

Responses to Paintings by African-American Artists

John H. Hughley

Associate Professor of Art, (ED.D.)
North Carolina Central University
U.S.A.

Abstract

This study investigates responses of African-Americans and others to paintings by African-American artists. The paintings used in this study are from the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the Depression of the 20s, the Harmon Foundation Exhibitions, and the Federal Arts Project of the Works Projects Administration (WPA). Responses from 158 males and females from secondary public schools and universities were collected. An equal number of African-Americans and Caucasian Americans were selected from mid-west secondary public schools and undergraduate and graduate students from mid-west and southern universities.

Art Educators and Art Historians chose paintings that best represented descriptive and interpretive dimensions found in paintings by African-American artists from the 20s, 30s, and 40s. The 158 subjects responded to slides of paintings by checking a blank on 18 different Likert scales ranging from 1 (most positive) to 7 (least positive). Adjectives were listed to the left (most positive) and right (least positive) of each scale. A response of 4 represented no opinion.

Analysis of the data indicated there were no statistically significant differences between responses by African-Americans and Caucasian Americans. However there were appreciable response differences. While overall responses by both groups were positive, responses by African-Americans were appreciably more positive than those by Caucasian Americans.

Key Words: (responses to paintings)

Introduction:

Alain Locke was an African-American cultural historian in the visual arts and Professor of Philosophy at Howard University. During the Harlem Renaissance he initially opposed the use of the visual arts to advance the political, social, religious, and psychological needs of African-Americans. Later he revealed a change in his philosophy by stating that African-American artists should use African-American experiences as inspiration for their artworks. He advocated creating artworks in response to the social needs of a particular audience, in this case the African-American audience. However, Locke did not advocate the use of artworks for such purposes over self-expression (Adams, 1990; Reynolds & Wright, 1989).

Lewis (1990) states in her book about African-American artists that contemporary African-American artists are driven by needs that are both aesthetic and social that ...”They are accepting and using their own philosophies as the basis of their artistic expression (p.3).

This project entails collecting responses to descriptive (texture, shape, pattern, color, etc.) and interpretive (psychological, social, emotional, religious, political, etc.) dimensions found in paintings by African-American artists. The project is based on studies by Neperud and Jenkins (1982) Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) Depillars (1976) and Spellman (1973). In my investigation, I am primarily interested in (a) determining what characteristics influence African-Americans and Caucasian Americans when responding to paintings by African-American artists.

Main Text:

Alain Locke was an African American cultural historian in the visual arts and Professor of Philosophy at Howard University. During the Harlem Renaissance he initially opposed the use of the visual arts to advance the political, social, religious, and psychological needs of African Americans. Later he revealed a change in his philosophy by stating that African American artists should use African American experiences as inspiration for their artworks. He advocated creating artworks in response to the social needs of a particular audience, in this case the African American audience. However, Locke did not advocate the use of artworks for such purposes over self-expression (Adams, 1990; Reynolds & Wright, 1989).

Lewis (1990) states in her book about African American artists that contemporary African American artists are driven by needs that are both aesthetic and social that ... "They are accepting and using their own philosophies as the basis of their artistic expression (p.3).

This project entails collecting responses to descriptive (texture, shape, pattern, color, etc.) and interpretive (psychological, social, emotional, religious, political, etc.) dimensions found in paintings by African American artists. The project is based on studies by Neperud and Jenkins (1982) Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) Depillars (1976) and Spellman (1973). In my investigation, I am primarily interested in (a) determining what characteristics influence African Americans and Caucasian Americans when responding to paintings by African American artists.

Neperud and Jenkins (1982) Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) state that studies suggest there are certain characteristics peculiar to artworks by African American artists. When responding to these characteristics African Americans and others interpret these characteristics differently. According to Depillars (1976) Neperud & Jenkins (1982) and Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) visual structure such as shape, color, and rhythms are used by African American artists in ways that reflect the African Americans' experiences. Depillars also considers the use of symbols that are comprehensible to African Americans. Depillars' point of view is similar to Gibson's views on perception and discrimination of structural dimensions. Gibson (1969) says:

[perception] is the process by which we obtain first-hand information about the world around us. It has a phenomenal aspect, the awareness of events presently occurring in the organisms' immediate environment. It also has a responsive aspect; it entails discriminative, selective responses to the stimulus in the immediate environment (Marschalek, 1983, p. 3).

For Neperud and Jenkins (1982) Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) the art of African American artists has a specific visual form which has aesthetic values. However, they say there is no supporting evidence that extends ethnic differences in perceiving art to the formal dimensions of color and pattern as suggested by other studies, e.g., Depillars (1976), Fuller (1971), Gaither (1972), and Karenga (1971). Other studies (Depillars, 1976; Fuller, 1971; Gaither, 1972; and Karenga, 1971) support the idea that African Americans and Caucasian Americans differ in the interpretation of artworks by African American artists. Additionally, Neperud and Jenkins (1982) Neperud, Serlin, & Jenkins (1986) see visual preferences in African American figurative references.

The findings in the above studies stimulated the question of investigating and evaluating responses of African Americans and Caucasian Americans to paintings by African American artists. I was interested in finding out if there is evidence that responses by African Americans and Caucasian Americans to paintings by African American artists differ. Also, if there are characteristics that are peculiar to paintings produced by African American artist, what are those characteristics and how do they affect responses by African Americans and Caucasian Americans to paintings by African American artists. The potential significance of this project is in terms of future research in this area of knowledge, as well as determining the nature of responses of African Americans and Caucasian Americans at different developmental levels to painting by African American artists.

In the 20s African Americans migrated from the rural South to cities in the North to take advantage of job opportunities. Harlem, a Manhattan neighborhood in New York City, is where a number of migrating African Americans settled. Harlem became a cultural Mecca for many artists, and writers. A renaissance in the arts took place. This renaissance was mainly in the literary and performing arts, but visual artists were included whenever possible. Aaron Douglas was the most significant visual artist from this period, but soon to follow was the emergence and seasoning of a number of African American visual artists. These artists were encouraged by different sources to use the experiences of African Americans as stimulus for their artworks.

The Harmon Foundation was one such agency that encouraged African American artist to look to African American experiences for inspiration.

William E. Harmon, a philanthropist who developed selling real estate by subdivisions, was sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. He believed in self-help. Thus, he encouraged African American artists to help themselves through his sponsorship of art exhibitions during the 20s and 30s. Artists participating in the Harmon Foundation exhibitions included Aaron Douglas, William Henry Johnson, Laura Wheeler Waring, Hale Aspacio Woodruff, Lois Mailou Jones and others (Reynolds & Wright, 1989; Fine, 1973).

The Federal Arts Project under the Works Projects Administration was a program designed to relieve economic hardship during the Depression of the 20s. Artist were commissioned to produce art in public places. African American artists, as well as others participated in this program. Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, and Hale "Woodruff are among the African American artists who participated. Louise Nelveson, Jackson Pollock, and Stuart Davis are examples of non-African Americans participating (Fine, 1973; Reynolds & Wright, 1989).

For my project, I chose to collect for investigation responses to paintings by African American artists from the 20s, 30s, and 40s. The paintings used in this project are from the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the Depression of the 20s, the Harmon Foundation Exhibitions and the Federal Arts Project of the Works Projects Administration (WPA). I chose to use paintings from these time periods because of evidence that during these periods there was special emphasis placed on expressing racial commitment in works by African American artists. See Table 1 for a list of artists and paintings used for this project.

Table 1.

List of Artists and Paintings

<u>Artists</u>	<u>Paintings</u>
1. Delaney, Joseph	Clara
2. Woodruff, Hale Aspacio	1839-Mutiny Aboard the Amistad, Panel 1. 1839-Return to Africa, Panel 3. Little Boy. Ambulance Call. War Series, No. 2: Shipping Out. The Migration of the Negro Series, No. 1: During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes. Piano Lesson. Harlem Series, No. 19: And Harlem Society Looks On. Barber Shop. The Carpenters. Harlem Series, No. 2: Most of the people are very poor. Rent is high. Food is high. Yellow Hat. On a John Brown Flight. Jitterbug Dancers Green Necklace. When Tricky Sam Shot Father Lamb. Baptizing Day. The Janitor Who Paints. Jennie. Self-Portrait. Portrait of Alta Douglas. Illustration of the Prodigal Son. (for James Weldon Johnson's God's Trombones) Anna Washington Derry. Night Turtle Fishing in Haiti. Miss Bailey with the African Shawl. Self-Portrait.
3. Lawrence, Jacob	
4. Lewis, Norman	
5. Johnson, William H.	
6. Alston, Charles	
7. Hayden, Palmer	
8. Jones, Lois Mailou	
9. Johnson, Malvin Gray	
10. Douglas, Aaron	
11. Waring, Laura Wheeler	
12. Scott, William Edouard	
13. Harleston, Edwin A.	
14. Pippin, Horace	

In light of the purpose of this study, to investigate responses to interpretive and formal qualities found in paintings by African American artists, the following hypothesis was investigated.

There will be no significant differences between the responses of African Americans and Caucasian Americans to adjectives describing qualities found in paintings by African American artists.

The sample for this study consisted of 158 subjects from secondary public schools and undergraduate and graduate university students. An equal number of African Americans and Caucasian Americans were selected from central Illinois secondary public schools and undergraduate and graduate students from a mid-west and southern university. Subjects with and without formal instruction in art are also represented.

The stimuli consisted of 27 two by two inch 35mm images of paintings by African American artists from the 20s, 30s, and 40s. The subjects viewed each image and marked 18 Likert scales for each image. Each image was projected for 15 second. The projection screen was blank when the subjects marked their responses to each slide. The subjects responded by placing an "x" on each Likert scale. The scale ranged for 1, a positive response, to 7, a negative response. A response of 4, represented a neutral response or no response at all.

A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed on the 18 Likert scale questions. Five factors were identified with eigenvalues greater than 1, the usual cutoff, explaining 70 percent of the total variance. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2.

Factor Rotation of Likert Scales

Likert Scales	Factor 1 (Exciting)	Factor 2 (Relaxing)	Factor 3 (Heavenly)	Factor 4 (Delicate)	Factor 5 (Detailed)
exciting-dull	.78	.08	-.10	.22	.23
sensitive-insensitive	.78	.13	.23	.01	-.08
thoughtful-thoughtless	.73	.09	.33	-.02	-.01
beautiful-ugly	.72	-.37	.08	.12	.21
powerful-powerless	.61	.19	.03	-.21	.37
organized-disorganized	.58	.26	.53	.11	.04
familiar-unfamiliar	.54	.30	.19	.68	-.08
relaxing-tense	.11	.87	-.01	.12	.01
pleasant-unpleasant	.30	.82	.08	.13	.07
warm-cold	.27	.75	.11	-.15	.16
happy-sad	.19	.69	-.06	.30	-.10
smooth-rough	-.07	.54	.50	.20	.27
comforting-disturbing	.49	.50	-.04	.46	-.13
heavenly-earthly	-.24	.30	-.73	-.14	.14
real-unreal	.31	.35	.56	-.18	.15
delicate-heavy	-.01	.26	.17	.84	-.05
decorative-plain	.46	-.03	-.22	.54	
detailed-simple	.06	.11	.06	-.05	.90

The goal of the factor analysis is to develop uni-dimensional common clusters of concerns. Factor 1, labeled Exciting, shows that 7 questions are grouped together. Although naming a factor is something of an art, all the questions do seem to be related to issues dealing with power, beauty and excitement. The second factor, Relaxing, focuses on issues of comfort and happiness, and consists of 6 items.

Factors 3, 4 and 5 consist of just two or even one question each. Factor 3, deals with the contrast between reality and future possibilities. Factor 4 deals with delicacy. Factor 5, deals with complexity.

In order to study the correlates of each opinion, responses to each question in each common cluster were added together to form 5 scales. Each scale was then correlated with the school class, age, sex, ethnicity, and years of art experience. The results of each regression are presented in Tables 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. SAS Type 3 sums of squares was used for the regressions, so that each of the items presented can be read as full partials, meaning that the order that the variables are presented does not affect the final equation. For each question the positive response was coded as a 1, with the more negative aspects of each variable at the high end of the scale, which was 7.

Table 3.

Regression Analysis of Dependent Uni-Dimensional Scale Exciting (Factor 1) with Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Error	p
Class	-1.15	0.661028	.0828
Sex	0.40	0.635864	.5300
Age	-0.16	0.082154	.0497 *
Ethnicity	-1.33	0.626170	.0354 *
Experience	-1.97	0.652062	.0030 *
Constant	32.61		
Multiple r	.39		

Table 4.

Regression Analysis of Dependent Uni-Dimensional Scale Relaxing (Factor 2) with Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Error	p
Class	-0.12	0.467448	.8001
Sex	0.61	0.449654	.1758
Age	-0.11	0.058095	.0680
Ethnicity	-1.56	0.442798	.0006 *
Experience	-1.34	0.461108	.0043 *
Constant	26.63		
Multiple r	.37		

Table 5.

Regression Analysis of Dependent Uni-Dimensional Scale Heavenly (Factor 3) with Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Error	p
Class	-0.56	0.205984	.0077 *
Sex	-0.56	0.198142	.0052 *
Age	0.01	0.025600	.8300
Ethnicity	0.07	0.195121	.7149
Experience	-0.34	0.203190	.0967
Constant	-0.97		
Multiple r	.33		

Table 6.

Regression Analysis of Dependent Uni-Dimensional Scale Delicate (Factor 4) with Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Error	p
Class	0.14	0.183363	.4310
Sex	0.02	0.176383	.9317
Age	-0.01	0.022789	.7760
Ethnicity	-0.62	0.173694	.0005 *
Experience	-0.30	0.180876	.0964
Constant	8.73		
Multiple r	.29		

Table 7.

Regression Analysis of Dependent Uni-Dimensional Scale Detailed (Factor 5) with Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Error	p
Class	0.19	0.113698	.0930
Sex	-0.06	0.109370	.5697
Age	-0.03	0.014131	.0771
Ethnicity	-0.30	0.107702	.0054 *
Experience	-0.22	0.112156	.0499 *
Constant	4.35		
Multiple r	.29		

Conclusion:

Table 3 shows that as age goes up, excitement with art also goes up. In terms of ethnicity (Black = 1, Other = 0), the African American respondents reported higher levels of positive feelings. Females expressed more positive feelings and excitement about art than males. As a student progresses in art education from high school to college to graduate school, satisfaction with art goes up too. The multiple r for the equation is .39, which is about average for questionnaire work.

In Table 4, Factor 2 (Relaxing) correlates significantly with ethnicity and experience. Although not significant (.068) the demographic variable "age" nearly correlates. Factor 3 (Heavenly) in Table 5 is the only factor that does not correlate significantly with ethnicity, but correlates significantly with class and sex. Factor 4, (Delicate) in Table 6, correlates significantly only with ethnicity. Table 7, Factor 5 (Detailed) correlates significantly with ethnicity and experience.

The results show quite conclusively that the African American respondents express significantly more positive feelings about paintings by African American artists than the non-black respondents. In all tables except Table 5, Factor 3 (Heavenly) this variable was significant and in the predicted direction.

References:

- Adams, R.L. 1990. Alan Locke Revisited: The Reconsideration of An Aesthetic. In B. Young, (Ed.), Art, Culture, and Ethnicity. Reston, Virginia: National Art Education Association, 231-240.
- Depillars, M.N. 1976. African-American Artist and Art Students: A Morphological Study in the Urban Black Aesthetic. Dissertation Abstracts International, 37, 4074-A. (University Microfilms No. 76-30, 335).
- Fine, E.H. 1973. The Afro-American Artist. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Fuller, H.W. 1971. On Black Aesthetics. In G. Addison, (Ed.), The Black Aesthetics. New York: Doubleday.
- Gaither, E. 1972. Visual Art and Black Aesthetics. Journal of Affairs of Black Artists, 1.
- Gibson, E.J. 1969. Principles of perceptual learning and development. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Karenga, R. 1971. Black Cultural Nationalism. In G. Addison, (Ed.), The Black Aesthetics. New York: Doubleday.
- Lewis, S. 1990. Art: African American. Los Angeles, California: Handcraft Studios.
- Marchalek, D.G. 1983. The influence of viewing time upon the recognition of color and subject matter placement in paintings for elementary and high school students. Studies in Art Education, 25, (1), 58-65.
- Neperud, R.W. & H.C. Jenkins. 1982. Ethnic Aesthetics: Blacks' and Nonblacks' Aesthetic Perception of Paintings by Blacks. Studies in Art Education, 23 (2), 14-21.
- Neperud, R.W., R. Serlin & H. Jenkins. 1986. Ethnic Aesthetics: The Meaning of Ethnic Art for Blacks and Nonblacks. Studies in Art Education, 28 (1), 16-29.
- Reynolds, G.A. & Gribbsley J. Wright. 1989. Against the odds: African-American artists and the Harmon Foundation. New Jersey: The Newark Museum.
- Spellman, R.C. 1973. A Comparative Analysis of the Characteristics of Works and Philosophies of Selected Contemporary Mainstream Afro-American Artists. Dissertation Abstracts International. 34, 3266-A. (University Microfilms No. 73-30).