

RACIAL MOUNTAINS, RENASCENT HARLEM, AND RED CLAY: THE CHARLES
HENRY ALSTON MURAL SKETCH IN THE ACKLAND ART MUSEUM COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Catherine (Caitlin) P. Swindell: Racial Mountains, Renascent Harlem, and Red Clay:
The Charles Henry Alston Mural Sketch in the Ackland Art Museum Collection
(Under the direction of John Bowles)

This thesis examines a draft mural sketch by Charles Henry Alston (1907-1977), which was accessioned into the Ackland Art Museum in 2009 from the artist's papers held at the Southern Historical Collection of the Louis Round Wilson Library. The untitled, undated, and unsigned sketch is an intriguing enigma that invites both factual and interpretive scrutiny. This paper, therefore, seeks to address, and where feasible, answer, several foundational questions about the object. Has the artist been correctly identified? Did anyone commission the mural, and if so, who? When was the sketch produced? What does each vignette within the work portray? Beyond understanding the untitled mural sketch as a Great Migration image, I will demonstrate how the work presents visual clues that allow for multiple interpretations informed by Alston's biography, his stance on African American art, and the African diaspora more broadly.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Ackland Art Museum accessioned an enigmatic mural sketch by Charles Henry Alston (1907-1977), noted African American painter, muralist, illustrator, sculptor, and educator (Figure 1). The sketch is from the artist's papers held at the Southern Historical Collection of the Louis Round Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.¹ The untitled, undated, and unsigned sketch is an intriguing enigma that invites both factual and interpretive scrutiny. This paper, therefore, seeks to address, and where feasible, answer, several foundational questions about the object. Has the artist been correctly identified? Did anyone commission the mural, and if so, who? When was the sketch produced? What exactly does each vignette within the work portray? How do these scenes relate to Charles Alston's own biography and/or convey his interest in the diverse cultural fabric of New York City and the United States more broadly?

The work depicts, against an array of red ochre and charcoal gray shapes, a series of figures as they approach a cityscape, arrive by various modes of transportation, engage in productive pursuits, and enjoy the benefits and pleasures of civic life. Some figures and locations appear more legible than others. Because Alston did not depict the scenes naturalistically, the work allows for several interpretations regarding what type of

¹"Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1930s-1990s," Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/a/Alston,Charles_Henry.html#

imagery is actually depicted, and how these images relate to larger themes. Therefore, my analysis considers and to some extent speculates about the significance of ambiguously rendered vignettes. For example, while some viewers may interpret a section of the sketch as a visually cohesive use of grey charcoal to convey an abstracted background, I propose that this particular section suggests mountain peaks (Figure 1b). The composition may also allude to the artist's personal journey from the red clay of North Carolina to the exciting urban environment of his adopted Harlem home, confronting all the while the burdens of discrimination and racial expectation, which poet and essayist Langston Hughes famously described as "racial mountains," an apt metaphor signifying the obstacles which a black artist must surmount.² Thus the two grey triangles that incongruously loom over the city may be understood as a reference to Hughes' "racial mountain."

From a distance, the mural sketch appears somewhat abstractly rendered, with gestural lines intermingling with the color-blocked sections applied with charcoal and chalk. Upon closer inspection, a number of vignettes, such as scenes of travel, work, education, sports, and the arts, become more recognizable and create a panoramic narrative that conveys significant moments of collective aspiration, struggle, and achievement; these scenes are often utilized in many other Harlem Renaissance artists' work depicting the Great Migration. This period of demographic movement from 1913-1946—in which hundreds of thousands of southern African Americans migrated to northern cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit—in many ways contributed to the sense of optimism and solidarity that developed in the arts during the Harlem

²Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 122 (June 1926) 692-694.

Renaissance.³ Alston's life story fits squarely within this period of literary and artistic rebirth.⁴ As a child Alston moved in 1915 with his family from Charlotte, North Carolina, to New York City, and arrived in Harlem already possessing artistic interests and abilities that informed his later contributions.⁵ The mural sketch in the Ackland Art Museum collection synthesizes these two parallel narratives.

I will situate the mural sketch within broader contexts that include Great Migration imagery, muralism as a significant genre during Alston's career, and Alston's position regarding "Black art." For example, considering Alston's friendships with writers and theorists such as Langston Hughes and Alain Locke, how might Alston's mural sketch reflect the larger debates regarding African American art as a racially representative tradition?

Assumed to be a rather straightforward thematic exploration of the mass exodus of blacks who fled the rural South to the urban North to escape discrimination, receive an education, pursue work, and achieve a better life, Alston's sketch has been largely

³Sharon Patton, *African American Art* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 110.

⁴While my interpretation considers Alston's biography, I am aware of the problematic nature of relying solely or too heavily on an African American artist's biography as it can diminish an artist's agency and creative voice. In her seminal essay "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," Lowery Stokes Sims explains, "self-representation (versus depiction) is one of the most fertile, encompassing race as well as gender. A curious notion which has come out of these modalities of self-representation is that the identity of the artist is by necessity conflated with the character of his or her work; that somehow gender or race are factors which automatically predetermine the subject and nature of the work of women and African Americans": Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (December 1994): 587. My inclusion of biographical support in this thesis is motivated by interviews in which Alston frequently mentioned the significance of growing up in Charlotte, the impact of his first experiences learning about art-making, and the effects of living and working in Harlem during the New Negro Movement.

⁵Alvia J. Wardlaw, *Charles Alston* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate Communications, Inc., 2007), 113.

overlooked in the six years it has been publicly available for display and study. Beyond understanding the work as an African American migration narrative, I will also demonstrate how the sketch relates to broader issues of multiculturalism and to the African diaspora.

Despite the powerful personal story and the consequential cultural epoch so meaningfully conveyed in the work, the sketch appears never to have been executed as a painted mural. Therefore it is not surprising that the Alston sketch in the Ackland Art Museum has not been the subject of in-depth scholarly treatment. Considering the limitations imposed by the paucity of relevant primary and secondary source materials, the aim of this paper is to fill that void. This thesis explores Alston's biography as it relates to the sketch, and considers Alston's interviews and correspondence that reveal his influences and aims of his artistic career. These source materials allow me to place the sketch, both temporally and contextually within its movement antecedents and the artist's oeuvre. Because the work has never been published or thoroughly analyzed by previous scholarship, the artist's papers, held at both the Wilson Library and the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, provide a relevant source of data for my original analysis. While one hopes to encounter a piece of correspondence that identifies the origins of the mural sketch, or an exhibition brochure in which the work may have appeared, this has not been the case in my research. A review of Alston's lecture notes, correspondence, newspaper clippings, copies of his resume, his hand-drawn Christmas cards, and illustrations for fashion magazine advertisements, has provided a useful context within which to better understand Alston's prolific career as an artist, teacher, and family man. These archival materials provide a diverse range of information about

the artist and his works, even though they have not produced any solid evidence to identify the purpose for creating the mural sketch, nor a specific date for its creation.

In Chapter I, I will provide a visual analysis of each of the respective vignettes within the mural sketch, and identify how periods of Alston's own life may be reflected in the work. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the inclusion of certain visual landmarks enables a more accurate dating for the untitled mural sketch. Chapter II offers contextualizing information to demonstrate how the scenes may be conventionally understood as a panoramic narrative conveying the Great Migration, as was evocatively portrayed by Alston's pupil, Jacob Lawrence. I will examine several other sketches, murals, and paintings by Alston, in hopes of illuminating visual or thematic connections between these works and the untitled sketch. An overview of theories regarding conceptions of black art as proposed by scholars Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois demonstrates the modes of thinking that influenced Alston's career as both a teacher and professional artist. Additionally, I will explore muralism as a medium that often engages communities, considering the restrictions stylistic and otherwise that impact the artist's final design. Chapter III demonstrates how the sketch, and particularly its use of monochromatic browns and greys, relates to Alston's representations of race in his other works of the 1960s. Additionally, in one particular dancing scene, Alston acknowledges and perhaps celebrates the broader diversity of cultures of diaspora. Finally, I suggest that the work—although clearly grounded in the African American experience in Harlem—exalts universal virtues of work, family, progress, civic engagement, and personal fulfillment in a manner that addresses more broadly the immigration story of many nationalities in the melting pot of New York City. When understood through these

various interpretations, the multiple links to a diverse group of peoples provide a useful and multi-faceted approach for exhibiting the mural sketch in the Ackland Art Museum.

CHAPTER I: CONSIDERING FORMAL QUALITIES

Visual Analysis of the Sketch

Surveying the details of the mural sketch from left to right, one encounters an extraordinary interplay of abstracted sections of reddish brown ochre and gradients of black charcoal that excite the viewer's gaze and provide a dynamic background against which to ascertain figures in movement who are rendered in both white and black chalk. Through visual analysis, I will identify possible links between imagery in this sketch and moments in Alston's life in order to establish a basis for discussion of the work as it relates to larger themes.

In the first vignette depicted at left, a train rendered as an old-fashioned steam locomotive juts sharply into the scene (Figure 1a). The model of the train proves incongruous to the time period depicted; this stylistic choice may signal the first clue that this work relates to Alston's biography. For example, the image of the train reflects a few instances in Alston's upbringing that relate to his initial interest in art, and his North Carolina roots. Known to his close friends and family as "Spinky," Alston became fascinated with drawing at a young age when he copied his older brother Wendell's illustrations of locomotives and automobiles.⁶ Wendell taught his younger brother Spinky how to draw these various mechanical designs, thus linking one of Alston's early memories of art making with trains. Additionally, growing up in Charlotte, Alston, his two siblings, and many of the children of the Bearden family into which his mother

⁶Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 5.

remarried enjoyed walking to the Southern Railroad station to observe the trains pass by. Alston's sister Rousmaniere noted that they were eager to "see the trains come into town, especially the Number 37 New York-to-Atlanta special in the morning and the Number 38 in the evening on its way to Washington D.C."⁷ Arguably, the red ochre color that pervades the mural sketch and from which the train emerges may also relate to Alston's first memories of his artistic inclinations and fascination with red clay. Alston recalled, "I remember North Carolina very vividly because even in those days (and I was very young) the red clay used to intrigue me. I'd get buckets of it and put it through strainers and make things out of it. I think that's the first art experience I remember, making things."⁸ Having always been interested in the arts, Alston's fond memories of his childhood in Charlotte influenced his later works, and inspired him to return to the South in the 1940s to depict farmers at work.

Hazily depicted above the train is a ship rendered with small dark circles to signify portholes, resting on a wavy sea-line, with a plane placed between the train and ship (Figure 1a). Family groups with suitcases by their sides disembark from the ship, deplane from the aircraft, and arrive by train in an urban center clearly intended as New York City and by those with more intimate knowledge of the locale as Harlem. To more clearly place the scene, the sketch was amended with pencil notations above and outside the pencil border delineating the image. The first notation at the far left contains the

⁷Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 5. See also *Family Name*, directed by Macky Alston (New York, NY: Docurama Films, 1997), DVD; this film includes interviews with Alston's sister Rousmaniere as she reflects on her childhood and her fond memories of watching the trains with her brother Charles Alston.

⁸Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

letters “Tribu,” with the last letter indecipherable. Alston then added to the sketch in pencil, directly beneath the notation, an arched structure with distinctive diagonal beams that depicts the Harlem River Lift Bridge, a part of the Triboro or Triborough Bridge. This series of spans connects the New York City boroughs of Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx as it crosses the Harlem River, the Bronx Kill, and the Hells Gate (a strait of the East River).⁹ To further ground the locale in Manhattan, a second handwritten pencil notation containing the abbreviation “Emp. St” reminds the artist to include the Empire State Building in the skyline beneath the annotation. Unlike the bridge, the image associated with this notation was not realized in the scenes depicted within the mural sketch. The image as drafted retains buildings with rectangular tops and not the stepped, triangular spire of the iconic skyscraper. The third and final notation refers inscrutably to including “VII etc,” which could refer to Seventh Avenue, a main thoroughfare in Harlem.¹⁰ This numerical reference might also suggest the Harlem River Houses, a seven-building public housing complex added to the Harlem skyline in 1937. Harlem River Houses was the nation’s first federally funded public housing development.¹¹ The significance of these visual markers of Harlem will require further discussion, as it relates to Alston’s biography and commonly portrayed images during the Harlem Renaissance.

⁹“Triborough Bridge Renamed Robert F. Kennedy Bridge,” Metropolitan Transportation Authority Press Release, November 21, 2008.

¹⁰Alston remembered Seventh Avenue as “the promenade” which on “a Sunday you’d stroll along . . . in your best clothes and look over the passing parade of beautiful gals. The 135th Street corner was our meeting place. You could stand there and in the span of a Sunday afternoon see anyone who was anybody in Harlem.” Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

¹¹Carter B. Horsely, “At Project in Harlem, It is a Time of Pride,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 1975.

Against the background of a city skyline, a lightly drawn suggestion of the Statue of Liberty, and two triangular “mountainous forms,” a figure pushes a cart away from a pile of boxes, perhaps representing the hardworking longshoremen and warehousemen who loaded and unloaded various goods (Figure 1b). As the scene progresses, a figure with arms outstretched gestures towards what may be a group of construction workers in order to raise girders at a building site. Depicted beside this figure is a man who helps to prepare the construction site and form the foundation of a building using a jackhammer. In the next vignette, garment industry workers sew cloth, carry materials, and transfer completed inventory on garment racks (Figure 1c). In the central portion of the sketch, four figures arranged in separate pairs represent, respectively, educators in cap and gown issuing degrees and people in lab coats studying an x-ray. These latter figures are assumed to be doctors given that both wear oversized coats, and one has what may be a stethoscope around his neck, while the other figure may be a woman (Figure 1d). Thus the images depicted in this vignette, universally understood as aspirational markers of socioeconomic success and class status, had personal significance for an artist married to a surgeon and employed as a university professor.¹² Moving to the right, a political candidate with one arm raised stands behind a podium that bears the text “Vote For.” One might conclude this scene depicts a political candidate speaking at a campaign rally for an audience represented by two figures beneath the podium and perhaps also the three figures to the right. Additionally, one lone uniformed protestor, with his back to the

¹²Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 30.

speaker, holds a large sign, perhaps intended as a reminder of the critical role that black veterans played after World War II as activists advancing the cause of civil rights.¹³

Immediately adjacent to the campaign rally is a perplexing scene framed in a manner suggestive of the trompe l'oeil effect of architecture found in an M.C. Escher drawing (Figure 1d). The exterior lines of a corner bank building identified as Carver Savings could simultaneously indicate two different architectural structures and corresponding scenes. Three figures in floor-length capes or coats, who may simultaneously be among the audience at the campaign speech, at first glance fool the eye and appear as customers entering the bank from the street. Closer attention to the perspective reveals that they are either looking out a window at buildings or exiting an interior space that may represent the bank lobby with tellers behind the counter. In the center of the scene, a lone figure has hands clasped and a bowed head. Continuing the conjecture, one might suppose the figure is a disappointed customer who had his loan rejected. An alternative, but less likely interpretation of the scene suggested by the posture of the stationary figure and the dress of departing figures is that a minister is praying as congregants in choir robes leave a church following the service. But the interior might also be seen as a courtroom with a judge behind the bench, a lawyer leaning in to argue, and a litigant disappointed by the decision. Thus, this complicated scene can be understood in several ways, since the perspective of the two walls that form Carver Savings Bank could appear either as though the walls recede into space or project forward.

¹³Christopher S. Parker, "When Politics Becomes Protest: Black Veterans and Political Activism in the Postwar South," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 71, No. 1, (January 2009), 113-131.

To the right of this ambiguous vignette, located above a piano that begins the next scene, a faintly drawn, unidentified vertical structure appears (Figure 1e). On the top and to the left of this column, a circle with dots and lines could signify a wall clock. The suggestion of a second circle appears to the right of the first. Strangely contrary to the scale of the other images in the composition, the vertical structure when viewed as an attachment to the top of the grand piano below can be perceived at the angle presented as the fret board, strings, and circular tuning pegs of a guitar. This interpretation could also align with the earlier discussed scene as it could serve a dual function of presenting both a piano and an oversized guitar.

Perhaps more likely, Alston intended to portray three figures, a pianist at a grand piano, a trumpeter, and a bass player, to form a jazz ensemble. The music and nightlife in clubs, such as the Cotton Club and its rival, Connie's Inn, were emblematic of Harlem as a cultural center beginning in the Prohibition era. In an oral interview recalling Harlem as a "fantastically interesting place in those days, in 1928, 1929," Alston expressed his interest in music and the clubs, mentioning these famous white-owned venues that featured black entertainers but admitted only white patrons, as well as Small's, one of the few black-owned mixed-venues at the time.¹⁴ Observing that it was "an exciting time," Alston stated that although he was a "little young," "[I]luckily [he] got in just on the fringe of it."¹⁵ Alston was not only an enthusiastic patron of jazz music, but

¹⁴Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. See also: Joan Kanel Slomanson, "Racial Divisions in Harlem," *New York Times*, January 29, 2006.

¹⁵Oral History Interview with Charles Alston, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

also a painter of blues singers and jazz bands throughout his career and most notably in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the next vignette, Alston depicts dancers, a male figure and a female one, whose clothing recalls Caribbean or Latin American dance costumes used in performing the rumba. Alston's decision to include a cultural marker of Afro-Cuban dance practice further suggests the intended breadth of the mural sketch by depicting people and cultural contributions from locations outside of the American South. So while at first glance, the mural sketch may appear devoid of any allusions to an African diaspora, Alston has subtly incorporated cultural markers in the form of the rumba dancers to refer to the broad multitude of New York City's inhabitants. The rumba figures reference peoples from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the West Indies, and specifically, to those of African descent. This vignette will be further discussed in Chapter III to demonstrate how it relates the work more broadly to diaspora.

As the panoramic scene progresses past the jazz group and rumba dancers, a baseball player wearing a baseball cap and equipped with a bat emerges, along with two men in the middle ground, engaged in a boxing match. Although the sketch contains no intrinsic clues as to the identity of these figures, the inclusion of these two sports scenes would certainly remind viewers of Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player to join the Major Leagues, and of heavyweight champion Joe Louis, an African American boxer whom Alston portrayed in earlier cartoons distributed to over two hundred black newspapers.¹⁶ In Alston's cartoon depicting Joe Louis, the caption reads:

¹⁶Cartoons of Joe Louis in the Ackland Art Museum collection include objects 2009.18.42 and 2009.18.43, which are both *Untitled (Sgt. Joe Louis, Champion of Champions)*, c. 1940-1944 and each image measures 5 15/16 x 6 in. (15.1 x 15.2 cm). Transferred from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, Charles

“Joe’s meteoric rise from the poverty and obscurity of an Alabama sharecropper’s cabin to fame and fortune as the sports idol of a nation, is an eloquent example of democracy in action!” (Figure 2).¹⁷ Additionally, if Alston created the mural sketch in the late 1960s, then it would have coincided with the beginning of the career of African American boxer Cassius Clay, known later as Muhammad Ali.

In one of the final scenes, two children play a board game or perhaps play with jacks or marbles (Figure 1e). One figure sits with legs crossed while the other appears to be seated with his legs outstretched. The vignette represents the importance of family, a theme that pervaded Alston’s artwork throughout his career. Although Alston never had any children of his own, his life’s work involved mentoring and teaching students of various ages. The scene of the children playing a game with marbles, rendered by small dotted marks, certainly indicates a conventional way of depicting children at play, but it also could link the work back to Alston’s own childhood. Depictions of children with a red-orange ball in hand have surfaced in a number of Alston’s works including *Family* (1955), *Family Group* (ca. 1950), *Walking* (1958), and two *Untitled (Study for Mural)* sketches (ca. 1958 and 1960s) (Figures 3-7). The repetitive representation of a ball of red-ochre or yellow-orange material may be an allusion to Alston’s childhood and his fond memories of playing with North Carolina red clay.

Henry Alston Papers. See also U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, “Charles Alston, Artist and Teacher,” <http://arcweb.archives.gov>. Images of over one hundred illustrations that Alston drew for the Office of War Information are available through this online archival research catalog.

¹⁷Cartoon of Joe Louis in the Ackland Art Museum collection, c. 1940-1944. Transferred from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill’s Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, Charles Henry Alston Papers.

Toward the right edge of the sketch, Alston depicts a team of either two or three muralists painting triangular forms with rounded apexes, perhaps mountains, with a bridge towards the background (Figure 1e). This painting within the mural sketch assuredly links the vignette with the overall work on paper, and evokes Alston's experiences collaborating with multiple artists to create murals. For example, Alston worked with artists Vertis Hayes, Sara Murrell, and Georgette Seabrooke among others for the mural program at the Harlem Hospital, which was completed in 1936. The scene of multiple muralists within the untitled Ackland mural sketch could also refer to Alston and Hale Woodruff, with whom he completed the murals for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance in California in 1948 (Figures 8-9).¹⁸ The repetition of mountainous forms in the final scene of the work strengthens the argument that the charcoal rendered mountains in the beginning of the sketch may also allude to the "racial mountain." Perhaps then, this vignette toward the right edge of the work suggests his appreciation for many of the artists with whom he worked, inserting another autobiographical piece into the narrative.¹⁹

¹⁸"Harlem Hospital WPA—The Murals: Magic in Medicine," Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, New York. <http://iraas.columbia.edu/wpa/murals.html>; Woodruff, like Bearden and numerous other New York contemporaries, was a close friend of Alston's. In several interviews, Alston fondly refers to the lifelong friendships he had with Woodruff and Bearden. The significance of their friendships is also suggested by the inclusion of newspaper clippings and other ephemera mentioning Woodruff's artistic achievements, which are included in the Charles Henry Alston papers.

¹⁹Instead of depicting a seated muralist holding a paintbrush and aided by two assistants at a table, the scene at the far right could depict two figures seated on a park bench, one of which is positioned next to a baby stroller. Although this interpretation would align thematically with the children at play located immediately beneath the image, the depth of the "mountains and bridge" landscape behind the figures does not correlate in scale with the size of the seated figures. Most significantly, the landscape scene is demarcated within a rectangular form, suggesting more plausibly that this framed part of the sketch is intended as a work of art. Given the arts and

The roughly sketched individuals, buildings, modes of transportation, musical instruments, and means of production are not placeholders for more finely wrought figures or images to be painted later with realistic clarity. If that were the case, Alston presumably would have roughed-in all the sketched images in black or rendered in pencil on tracing paper as he did with the preliminary sketch for his mural, *Man on the Threshold of Space* at P.S. 154 Manhattan (now Harriet Tubman Junior High School), which was completed in 1963 (Figure 10). Intentionally, the figures depicted on the left arriving in New York by ship, plane, and train with their suitcases and tool boxes are drawn with white chalk, unlike those on the right drawn with black chalk. Moreover, white chalk highlights are used throughout the remainder of the image, suggesting that the final work when painted would carry the colors and lines forward exactly as drawn. Alston's detailed use of different colors suggests that the sketch was not intended as a *rough* approximation of his vision for the work, but rather a likely indication of how the finished mural was intended to appear.²⁰ A completed mural derived from this sketch would differ dramatically in style from the California murals, for example.

entertainment theme of this section and the depiction of other biographically significant images within the sketch, one may reasonably assume that the artist would pay homage to the very art form in which he has been engaged and recognize the contributions of his collaborators in mural projects. Thus, while some viewers might perceive a baby stroller next to the seated figures, a more likely explanation of the object is that it is either a cart or a table on which artist materials rest for the artist at work.

²⁰It is useful to consider another of Alston's mural projects in which Alston's preliminary mural sketch differs minimally from its final result. See figures 43 and 44 of the "Our Constitution" work from the City College of New York. The oil on canvas mural was mounted on a wall in the College's North Academic Center, Aronow Theatre Lobby; the final work measures 90" x 120." City College of New York, "CCNY Art Collection Album" posted on Flickr at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/26746018@N03/2607390485/>

The use of white, the omission of facial details, and the subject matter of several vignettes also may indicate a desire to emphasize the universality of the image. Many individuals came to New York to support their families, to build the city, to contribute to society, and to enjoy its freedoms, not just African Americans who migrated from the rural South to the urban centers of the North. Alston's pupil, Jacob Lawrence, had by this point executed a series of paintings focused on the African American experience in the Great Migration that were more explicitly grounded in black imagery. Alston had experienced criticism from white audiences for including more overtly black images in his earlier hospital murals about the history of medicine. Additionally, African American activists had hoped that Alston would emphasize the Double V objectives (victory abroad and at home) in his series of editorial cartoons produced for the government during World War II.²¹ Alston frequently objected to his categorization as a "negro" or black artist. Thus, the mural sketch captures the competing influences that challenged him. In a letter written just five years before his death, Alston wrote Curator Robert Doty at the Whitney Museum of American art, declining an invitation to join an exhibition of black artists. As Alston stated in the letter:

The museum's role is not to mount an exhibition for Black artists only, but to seek out and find the talented Black as he has the talented White artist, and place him in the mainstream of American art, where he must be tested in the same crucible of quality as any other artist. As for myself, albeit proudly Black, I would hate to think that I was in an exhibition because I'm Black, rather than because I am a good painter. Finally let me say to you and to others who advocate such a project, that separate exhibitions lead to separate standards and separate, I repeat, is by nature unequal in a democratic society.²²

²¹Harry Amana, "The Art of Propaganda: Charles Alston's World War II Editorial Cartoons for the Office of War Information and the Black Press" *American Journalism* 21 (2004): 79-111.

²²Gylbert Garvin Coker, "The Legacy" in *Charles Alston: Artist and Teacher. exh. cat.* (New York, NY: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1990), 27. For more information on Robert Doty's "Contemporary Black Artists in America" show of 1971 and regarding the other black artists who

Through his life's work as a teacher, mentor, and artist Charles Alston engaged in a quest for freedom of expression, which was a contested idea at the time for several black artists.²³

Clues to Dating the Sketch

After going through the materials in the Alston papers in Chapel Hill, I discovered a number of inventory lists prepared by the artist's wife, Myra Logan, and one by the executor of his estate that describe a mural sketch 10" x 78," which approximates the dimensions recorded by the Ackland registrar for the sketch at issue, 9" x 82½" (Figure 11). In these various lists, the inventory title provides no identifying information, only a question: "Mural Sketch for (?)"

Because the work depicts a commercial building façade above which is drawn the words "Carver Savings," a possible scenario is that the mural was prepared for the Carver Federal Savings Bank for installation in its lobby or boardroom (Figure 1d).²⁴ The headquarters building of the bank at 75 West 125th Street was destroyed in a fire on October 28, 1992.²⁵ However, nothing in press articles about the fire indicates the loss of

protested this show, see Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: the Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

²³Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 112.

²⁴"Negro Loan Office Open," *New York Times*, January 6, 1949; "Harlem's First Negro Loan Bank Open," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 8, 1949. Carver Federal Savings Bank, a leading financial institution in Harlem named after scientist George Washington Carver, was organized and chartered in 1948 and opened for business on January 5, 1949 as the first black-owned and managed lender in the State of New York.

²⁵Christine Dugas, "Carver Bank Guttled In 3-Alarm Blaze," *Newsday*, October 29, 1992; J. Zamgba Browne, "Carver Bank's Harlem HQ Damaged by Fire," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 31, 1992.

a completed mural. Presumably, a mural commissioned by a leading Harlem bank to celebrate the community it served would focus more directly on Harlem itself, but the sketch more generically depicts New York and universal themes relating to family, opportunity, industry, and attainment in education, professions, sports, and the visual and performing arts. Therefore, it is unlikely the Carver Savings Bank commissioned Alston to complete a mural for their located business.

Another possibility is that the sketch was prepared in anticipation of grant funding for a proposal submitted on May 21, 1971, to the New York Council on the Arts by the Northside Center for Child Development on behalf of the 110th Street Housing Development Corporation. The Charles Henry Alston papers in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, contain a copy of a letter that accompanied the Center's application for a two-year grant of \$115,000 to fund "art forms designed and executed by an artist whose work has demonstrated excellence in quality."²⁶ The letter explains that the art acquisition would enhance the child development center, other social and recreational services facilities, and the housing complex of over six hundred units comprising a full block at 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, described as the "Gateway to Harlem."²⁷ The effort proved unsuccessful; a letter denying the application explains that

²⁶Letter, dated May 21, 1971, from Mamie Phipps Clark, Executive Director, Northside Center for Child Development, Inc., to the New York State Council on the Arts, Attention, Eric Larrabee, Series 2, Correspondence, 1931-1977, Box 1, Folder 8, Correspondence, 1970-1979, Page 42, Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

²⁷*Ibid.*

the disposition did not reflect on the merits of the proposal, but involved budget limitations.²⁸

In a routing slip transmitting the rejection letter to Alston, the Northside Center Director addresses the artist familiarly by his nickname, and states “I am going to try some private foundations,” and inquires, “Have you any ideas?”²⁹ If there were any remaining question that the Director was acting as an intermediary for Alston, such doubt would be dispelled by a subsequent letter seeking funds from the J.M. Kaplan Fund. Reiterating the need for the “‘Gateway to Harlem’ fronting on a circle at the northern end of Central Park” to be “enhanced by exterior and interior art forms designed and executed by an artist whose work is of known excellence,” the Northside Center Director candidly admits that the proposal had been discussed with the “noted artist and sculptor Charles Alston.”³⁰ She pointedly adds that Alston “lives within sight of the development” and “is interested to consider [the commission], assuming that it can be funded.”³¹ Nothing appears to have developed in this regard, as no further correspondence on the topic has been located in Alston’s papers. By late 1972 and early 1973 Alston had turned his

²⁸Letter, dated October 19, 1971, from Arthur J. Kerr, Assistant Executive Director, New York State Council on the Arts, to Mamie Phipps Clark, Northside Center for Child Development, Inc., Series 2, Correspondence, 1931-1977, Box 1, Folder 8, Correspondence, 1970-1979, Page 64, Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

²⁹Route Slip, dated November 22, 1971, from Mamie, Northside Center for Child Development, Inc., to Spinky, Series 2, Correspondence, 1931-1977, Box 1, Folder 8, Correspondence, 1970-1979, page 69, Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

³⁰Letter, dated January 3, 1972, from Mamie Phipps Clark, Executive Director, Northside Center for Child Development, Inc., to Raymond S. Rubinow, Secretary, The J.M. Kaplan Fund, Inc., Series 2, Correspondence, 1931-1977, Box 1, Folder 8, Correspondence, 1970-1979, Pages 83-84, Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

³¹*Ibid.*

attention to the mosaic murals commissioned for the new Family and Criminal Courts Building in the Bronx (Figure 12).³²

The Ackland Art Museum records date the work to 1949 or after, most likely because the sketch refers to Carver Savings, which, as noted earlier, opened in that year. But, the subject matter, manner of execution, and color scheme of black, orange-red, white, and gray are characteristic of several of Alston's painting studies in the Ackland collection and other larger works that are dated to the 1950s and early 1960s (Figures 13-14). This likely prompted the registrar to acknowledge that the work may have been produced after 1949. But by evaluating clues intrinsic to the work itself, consulting extrinsic sources for historical information, and comparing the style to other Alston works, one may confidently advance the date considerably beyond the current estimation.

Furthermore, the inclusion within the panel of certain visually identifiable images that can be accurately dated validates the assertion that the work was produced at a much later date than 1949. The sketch contains a political campaign vignette: a candidate speaks before an audience, assumed to be African American in composition, at a podium draped with bunting under which appear the words "Vote For" (Figure 1d). Harlem voters were active participants in the political process in the 1940s, electing Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to the United States Congress in 1944 as the first African American

³² Draft Agreement, revised February 13, 1973, between Cauldwell Wingate Company, Inc., Contractor, and Charles Alston, Art, Series 3, Commission and Teaching Files, 1947-1976, Box 1, Folder 13, Family and Criminal Courts Building, Bronx, New York, 1972-1976, Pages 1-5, Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. To ascertain whether the mural sketch in the Ackland collection was intended for the 110th Street Housing Development will require further research and access to the archives of the New York Council on the Arts and the Kaplan Fund.

member of the House of Representatives from the state of New York.³³ But unlike the specific reference in the composition to Carver Savings, the identity of the candidate at the podium is not specified. Therefore, if the campaign scene more universally depicts an act of achieved participation in the electoral process for black voters at large, the vignette could date the sketch as being contemporaneous with, or after, the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.³⁴ At a minimum, this detail suggests that the work can be dated to the period during which disenfranchised African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement increased pressure on Congress to protect the voting rights of racial minorities that culminated in the passage of the first voting-rights legislation since the Post-Civil War Reconstruction era: the Civil Rights Act of 1957.³⁵ Absent proof of a dated commission for its production or other indications in the Alston papers in the Smithsonian Institution or the Wilson Library or in other source materials for its origin, the work's political subject matter dates it conservatively to the era in the early 1960s when attaining full voting rights was a paramount objective of the African American community likely portrayed in the mural sketch.

Other clues, however, suggest a more plausible date for its production is during the late 1960s. The mural contains patent references to identifiable New York City icons, such as the Triborough Bridge, possibly the Statue of Liberty, and the Empire State

³³Office of History and Preservation, U.S. House of Representatives, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-2007* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008).

³⁴James D. King and James W. Riddlesperger, Jr., "Presidential Leadership Style and Civil Rights Legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1957 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965," *Presidential Leadership and Civil Rights Policy*, ed. James W. Riddlesperger, Jr., and Donald W. Jackson. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 545-546.

³⁵King and Riddlesperger Jr., "Presidential Leadership Style and Civil Rights Legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1957 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965," 546.

Building (Figure 1b). Therefore, one may confidently posit that the distinctive high arches and elongated entrance steps of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center form the backdrop for the dancing figures in the far right of the mural sketch dealing with the performing arts (Figure 15). The first public performance at the “Met” was on April 11, 1966, and the building officially opened on September 16, 1966.³⁶

Finally, as noted previously, on the left of the mural, gray peaks of considerable height tower incongruously over the New York City locale (Figure 1a). Also, on the far right a painter appears, sitting on a bench in front of a large canvas or mural wall, rendering a scene of stylistic mountains with a distant bridge enveloped in clouds (Figure 1e). One may discern from the inclusion of these mountains an allusion to the metaphor contained in the seminal essay by Langston Hughes, which appeared in *The Nation* on June 23, 1926, entitled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes died in New York City on May 22, 1967, and it would be reasonable to speculate that the news of the poet’s death brought the metaphorical image to mind when Alston created the sketch at issue, and that the work was likely produced in 1967 soon after Hughes’ death.³⁷

³⁶Raymond Ericson, “Rudolf Bing Announces Settlement of the Musicians’ Strike from Stage of the Met,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1966; and the Obituary of Beverly Bower, “Beverly Bower, 76, Soprano Who Sang At the Met,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2002.

³⁷The Obituary of Langston Hughes, “Langston Hughes, Writer, 65, Dead,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1967. As noted earlier, a tenable production date circa 1971 may be shown if further research can document that the sketch was prepared for the unsuccessful grant proposal to include artworks in a public housing project constructed at 110th Street and Fifth Avenue by the New York State Urban Development Corporation.

CHAPTER II: AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

What is the “Black Experience?”

Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance confronted a continuing polemic about representing the “African American experience” in their artwork. Alston’s artistic career provides a useful context in which to discuss his role in these debates. These topics include but are not limited to segregated exhibitions based on race and the use of “African” motifs in art. While many black artists were mired in a conundrum framed by critics’ prescriptions of what their art should convey, Alston relied little on critical reception of his work. Alston throughout his career produced abstract and figurative work simultaneously in a variety of media ranging from paintings, drawings, sculpture, photographs, and murals. As one of the most significant artists during the Harlem Renaissance and throughout the Civil Rights Movement, Alston has not received the recognition he deserves, likely due to criticisms that he lacked an “identifiable style.”³⁸ Thus Alston provides a complex character study within which to place the mural sketch and his other works that relate to issues regarding blackness in art.³⁹

³⁸Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 48.

³⁹Completely absent from David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis Ryan’s seminal text, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, and with only one of Alston’s paintings mentioned ever so briefly in Richard Powell’s *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, these instances point to many in which Alston’s oeuvre does not garner appropriate attention. See: David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis Ryan, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1987); and Richard Powell and David A. Bailey, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

Alston once remarked, “I don’t believe there is such a thing as ‘Black art’ though there has certainly been a black experience.”⁴⁰ Thus I will use the phrase as it relates to the Great Migration, a movement referred to by some scholars as the “African American Migration Experience,” because it exclusively refers to black southerners who traversed to northern cities, experiencing a variety of hardships often because of their race. So while I do not intend to demonstrate the various interpretations of the “black experience,” Charles Alston’s sketch, and his utilization of vignettes commonly portrayed in Great Migration imagery, provide an opportunity to interpret *one* version of this experience, in terms of what Alston specifically represents in the work.⁴¹

This chapter examines how Charles Alston’s sketch both engages and departs from other black artists’ depictions of the Great Migration, including the *Migration of the Negro* series by Alston’s pupil, Jacob Lawrence. Additionally, this chapter will consider works from Romare Bearden’s *Southern Recollections* works in which similar visual signifiers of migration and movement are embodied through representations of the railroad.⁴² A brief discussion of William H. Johnson’s paintings of southerners and newly urbanized black northerners also reveals tropes utilized in Great Migration imagery.

⁴⁰The Obituary of Charles Alston, *The New York Times*, April 28, 1977.

⁴¹For a scholarly critique on the “black experience” see Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)” in *Public Culture* 7 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Fall 1994): 77-94; and Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and “Racial Art” in America*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012.

⁴²Carla M. Hanzal, *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*. Charlotte, NC: the Mint Museum of Art, 2011.

Towards the end of the chapter, I will introduce theoretical precedents that informed Alston's work, and discuss how many of the issues Alston dealt with and addressed throughout his career, culminated to some extent with the untitled mural sketch and with the Spiral Group of the 1960s, of which he was a part. These analyses will illuminate the various methods and cultural influences that influenced the creation of Alston's mural sketch.

Jacob Lawrence's 'Migration of the Negro' Series and Alston's Sketch

The untitled mural sketch at the Ackland Art Museum illustrates Alston's biography and addresses familiar images of occupational and educational progress that many African Americans experienced during the Great Migration. While several black artists throughout the twentieth century created works that relate to the Great Migration, few, if any, have produced a single work that spans the narrative from the migrant's origins to the urban destination. Typically, as evidenced in the works of William H. Johnson and Romare Bearden, black artists' work relating to the Great Migration depicts either figures in the rural South traveling to the North, or southerners already established in northern cities, immersed in their newfound urban culture.

In William H. Johnson's *The Breakdown* of 1940, a couple traveling with furniture in tow becomes stranded due to a mechanical breakdown (Figure 16). As one figure attempts to fix the automobile, another resourcefully begins a fire. Painted with a prominent hood ornament in the shape of a cross and horizontal lines perhaps to suggest crop fields, the work alludes to the strength and determination of a rural and religious southern couple as they travel presumably to a northern city for a better life. Similarly painted in his self-consciously primitive style, William H. Johnson's *Harlem Street Life*

(ca. 1939-1940) and his *Jitterbugs* series (ca. 1940) depict figures at cabarets, jazz clubs, and standing, well dressed amongst tall apartment buildings in Harlem (Figures 17-18).⁴³ These works demonstrate scenes at the beginning and towards the end of the narrative spectrum that encompasses the Great Migration. Thus, artists often depicted rural black southerners beginning their migratory journey or thriving in the cosmopolitan black communities in Harlem. Narrative moments in between tend to be much more rare.

Like his friend, cousin, and mentor, Charles Alston, artist Romare Bearden also sporadically returned to Charlotte to revisit places from his southern roots. A recent exhibition held at the Mint Museum in Charlotte from 2011-2012, *Southern Recollections*, showcased over ninety works spanning the entirety of Romare Bearden's artistic career. Each work included in the exhibition either directly portrayed vignettes from the South or related to Bearden's childhood memories while living in Charlotte. As previously mentioned, Alston and Bearden, along with each of their siblings would frequently visit the nearby train station, when they were childhood neighbors. The image of the train thus provided significance for each of these artists as it related to fond memories from their upbringing. More directly, the inclusion of the train or train car in Bearden's collages often alludes to the Great Migration. In Bearden's *Watching the Good Trains Go By* (1964), and *The Train* (1974), the train's minimal presence in the composition, however small, provides significance when juxtaposed with the visibly distraught and somber groups of figures in the foreground of each work (Figures 19-20).⁴⁴ Thus, the train can function symbolically as movement, a beacon of hope and a

⁴³Patton, *African-American Art*, 153.

⁴⁴Hanzal, *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*, 80.

vehicle for change.⁴⁵ This notion is presented similarly by Jae Emerling; she notes that “Bearden’s art embodies a diasporic ‘hybrid modernity’ that creates relations between the past and the present. This is evident in a number of his collages wherein the train signifies movement between places and cultures (a material means of migration and return.)”⁴⁶ In Alston’s untitled mural sketch, the train might also be understood symbolically, as it initiates migratory movement and figures prominently in the foreground of the scene. The train’s outdated model juxtaposed with skyscrapers and other indications of a modern city, combined with the ship that alludes to diasporic migration succeed in engaging the hybrid modernity to which Emerling refers.

One of the only other artists to convey the multitude of stories and scenes prevalent throughout the Great Migration is Jacob Lawrence, one of Alston’s most successful students, who created a sixty-panel series entitled *The Migration of the Negro* created from 1940-1941 (Figures 21-28). As art historian Patricia Hills explains:

when Jacob Lawrence began his series *The Migration of the Negro* in 1940, he launched a new theme in painting for the twentieth century—an imaginative didactic exodus narrative... What he accomplished, as the emerging storyteller, or griot, of his Harlem community, was a tapestry of pictures and text captions that draw the viewer through time and geography, struggles and hopes.⁴⁷

⁴⁵See also Ruth Fine and Jacqueline Francis. *Romare Bearden, American Modernist*. Vol. 71, Studies in the History of Art. Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. Fine discusses *The Train* on page 54 and explains, “In this and other collages from the same time depicting guitar and harmonica players in overalls, Bearden evoked the train-whistle blues and the Great Migration, which carried blacks and their music from the rural South.

⁴⁶Jae Emerling, “On the Image of Bearden” in *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*, 80.

⁴⁷Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: the Art of Jacob Lawrence*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 97. Hills’ use of the term “griot” defined as “a member of a hereditary caste among the peoples of western Africa whose function is to keep an oral history of the tribe or village and to entertain with stories, poems, songs, dances, etc” is useful in relating the series and its function to the discussion relating to diasporic arts.

A brief discussion of Lawrence's series in comparison to Alston's mural sketch will illuminate the ways in which Alston and Lawrence convey narratives understood as encompassing a "black experience." While neither artist defined or explained the meaning behind this phrase, both used it when discussing their art. In this way, interpreting Alston's sketch as engaging a "black experience" can be further grounded in a careful consideration of the themes and influences found in Lawrence's expansive series.

Organizing the series through eight sections, Lawrence depicts panels that incorporate:

- 1) Causes of the Migration
- 2) Stimulation of the Migration
- 3) The Spread of the Migration
- 4) The Efforts to Check the Migration
- 5) Public Opinion Regarding the Migration
- 6) The Effects of the Migration on the South
- 7) The Effects of the Migration on Various Parts of the North
- 8) The Effects of the Migration on the Negro⁴⁸

Lawrence's series differs greatly from Alston's sketch in several ways. The significant differences range from narrative scope, size, medium, style, to the utilization of captions or lack thereof in Alston's case. Another key difference worth considering is that Lawrence's more thorough depiction of the migration considers turmoil and struggle after the arrival in northern cities.

Lawrence's multi-panel series allows for a lengthier depiction organized in groupings, much like Alston's treatment of narrative vignettes. Lawrence began *The Migration of the Negro* after completing ambitious series that detailed the lives of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Frederick Douglass. These previous series required some

⁴⁸Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: the Art of Jacob Lawrence*, 98.

research and primarily addressed the linear accounts of an individual's accomplishments. *The Migration of the Negro*—the quintessentially American journey predicated in part on the nation's original sin, racial intolerance—prompted Lawrence to pursue more in-depth research in order to effectively convey through text and image black Americans' varied experiences. For the *Migration* series, Lawrence thoughtfully composed panels into groups with each panel utilizing descriptive captions. As Hills explains, "his *Migration* series would need to have a more complex orchestration if he were to represent in pictures and texts not just the phenomenon of people on the move but also the economic and social forces underlying that movement."⁴⁹

Panels from Lawrence's series that depict migratory movement as Alston conveys in his sketch include panel 18 in which family groups walk with their bags in a focused direction (Figure 21). Additionally, panel 23, entitled "And the migration spread," depicts a flurry of dark skinned figures with suitcases in hand as they board two overcrowded train cars (Figure 22). Lawrence's panel 40, "the migrants arrived in great numbers" compositionally bears similarities to the beginning of Alston's sketch, and to Lawrence's other panels including figures with many suitcases in tow (Figure 23). Aside from the traveling component found in both the sketch and the series, another shared attribute for these works includes imagery related to education. For Alston, doctors and figures in caps and gowns hold diplomas and signify various educational aspirations that one may finally achieve in a northern city. Similarly, in Lawrence's panel 58, "In the North the Negro had better educational facilities," three African American girls apply chalk onto a blank blackboard, each figure with an arm reached at its most upright position to write a single number (Figure 28). The use of each figure's raised arm creates

⁴⁹Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: the Art of Jacob Lawrence*, 97.

a visual peak as the viewer's eye follows the progression of the figures' chalk marks, signifying through the composition a positive and upward direction. The panel indicates opportunities for better education in the North, and especially in this instance for young black girls. However, this panel's use of dark colors, lack of lengthy written work on the blackboard, and distanced space between the figure suggests a cynical view of the opportunities or lack thereof afforded to black children. Thematically Alston and Lawrence address two similar themes. While some of Lawrence's panels may resonate with viewers as hopeful and uplifting much like the scenes in Alston's sketch, *The Migration of the Negro* differs from Alston's work in that it directly addresses black citizens realizing the false promises of northern cities.

While Alston's sketch depicts figures engaged in labor and industry, his work conveys moral uplift and opportunity, whereas Lawrence's series depicts violent acts against blacks in northern cities and in some instances illustrates tensions between already well-established black northerners and the newly arrived black southerners. For example racially influenced violence is captured in a number of panels including panel 50, "Race riots were very numerous all over the North because of the antagonism that was caused between the Negro and white workers. Many of these riots occurred because the Negro was used as a strike breaker in many of the Northern industries" (Figure 24). In this panel, three different figures, all presumably white due to the use of pale pink and yellow color to depict the figures' hands, wield clubs and possibly a knife. The dynamic, diagonal divide of the composition heightens the frenetic energy of the three men who presumably will soon attack African American figures understood as outside of the composition. Other depictions of the effects of racial violence or the difficult living

conditions experienced by numerous black Americans in northern cities include panel 51, depicting buildings engulfed in fire, and panel 55 in which three figures stand beside a coffin, mourning the loss of a black person who contracted tuberculosis due to cramped living conditions (Figures 25 and 27). Finally, one perhaps unexpected kind of discrimination may be gleaned from the title of panel 53, which states “The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness” (Figure 26). This scene demonstrates a point of view directly in opposition to the harmonious groups of people depicted in Charles Alston’s untitled mural sketch. Author Brian Cohen addresses the impact of Jacob Lawrence’s series, stating:

In the *Migration* Series Jacob Lawrence did what hadn't been done before. A Black American, the child of migrants from the South, he drew upon the resources of his community, the history of his people, the traditional aims of European art, and a variety of 20th C [century] modernist influences to create a vision of a vast, unacknowledged, and hugely influential struggle in American history. What he did, with means so modest and expression so spare and affecting, as a twenty-three year-old black man struggling in a country riven by economic depression and racism, remains stunning and enduring, and a reminder to us now of how much we have left to do.⁵⁰

In this way, Lawrence’s series provides a useful contrast to Alston’s sketch. Why would Alston choose to portray only the “positive” images experienced by migrants from the South? I would argue that the nature of mural work and possible restrictions or intended goals of the building or space for which Alston was sketching would encourage Alston or any prospective commissioned artist to include uplifting imagery. Furthermore, the sense of community conveyed in Alston’s sketch as well as the inclusion of possible allusions to his own friendships and family in the work, relate to many of Alston’s themes and aims throughout his career as an artist and teacher. Alston

⁵⁰Brian D. Cohen, “Jacob Lawrence Migration Series at MoMA,” the Huffington Post, updated August 21, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-d-cohen/post_9996_b_8018432.html

often decided to portray the positive moments from “the black experience” rather than the negative ones.⁵¹ In short, the comparison illustrates how two artists incorporate the “black experience” through Great Migration imagery, a topic that twentieth-century African American artists have rarely explored in depth.

How Theoretical Precedents Inform Alston’s Mural Sketch and Oeuvre

*With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance—in the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.*⁵²

-Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, 1925

During the New Negro Movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance, Alston became friends with theorists and artists including Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes. These prominent figures and their differing theories about engaging race in the arts informed Alston’s oeuvre as it developed, leading up to the production of the mural sketch. While the untitled sketch, I argue, was likely not produced during the Harlem Renaissance but in the 1960s, the sketch draws on themes that Alston explored during earlier periods in his career. Additionally, a brief explanation of two of Alston’s earlier and completed mural projects for the Harlem Hospital in New York (1936) and for the Golden State Mutual Insurance Company in California (1949) illustrate the differing points of view regarding racial representation as discussed by Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois respectively (Figures 29-30 and 8).

⁵¹One major exception to this claim is a drawing ca. 1935 that conveys extreme racial violence with a man holding a lynched black man’s genitals. This drawing was for a politically charged exhibition *Negro Rights*, but the sketch was not included in the exhibit. See Helen Langa, “Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints,” *American Art* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 25.

⁵²Alain Locke, “The New Negro” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 6.

While attending Columbia University, in the mid 1920s, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Charles Alston first met black philosopher, Harvard graduate, and arts patron Alain Locke (1885-1954), who published in the 1925 *Survey Graphic* an essay entitled, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts.”⁵³ This text, which accompanied images of African art from Albert Barnes’s collection, encouraged the “New Negro” to learn about form and the plastic arts from Africa.⁵⁴ Locke’s text as well as his anthology of essays, poetry, and illustrations, known as *The New Negro*, explored the ways in which one ought to convey an African American identity in art. Arguing that African Americans have a distinct culture and should express themselves to white America and the rest of the world, Locke posits that studying the forms of African art provides a pathway for new modernist expression and has the possibility to provide cultural and racial dignity for African American culture.

In his writings on African art, Locke focuses primarily on West and Central African art, a field not identified by white audiences as part of a “classical” heritage.”⁵⁵ After Locke had already suggested that African American artists engage African aesthetics, white Americans anticipated that black artists would incorporate African

⁵³Coker, “The Legacy” in *Charles Alston: Artist and Teacher. exh. cat.* (New York, NY: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1990). 10.

⁵⁴Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 254-267.

⁵⁵Thus Locke’s approach in relating African American culture with African art outside of Egypt differed greatly from black artists during the early twentieth century who utilized images of the great pyramids and other Egyptian motifs to link their culture to one of the most celebrated ancient civilizations, especially during the “Egyptomania” that consumed many Americans during the 1920s. See Caroline Goesser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

imagery. Accustomed to avant-garde works by artists such as Modigliani and Picasso, white patrons in the United States grew fascinated by black artists who portrayed this “primitive” aesthetic. As the African American novelist Langston Hughes aptly put it, this period was one “when the Negro was in vogue.”⁵⁶ As a mentee of Locke, Alston assisted him with installing an exhibition of African art in 1935 that proved extremely useful as it allowed Alston to handle and closely observe African objects from the Schomburg collection.⁵⁷ As author Gylbert Coker explains, “this experience, like his relationship with Locke, would prove to have a lasting effect on both Alston’s creative process and his views about African-American art.”⁵⁸

Becoming the first black supervisor for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project in 1935, Charles Alston coordinated many artists in various projects while simultaneously working on two murals: *Magic in Medicine* and *Modern Medicine* for the Harlem Hospital (Figures 29-30). In 1936, these two murals were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art before their installation at Harlem Hospital.⁵⁹ In these murals, Alston synthesizes Locke’s ideals of incorporating visual signifiers of African culture as a predecessor to modernity. For example, in *Magic in Medicine* a Fang reliquary statue figures prominently in the scene, with the theme of this panel conveying an African-influenced, “holistic approach to healing” in medicine.⁶⁰ Figures

⁵⁶Patton, *African-American Art*, 111.

⁵⁷Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

⁵⁸Coker, *Charles Alston: Artist and Teacher*, 10.

⁵⁹Lemoine D. Pierce, “Charles Alston—An Appreciation” in *The International Review of African American Art* 19:4 (2004): 38.

⁶⁰Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 27.

range from playing musical instruments, to exhibiting raised arms to suggest prayer, to dancing around the Fang sculpture, all surrounded by forest “huts” and an oversized moon that convey an ambiguous and “exotic” African setting.

In contrast, the panel entitled *Modern Medicine* depicts various doctors in lab coats performing surgery, and perhaps discussing research or engaging in a lecture, with an exaggeratedly oversized microscope towards the center of the composition. The *Modern Medicine* panel, though markedly “modern” thanks to the inclusion of the telescope, as well as industrial-type buildings depicted in the upper left corner, still retains elements from an African past. For example, in the upper right corner, a Fang reliquary sculpture, reminiscent in style to the one depicted at center in *Magic in Medicine*, is placed atop a largely nondescript mountainous landscape, and beside two stereotypical renderings of African drums.⁶¹

Additionally, the Harlem Hospital project, which involved six other artists, whom Alston managed, received criticism; and four sketches were rejected arbitrarily, which Alston protested in various letters, suggesting outright that the hospital commissioner had engaged in racial discrimination. As author Alvia Wardlaw notes, “for Alston, it was the first milestone in a career of intellectual activism, advancing his determination to speak for, to represent, and to lead his people.”⁶² This propensity towards activism was earlier realized in the formation of the artists group known as “306,” which met during the Harlem Renaissance in a studio at 306 West 141st Street. The space served not only as a meeting place for Harlem Renaissance intellectuals but also provided arts workshops in

⁶¹Diana L. Linden and Larry A. Greene, “Charles Alston’s Harlem Hospital Murals: Cultural Politics in Depression Era Harlem,” *Prospects* 26 (2001), 402.

⁶²Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 32.

the space downstairs, where several artists instructed art classes.⁶³ During the 1930s, Alston hosted various intellectuals to discuss aesthetics and more broadly issues of white patronage and the lack of black contributors in WPA art programs. At this point in Alston's career, he was simultaneously involved in a number of organizations including the Harlem Artists' Guild, among others.⁶⁴

This issue of how to convey racial identity to diverse audiences relates also to the concept of double consciousness as discussed by W.E.B. DuBois in his publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).⁶⁵ When describing the "identity crisis" that affected black Americans DuBois explains the problem as being

born with a veil, [a] double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.⁶⁶

An exploration of double-consciousness, and the "twoness" that impacts African Americans extends throughout DuBois' written works into the 1920s, including his essay entitled "Criteria of Negro Art," which was published in 1926 in *The Crisis*. In a famous passage often quoted as succinctly encapsulating his vision of African American art, DuBois in "Criteria of Negro Art" explains, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not

⁶³Linden and Greene, "Charles Alston's Harlem Hospital Murals," 398.

⁶⁴Ibid., 399.

⁶⁵Patton, *African-American Art*, 106.

⁶⁶W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 17.

used for propaganda.”⁶⁷ For DuBois, black artists are reluctant to identify one of their own as accomplished until they are recognized by either white Americans or through international praise. This tendency DuBois finds deeply problematic. Charles Alston, at earlier points in his career did not necessarily work to seek validation from white audiences, something DuBois had strongly cautioned against. For example, Alston resisted and challenged white hospital authorities who rejected his designs for the Harlem Hospital Murals.⁶⁸ Alston certainly engaged Locke’s predilection for African art as a means to modernity in the Harlem Hospital murals. In an interview Alston gave in 1968, he describes how Locke’s promotion of African aesthetics was initially appealing to him, but later became a kind of affectation. Alston explains:

I know for a long time I had to almost consciously make my stuff not do a long neck on a figure. One or two of those very delicate lovely pieces were long-necked. About that same time I became aware of European painters who had discovered African art. And they were my first idols in painting. People like Modigliani, for instance, and that of course was a tremendous influence in my early painting. Fortunately I think I realized that this can get to be a pattern kind of thing, a very affected kind of thing.⁶⁹

Thus, the elongated forms characteristic of European painting inspired by African “primitivism,” incorporated in several of Alston’s portraits and in the Hospital murals indicates his awareness of Locke’s teachings. However, examples of Alston’s artwork often associated with Social Realism, including the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building in California (1948), demonstrate Alston’s conscious shift towards propagandistic aims, leaving behind his stylized depictions of peoples of African descent.

⁶⁷W.E.B. DuBois, “Criteria of Negro Art” in *The Crisis*, vol. 32, (October 1926), 291-292.

⁶⁸Linden and Greene, “Charles Alston’s Harlem Hospital Murals,” 391.

⁶⁹Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

When no other financial institution offered insurance to African Americans, the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, a small black-owned business that opened in 1925, provided African Americans with insurance. In many ways, the murals created by Charles Alston and Hale Woodruff in 1949 for the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building in Los Angeles in their content and style offer a propagandistic component that aligned with DuBois's notions of successful art. These two murals illustrate African Americans' contributions to the state of California; Alston's panel portrays the "Exploration and Colonization" of California with references ranging from 1527-1848, and Woodruff completed the other part of the diptych entitled "Settlement and Development" that covered the period of 1849-1949 (Figures 8-9).⁷⁰ Depicted in a social realist mode, these murals highlighted the accomplishments of African Americans, and thus thematically are well suited for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company as it was at the time, one of the most prominent African American owned businesses in California.⁷¹ Although references to Africa are absent in this commission, Alston's work demonstrates a continued approach at representing black Americans as "individuals rather than types," which remains constant throughout his career.

Some of the major influences on Alston's California mural developed from observing and interacting with major Mexican muralists of the period, Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. In his interview in 1968 with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Alston notes:

I happened to be on the mural project so I was particularly aware of the Orozcos and the Riveras. As a matter of fact, I used to go down to Radio City when Rivera

⁷⁰Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 43-46.

⁷¹Coker, *Charles Alston: Artist and Teacher*, 12.

was painting the one they destroyed. And between his broken English and my broken French, we managed to communicate. And I was very much influenced by his mural work... You couldn't escape the social implications of painting then. I think most of us went through that stage where we did an amount of social realism.⁷²

In this passage, Alston reflects on the diverse influences during the burgeoning mural movement that pervaded many major cities in the United States around the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, Alston and other African American artists engaging in Social Realism considered the political contexts within which they worked and sought to address the existing social conditions for African Americans. As author Lizetta LeFalle-Collins explains, “Social realists believed that art could not be separated from its social and political context, a context that was indebted to Mexican influences.”⁷³ Although the style of Alston’s works varied dramatically, Alston’s role as an activist remained consistent to some extent. Therefore, the Mexican muralists’ close examination of class structures, oppression, and revolution provided an important model for African-American artists” with major significance for Charles Alston specifically.⁷⁴

⁷²Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

⁷³Lizetta LeFalle-Collins and Shifra M. Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School*. (New York, NY: the American Federation of Arts, 1996), 29.

⁷⁴LeFalle-Collins and Goldman, *In the Spirit of the Resistance*, 38.

CHAPTER III: MULTICULTURALISM AND DIASPORA

Abstraction and the Spiral Group

In 1950, Alston became the first African American instructor at the Art Students League, where he taught for the next twenty-five years, and it was during these decades that his work evolved into more abstract interpretations of the figure.⁷⁵ As Wardlaw notes, “he had begun to experiment in the late 1940s with more contemporary modes of expression.”⁷⁶ *Palavar #1* from 1946, for example, is reminiscent of Jean Arp’s work, with its interlocking organic forms utilizing negative space as a design format within the composition (Figure 31). This abstract style in which Alston worked for a number of years concurrently with more figurative work, developed into a monochromatic palette during the 1960s.

The use of shades of grays, blacks, creams, and ochres almost exclusively during this period related to the initiatives of another art group founded in 1963 by Alston, along with Woodruff and Bearden, that was known as Spiral. The group also included Norman Lewis, Emma Amos, Perry Ferguson and others. Its name “evoked the Archimedean spiral, a symbol of expansive positive energy and all-encompassing movement, ‘because from a starting point, it moves outward embracing all directions, yet constantly upward.’”⁷⁷ The group, which met at Romare Bearden’s studio, gathered artists to

⁷⁵Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 23.

⁷⁶Ibid., 63.

⁷⁷Ibid., 82

discuss how African Americans fit into American society both as citizens and artists. In 1965, during a time of segregation, the Spiral group members decided to create an exhibition that would include artworks of all styles and media, but utilizing only the colors black and white. This exhibition, entitled “Black and White,” was held at a rented space at 147 Christopher Street in downtown Manhattan.⁷⁸ As Sharon Patton explains, the participants in this exhibition:

did not want to be labeled ‘black-artists,’ nor to have their work categorized as ‘naively primitivist’ or ‘realist.’ Yet each wished to identify and define their own relationship to their people’s struggle and to explore the possibility of conveying cultural significance through their art.⁷⁹

Thus the exhibition not only responded to the Civil Rights Movement, but also allowed artists to contribute their unique relationship to the culture/s within which they are a part. Alston’s reflections on the period in his 1968 interview with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art demonstrates a more nuanced sentiment regarding political art, and art in general. As Wardlaw concludes, “it was important [for Charles Alston] that the political statement of a work of art not mitigate its quality. The artist, first and foremost, had to be accomplished enough to interpret the great themes of struggle so prominent in the period without preaching.”⁸⁰ The untitled mural sketch in many ways accomplishes this agenda. If one considers the untitled sketch as a completed work of art, it certainly portrays issues and themes relevant to a political or social cause through its immigration narrative display, yet its vignettes provide some ambiguity so as not to “preach” any sentiment in

⁷⁸Patton, *African-American Art*, 185.

⁷⁹Ibid., 186.

⁸⁰Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 99.

overt ways.⁸¹ As an intellectual and cultural activist, Alston's participation in Spiral demonstrates a culmination of ideals developed throughout his career.

Representations of Skin Color in Alston's Works

While I have suggested that a number of scenes within the mural sketch may represent moments from Alston's life, and include visual references to other artists including Hale Woodruff and Langston Hughes, broader themes of a multicultural American identity ultimately complement those previously discussed. Many of Alston's works from the beginning of his career, including those from the 1920s when Alston was working closely with Alain Locke, and pieces created as he was preparing for and after his Rosenwald travel fellowship to the rural South (1940), depict African American figures as recognizably "black." For example, in *Vaudeville* (1930), *Girl in a Red Dress* (1934), *The Blue Shirt* (1935), and *Shade Chapman* (1939) Alston depicts the figures as black either by painting them with darker skin tones, or by engaging stereotypical portrayals of African American physiognomy commonly understood as representing African Americans during the early twentieth century (Figures 32-35).

Alston professed a lifelong admiration for the works of Amadeo Modigliani among other European Modernists, and many of his works throughout his career engage some of the stylistic elements inspired by Modigliani's portraits. Alston most admired

⁸¹Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. In the interview Alston states: "I sometimes feel that what I see presented as black art is motivated much more by the political aspects of the situation than the art aspects. I think this is difficult to make clear. I think it's perfectly all right to use art politically. Its been done beautifully by Daumier, Goya. But always behind this was a thorough and solid background in the aesthetic aspects of the art..Maybe what I'm saying is that I think there is a great anxiousness to make a statement before you're equipped to make the statement in that particular medium."

Modigliani's predilection towards depicting elongated faces and bodies. Even when utilizing this modern style, Alston renders figures in *Midnight Vigil* (ca. 1936) and *Tobacco Farmer* (1940) with flared nostrils, large lips, and slightly bulbous foreheads and facial shapes, joining stereotypical traits of African Americans with European modernist stylistic tendencies (Figures 36-37).

In the 1950s, Alston returns to the jazz imagery and portraits of singers that had been central to his work in the 1930s; during this time, he also begins to paint several portraits of families. In these later works, Alston utilizes different stylistic methods that are less overtly stereotypical and instead incorporates geometric shapes to form more abstractly the facial features. In *Woman with Flowers* (1949) and *Blues Singer* (1955), though Alston portrays the figures with darker complexions, his abstraction becomes more developed as he conveys African American figures with less recognizably "racialized" features (Figures 38-39). For example, a broad stroke or a simple line becomes a suggestion of a nose. Also during this period of his career, Alston begins to more frequently paint individuals of various skin tones including *Adam and Eve* (ca. 1954) and *Standing Woman* (ca. 1956) among others (Figures 40-41). Alston's application of a spectrum of skin colors is crucial in understanding his developing opinions on depicting race in art. This progression towards obscured faces, ambiguous features, and varied skin tones in the 1950s and 1960s would also suggest that the untitled Ackland mural sketch may have been created during this period in his career, as the figures are faceless and defined with both white and black chalk.

In Alston's portraits of families from the 1950s, many of the faces of the figures are obscured. Alston once commented when asked why the families are "faceless," that

“such is the way white America views blacks.”⁸² In interpreting Alston’s statement, Wardlaw explains, “although Alston’s comment may stem from personal experience, these paintings represent much more than a response to whites’ misperception of blacks.”⁸³ Many of these portraits portray figures from one family unit as having different skin colors that could reference the diverse groups of people that represent Americans of African decent. While figures in some of Alston’s works, including the Ackland mural sketch, lack facial features, the context of either the family unit or depictions of progress and opportunity offer other ways in which to understand the figures’ relationship to one another. For example, in the mural sketch, it matters not what the individuals look like, but rather how people from different racial backgrounds commune together in the melting pot of New York City.

Alston also rarely titles his works with descriptions that specify race. However, in a painting produced in 1968, Alston depicts two dark skinned individuals with no distinct facial features whatsoever; this work has been titled and referenced by Alston in two distinct ways. As authors Harry Henderson and Romare Bearden explain “although he always referred, in speaking, to this painting by this title (*Black Man, Black Woman, U.S.A.*), he was also ambivalent about it (Figure 42). In his 1968 exhibition, he titled it

⁸²Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 52.

⁸³Ibid.

Family No. 4.”⁸⁴ Alston’s propensity to title works in the 1950s and 1960s with no racial signifiers could align with his goals of producing artwork with a universal appeal.⁸⁵

Because Alston has vacillated between styles and subject matter, identifying specific instances when Alston promotes the “black experience” becomes challenging. Alston sheds light on interpreting meaning in the body of his work in the following passage, noting:

I don’t think that there’s anything more American than what a black American does—it’s so uniquely an American experience. So I just consider myself to be an artist who happens to be black, who happens to have lived through the Black experience, and inevitably its got to have its influence on your work, but if its anything at all, its American.⁸⁶

Therefore, Alston’s oeuvre and his untitled mural sketch can engage multiple meanings including references to his biography, more general themes relating to a “black experience,” but also one that is “American,” incorporating visual references to the diverse group of peoples who populate the United States.

Alston once stated in an interview with Grace Glueck that “depending upon how I feel, I work either figuratively or abstractly...I’ve never held with the ‘consistency’ the critics are so hipped on. After I’ve solved a problem, I can’t get interested in repeating

⁸⁴Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: 1792-Present*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), xvii.

⁸⁵Harriet Doar, “Figures are Proud—And Faceless,” *The Charlotte Observer*, March 31, 1968. This particular painting was very well received as discussed by Harriet Doar: “It is one of the best-known paintings by Charles H. Alston...The painting was in the recent City College survey exhibition of Afro-American art since 1800, was on the cover of Ebony magazine, and will probably wind up in the offices of the new NAACP headquarters in New York.”

⁸⁶Harry Henderson, “Remembering Charles Alston” in *Charles Alston: Artist and Teacher. exh. cat.* 8. (New York, NY: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1990), 8.

it.”⁸⁷ So perhaps, rather than pursuing styles or thematic conventions that may have been valued at the time, Alston may have been less dependent on the guidance and influence of other artists and critics. Recalling the works of some of the major cultural leaders during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes or Claude McKay, Alston expresses how after their work was no longer “‘in vogue,’ they were left lost and confused.”⁸⁸ These pointed reflections further demonstrate Alston’s reliance on his own artistic vision.

As an intellectual and cultural activist, Alston’s participation in Spiral demonstrates a culmination of ideals developed throughout his career, and a tendency towards utilizing limited color palettes, ones that evoke skin color, to convey an American movement aimed towards acquiring civil rights. In this way, the Ackland mural sketch could closely align with Alston’s thematic intentions in the early 1960s, and his work with Spiral.

Skeptical viewers of the significance of the use of color in the Ackland mural sketch may claim that the ochre, white, and black are simply the typically used materials for preliminary sketches. But if we consider this sketch against others of Alston’s it appears to be the only figurative mural sketch that incorporates these ochres, greys, and whites with no additional colors. Two abstract sketch studies rendered in shades of brown, black, red, and orange, created in the 1950s, were also accessioned into the Ackland Art Museum collection from the Charles Henry Alston papers of the Southern Historical Collection (Figures 13-14). These abstract color studies may demonstrate the

⁸⁷Oral History Interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1968 October 19, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*.

⁸⁸Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 10.

beginning of Alston's exploration of these tones for the later mural sketch he produced in the early 1960s, and as a predecessor to the restricted color palette advocated by the Spiral group.

In a preliminary sketch for the mural entitled *Man on the Threshold of Space*, which was completed in 1963 at P.S. 154 Manhattan (Harriet Tubman Junior High School), Alston works in pencil on tracing paper (Figure 10). This particular sketch demonstrates what one might consider a less developed work than the Ackland untitled sketch. For *Man on the Threshold of Space*, Alston depicts the draft completely in grey pencil, with no color embellishments. The scale of this sketch is much smaller than that of the untitled Ackland sketch, again suggesting differences in the various stages for mural projects. In a few other untitled mural sketches, dated during the late 1950s and 1960s, Alston incorporates colored pencil and pastel to fill in cruder pencil sketches. In one of these sketches, which depicts similar vignettes to the sketch in question, Alston has again rendered the figures with blank faces, but with varying degrees of pale to dark skin tones to signify different races cohabitating in New York City (Figures 6-7). The theme of universality or depictions of diverse groups of American people assuredly can be found in yet another preliminary mural sketch as the colors of the figures range from brown to orange, pale pink to blue. Alston renders one figure's arm in pink as he holds an object reminiscent of a sketched-in globe (Figure 6). The unusual use of skin colors and the treatment of the globe, with multiple colors to suggest continental land and a bright yellow to signify the vast waters of the Earth, could all point to the arbitrariness of skin color and continental divides, perhaps subtly addressing the idea that race is socially constructed. Furthermore, while the blank faces of the figures throughout a number of

Alston's works may have initially related to his feeling that black Americans are "faceless" to whites, a continued approach that pairs this technique with scenes suggesting racial uplift could suggest that Alston did not carefully delineate the faces in order to convey a greater universality in the work, and perhaps appeal to a wider audience.

In 1973, prominent architect Max Abramowitz commissioned Charles Alston to create two mosaic murals for the Bronx County Family and Criminal Court buildings (Figure 12). Henderson notes that this commission thrilled Alston and provided him with an important opportunity to communicate with a broad public.⁸⁹ The murals also demonstrate Alston's increasing interest in conveying persons of different races living together harmoniously. The Criminal Court mural offers an abstract representation of "equal justice for all" through its depiction of various globe-like forms in different colors to suggest the different races of humankind joined together. Additionally, the Family Court mosaic mural presents stylized images of figures of different races, rendered in brown, white, black, orange, and yellow. Completed in 1976, these murals realize the themes, color schemes, and stylistic approaches conveyed in the untitled mural sketch, and illuminate a profound change from Alston's earlier Harlem Hospital murals and their overt African-ness. Thus, Alston's mural projects towards the end of his life demonstrate a progression from specifically African and black aesthetic practices to a universal approach in representing the human condition.

⁸⁹Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: 1792-Present*, 270.

Diaspora and the Afro-Cuban Rumba

Alston's untitled mural sketch much like the international movement, known as the Harlem Renaissance, engages and promotes complex racial discussions and questions relating to identity in vast contexts. As author Jeffrey Ferguson explains:

Because the writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance focused intensely on matters of heritage, black culture, black consciousness, and many other issues related to the general questions 'Who am I?' 'Who are we?' and 'Where do we find ourselves?' During the 1920s, many of these writers and thinkers agreed that a new kind of black person had emerged, but hardly anyone could identify him or her exactly. Some writers looked to Africa, some to the American South, some to Pan-African and other global identities. Still others wondered how to balance ideas of racial unity with loyalties within the group, including class, gender, and nation. Ambiguities of every sort attended these reflections—between newness and tradition, sameness and otherness, invention and imitation.⁹⁰

By including two Afro-Cuban rumba dancers in the untitled mural sketch, Alston not only acknowledges diasporic black culture, he celebrates its presence by integrating these figures into the narrative.

The dancing couple found in Alston's untitled mural sketch, and their compositional placement to jazz musicians and other entertainers demonstrates Alston's incorporation of diasporic peoples and black Americans united in Harlem (Figure 1e). The man's billowed shirt, especially its ruffled sleeves, and the woman's rustling, long layered dress with its gestural lines of movement in the bottom of her hem point to a cultural connection that may not be specifically African American, but rather a signifier of diaspora.⁹¹ These outfits illustrate guarachera costume of the Afro-Cuban culture, and

⁹⁰Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 17.

⁹¹The inclusion of the Afro-Cuban couple could also signify Pan-Africanism, which is a movement that is "based on the idea of overcoming vast differences in language, ethnicity,

according to author Robin Moore this kind of dress is characterized by the ruffled shirts and the long flowing tails of female dancers' dresses.⁹² The rumba dance of the Afro-Cuban folk tradition became popularized in the United States in the 1930s, and the term "rumba" can refer to varied styles of dance, music, and performance, and since the term has taken on several meanings it becomes difficult to define.⁹³

Author Christina Abreu in her 2015 publication, *Rhythms of Race: Cuban Musicians and the Making of Latino New York City and Miami, 1940-1960* explores the complex web of diaspora musical traditions that developed during the mid twentieth century. Abreu illuminates the ways in which African American, Hispanic, African, and Afro-Cuban peoples' cultural traditions overlapped and informed the music and entertainment of the era; her discussion of New York City in particular provides a useful context for further interpreting the final scenes in Alston's untitled mural sketch. During the 1940s and 1950s, around 90,000 black and white Cubans migrated to New York City and Miami. On the heels of the Great Migration, the influx of Caribbean immigrants joined black Americans in many of their neighborhoods including Harlem, New York.⁹⁴

religion and geographical origin," to promote and unite the peoples of the black "race." Patton, *African American Art*, 109.

⁹²Robin Moore, "The Commercial Rumba: Afrocuban Arts as International Popular Culture," *Latin American Music Review/ Revista de Musica Latinoamericana* 16, no. 2 (Autumn—Winter 1995): 174.

⁹³The dance was developed more than three hundred years ago, as an erotic pantomime performed as a courtship of barnyard fowls, with each flutter and flounce of the sleeve to represent a movement of feathers; See Joann Stevens and Marvin T. Jones, "Unearthing Island Roots," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1982.

⁹⁴Christina D. Abreu, *Rhythms of Race: Cuban Musicians and the Making of Latino New York City and Miami, 1940-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5. Abreu describes the dynamics of the melding of diasporic peoples: "In New York City, Cuban migrants and musicians settled near and among much larger Puerto Rican and African American communities, mostly in Harlem and the South Bronx but also in lower Manhattan, and it was in

The inclusion of the dancers, and their allusion to the Caribbean, whether Cuban or otherwise, engages Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as it relates to diaspora. Hall explains:

the diaspora experience . . . is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.⁹⁵

The multitude of ambiguities in the mural sketch allows viewers to engage diasporic interpretations because the work does not depict the vast intricacies of New York and Harlem as "accomplished fact" rather they become interpretive. The works' various and possible meanings illustrate Hall's declaration that cultural identity is a "production, which is never complete."⁹⁶ Understanding the sketch in terms of diaspora strengthens its appeal as an object for interpretive display; the work surpasses any limited associations inherent in designating it simply as an expression of the black experience or narrative specific to black southerners during the Great Migration.

these contexts, which were sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile, that black and white musicians engaged with ideas about their music, race, and national identity."

⁹⁵Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235.

⁹⁶Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 222.

CONCLUSION: VIEWER EXPERIENCE AND MUSEUM DISPLAY

The untitled mural sketch offers the Ackland a wealth of opportunities for both exhibition and interpretation. Because the work engages several narratives simultaneously, the sketch would benefit from display in varied contexts. As I have demonstrated, the work may reflect moments from Alston's life, and at its core depicts a version of the "black experience" in the early twentieth-century through its conventional scenes of movement and progress found in Great Migration imagery. Beyond the personal and migratory narratives, the sketch may also represent, through its use of color and an illustration of the Afro-Cubano Rumba, the multiculturalism of New York City.

This link between the United States, the "black experience" and the diasporic peoples demonstrates how the scenes can provide meanings for different viewers. As author Lisa Roberts explains, "objects' meanings are linked to what we do with them, and thus to how we choose to see them."⁹⁷ Because so much information about this work is largely unknown, the display of this sketch provides the opportunity for museum visitors to acknowledge their ways of viewing. The Ackland then, in future use of the work in exhibition spaces, would benefit from providing the various and occasionally speculative conclusions reached in this project. In this way, with the presentation of the works' multiple and possible meanings, viewers will not rely solely on one prescribed narrative offered by a museum label. Instead, "the work of interpretation becomes an act of

⁹⁷Lisa C. Roberts, "Changing Practices of Interpretation" in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, edited by Gail Anderson (Plymouth, UK: Altamira Press, 2012), 156.

empowerment, because it provides visitors with both the knowledge and the consent to engage in critical dialogue about the messages museums present.”⁹⁸ It is my hope that this research will contribute and figure prominently in future display and discussion surrounding the sketch in the Ackland Art Museum through its various aesthetic, biographical, social, political, and historical contexts.

⁹⁸Roberts, “Changing Practices of Interpretation,” 158.

FIGURES



Figure 1 – Charles Alston, Untitled Mural Sketch, n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.



Figure 1a – Charles Alston, Untitled Mural Sketch (Detail depicts travel by train, plane, and ship) n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.

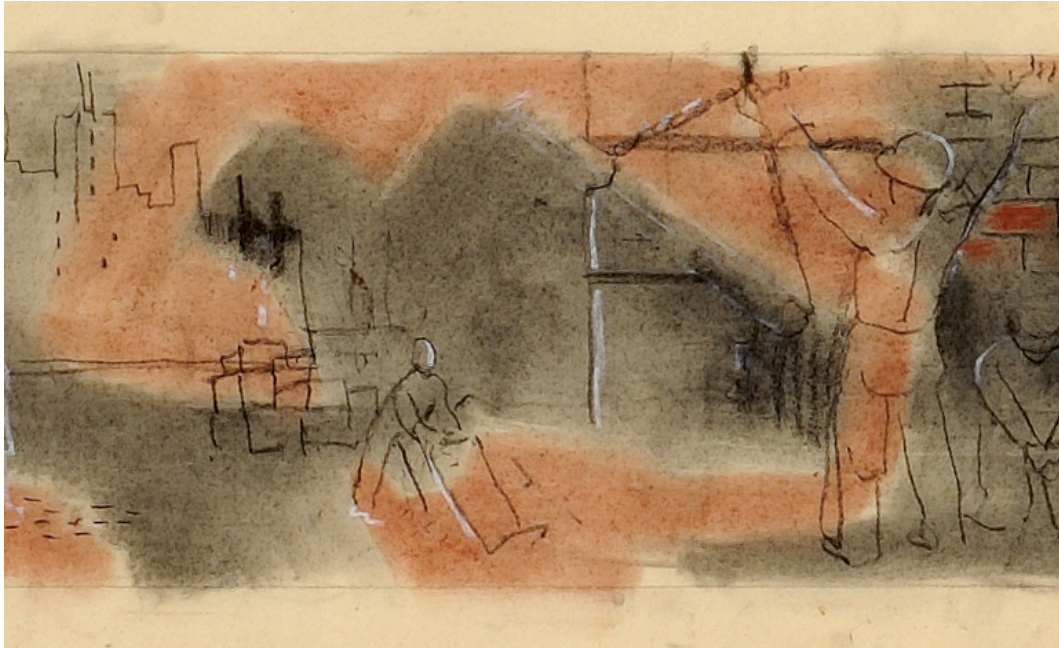


Figure 1b – Charles Alston, *Untitled Mural Sketch* (Detail depicts skyscrapers, mountains, an industrial workers), n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.

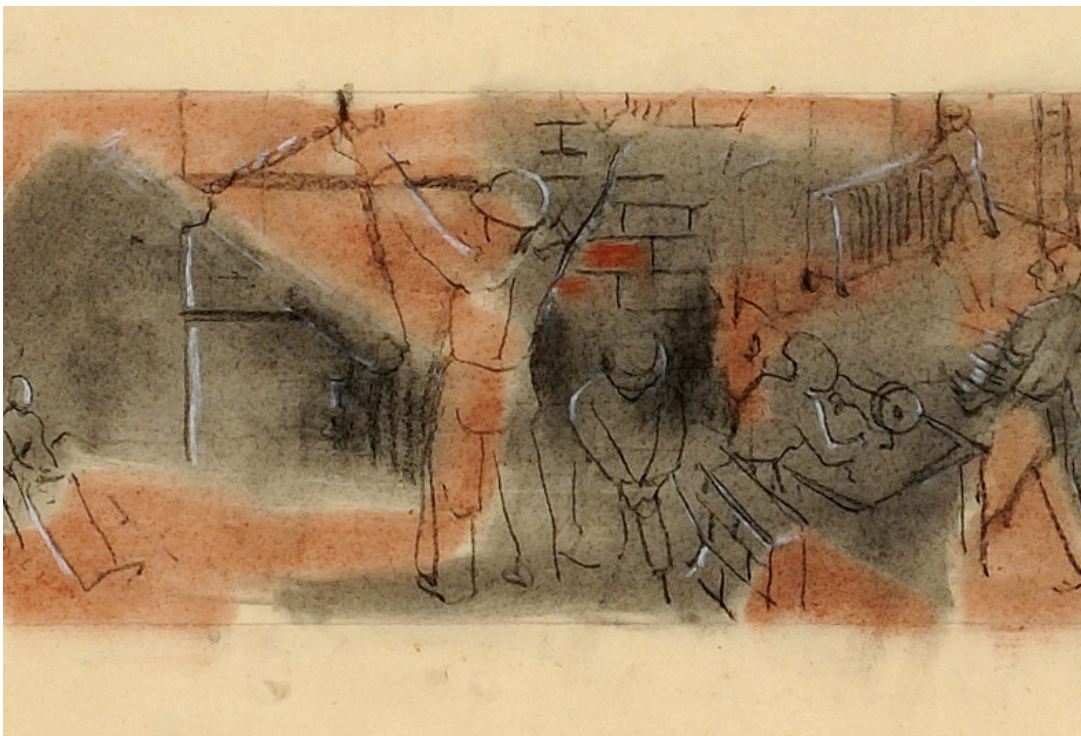


Figure 1c – Charles Alston, *Untitled Mural Sketch* (Detail depicts construction and garment industry), n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.

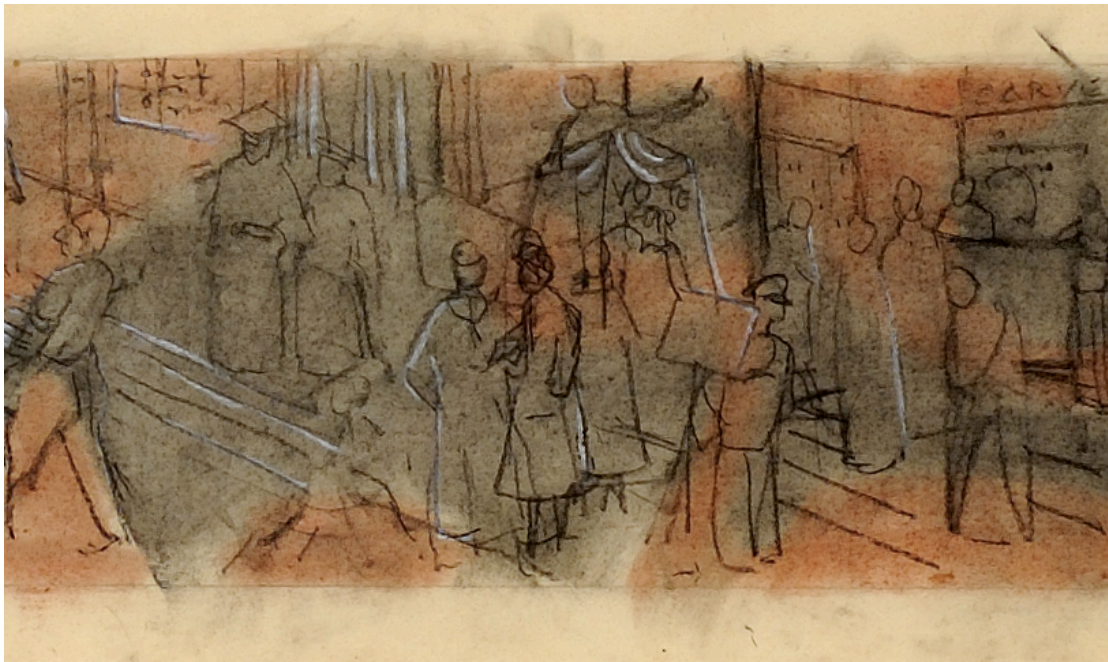


Figure 1d – Charles Alston, *Untitled Mural Sketch* (Detail depicts education, politics, economy, and possibly church), n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.

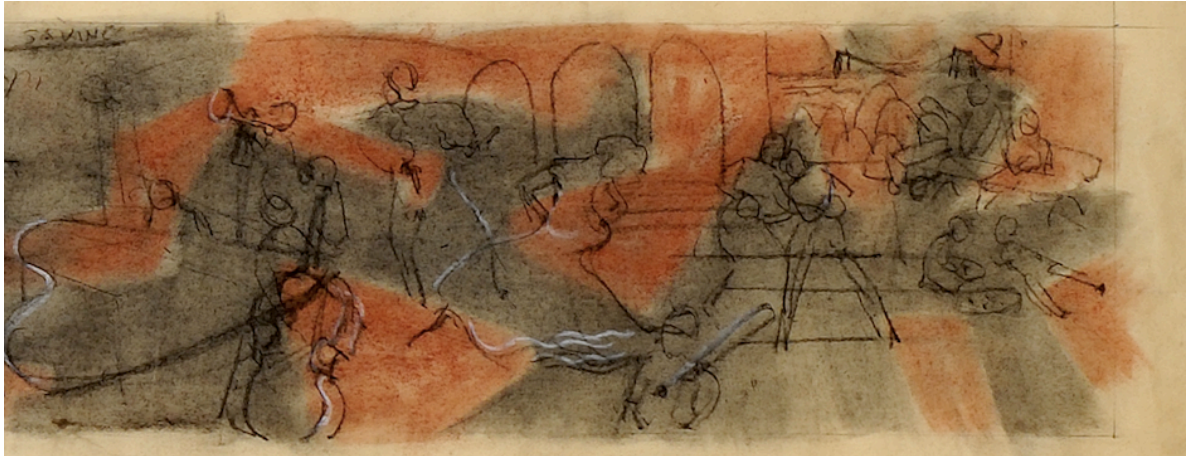


Figure 1e – Charles Alston, *Untitled Mural Sketch* (Detail depicts entertainment and the arts: music, dance, sports, and painting), n.d. Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.



Figure 2 – Charles Alston, Untitled (Sgt. Joe Louis, Champion of Champions), ca. 1940-1944. Cartoon Drawing. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.



Figure 3 – Charles Alston, *Family*, 1955. Oil on canvas. Photo: Whitney Museum of American Art.



Figure 4 – Charles Alston, *Family Group*, ca. 1950. Oil on canvas. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 5 – Charles Alston, *Walking*, 1958. Oil on canvas. Photo: National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 6 – Charles Alston, Untitled sketch I, ca. 1958. Drawing. Photo: Bill Hodges Gallery.



Figure 7 – Charles Alston, Untitled sketch II, ca. 1960s. Oil and pastel on transparent paper. Photo: Bill Hodges Gallery.



Figure 8 – Charles Alston, *The Negro in California History: Exploration and Colonization* (Golden State Mutual Life Insurance mural), 1948. Oil on canvas. Photo: California African American Museum.



Figure 9 –Hale Woodruff, *The Negro in California History: Settlement and Development* (Golden State Mutual Life Insurance mural), 1948. Oil on canvas. Photo: California African American Museum.

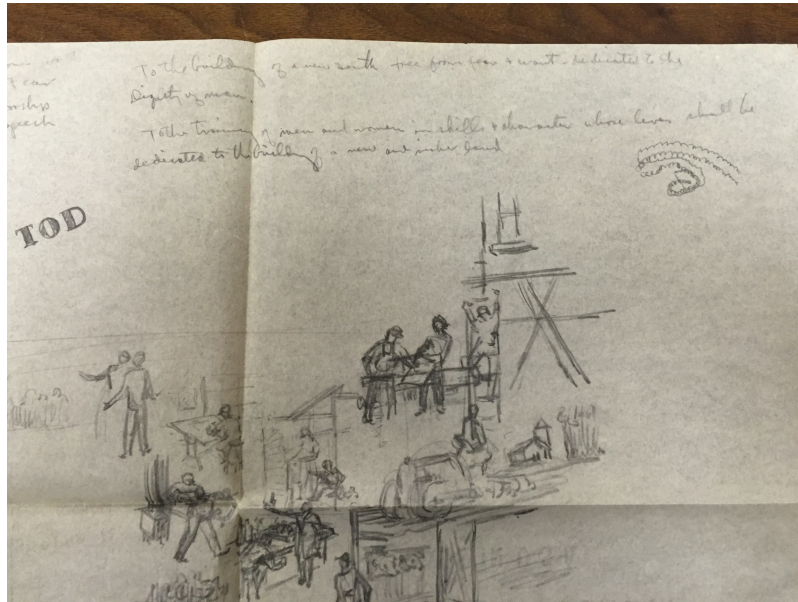


Figure 10 – Charles Alston, Sketch for mural entitled *Man on the Threshold of Space*, which was completed in 1963 at P.S. 154 Manhattan (Harriet Tubman Junior High School). Drawing. Photo: Author's image taken at the Wilson Library.

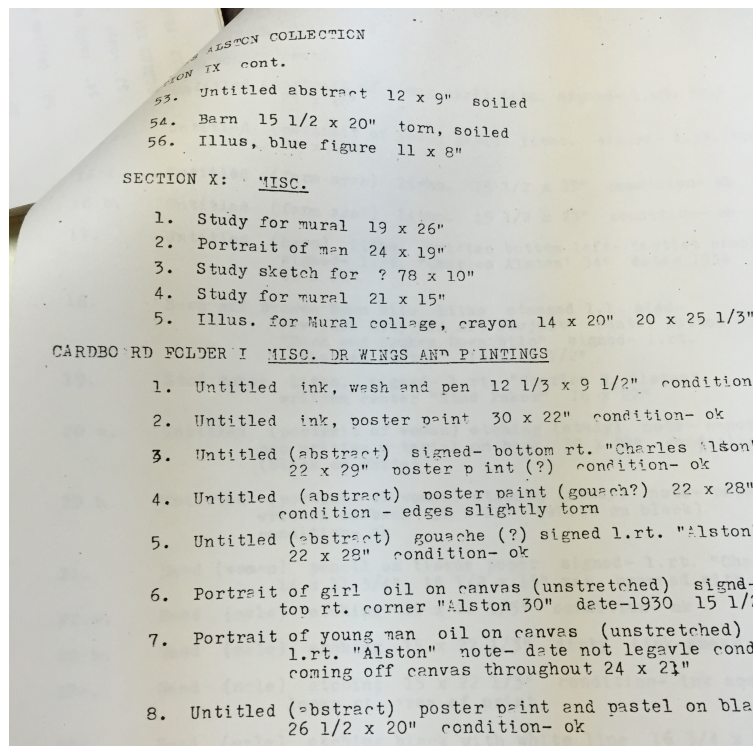


Figure 11 – Inventory List from the Charles Henry Alston papers, the Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library: Series 2: Career, Subseries 2.1 Occupation, Folder 25 in "Descriptions and price lists." Photo: Author's image taken at the Wilson Library.



Figure 12 – Charles Alston, *The Family*, Mural for the Criminal Court/Family Court Building in the Bronx, 1976. Mosaic mural. Photo: Lehman College Art Gallery – The City University of New York.



Figure 13 – Charles Alston, *Untitled sketch*, ca. 1950s. Pastel on canvas. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.



Figure 14 – Charles Alston, Untitled sketch, ca. 1950s. Pastel on canvas. Photo: Ackland Art Museum.



Figure 15 – Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, New York. Photo: The Metropolitan Opera at <http://www.metopera.org/About/The-Met/>



Figure 16 – William H. Johnson, *The Breakdown*, 1940. Oil on plywood. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum.

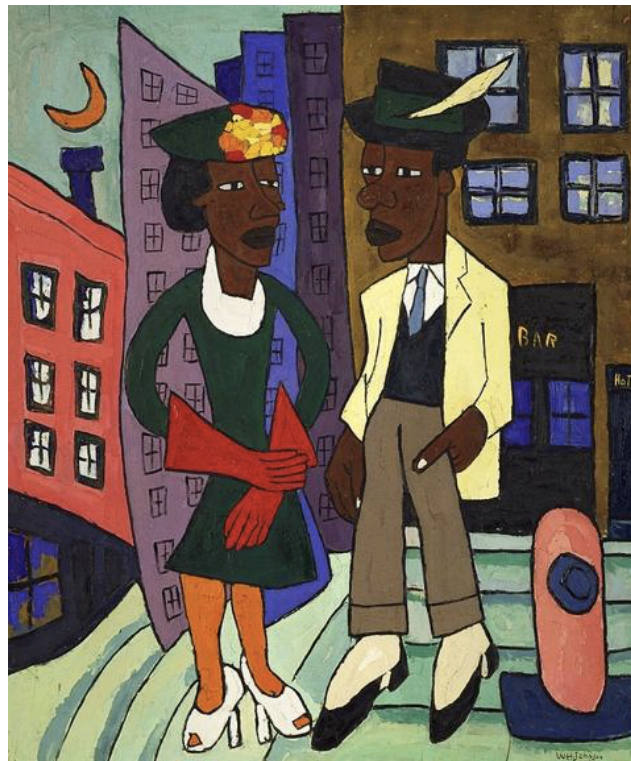


Figure 17 – William H. Johnson, *Harlem Street Life*, 1939-1940. Oil on plywood. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 18 – William H. Johnson, *Jitterbugs III*, ca. 1940. Color silkscreen print. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 19 – Romare Bearden, *Watching the Good Trains Go By*, 1964. Collage on cardboard. Photo: Columbus Museum of Art.



Figure 20 – Romare Bearden, *The Train*, 1974. Collage on paper. Photo: The Mint Museum Charlotte.



Figure 21 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 18: The migration gained in momentum. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

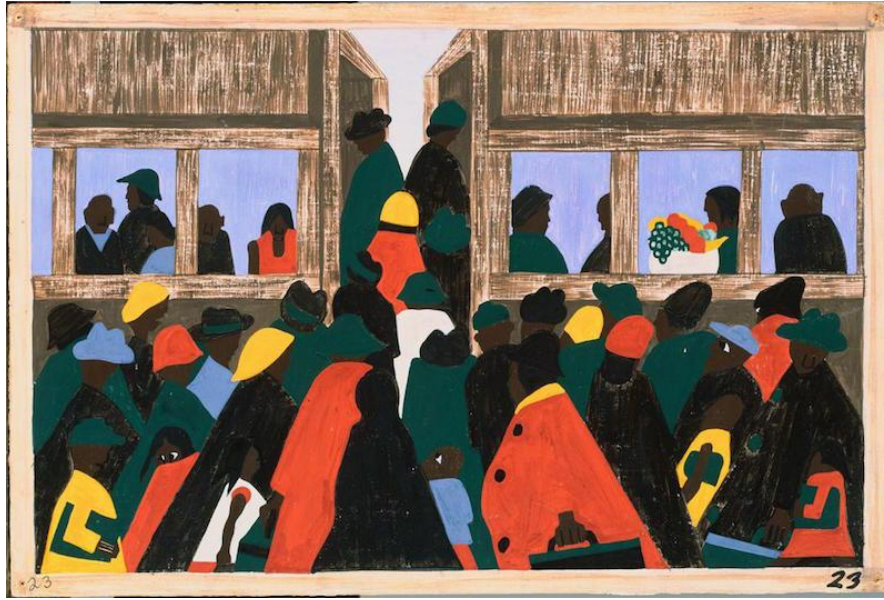


Figure 22 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 23: And the migration spread. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 23 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 40: The migrants arrived in great numbers. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 24 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 50: Race riots were very numerous all over the North because of the antagonism that was caused between the Negro and white workers. Many of these riots occurred because the Negro was used as a strike breaker in many of the Northern industries. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 25 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 51: In many cities in the North where the Negroes had been overcrowded in their own living quarters they attempted to spread out. This resulted in many of the race riots and the bombing of Negro homes. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 26 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 53: The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 27 – Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 55: The Negro being suddenly moved out of doors and cramped into urban life, contracted a great deal of tuberculosis. Because of this the death rate was high. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 28 – Jacob Lawrence- *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-1941. Panel 58: In the North the Negro had better educational facilities. Casein tempera on hardboard. Photo: The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.



Figure 29 – Charles Alston, *Magic in Medicine* (Harlem Hospital, New York), 1936. Oil on canvas. Photo: The Julliard Journal at <http://www.juilliard.edu/journal/1305/wpa-murals>



Figure 30 – Charles Alston, *Modern Medicine* (Harlem Hospital, New York), 1936. Oil on canvas. Photo: Image scanned from Patton, *African-American Art*, 143.



Figure 31 – Charles Alston, *Palavar # 1*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 32 – Charles Alston, *Vaudeville*, ca. 1930. Watercolor on paper. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 33 – Charles Alston, *Girl in a Red Dress*, 1934. Oil on canvas. Photo: The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts.

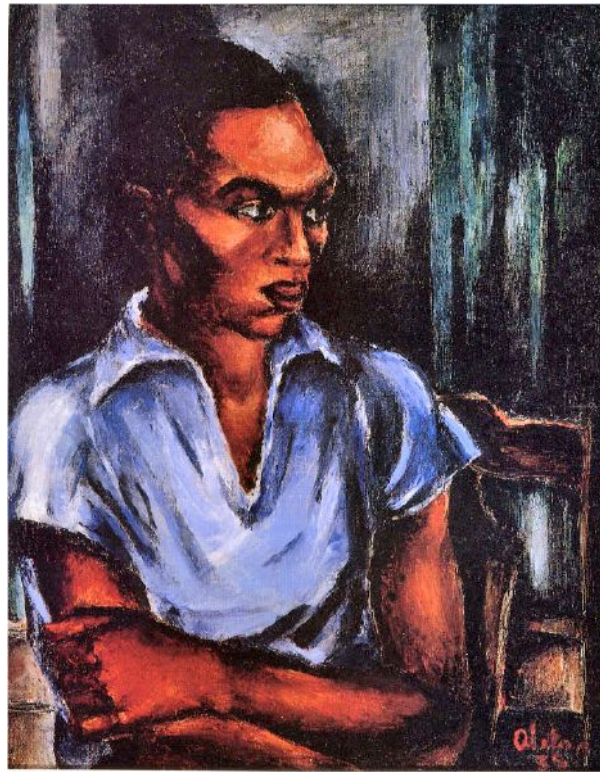


Figure 34 – Charles Alston, *The Blue Shirt*, 1935. Oil on canvas. Photo: The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts.



Figure 35 – Charles Alston, *Shade Chapman*, ca. 1939. Gouache on paper. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 36 – Charles Alston, *Midnight Vigil*, ca. 1936. Gouache on paper. Photo: The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts.



Figure 37 – Charles Alston, *Tobacco Farmer*, 1940. Watercolor and gouache on paper. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 38 – Charles Alston, *Woman with Flowers*, 1949. Oil on Masonite. Photo: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



Figure 39 – Charles Alston, *Blues Singer # 4*, 1955. Oil on canvas. Photo: Kenkeleba House.



Figure 40 – Charles Alston, *Adam and Eve*, ca. 1954. Oil on canvas. Photo: Scanned image from Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 56.

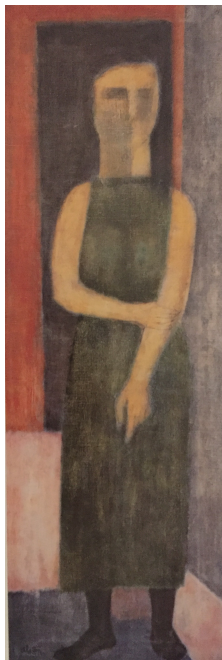


Figure 41 – Charles Alston, *Standing Woman*, ca. 1956. Oil on canvas. Photo: Scanned image from Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 57.



Figure 42 – Charles Alston, *Family No. 4 (Black Man, Black Woman, U.S.A.)*, ca. 1967. Oil on canvas. Photo: Scanned image from the cover of the *Crisis*, August/September 1977, Southern Historical Collection.



Figure 43 – Charles Alston, *Untitled (Community Center Scene)*, 1950s. Photo: Image scanned from Wardlaw, *Charles Alston*, 77.

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