in the history of Black Visual Arts. To learn more, visit your local library during Black History Month—and beyond!

Joshua Johnson (c.1763-c.1826) was one of the earliest African American artists, and is regarded as the first African American professional artist. Johnson was born into slavery near Baltimore around 1763 and gained his freedom in 1782. He described himself as a “self-taught genius” and painted portraits of families, children, and prominent residents of Maryland.

James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) was a photographer best known for his portraits of Black New Yorkers. He was a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, and produced the most comprehensive documentation of life in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s.

Augusta Savage (1892-1962) was a sculptor, art teacher, and community art program director, and a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She created works that elevated images of Black culture into mainstream America. In 1934, she became the first African American member of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors.



This replica of Augusta Savage’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)* can be found at Langston Hughes Community Library’s Black Heritage Reference Center.

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was a painter known for his portrayal of African American historical subjects and contemporary life, which he referred to as “dynamic cubism.” Lawrence found inspiration in everyday life during the Harlem Renaissance. At the age of 23, he became nationally known for his 60-panel *Migration Series*, which depicts the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North.

Norma Merrick Sklarek (1926-2012) was the first African American woman to become a licensed architect, in New York and California. Her projects included the United States Embassy in Tokyo, Japan (1976) and the Terminal One station at the Los Angeles International Airport (1984).

Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953) is an artist best known for her photography, who also works with text, fabric, audio, digital images, and video installations. She became well known for her early 1990s photographic project *The Kitchen Table Series*. Her artwork focuses on the themes of racism, sexism, politics, and personal identity.

Henry Taylor (born 1958) is a Los Angeles-based multimedia artist whose paintings, sculptures, installations, and more are grounded in both his personal experiences and in the shared history of African Americans, including the Great Migration, the Black Panther Party, Hip Hop culture, and the incarceration, poverty, and deadly encounters with police that disproportionately affect Black people.

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) was known for his neo-expressionist paintings and graffiti art. Basquiat’s art focused on dichotomies such as wealth versus poverty, integration versus segregation, and inner versus outer experience. He rose to success during the 1980s and has become a cultural icon, embodying the NYC art scene of that time.

Kara Walker (born 1969) is a visual artist best known for her black cut-paper silhouettes. She has also used gouache, shadow puppets, video animation, and large-scale sculptures in her artwork, which explores race, gender, sexuality, the history of American slavery, racial violence, and identity.

Kehinde Wiley (born 1977) is a portrait painter known for his highly naturalistic paintings of Black people in the style of the Old Masters. In October 2017, Wiley was selected by Barack Obama to paint his presidential portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery’s permanent collection.



Kehinde Wiley and Barack Obama at the unveiling of the president’s portrait.

Photo Credit: [instagram.com/smithsoniannpg](https://www.instagram.com/smithsoniannpg)

Cyrus Kabiru (born 1984) is a self-taught sculptor from Nairobi, Kenya, who is known for his multidisciplinary practice that blends fashion, sculpture and photography with Afrofuturistic themes. He is best known for his *C-Stunners* series of eyewear sculptures and his self-portrait photographs wearing them. Kabiru’s artwork is made from found materials and brings focus to contemporary issues of consumerism and waste.

Lina Iris Viktor (born 1987) is a British-Liberian painter and sculptor born in the United Kingdom, best known for her Afrofuturistic digital art and sculptures. Her educational background is in film, photography, and performance arts, and her artwork is influenced by architecture, West African sculptural traditions, ancient Egyptian iconography, classical astronomy, and European portraiture.

Thursday



Think of a Black artist who has worked across multiple disciplines (e.g., visual arts, music, literature). How did this multidisciplinary approach shape their work?

Friday



Think about the different artistic mediums used by Black artists throughout history. How have they innovated within these mediums?

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS ICONS FASHION & DESIGN

These are just some of the important icons in the history of Black Fashion & Design. To learn more, visit your local library during Black History Month—and beyond!

The Tignon Law (1786): This Louisiana law was enacted to regulate the appearance of Black women. In order to “establish public order and proper standards of morality,” the law prohibited them from going outdoors without wrapping their natural hair with a Tignon headscarf. Black women soon turned tignons into a major fashion statement and a sign of their creativity.

Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907) was a seamstress, activist, and writer, who was also the personal dressmaker and confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln. In 2022, Sarah Jessica Parker wore a dress to the Met Gala based on one of Keckley’s designs for Mary Todd Lincoln.

Zelda Wynn Valdes (1905-2001) was a fashion and costume designer who in 1948 was the first Black designer to open her own shop, which was also the first Black-owned business on Broadway in New York City. Her designs were worn by entertainers including Dorothy Dandridge, Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Mae West, Ruby Dee, Eartha Kitt, and Sarah Vaughan.

Ruby Bailey (1905-2003) was an actress, painter, illustrator, and fashion designer whose works of “wearable art” were well-known in Harlem, including an award-winning “Bug” cocktail dress embroidered with jewel-encrusted bees and spiders. Several of the “Manikins” (intricately designed Barbie-doll-sized figures, wearing her designs, made with cotton fiber and glue) and dresses Bailey created are now part of the Museum of the City of New York’s Costume and Textiles Collection.

Ann Lowe (1898-1981) is best known for designing the gown worn by Jacqueline Bouvier in 1953 when she married John F. Kennedy. In 1964, the *Saturday Evening Post* called Lowe “society’s best kept secret,” a designer whose name was passed from generation to generation of high-society clients. Lowe’s designs can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Willi Smith (1948-1987) once said, “I don’t design clothes for the Queen, but the people who wave at her as she goes by.” Smith apprenticed with luxury designer Arnold Scaasi while he was in his teens, went to Parsons School of Design in 1965, and created his fashion label WilliWear in 1976. His affordable “streetwear” designs, which “brought urban culture to the catwalk,” made him the most



Mary Lincoln’s Dress, made by Elizabeth Keckley, 1861.

Photo Credit: Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

famous Black fashion designer of the 1980s, and generated nearly \$25 million in annual sales at the time of his death.

Jay Jaxon (1941-2006) was a fashion designer, costumer, and couturier. Born and raised in Jamaica, Queens, Jaxon moved to Paris in 1968, worked at esteemed fashion houses including Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Dior, and became the first American and the first Black couturier to lead a Parisian fashion house, Jean-Louis Scherrer. Queens Public Library hosted an exhibition and retrospective of Jaxon’s work in 2019, curated by fashion designer and historian Rachel A. Fenderson.



Rachel A. Fenderson, curator of Queens Public Library’s Jay Jaxon exhibition.

Stephen Burrows (born 1943) is an award-winning fashion designer based in New York City. Burrows studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology, then began working in the Garment District and with Andy Warhol and his entourage. Burrows was one of the first African Americans to sell his designs internationally and develop a mainstream, high-fashion clientele, including celebrities like Farrah Fawcett, Brooke Shields, Barbra Streisand, Cher, The Supremes, and Bette Midler.

Virgil Abloh (1980-2021) was a fashion designer, trained architect, DJ, artist, and entrepreneur. He interned at Fendi alongside rapper Kanye West in 2009, began a creative partnership with West, and founded his own fashion house, Off-White, in 2013. Three years before passing away from a rare form of cancer, Abloh became the first African American artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton and one of the few Black designers in charge of creative direction at a major fashion house.

Dapper Dan (born 1944) is a fashion designer and haberdasher based in Harlem. He has been called “the godfather of hip hop fashion,” and his influential 1980s store, Dapper Dan’s Boutique, helped introduce high fashion to the Hip Hop world—his clients included Mike Tyson, Eric B. & Rakim, Salt-n-Pepa, LL Cool J, and Jay-Z. Copyright infringement issues with European luxury brands led to the demise of Dapper Dan’s Boutique in 1992. Ironically, after social media users pointed out that one of his original designs had been copied by Gucci, Dapper Dan entered into a partnership with them, launching a fashion line in 2017 and a new store (Harlem’s first luxury fashion house store) in 2018.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS

AFROFUTURISM

“Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that combines science fiction, history, and fantasy to explore the African American experience and aims to connect those from the Black diaspora with their forgotten African ancestry.”—*Tate*

“Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.”—*Ytasha L. Womack*

“The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars...it is to explore the vastness of heaven. It is to explore the vastness of ourselves.”—*Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower*

Here are 15 stepping stones on your path to Afrofuturism!

FILM: *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), directed by **Ryan Coogler**

MUSIC: *Dirty Computer* (2018) by **Janelle Monáe**

BOOK: *Kindred* (1979) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) by **Octavia E. Butler**

TELEVISION: *I’m a Virgo* (2023), created by **Boots Riley**

SUN RA: *Space is the Place* (1973 album, 1974 film, 1993 soundtrack to the 1974 film)

BOOK: *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by **Tomi Adeyemi**

FILM: *Blade* (1998, directed by **Stephen Norrington**) and *Blade II* (2002, directed by **Guillermo del Toro**)

MUSIC: *Baduizm* (1997) by **Erykah Badu**

BOOK: *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* (1994) by **Nancy Farmer**

FILM: *They Cloned Tyrone* (2023), directed by **Juel Taylor**



FEBRUARY 25, 1870:

United States Senator Hiram Rhodes Revels became the first African American to serve in either house of the U.S. Congress. He represented Mississippi during the Reconstruction era.

How do Black artists use technology in their artistic creations? Think of some examples. How have they inspired you?

Wednesday



What are some of the innovative techniques used by Black artists, and how have those techniques evolved over time?

Thursday



Discuss the future trends and directions of Black art. What do you expect to see from Black artists in the next 5-10 years?

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

— “We Wear the Mask,” Paul Laurence Dunbar

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE ARTS: JOURNAL

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programs, scan this QR code or visit
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