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The New Industrial Resolution from Green to Sustainable

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Gender Politics within Art of the Harlem Renaissance

Commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural revolution taking place in Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century gave African Americans an opportunity to subvert the racial oppression caused by over two hundred and fifty years of slavery. Emerging around the end of World War I, the movement marked the first time that mainstream publishers and critics took the artistic endeavors of African Americans seriously. As a result, many African Americans used art as a means of conveying the struggle to understand newly gained freedom as well as the historical and contemporary experiences of being black in America. Black women in particular began to attempt to undo the devastating effects of slavery, often finding the damages too profound to negate.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's sculpture, *Ethiopia Awakening*, transfixes the female at the heart of the rebirth of African American culture, and emphasizes that black women need to be liberated from oppression in order for the rest of the race to progress. Although it also conveys difficulties faced by African American women, Archibald Motley's painting, *Brown Girl After the Bath*, positions the need for social change

within the male viewer and, consequently, caters to the male's dominant status. Within these portrayals of gender politics, both of the artists examine the role beauty plays in a society dictated by males, as it has the power to deepen and relinquish the objectification to which African American women were subject.

Harlem offered itself as a progressive milieu where art was employed not only as a means of self-expression, but as part of an intensive effort by African Americans to redefine their cultural and individual identities. As a result, the majority of fine art produced during the Harlem Renaissance has political, social, and religious undertones. Therefore, it is not surprising that radical changes in established gender roles began to influence the work of both male and female artists, as they attempted to convey what it meant to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

By providing a representation of the agency possessed by African American women to surmount oppression, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's *Ethiopia Awakening* reveals some of the major transformations in the self-conception of women during the Harlem Renaissance. For many members of the black community,

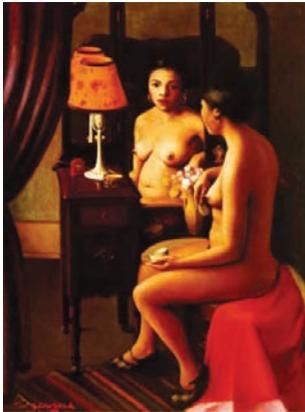
symbolized a religious and historical means of redefining what it meant to be an African American. Considering this, Fuller's sculpture urges African Americans to overcome subjugation by awakening the race's past. In America, the African American past was often associated with ugliness and hate; however, Fuller believes it is necessary for black people to embrace their background as an integral element of the beauty within their race.

Because Fuller personifies Ethiopia as a female, she implies that the call for change requires not only a racial awakening, but a gender vivification as well. According to this conception, African American people can only truly be liberated once black women are freed from oppression. Had the same sculpture been produced using a male as the subject, it could be argued that Fuller's plea for liberation would be unsuccessful. For in order to successfully free a race from subordination, discrimination within the race must first come to an end.

Fuller's interpretation of the cultural re-emergence of African Americans appears as a woman with the lower portion of her body wrapped tightly with woven cloth. The distinct pattern created by the entwined fabric

is reminiscent of the wrapping of a mummy, alluding to the idea that someone else has deliberately bound her. Yet, although she has been constricted by those around her, Ethiopia is depicted holding the loose end of the constraining fabric, suggesting she is capable of removing it. Like *Ethiopia*, African American people should not feel responsible for their subjugation but should instead recognize that they have the power to free themselves from its constraints.

Ethiopia's mummified body is a symbol for the preservation of African American culture and offers hope by suggesting that African American people already possess what is necessary for them to overcome oppression. For the Ancient Egyptians, mummification



was a means of preserving the physical body so that the deceased person could experience the afterlife. During the process of mummification, the body is embalmed in a way that prevents it from deteriorating. Since Ethiopia is wrapped in the same manner, her beauty and identity have likewise been preserved. According to this formulation, once they have freed themselves from the constraints with which society binds them, African Americans will expose a concealed beauty and culture that already exists underneath societal constraints.

The fact that Ethiopia's legs are bound while the upper half of her body is free demonstrates that in order to gain social mobility, members of the race must first find individual power. By placing the figure's hand on her heart

and rendering her with closed eyes, Fuller implies that the beauty required to overcome oppression does not originate from the outside world, but rather from reverence found within oneself. In Fuller's representation, the things projected onto the individual by society serve only to restrict and cover genuine beauty. As she is the one holding the end of the fabric, Ethiopia is able to unwrap herself and will eventually grant herself social mobility.

In using a woman as the representative for the re-emergence of African American culture and beauty, Fuller extends the meaning of the metaphor and calls attention not only to the oppression of the race, but specifically to the oppression felt by females within the race. While struggling to comprehend the ways in which the objectification of women masks their real beauty, she finds that it is a self-realized beauty that is required for the entire race to move forward. Fuller renders the figure unwinding the constraints from around her head and chest, the core of her mind and heart, first because it is only after the individual is free that the entire race will be able to advance.

By clothing Ethiopia, Fuller refutes female beauty that is reliant on sexuality and attributes prescribed by the beholder, and repositions it as existing within the woman herself. The majority of the detail found within *Ethiopia Awakening* is on the figure's face and hands, while the center of the subject's body, the location of her sexual organs, is sculpted with very little detail. Fuller avoids over-emphasizing Ethiopia's breasts and has the cloth she is holding cover her stomach and vagina. Furthermore, she refuses to show the subject's hair by rendering her wearing a large headdress. By downplaying her physicality, Fuller situates the source of beauty within women.

Another portrayal of female beauty that expresses the individual's attempt to understand the difficulties associated with being an African American woman during the early twentieth century is Archibald J. Motley's *Brown Girl After the Bath*. In this painting, a nude African American woman is seen sitting in front of a vanity. While in traditional nudes the figure's

face is frequently left out or illustrated looking away, Motley chose to render his subject in front of a mirror that is reflecting her staring back at the viewer.

Unlike Motley's painting, classical renditions of female nudes prompt the viewer to objectify the figure which is regarded strictly in terms of her physical, and sexual, features. In this context, the woman is transformed from a person into an image created solely for the audience's viewing pleasure. By having the subject stare back at the viewer, Motley challenges this idea. His creation of a painting where the spectator is forced to look into the subject's eyes requires that the person looking at the woman's body become engaged on a more personal level.



Because the way in which the woman is sitting would have yielded a reflection much different from the one that appears in the painting, it is evident that Motley deliberately altered the mirror image. Had the reflection been rendered the way it would have actually appeared, the subject would be seen staring back at herself rather than at her viewer. Beyond challenging the voyeur to reevaluate how they view the nude, this conveys the female's search for beauty lies not within herself, but by the way she is perceived by others. When looking into the mirror, the figure is unable to see a genuine reflection, and can only see the way in which others see her.

In order to satisfy society's prescribed definition of beauty, African American women often felt as though they needed to conceal the features distinctive to their race. Motley depicts this problem by choosing to show the figure in the middle of applying powder to her face. Because make-up is generally used to enhance physical appearance, the subject's application of powder implies that she believes she needs lighter skin to be beautiful. Similarly, powder is also used to hide imperfections, which suggests that the subject thinks of her dark skin as a flaw. The woman's application of make-up masks her identity as an African American woman.

Within Motley's painting, the subject's beauty is unnatural, as all of the things she feels she needs to be beautiful are being applied over top of her true identity. Like Fuller's representation of Ethiopia mummified by constraints, Motley's figure is covered with

predetermined roles. Here, the female is put on display for the satisfaction of an audience even within her own bedroom.

Because she is sitting on stage looking out at the audience, it is clear that the woman has some understanding of her position within society. However, in this depiction, the viewer witnesses the process through which she becomes this character as they see her before she puts on the clothes and make-up that make her beautiful. Motley might have chosen to highlight this process in an effort to understand, and prompt others to recognize, what it felt like to be forced to play a role as if life were a theatrical production.

The attempt to understand the oppression of African American women living in the early twentieth century was pursued by male and female artists within the Harlem Renaissance. While both Fuller and Motley demonstrate

male, inherently supporting the existing social structure. Therefore, while Motley's attempt to gain an understanding of women's place in a society dominated by males is admirable, as a male he is unable to illustrate the female's position without objectifying her himself.

By clothing her personification of Ethiopia, Fuller focuses less on portraying the details of the subject's physicality and proposes that both the gender and racial awakening required to bring African Americans out of oppression necessitates black women's quest for internal beauty. Because she gives her figure a certain degree of agency, as she holds the end of the fabric she is confined by, Fuller suggests that women possess both the power and responsibility needed in order to change the way they are treated.

Attempts to understand the position of African American women during the early

In their inability to understand the objectification and oppression felt by females within their race, male artists were restricted in their view of freedom.

other people's interpretation of beauty, leaving her real appearance hidden underneath. The reflected image in the mirror is lighter than the portion of the subject's body that is facing the audience, implying that those that look at her see only the applied aspects of her appearance.

The conception of beauty as something that is superficial, appreciated for the pleasure it gives others, is also revealed in *Brown Girl After the Bath*. The curtain in the left hand corner of the painting makes the subject appear as though she is on a stage. Similarly, the vanity that the figure is sitting in front of is on wheels and seems to have been placed in the center of the room as part of a set. Using this formulation Motley positions women on a stage where they unavoidably become idealized objects acting within the constraints of

what it meant to be positioned at the bottom of a society founded on subordination, the intensity of this objectification is yielded in the fact that Motley found it necessary to portray the female subject of his painting in the nude.

Motley, although successful in challenging the viewer of *Brown Girl After the Bath* to recognize the way in which an outside perception of beauty affects women, undermines his message and participates in the same objectification by using a nude female. As a result, his painting deals more with challenging the viewer, and in particular the African American male, than with relieving the female subject of oppression. By requiring that the person looking at the painting think what it means to be objectified, Motley seems to situate the potential for change within the

twentieth century were beneficial in their recognition of existing subjugation. However, in their inability to understand the objectification and oppression felt by females within their race, male artists were restricted in their view of freedom. As part of the class responsible for the damages, men were often unable to fully separate themselves from the power allotted to them by the patriarchal social structure. Artistic representations yielded by many male artists of the Harlem Renaissance illustrate male's failure to see women as part of a movement for social change, as even in their attempt to understand oppressive gender politics, women remain objectified.

by Danielle Palencar