The Harlem Renaissance Project

“From 1920 until about 1930 an unprecedented outburst of creative activity among African-Americans occurred in all fields of art. Beginning as a series of literary discussions in the lower Manhattan (Greenwich Village) and upper Manhattan (Harlem) sections of New York City, this African-American cultural movement became known as “The New Negro Movement” and later as the Harlem Renaissance. More than a literary movement and more than a social revolt against racism, the Harlem Renaissance exalted the unique culture of African-Americans and redefined African-American expression. African Americans were encouraged to celebrate their heritage and to become “The New Negro,” a term coined in 1925 by sociologist and critic Alain LeRoy Locke. One of the factors contributing to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance was the great migration of African-Americans to northern cities (such as New York City, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.) between 1919 and 1926. In his influential book The New Negro (1925), Locke described the northward migration of blacks as “something like a spiritual emancipation.” Black urban migration, combined with trends in American society as a whole toward experimentation during the 1920s, and the rise of radical black intellectuals — including Locke, Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of The Crisis magazine — all contributed to the particular styles and unprecedented success of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance period.” Many believe the Harlem Renaissance probably realized its foundation in the works of W.E. B. Du Bois, since he believed that an educated Black elite should lead Blacks to liberation. He further believed that his people could not achieve social equality by emulating white ideals; he felt that equality could be achieved only by teaching Black racial pride with an emphasis on an African cultural heritage. Although the Renaissance was not a school, the writers associated with it had a common bond: they dealt with Black life from a Black perspective. While the Renaissance is often thought of as solely a literary movement, some historians of the period also include artists and musicians.