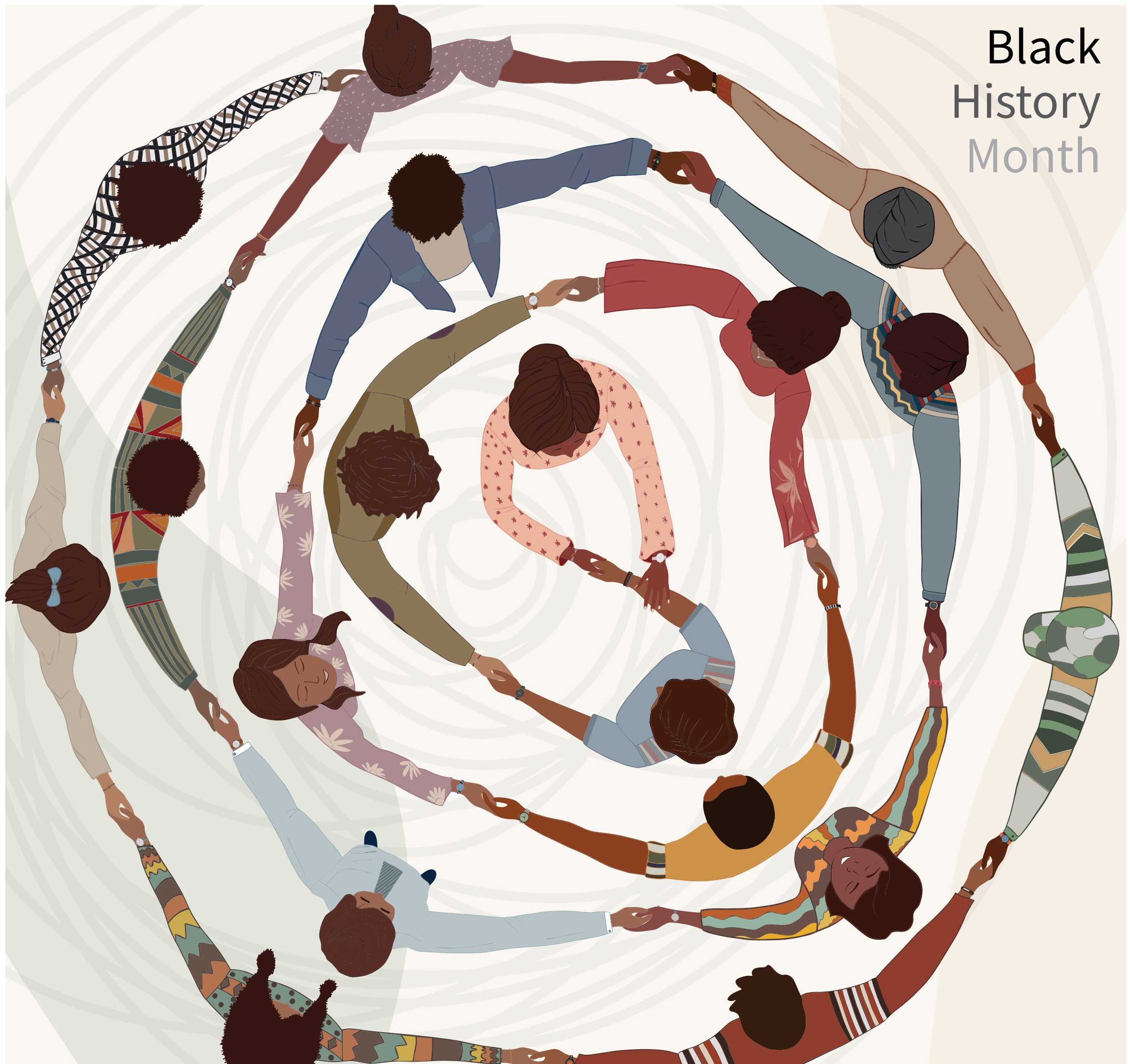


Black History Month



Celebrating Black Influence

This year’s Black History Month places the theme “African Americans and the Arts” at center stage, inviting a profound reflection on the immense influence of Black Americans on the diverse landscape of artistic expression.

From music and dance to literature, visual arts, and beyond, Black creatives have played pivotal roles in shaping cultural narratives, challenging societal norms and leaving an indelible mark on the world of art.

MUSIC

The realm of music is one of the arenas in which Black artists have significantly affected global culture.

From the rhythmic beats of jazz and blues to the soulful melodies of gospel and the electrifying energy of hip-hop, Black musicians have pioneered genres that transcend borders. Icons like Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, and contemporary figures like Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar achieved immense commercial success and used their platforms to address social justice issues and advocate for change.

DANCE

Dance is another realm where Black artists have left an enduring legacy.

The evolution of dance, from the spirited rhythms of traditional African dances to the innovation of hip-hop choreography, demonstrates the profound influence of Black creativity. Pioneers like Alvin Ailey revolutionized modern dance, blending African-American experiences with artistic expression to create evocative performances that continue to captivate audiences worldwide.

LITERATURE

Literature, too, bears the unmistakable imprint of Black voices.

From the Harlem Renaissance to the



WORLD TELEGRAM STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER, PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Hurston

present day, Black writers have crafted narratives that illuminate the Black experience, challenge stereotypes and contribute to the rich tapestry of American literature.

Literary luminaries such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin and contemporary voices like Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehisi Coates have reshaped storytelling, providing insights into the complexities of race, identity and resilience.

VISUAL ARTS

Visual arts, encompassing painting, sculpture and photography, have also been profoundly influenced by Black artists.

From the vibrant works of Romare Bearden to the politically charged paintings of Kara Walker, Black visual artists have utilized their craft to challenge perceptions and contribute to a broader



EDUARDO MONTES-BRADLEY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Coates



FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION COLLECTION

Ellington

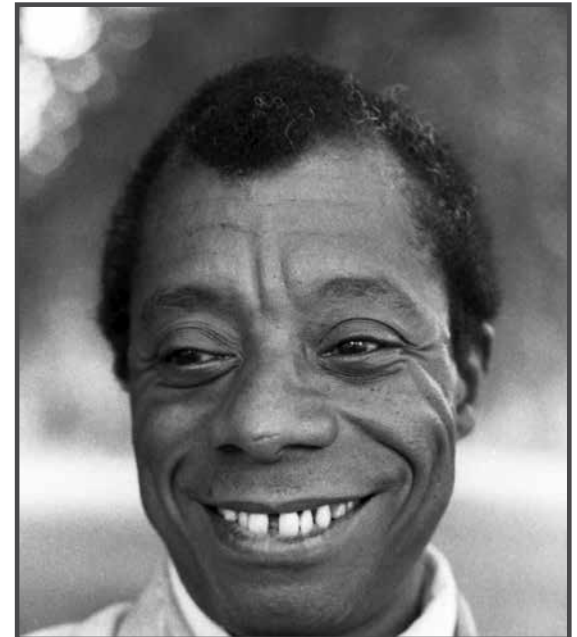


CARL VAN VECHTEN, PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Ailey

conversation about representation and identity.

As we celebrate “African Americans and the Arts” during Black History Month in 2024, it is an opportunity to recognize the profound effect of Black creatives across artistic disciplines. Their contributions have enriched the cultural fabric of America and served



ALLAN WARREN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Baldwin

as catalysts for social change and understanding.

The theme invites us to reflect on the enduring legacy of Black artists, acknowledging the power of the arts to transcend boundaries, foster inclusivity and amplify the diverse voices that contribute to the vibrant mosaic of human expression.

The Visionary Kara Walker

Kara Walker, a groundbreaking visual artist, has emerged as a transformative force in contemporary art, challenging conventions and sparking crucial conversations about race, identity and historical narratives.

Born Nov. 26, 1969, in Stockton, California, Walker's artistic journey has unfolded with a striking blend of innovation and provocation.

Walker's interest in art began early, influenced by her father, who was an artist. She pursued her undergraduate studies at the Atlanta College of Art before earning her Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design.

This educational foundation laid the groundwork for a career characterized by fearless exploration and a commitment to confronting uncomfortable truths.

SILHOUETTES AND SUBVERSION

Walker's signature medium is the silhouette, a traditional art form that she has redefined and subverted to explore complex themes of race, gender, and power dynamics. Her large-scale installations, often using cut-paper silhouettes, evoke visceral responses, inviting viewers to confront the historical legacies of slavery and racism in the United States.

One of Walker's earliest major works, "Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart" (1994), is a silhouette narrative that tackles the Civil War and its aftermath, addressing the intersection of sexuality, violence and racial dynamics. "Gone" established Walker's reputation as an art-

ist unafraid to delve into the complexities of history and its impact on marginalized communities.

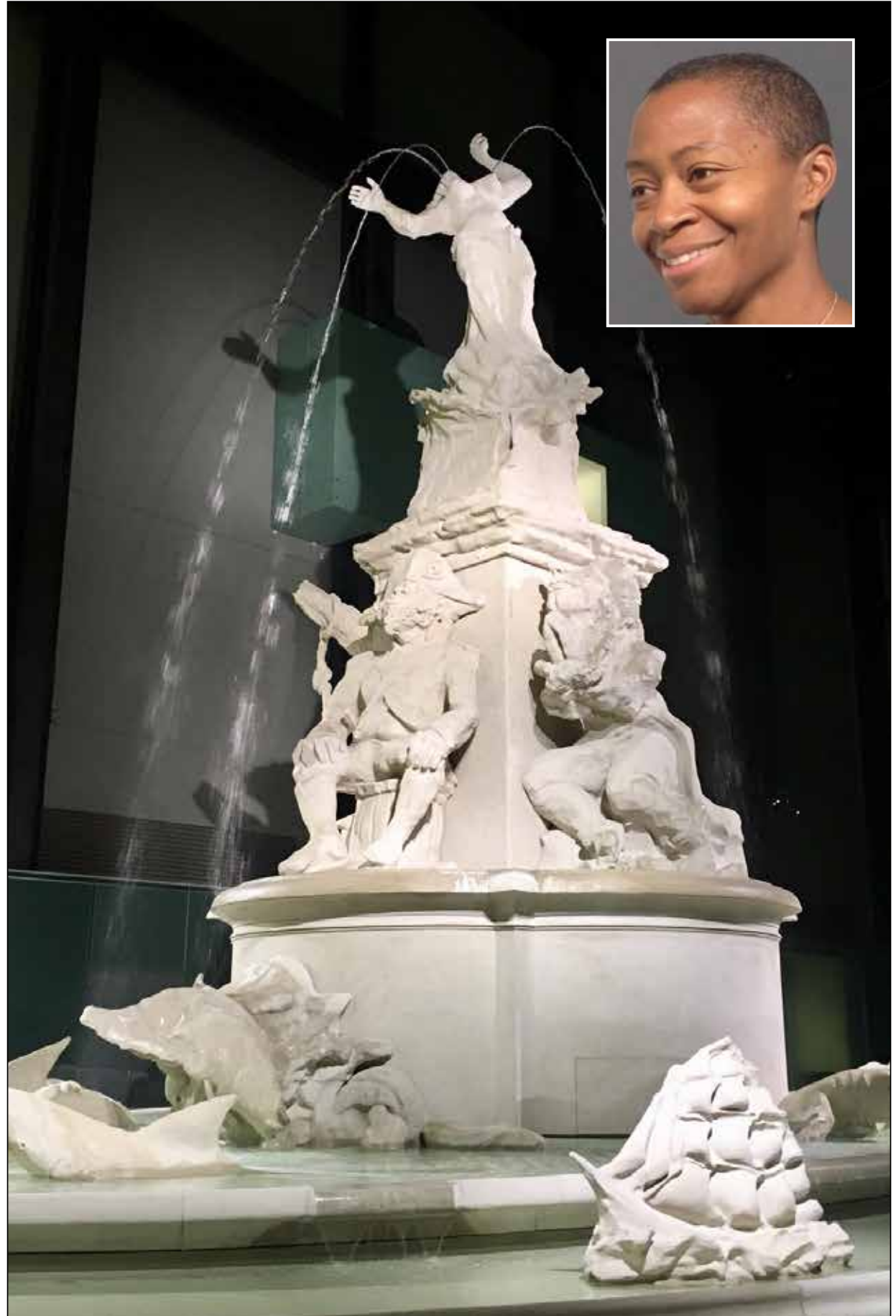
"A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" (2014) was commissioned for the Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, New York. This monumental installation further solidified Walker's position as a leading contemporary artist. The piece, featuring a towering sugar-coated sphinx, provocatively explored the historical connections between sugar production, slavery and the exploitation of Black bodies.

INFLUENCE AND LEGACY

Walker's effect on the art world has earned her numerous accolades. In 1997, at the age of 27, she became one of the youngest recipients of the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the "Genius Grant." Her contributions have been celebrated with major awards, including the United States Artists Eileen Harris Norton Fellowship in 2008 and the Deutsche Bank Artist of the Year in 2020.

Kara Walker's influence extends far beyond the confines of the art world. Her unflinching examination of America's painful past challenges viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic racism and the enduring legacies of slavery. Through her work, Walker has inspired a new generation of artists to engage with history and use their creative platforms to foster dialogue and understanding.

Walker's work has not been without controversy, with some critics challenging her approach to sensitive subjects. However, her ability to provoke meaningful discourse has fueled her reputation as an artist who refuses to shy away from difficult conversations.



Alvin Ailey: Dance Pioneer

Alvin Ailey emerged as a luminary in the dance world, a visionary whose profound effect transcends the boundaries of the stage.

Born Jan. 5, 1931, in Rogers, Texas, Ailey's journey from a small town to the dazzling lights of Broadway transformed the landscape of modern dance, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to captivate audiences worldwide.

Growing up in poverty after his father abandoned the family and his mother was raped, he found solace and self-discovery in dance, art and journal writing. He eventually moved to Los Angeles where he was able to explore the arts and take gymnastics.

Under the mentorship of Lester Horton, Ailey honed his craft and developed a unique choreographic voice combining many dance styles from Native American-inspired styles to ballet. Horton's dance school was one of the first racially integrated schools in the U.S. When Horton died suddenly in 1953, Ailey took over the company as artistic director.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

In 1958, Ailey founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a groundbreaking ensemble that would become a cultural institution, fusing the elements of modern dance with the rich tapestry of African-American cultural expression. Ailey's choreography breathed life into narratives inspired by the African-American experience, capturing the essence of struggle, resilience and triumph.

His work stressed intersectionality even before that phrase was popular as he was also a gay man and his work



CARL VAN VECHTEN, PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

combined theater, modern dance, ballet, jazz and the Black vernacular.

The company's signature piece,

gospel music, "Revelations" transcends dance, becoming a cultural touchstone that reflects the indomitable spirit of the African-American community. It continues to be a highly popular ballet performed around the world.

In 1961, the company would embark on a world tour under the aegis of The State Department, going to Southeast Asia and Australia. It was a relationship that wouldn't last in part because the FBI considered his homosexuality to be criminal and threatened him if he let it show on tour.

AILEY'S VISIONARY APPROACH

Ailey's choreographic brilliance extended beyond the stage, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity and diversity. His vision was a celebration of the human experience, embracing the diversity of race, gender and background. Ailey sought to create a space where dancers could express their individuality while contributing to a collective narrative that echoed the stories of marginalized communities.

Ailey's influence is immeasurable, reaching audiences globally and earning him acclaim and accolades throughout his illustrious career. In 1988, he received the Kennedy Center Honor for his contributions to the arts, cementing his place among the cultural icons of the 20th century.

Ailey died of AIDS in 1989.

His commitment to diversity, inclusion and the transformative power of dance has inspired generations of artists and audiences. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater stands as a living testament to his vision, showcasing the beauty and resilience of the human spirit through the art of movement.

The story of Ailey serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative power of art and the enduring legacy of those who dare to break barriers and redefine the cultural landscape.

"Revelations," choreographed by Ailey in 1960, stands as a testament to his genius. An exploration of spirituals and

Black Theater, Then and Now

Black theater stands as a dynamic and powerful force, weaving narratives that reflect the diverse experiences and rich cultural heritage of Black communities in America.

From its early pioneers to the vibrant productions of today, Black theater has been a cornerstone of artistic expression, providing a platform for storytelling, cultural preservation and social commentary.

The roots trace back to the 19th century when Black artists faced the challenges of racial discrimination and limited opportunities in the performing arts.

Despite these obstacles, talented individuals like Ira Aldridge emerged as pioneers, breaking barriers to become one of the first Black actors to gain international acclaim. Aldridge's success in classical theater paved the way for future generations, illustrating the transformative power of the stage.

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century marked a significant period of cultural and artistic flourishing within the Black community, and the theater was no exception. Playwrights such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston infused their works with the vibrancy of the Harlem Renaissance, addressing social issues and celebrating Black culture.

The era saw the rise of the New Negro Movement, which aimed to challenge racial stereotypes and promote a more positive representation of African Americans in the arts.

reotypes and promote a more positive representation of African Americans in the arts.

BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s further propelled Black theater into the spotlight.

Playwrights like Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, among others, used their works to explore themes of identity, systemic oppression and the quest for self-determination. This period laid the groundwork for the establishment of theaters dedicated to showcasing Black voices and stories, fostering a sense of community and empowerment.

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

In the contemporary landscape, Black theater continues to thrive, with a diverse array of voices contributing to its vibrancy.

August Wilson, hailed as one of the most significant playwrights of the late 20th century, crafted a monumental body of work known as The Pittsburgh Cycle, which delves into the Black experience across different decades. His plays, including "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson," have earned critical acclaim and numerous awards.

On Broadway, works such as "The Color Purple," "Hamilton"



DAVID SASAKI FROM SAN DIEGO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

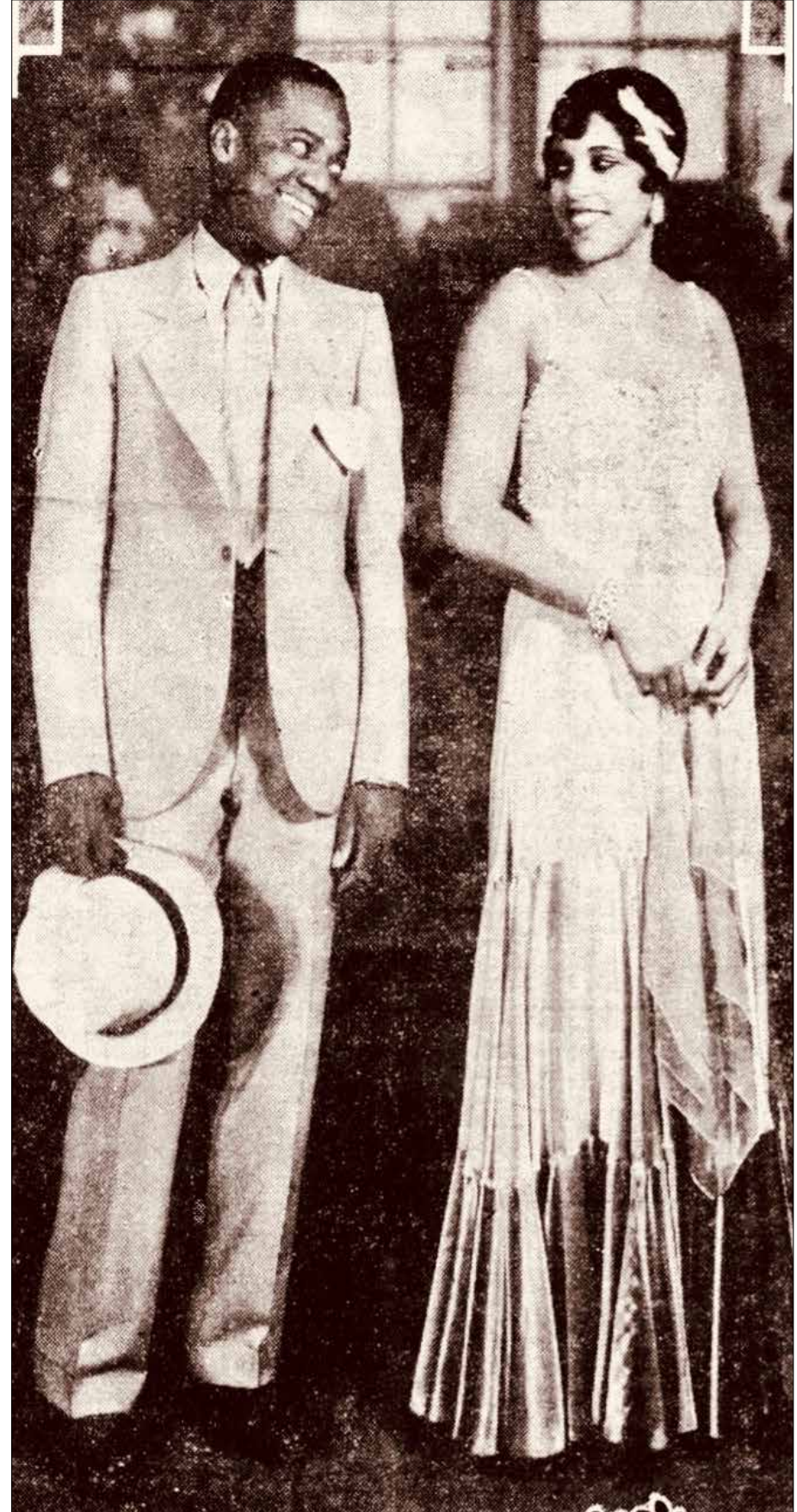
Baraka

and "A Strange Loop" have achieved immense success, further underscoring the demand for diverse narratives that resonate with audiences of all backgrounds.

The influence of Black theater extends beyond Broadway, with regional theaters, community-based organizations and independent productions contributing to the richness of unique and ever-evolving Black storytelling.

Black theater remains a powerful vehicle for social commentary, cultural celebration and the exploration of the human experience.

From the pioneers who paved the way to the contemporary artists who continue to shape the narrative landscape, Black artists are ensuring that the stage remains a space for the authentic and diverse voices of Black communities to be heard and celebrated.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Adelaide Hall and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson in Brown Buddies, on Broadway, 1930

Hip-Hop As Cultural Expression

In the composition of American history, the rhythmic beats and poetic verses of hip-hop stand as a testament to the power of cultural expression.

Emerging from the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop swiftly evolved from a local phenomenon to a global force, influencing music and shaping art, fashion and social activism.

Rooted in the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities, hip-hop emerged as a powerful voice for those seeking an outlet for self-expression. Birthed in the Bronx streets, it brought forth a fusion of DJing, MCing, breakdancing, and graffiti art — a collective cultural movement that resonated with the Black experience. Artists like DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa laid the groundwork for a movement that would transcend musical boundaries.

FASHIONING IDENTITY

Hip-hop's influence on fashion is undeniable, providing a canvas for artists to paint their identity. From the iconic track suits of the '80s to the baggy jeans and oversized hoodies of the '90s, hip-hop fashion became a medium through which artists expressed their individuality.



EDWARD REYES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Eazy-E, N.W.A.

Designers like Dapper Dan brought street style to high fashion, creating a bridge between urban communities and couture runways.

A SONIC REVOLUTION

The beats and rhymes of hip-hop serve as a sonic chronicle of the Black experience. Lyrics delve into social issues, systemic injustices, and the resilience of a community facing adversity.

Pioneering artists like Public Enemy, N.W.A, and Lauryn Hill used their platform to shed light on racial inequality, amplifying the voices of those often unheard.

Hip-hop extends beyond the

realm of music, acting as a cultural catalyst that transcends borders. Graffiti art, an integral element of the movement, transformed city landscapes into vibrant murals of self-expression. Breakdancing competitions, or "battles," became a global phenomenon, with dancers showcasing their skills as a form of personal narrative.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM

The music had a profound effect on social activism, with artists using their influence to advocate for change. From Tupac Shakur's poignant verses addressing societal issues to Kendrick Lamar's rallying cry for justice, hip-hop has consis-

tently been a platform for activism. The genre has birthed anthems of resistance, fostering a sense of empowerment and solidarity within communities facing adversity.

Black History Month is an opportunity to recognize hip-hop not merely as a genre of music but as a cultural force that has shaped and defined generations. Its influence on arts, fashion and social activism resonates far beyond the beats and rhymes, leaving an indelible mark on the global cultural landscape. As hip-hop continues to evolve, it remains a testament to the enduring power of expression in the face of adversity.



VICTOR FRANKOWSKI / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lamar



BRENNAN SCHNELL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Hill

Black Film Trailblazers

In the realm of cinema, Black filmmakers have left an indelible mark and reshaped the narrative, providing a nuanced and authentic representation of the Black experience.

From the early pioneers to contemporary visionaries, these filmmakers have navigated the challenges of a historically underrepresented industry to craft stories that resonate globally.

OSCAR MICHEAUX: PIONEERING VISIONARY

Oscar Micheaux, a trailblazer in every sense, stands as the first Black filmmaker to produce a feature-length film. In the early 20th century, Micheaux shattered barriers with films like “The Homesteader” (1919) and “Within Our Gates” (1920). His work addressed racial issues head-on, providing a counter-narrative to the prevailing stereotypes of the time.

GORDON PARKS: CAPTURING BLACK LIFE

Gordon Parks, a multifaceted artist, made history as the first African American to direct a major Hollywood film with “The Learning Tree” (1969). A photographer, musician, and writer, Parks used his cinematic lens to explore



BRENNAN SCHNELL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Coogler



BRENNAN SCHNELL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lee

the complexities of Black life, leaving an enduring effect on American cinema.

SPIKE LEE: A BOLD AUTEUR'S CHRONICLE

Spike Lee, often regarded as a modern-day auteur, burst onto the scene with “She’s Gotta Have It” (1986), challenging conventions and reshaping perceptions of Black identity. Lee’s filmography, from “Do the Right Thing” (1989) to “Malcolm X” (1992), confronts social issues with unapologetic intensity, earning him critical acclaim and sparking essential conversations.

AVA: TRAILBLAZING THE NEW WAVE

Ava DuVernay, a groundbreaking force in contemporary filmmaking, has shattered glass ceilings with films



BRENNAN SCHNELL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

DuVernay

like “Selma” (2014) and the documentary “13th” (2016). Her dedication to telling stories that matter, coupled with her advocacy for diversity in the industry, has positioned her as a leading voice in the cinematic landscape.

BARRY JENKINS: CRAFTING INTIMATE NARRATIVES

Barry Jenkins, acclaimed for his intimate storytelling and visual poetry, garnered widespread recognition with “Moonlight” (2016), which earned him the Academy Award for Best Picture. Jenkins’ films, including “If Beale Street Could Talk” (2018), delve into the complexities of identity, love, and societal expectations.

RYAN COOGLER: MARVELING AT DIVERSITY

Ryan Coogler, known for his powerful storytelling and directing prowess, made history with “Black Panther” (2018), a groundbreaking film that celebrated African culture and became a cultural phenomenon. Coogler’s ability to seamlessly weave storytelling with social commentary cements his place among contemporary cinematic visionaries.

Black filmmakers have played a pivotal role in shaping the cinematic landscape. Their narratives, diverse and rich, continue to resonate, challenging stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and representative future for the world of film.

Author Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston, a literary luminary of the Harlem Renaissance, left an indelible mark on American literature, carving a path as a novelist, anthropologist and folklorist.

Born Jan. 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston's journey unfolded against the backdrop of a racially charged America, yet she emerged as a fearless chronicler of the human experience.

Hurston's childhood was marked by upheaval, with her family relocating to Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-Black incorporated towns in the United States. This unique setting would later serve as the backdrop for much of her literary work. Despite facing financial challenges, Hurston's passion for education led her to Howard University, where she immersed herself in the vibrant cultural and intellectual milieu of the Harlem Renaissance.

LITERARY EXPLORATION

Hurston's literary journey unfolded against a tapestry of rich storytelling traditions and cultural nuances. Her immersion in folklore studies, particularly during her time at Barnard College under the tutelage of Franz Boas, fueled her fascination with Black oral



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traditions. This fascination bore fruit in her groundbreaking anthropological work, "Mules and Men" (1935), a collection of folklore from the Black communities of the South.

Hurston's magnum opus, "Their Eyes Were Watching

God" (1937), stands as a literary masterpiece and a cornerstone of Black literature. The novel, set in the fictional Eatonville, poignantly explores the journey of Janie Crawford as she navigates love, independence and self-discovery. Hurston's

exquisite prose and keen insight into the human condition captured the essence of the Southern Black experience, earning her accolades and cementing her legacy.

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Hurston's literary contribu-

tions during the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and artistic movement celebrating Black identity, were instrumental in reshaping the narrative. Her short stories, essays and plays, infused with a deep understanding of the human spirit, challenged stereotypes and provided nuanced portrayals of Black life.

Despite her literary prowess, Hurston faced challenges, including criticism from some contemporaries who perceived her work as too focused on rural folklore. Economic struggles further obscured her brilliance, leading to periods of obscurity and almost the loss of her legacy. She died of a stroke in a welfare home in 1960 and a yardman who was hired to clean out her belongings started to burn her papers. A friend passing by saw it and stopped him, rescuing her work.

LEGACY

Hurston's work gained renewed recognition posthumously, as scholars and literary enthusiasts began to appreciate the depth of her contributions. One of her works was published as recently as 2018. Alice Walker, a prominent writer, played a pivotal role in bringing Hurston's work back into the spotlight, describing her as a "genius of the South."

Today, Hurston's legacy endures in literary circles and in classrooms where her work continues to be studied for its profound cultural and historical significance.