

Chronology of societal and Afro-American art evolution in pre (1619-1865) and post (1865-1965) civil war in the US

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between the societal integration of African Americans and its influences on the group's art of painting in the pre-and-post-Civil War periods, i.e., from 1619-1865 and 1865-1965 in the US. It seeks to explore a relationship between greater social integration and influences on the artwork of African Americans over time - themes and elements of art, i.e., lines and colours. It draws upon John Dewey's theory of art as experience and Erwin Panofsky's thematic analysis (Iconography). The study findings suggest the oppression and exclusion of African Americans in general (in the pre-Civil War period) and its influences on the constrained creativity of the group's artwork (of painting). However, on the contrary, the findings indicate greater experimentation, uniqueness, and depiction of African identity in post-Civil War period artwork of painting. This coincides with the gradual but ominous social acceptance, educational attainments, and economic success of Afro-Americans in American society during this period. The findings and analysis validate a relationship between societal transformation of marginalized groups (from exclusion to integration) and influences on groups' artistic expressions.

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1. Introduction

Art is a form of human creative expression and has been used for centuries to express human thoughts, desires, ideas, and feelings. The peculiar artwork mirrors the artist's life experiences and, in a way, reflects the wider societal attitudes and perceptions. Painting is one such art form amongst others, through which artists have been expressing their thoughts around social norms and practices. In the same way, art reflects a particular society and can be influenced by societal change. Therefore, the study takes African Americans and their art as a case study to understand the link between art and socio-economic transformation. This study focuses on the evolution of African (Afro/Black) American art of painting in the context of their socio-economic condition through the pre-and-post-Civil War eras. The Civil War (1865) is considered a significant event in US history, as it abolished slavery practices and marks the liberation of Afro-Americans in the US. This study describes how this historic event of the Civil War left a lasting impact on the socio-economic transformation of Afro-Americans in the US society and consequently on the evolution of Afro-American signature art in the 20th Century.

African Americans were brought to the New World (US) as slaves from Africa Continent in 1619. Slavery undoubtedly has been influenced by the initial societal attitudes of White masters in the early US. Slavery put Afro-Americans through a long haul of unfair and unequal treatment, which remained legal for approximately two and half centuries. The attitudes became so deeply imprinted and entrenched for Afro-Americans suffered a lot. However, the discrimination and oppression of Afro-Americans sowed the seeds of anger and discontentment, which culminated in terms of an outbreak of racial conflict called the Civil War, of 1865. Though it constitutionally awarded African Americans citizenship and abolished slavery, this, unfortunately, did not place them as citizens as equal to the whites. However, society remained segregated along racial lines that set the stage for another long struggle for African Americans to get recognition as equal citizens. It took them another century to win equal rights and assert their unique African heritage and identity, which were comprehended after the Civil Rights Movement (1964-5).

The transition from slavery to emancipation had a profound impact on Afro-Americans' lives, identity, religion, and culture. Similarly, it influenced their creativity. This study seeks to what extent Afro-American art got influenced by the overall societal transformation (social and economic) in the pre-and-post-Civil War US. How did their art evolve in terms of themes, elements of art, styles, and techniques. The research is exploratory cum causative and has multidisciplinary nature. It establishes the reciprocal relationship between society and art. The research also describes how the power of soft forms (like art) in constructing identities and bridging gaps amongst groups by countering societal misperception. This study takes inspiration from John Dewey's theory, *Art as Experience* (1934) to explain a linkage between the social and economic conditions of society that influence the creative expression in individuals.

Dewey's philosophy negates the concept of art for art's sake and considered art a potent form of communication that serves a moral function in any society. For instance, constructs individual and communal identities, bridging communities' differences. Dewey claims that art is a product of culture, and through art, people express the significance of their lives, their hopes, and as well as their ideals (Field, n.d). Dewey believes art is a potential means of developing communities and serves a moral purpose in society. Art conveys messages that stimulate reflection on purposeful lives (Goldblatt, 2006). This paper incorporates four key ideas from the Dewey philosophy that helps to justify the study argument, including a) Art is influenced by societal change, b) Art for self-expression c) Art can be used for communal identification and c) Art can be used for community-based political action. These all concepts from Dewey's theory give a theoretical foundation to this study.

The study provides a qualitative thematic analysis framework, based on the thoughts of Erwin Panofsky's (art historian) "Iconography." Iconography is a method of analysis that identifies classifies and interprets symbols, themes, and subject matter in the visual arts to understand people, culture, and their environment in that specific time (Straten, 1986). This framework helps to identify and interpret three main areas of painting: a) Art Form and Factual Description, that includes elements of art, style, and technique; b) Emergent Themes of Afro American pre-and-post-Civil War paintings; and then c) determine its link with social-political context. The artifact and paintings presented in this study are evaluated under given categories such as Art Form and Factual Description which provides a pure description of the art medium and what we see in paintings, it can be related to the object, situation, and activities. Emergent Themes (factual descriptions grouped into themes) unfold deeper meaning or content of themes and subject matters in the paintings. Thematic linkages to socio-political context describe the socio-political environment in which artists lived and produced that work. This stage helps to determine art links with the societal condition and gives insights into the ideological influences of artwork.

This paper is divided into two main parts, first deals with African Americans' social and economic conditions in the pre-Civil War era (1619-1865) and their impact on their art. The second part covers afro American societal conditions in post-Civil war era (1885-1965) and the transformation in their art of paintings.

2. Research methodology

The study is exploratory-cum-causative research in nature. This study employs a qualitative approach and uses secondary data to establish a correlation between the Afro-American societal transformation in the pre-and-post-Civil War US and its influences on the Afro-American artwork. The secondary data is drawn from books, articles, websites, and artifacts, particularly paintings. The sample work (of both the artist and the paintings) is systematic in a way that the researcher picked up artists and works that carried significant value at the time, with a limited focus on age and gender. The study leverages a unique data analysis framework

i.e., Thematic Analysis Framework (based on the thoughts of Erwin Panofsky's Iconography) to interpret artifacts.

This analysis approach identifies, classifies, and interprets paintings/artifacts under three categories: i) Art Form and Factual Description: which provides a pure description of the art medium and what we see in paintings, it can be related to the object, situation, and activities, ii) Emergent Themes: unfold subject matters in the paintings and iii) Thematic linkages to socio-political context describe the socio-political environment in which artists lived and produced that work. This stage helped to determine art linkages with societal conditions and gave insights into the ideological influences of artwork. The study hypothesis and interpretation are also influenced by John Dewey's theory, *Art as Experience* (1934), which explains linkages between social and economic conditions of society that influence the creative expression in individuals/community. This paper incorporates four key ideas from Dewey's philosophy that both guided and reinforced study findings and analysis i.e., a) Art is influenced by societal change, b) Art for self-expression c) Art can be used for communal identification, and c) Art can be used for community-based political action. These all concepts from Dewey's theory give a theoretical foundation to this study.

3. African Americans societal condition and art of paintings in the pre-civil war era (1619-1865)

The advent of African slaves in the new land set the stage for racial classification in society. This resulted in racial oppression, discrimination, and exclusion of people of African origin. The slavery continued for over two centuries and was marked by cultural shock, which inhibited black assimilation into an unfamiliar culture but also influenced the societal condition (social and economic) of the African enslaved. Social includes access to health/disease patterns, and literacy and economic condition comprise occupational pursuits, urbanization, and land ownership.

In the pre-Civil War (the 1860s) around five percent enslaved or free blacks were literate (Ajha, n.d.). This number conveys that during slavery the Black Americans were kept deprived of accessing education and were predominantly illiterate. This deprivation was legalized through state regulations as one report suggests that "slaves were prohibited by law from learning to read or write" (Lynch, n.d.). Though an overwhelming majority was illiterate however some were allowed, encouraged, and facilitated by their masters to read and write. However, this was done by only a few who dared to violate the law out of sympathy. The literacy rates for Black Americans in pre-Civil War era were higher in Northern states than in Southern states. Furthermore, the numbers were higher for those who were free as compared to the slaves. Those literates few in the North supported others to get an education and for that, they created institutions. One report suggests that the "Free Black Americans in the North established their own institutions—churches, schools, and mutual aid societies" (Lynch, n.d.).

In general, the health conditions of African slaves during the pre-Civil War period remained poor. This could be attributed to poor diet, hard and miserable working conditions, and inaccessibility of healthcare facilities, which contributed to higher mortality rates amongst Black Americans. As American weather was new to the African slaves, hence it exposed them to disease and sickness. A report suggests that “besides the usual fever, disease of malnutrition and rheumatism, they suffered from leprosy, pleurisy, lockjaw, venereal disease, tuberculosis, and pneumonia” (Lynch, n.d.). Furthermore, it was abject poverty, poor sanitation and housing, and epidemics (cholera and yellow fever), which contributed to the poor health status of the African American slaves.

It is observed in the pre-Civil War era of the US, that the Afro-Americans did only the low-profile jobs either in fields or as domestic servants. Hence, most of them were employed in fields to cultivate tobacco, cotton, sugar, rice, and indigo plants. Similarly, it states that those who ended up as domestic servants were found working as butlers, cooks, waiters, maids, carriage drivers, tailors, fishermen, seamstresses, coachmen, and laundry workers. However, in some states, a small number of them were employed in respectable professions such as lawyers, officeholders, teachers, physicians, dentists, typesetters, and journalists (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011).

In terms of black urbanization in the pre-civil war era, the African slaves were brought in to find cheap labour for the agricultural economy of the Southern states of the US. As they were brought in with a particular intent, hence they were mainly concentrated in the South and employed in the agrarian economy. It could safely be assumed that by 1860, the population concentration of Black in the agrarian south was at least 90 percent (Williams, n.d.). In the context of land ownership before the Civil War period, Afro-American slaves were not allowed to own property. Though some states permitted them to have certain types of personal property (Foner, 2005). It can be argued that the social and economic dependency and social discrimination of Afro-Americans were rooted in slavery and continued for over two centuries. This also influenced African slaves' creativity and artistic expressions.

3.1. African American art in pre-civil war era

The history of Afro-American visual art started with the arrival of enslaved Africans between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in the US. However, African slaves brought with them agricultural skills and immense creative potential, and abilities to their new home. Afro-American art embraced a variety of forms like a small drum, quilts, several sculptures, ceramic face vessels, and domestic architecture including wood, and wrought iron fences, which remained the most significant creative products (Towns, 2010). This was attributed to their longstanding history where Africans remained involved in the production of metal goods for thousands of years together with unique woodcraft. Despite being mistreated and discriminated around three centuries, Afro-American craftsmen made significant contributions to the evolution of US society (Towns, 2010).

In the initial years, the slaves recognized themselves as craftsmen because of their skilled work. It is reported that two basic types of slave craft have survived in the colonial era. One type of craft belongs to the personal use of African slaves that includes numerous fetishes, these were made in many forms and materials such as rags, wood, and feathers, other types of craft include colourful patches of quilts, shell beads, doll, pottery, bone carving, baskets, and gravestones. However, these crafts were made for public and professional use by enslaved goldsmiths, silversmiths, potters, and many more, which were considered an important aspect of the colonial economy. Craft such as *Stoneware Vessel* (see figure 1) is one of the survived artifacts of the colonial period (Lewis, 1978, p.11). This ceramic face vessel was attributed to a small number of African slaves working as potters in the Edgefield District of South Carolina. The inspiration for making this vessel is unknown and the potter's name is also unidentified. However, the scholars hypothesize that the vessels might have had religious or burial importance for enslaved. Or a response from Africans to maintain their identity under the complex condition of slavery (Smithsonian, n.d).

Figure 1: Stoneware Vessel 1800s



Moreover, enslaved used to make musical instruments such as “banjo”, and were involved in fabric and quilt making (Towns, 2010). For instance, an African American woman Harriet Powers (1837-1910) who was born into slavery, was believed to be the most prominent figure amongst early African American quilters. *The Bible Quilt'* (see figure 2) is one of the examples of her work, the quilt is divided into fifteen pictorial rectangles, based on Bible stories (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2017). It is observed that quilters from the Nineteenth-century in the US did not present themes related to Negro equally, slave pottery and figurines did not visibly refer to African heritage (Bernier, 2009, p. 24).

However, in the New World, a quilt, a fence, a chair, or a pot was looked upon differently and considered utilitarian objects rather than expression of creativity (Towns, 2010). But the existence of these artifacts describes that many enslaved and free African Americans were in

search of ways in which they could express their “subjectivity, to some extent beyond the dehumanizing effects of soul-destroying labour” (Bernier, 2009, p. 18).

Figure 2: Harriet Powers ‘Bible Quilt’ 1898



With the expansion of the American colonies in the New World, the demand for skilled slave craftsmen increased. A system of hiring and apprenticing talented Blacks to white craftsmen developed in the 18th Century US colonies (Lewis, 1978, p. 09). A significant number of enslaved and free African Americans became quilters, goldsmiths, silversmiths, cabinetmakers, printers, engravers, portrait painters’ dressmakers, musicians, potters, daguerreotypists, and much more (Bernier, 2009, p. 19). Many were acknowledged for their quality of artistry work, that combined potential skill, intelligence, and sensitiveness of African creative expression (Bernier, 2009, p. 19) for example, “a group of African artisans in Andover, New Jersey, gained a reputation throughout the colonies for the excellent ironwork they produced” (Lewis, 1978, p. 10).

It is observed that transplanted Africans were disconnected from their cultural roots, and not encouraged to perform their artistic expression. But their artistic object like sculpture and quilt demonstrates their spiritual and social needs. These artifacts further describe how they kept their traditional African arts much alive in a restrictive environment. Though African enslaved have mostly used their skills to earn their living, which might have given them recognition to some extent. But their crafts remained primarily a vocation for income, rather than self-expression and creativity (Lewis, 1978, p. 22). In essence, it was not their choice but was driven by the need, aesthetics, and preferences of mainstream culture. No doubt, their artifacts made significant contributions to the colonial economy and an extent provided security for their survival. Moreover, their creative objects played an important role in the formation of an African American visual arts tradition.

Struggle for African American artists continued through later parts of the eighteenth and the entire nineteenth century. Through these centuries, most of them retained the status of craftsmen, and few earned recognitions as artists in predominantly white society (Lewis, 1978, p. 12). Of those few, the majority were either portrait or landscape painters, but they were influenced and followed European artistic traditions, as at that time Europe was considered the hub of an art centre.

Black artists who tried to create paintings, by using their aesthetics, were disregarded and neglected by the Whites. Because at that time the art of painting was viewed as high art and was confined to the reflection of European artistic traditions in the US. Hence, those few African Americans, who attempted to paint received little respect and recognition (Towns, 2010). Scipio Moorhead is one known enslaved Afro-American artist, who got recognition in Massachusetts in the latter half of the 18th century. However, much of his work remained unidentified because he never signed off his artistic work. *A portrait of Phyllis Wheatley* (see figure 3) is considered Moorhead's only recognized and survived work. The pose of Wheatley sitting at a writing table in the American colonial dress with a contemplative upward gaze presented typical portraits of the era (Oxford University, n.d).

Figure 3: Scipio Moorhead, Phillis Wheatley in 1773



Another recognized African American artist of this time was Joshua Johnston (1776-1825), known for his professional portraits in the US. Johnston was interested and followed the European traditional style of paintings. Johnston mostly works attributed to the subjects related to the White community, such as he painted portraits of aristocrats' families and wealthy slaveholders. While few art pieces are attributed to the African American community (Towns, 2010). The painting *Portrait of Adelia Ellender* (see figure 4) is one example of his work. The European style of painting and portraits of upper-class white community showcase that Johnston painted for living rather than expression.

Figure 4: Joshua Johnson, Portrait of Adelia Ellender during 1803-1805

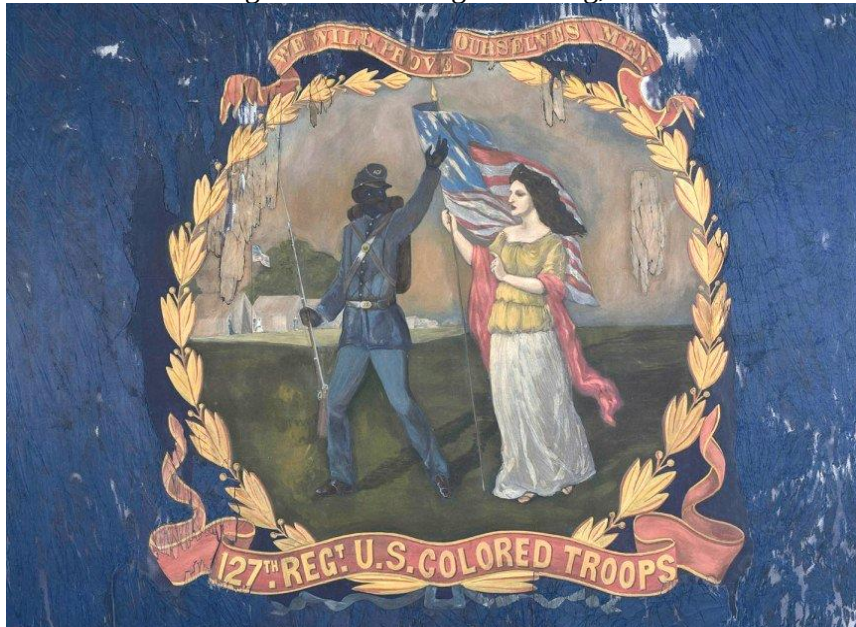


However, unlike Johnston and Moorhead, other unrecognized talented African American painters could not get success and recognition because of racial discrimination since a report indicates that racism was so pervasive at that time that society would not encourage and “support the African’s non-utilitarian talents, beyond the plantation or basic labor” (Towns, 2010). Moreover, the lack of dependable patronage and exclusion from the art academies, and teaching institutions in the early years of the 19th Century, could not provide Africans a space to grow as independent artists (Lewis, 1978, p. 20). Even in the mid-nineteenth century African American artists and their artwork were regarded as inferior and invalid. Rejection of everything black, made the majority of African artists frustrated. As a result, many African American artists refused to identify themselves with the black world and followed the terms of white society (Lewis, 1978).

However, just before the Civil War Afro-American artists “assumed their place in the fight for freedom and liberation” (Lewis, 1978, p. 17). The African American artists formed unions and alliances that gave them more strength and protection to some extent. These unions helped independent Black artists in their search for patronage. David Bustill Bowser (1820-1900) was amongst the most prominent, successful artists and political activists of his period. He was credited for his mainstream portraits of Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist John Brown. He is known for landscape painting portraits, emblems, and banners for fire companies and fraternal organizations. He was the first Afro-American whose art was widely viewed (Lewis, 1978, p. 20). Bowser contributed to Civil War by frequently using his political ideas in art as he painted

flags for colored troops, *Black Regiment Flag* (see figure 5) is an example of his work. The flag imagery “depicts a Black troop waving goodbye to Columbia, the goddess of Liberty, beneath a banner that reads: “We Will Prove Ourselves Men” (The history blog, 2019).

Figure 5. Black Regiment Flag, 1864



In retrospect, the artifacts produced by the enslaved and freed African Americans in the pre-Civil War period had limited artistic range, primarily constrained by economic motives. They were considered more as craftsmen rather than appreciated as genuine artists. Hence, their artistic expressions remained suppressed by the White community. They did not get the opportunity to express themselves truly in line with African artistic traditions. Even their creative work did not contribute to the development of a consciousness of racial expression. Their artifacts generally avoided themes related to African American communities. No agenda or vision can be seen in their early creative objects, and it seems they were forced to produce artifacts as per the White preferences and aesthetics.

Nevertheless, a few years before Civil War Afro-Americans showed little signs of transition, and it was their recognition as artists rather than crafts persons. The popular subjects or themes of African American artists were landscapes and portraits, primarily rooted in European aesthetics. They mostly used cool colours e.g., purple, green, and orange, and neutral colours, brown, white, black, and grey. Colours were blended smoothly with each other and looked more harmonized and realistic. These colours are considered an expression of harmony, tranquillity, and also sadness. In art, lines are another important element of artistic expression. Like colours, the lines during this period remained smooth, blended, and curvy that reflecting harmony. The lines and colours were both guided by the preferences for realistic perfection. The themes, colours, and lines of these noted African artists were visibly disconnected and devoid of African artistic values.

Since the art is considered a human expression and Dewey believes this expression comes from the human experiences. These experiences are based on the individual relationship with their external world. Similarly, artists as human beings take inspiration from their surroundings (Alexander, 2016). In the case of Afro-Americans in the pre-Civil War era in US, it can be argued that their artistic work was highly based on their societal conditions. The slavery, economic dependency and social discrimination did not allow them to work on exploring African aesthetic values. The craft, landscapes, and portraits of the white elite indicate that the ideology behind their theme was to survive economically in the new land rather than to express themselves. It can be argued that the product produced by artists enslaved or freed African Americans provides exemplary evidence that how the art was influenced by the societal conditions.

4. Socio-economic transformation in post-civil war era (1865-1965) and evolution of African American signature art

The post-Civil War era has seen dramatic changes in the social and economic sphere for African Americans. The demography has changed where the current situation offers a more balanced spread out of African Americans in the North and South of the US. More and more people entered into blue and white-collar jobs, whereas, in pre-Civil War period the Blacks were predominantly employed in agriculture. Similarly, the assets of the African American own have risen significantly in the post-Civil War period. One report suggests that “they were nearly twice as likely to own their own homes at the end of the century as in 1900” (Howard, 2003). The statistics give a strong indication that property ownership of African Americans has increased manifolds. The numbers have risen from 13.1% to 42.3% which in actuality is an increase of over 300% (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011).

The health condition of the Blacks radically improved after the Civil War. This is largely attributed to a large-scale welfare program i.e., Freedmen’s Bureau (immediately rolled out after the Civil War) which assisted the war affected people. Reportedly, “the bureau aided former slaves as well as white refugees by furnishing supplies and medical services, establishing the school, supervising contracts between ex-slaves and their employers, and managing confiscated or abandoned lands, which included leasing and selling some of those lands to former slaves. Moreover, by 1867, the Bureau oversaw forty-six hospitals staffed by physicians, surgeons, and nurses. Its medical department spent more than \$ 2 million to improve the health of ex-slaves and treated more than 450,000 cases of illness, thus helping to reduce the death rates among former slaves and to improve the sanitary condition” (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011).

The Black slaves were brought in to find cheap labor for the agricultural economy of the Southern states of the US. As they were brought in with a particular intent, hence they were mainly concentrated in the South and employed in the agrarian economy. However, in the post-Civil War era, mainly in later half of 19th Century and early 20th Century, large-scale rural to

urban migration was witnessed from the agrarian south to the industrial north. This worked as a pull factor that drove a significant number of Blacks (freed) in the post-Civil War period to move to the north in search of new opportunities and better life. This was further accelerated by increased labour demand in the north because of rapid industrialization which set the grounds for urbanization as well.

The post-Civil War period saw a radical turnaround in literacy rates which could be attributed to the establishment of the Black American literacy program. The most important is the Freedmen Bureau, a state-funded program, which provided support in the development of black schools and academic institutions besides social support in other domains. The report cites that “the bureau supervised day school, night schools, Sunday and industrial schools, as well as colleges” (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011). The literacy rates jumped from 5% in 1860 to 70% in 1910 (within a period of 50 years) providing a strong indication of greater state patronage to promote literacy amongst Black Africans. The state-sponsored programs encouraged greater enrolment of African Americans in formal education systems like fellow Whites. The numbers support the assessment that in the post-Civil War era, the greater enrolment and educational attainment amongst African Americans helped them gain better jobs and break the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

The socio-economic growth revived the communal feelings, and sense of identity, and fostered mutual support amongst African Americans in the post-Civil War period. The economic success in turn stimulated the feeling of Black identity and unique African heritage. This renewed sense of unique identity further cemented the community and restored a feeling of self-respect and pride. This all influenced the artistic expressions in the post-Civil War period, especially the art of painting.

4.1. Evolution of African American signature art of painting in post-civil war era

The Nineteenth Century Afro-American artists were equally conscious of the racism around them and aware that black skin was a badge of inferiority (Lewis, 1978, p. 30). Therefore, the end of the Civil War and abolition of slavery pushed them into another struggle to get equal rights and recognition in the US segregated society. However, in the early post-Civil War, era African American artists were still few in number and most of them avoided the racial subject matter in their work. To escape from racial discrimination many Afro-Americans preferred to travel to Europe for study visits or for places as permanent residents. Therefore, majority Afro-American artists travelled abroad and got training from European art schools. It is witnessed that “African American artists of this period, with only rare exceptions, contributed little to the development of a consciousness of black expression” (Lewis, 1978, p. 59). Might be their intent was to get recognized as artists with pure artistic values and expressions rather than socialists (Lewis, 1978, p. 23). Perhaps they wanted to take art for art's sake, wherein art is independent of its subject matter. Nevertheless, the range of themes remained limited in these period and

African American artists only followed European aesthetics and rejected their personal experiences.

The second half part of the 19th Century and the early years of the 20th Century provided a more conducive environment to the new generation of African American artists. It enabled more and more Black artists to see art as a profession because the new generation confronted a different social climate that was not experienced by their predecessors. Now the prominent abolitionists of the Civil War started supporting a number of African American artists to make meaningful careers possible for them (Lewis, 1978, p. 24). This changing trend caused the emergence of two groups of artists, one that followed European tradition and mostly painted landscape, such as Robert Stuart Duncanson (1821-72) and Edward M. Bannister. Both landscape painters were among those who were inspired by the key features and principles of the Barbizon School (the 1840s and 1850s), a French artistic expression, that dominated at that time in the European art world. The prominent feature of this school was the smooth blending of realism and romanticism in the landscape. Robert Stuart Duncanson got recognition as a successful landscapist. Duncanson was an extensive traveller, who painted numerous landscape scenes of different places in the US. In the following landscape painting titled; *Vesuvius and Pompeii* (see figure 6), Duncanson skilfully captured the unspoiled nature with the feeling of calmness. His paintings featured small size human figures, though overshadowed by the huge landscape. However, Duncanson's paintings of the Civil War era had heavy feelings with dark colours, which might reflect his professional disappointments and frustration which he experienced through the period of great change in the US history.

Figure 6: Robert Stuart Duncanson, *Vesuvius and Pompeii* in 1870



Figure 7: Edward Mitchell Bannister, Sunset during 1875-1880



Bannister (1828-1901) is one of those artists whose life speaks of such an unfortunate incident. In 1875, he was awarded for his painting titled *Under the Oaks* but when he actually went to receive it, he was barred entry into the gallery on racial lines (Lewis, 1978, p. 30). Though Bannister's work reflects his personalized expressions, he was not a socialist. His paintings reflect his exploration of nature with poetic vision (Lewis, 1978, p. 34). where he mostly painted landscape as reflected in his painting i.e., *Sunset* (see figure 7). By using dull and misty colours, he produced mysterious images (Oxford, n.d.). The works of Duncanson and Bannister depict a realist representation of nature, that reflects the artist's inclination towards European artistic traditions, especially in the forms of themes and techniques, which kept these artists away from their unique African artistic identity.

The second group of African American artists was interested to respond negative stereotypical images of African communities. Since the nineteenth century, White contemporary artists presented a symbolic image of Blacks as senseless, simple, in-human, and clowns to ridicule African American community through their creative activities. In the late nineteenth century African American artists mainly Tanner and Waring attempted to portray the positive image of Blacks in the US racially segregated society, though these were still testing times for Afro-Americans as European aesthetics dominated the art scene.

Much of Henry Ossawa Tanner's creative works are attributed to mitigating the negative stereotypes and dignified image of African Americans in US society” (Towns, 2010). His painting *The Thankful Poor* (see figure 8), depicts the life of Afro-Americans. Here, Tanner made a great effort to represent the routine life of ordinary African Americans with great respect and honors. He painted simple compositions with bold and deep hues on African

everyday life, heroism, and stories from Bible. His work received international acclaim and his successful career inspired others (Bernier, 2009).

Figure 8: Henry Ossawa Tanner Banjo Lesson, The Thankful Poor, 1894



While Laura Wheeler Waring (1887-1948) African portraits challenged the stereotypical images of Black Americans (Lewis, 1978). She was an important figure, who made great contributions to the field of portrait in US art. She adopted a realistic approach to her portrait with few elements of expressionism. Her work remains unrestrained with respect to structure and treatment of forms. Her soft and contrasting portrait style avoided the surface stillness, a key feature of realist painting of that era. This is shown in a famous painting named; *Anne Washington Derry* (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Laura Wheeler Waring, Anne Washington Derry, 1927



It is observed that the societal transformation after Civil War (1920-60) featured greater independence, recognition, and control by the African Americans over their social, political, and economic life in the US, consequently, this change impacted the artistic impressions. The artistic expressions and preferences of African Americans became more identity sensitive. Also, the work became more heritage centric as evident from the changes in themes, techniques, and influences. The new era, wherein, African American artists explored and expressed themselves with new subjects, and techniques and found elite patrons, is marked as Harlem Renaissance (in the 1920s). It witnessed heightened artistic activities by the African Americans in the creative fields i.e., literature, visual, and performing arts. Harlem Renaissance provided African Americans a platform and opportunities to demonstrate their creative and intellectual abilities and earned recognition. This social change demonstrated enormous energy, the excitement amongst the African Americans, and art became more impressive, experimental, and unique in terms of its wide range of themes.

Harlem emerged as the capital of the Black Intellectual Movement and this period is characterized by the emergence of the Black community “Nightclubs, community centres, cafes, publishing houses, photography studios, and art galleries” (Hinnov, 2009, p. 49). The African American community started considering it as a “mecca” for all those who moved to the North from Southern US during the early 1900s. The known artists of this era are Aaron Douglas Barthé, Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Lois Mailou Jones, and Jacob Lawrence. These were considered modern artists who contributed to the enrichment and development of mainstream US art. These artists created a new portrayal of blacks and their lives in America. Though the Harlem renaissance was a short-lived movement it considerably changed the attitudes toward the black community. Overall African American art during this period developed communal feelings, and a sense of pride and illustrated unique African heritage. Likewise, Dewey's philosophical thoughts also justified that art could play a significant role in communal identification. For him, the work of artists expresses to viewers their common experiences and concerns. Therefore, art can be influenced the process of integration and strengthening of a group's identity (Mark, 1999).

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) was widely acknowledged as one of the most accomplished and influential artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas' work not just captured the spirit of the modern time but contributed to the emergence of new Black aesthetics. Douglas explored and experimented with African art and expressed interest in African cubistic forms, yet he remains distinguished as an African American painter, muralist, and illustrator who portrayed African Americans “with a new measure of dignity and pride” (McKinney, 2019, p. 165). Douglas' work provided direction to the visual aspects of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. His murals were stylized with geometric figures. Due to his unique artwork, reflecting African heritage, he was bestowed the title “Pioneering Africanist” by Alain Locke (Thompson, 2000). In his mural for the New York Public Library, named; *Aspects of Negro Life* (see figure 10) He illustrated the Black history from slavery to great migration in one section of the mural.

Figure 10: Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting, 1934



Archibald Motley Jr. (1891-1981) remains one of the unique artists amongst the known names in the Harlem Renaissance Movement, who painted only the subject related to the African community. He was amongst those who did glorify the image of the Black community in their real urban image, as he viewed them during the 1920s. His painting, *Barbecue*, (see figure 11) reflected the figures, joy, and movement of the Black urban life of that period.

Figure 11: Archibald Motley, *Barbecue*, c. 1934



Another eminent artist William Henry Johnson (1901-70) was a real modernist, art critics labelled his work “primitive” because of his simple composition and flat shapes (Lewis, 1978, p. 90). His paintings include scenes pertaining to the Black soldier community during World War II where he reflected on their emotional journey from leaving homes to performing duties, thereby highlighting the community’s contribution to US society. His painting *Street Paintings* (see figure 12) reflects his signature style highlighting the life of Afro-Americans.

Figure 12: William Henry Johnson, Street Musicians



Lois Mailou Jones (1905–1998), is one of the most known female artists in African American community. She wanted to see afro American artists as successful and rightful place as American artists placed themselves in the mainstream of the art world. Jones's artistic style was a combination of several cultures including American, African, Haitian, and French. Jones's personal life exhibits consistent development, which influenced her creativity. Her early work demonstrates a realistic approach, but later she developed her own style that featured a combination of African forms, cubism, and personal impressions that can be seen in one of her paintings *Les Fétiches* (see figure 13) exciting composition that reflects African tradition (Lewis, 1978, p. 100).

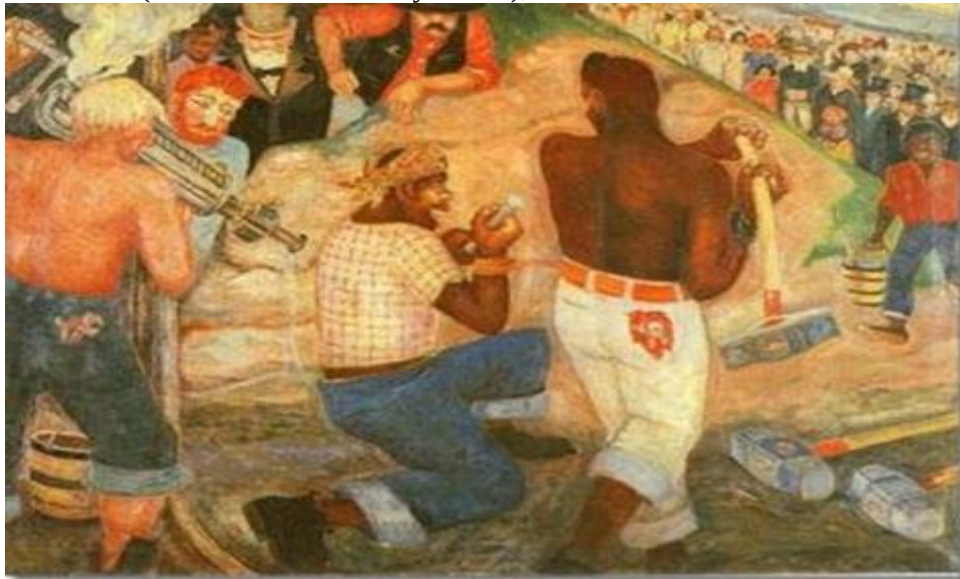
Figure 13: Loïs Mailou Jones, *Les Fétiches*, 1938



Palmer Hayden (1893-1973) was an eminent and influential African American artist of the 1920s. His initial work was motivated by the Black theme, apparently inspired by Alain Locke's

ideals, wherein he encouraged African artists to express their unique history and origin in creative work. Hayden's paintings reflecting African identity earned him great acclamation among art connoisseurs. His painting series titled *Twelve Paintings* gyrates around the same idea which is focused on Afro American named John Henry. From this series, one of the paintings (see figure 14) reflects the scene of how Blacks' life shifted from agrarian to industrial sphere.

Figure 14: Palmer Hayden, John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left (from the John Henry Series), 1947



The Harlem Renaissance evidently increased the opportunities for art education and training for African Americans. Additional funds were made available through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and increased enrolment at art centres to train young artists to become professionals in performing arts. The Great Depression of 1929 in US history seriously dented the affluence and prosperity of the Harlem Renaissance. Soon Black artists became dependent on social security for their survival. After the great depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's launched the "New Deal" (1935-1943), a program to restore America and get people back to work. He launched WPA, as part of the New Deal. Within WPA, the Federal Arts Project (FAP) supported artists and covered a spectrum of creative fields including music, writing, and drama. As a result of this policy, many African American painters and sculptors got work and recognition (Lewis, 1978).

After WWII, African Americans were seeking equality and recognition in all aspects of American life. "In this struggle for an equal economic, political, and social right, Black artists adopted the concept of self-determination through self-expression" (Lewis, 1978, p. 133). This idea motivated African Americans to formulate their aesthetic values. Therefore, this demand became a dominant theme in African American art during the 1960s. Once again "Black artists, writers, musicians, and dancers joined together, as they had during the Harlem Renaissance, to formulate new ideological directions" (Lewis, 1978, p. 125). Now the unity and dedication to

developing unique self-identity in US society inspired like-minded artists to form a group that led to the reshaping of the role of Afro-American artists.

A major shift in terms of themes is observed after WWII, now Afro American artists were more inclined to produce work on political issues. Philosophically, Dewey also suggested a pragmatic use of art for promoting awareness and addressing shared challenges. According to Dewey this type of community-based political action through art is address common problems. Moreover, Dewey assigned the role of social criticism to the artist, who can reconsider, discuss, and debate established beliefs and practices (Mark, 1999). In the same way, Afro-American artists applied political content in their art to promote community concerns, to aware community-based challenges, and highlight unjust practices against them in US segregated society. As Dewey believes art can play a critical role by sharing experiences, history, culture, and identity of individuals. This can lead to developing understanding between divided communities. For Dewey “Art breaks through "gulfs, walls, and barriers" that separate human beings from one another, therefore art serves to bridge the gap between communities that “other forms of communication cannot penetrate” (Alexander, 2016).

Figure 15. Charles Alston, *Walking*, 1958



A prominent socio-political artist Charles Alston (1907-1970) accomplished African American painter, sculptor, muralist, and teacher. Alston developed a range of stylistic approaches and experimented with colour, space, and form in his art. His distinctive figurative in cubist style expresses and exposed the unjust and humiliation experienced by the black community (Lewis, 1978, p. 111). His painting *Walking* (see figure 15) was an inspiration by the event of the Montgomery bus boycott. The painting represented a group of walking women who are fighting against the segregation system. With the strong composition, shapes of women figures, intense slabs of colour, and abstract techniques the painter conveyed a sense of a purposeful movement (Smithsonian, n.d.)

Another artist Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) achieved international fame for her socially conscious work and powerful representation of race, class, and African American female identity (Philadelphia Museum of Art, n.d.). Catlett's work communicated the struggle of African Americans particularly the ideals of the Black civil rights movement in the United States. She highlighted injustices around African American community and painted the subjects that underline the need for improvements in Blacks' lives in all spheres (Lewis, 2015). Her painting titled *War Worker* (see figure 16) celebrates the intricacies of Black identity and their struggle.

Figure 16: Elizabeth Catlett, *War Worker*, 194



Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), is another eminent artist, who was more influenced to depict human struggle especially in the United States. Lawrence painted subjects related to black history, their lives, and ambitions in US society. The subject selection was related to the everyday life of the black community with pride and dignity, and their struggle for justice. He had a unique style of painting; sharp edges, stylized images, colourful composition, and human story-based work gave him a wide audience. His known work includes *The Great Migration* (see figure 17) a set of sixty-panel paintings that “interpret visual documents of the greatest mass relocation of Black Americans since the end of the slave trade between the United States and Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century” (Oxford, n.d.). His abstract expressionist style with the thick paints, flattened perspective, and featureless characters describe hope, fear, and triumph.

Figure 17: Jacob Lawrence, The Great Migration of the Negro (1940–41)



Norman Lewis, (1909-1979) was the first major African American abstract expressionist, who was influenced by his own experiences around social inequalities experienced by African communities in the US. Lewis was a founding member of Spiral Group, a group that contributed to the Civil Rights movement through creative activities. His work such as; *Evening Rendezvous* (see figure 18) is a forceful political painting in an abstract expressionist style, which directly attacks American racism (The Art Story, n.d.). This painting brought the turmoil of the civil rights movement into the gallery with the abstract language. “The combination of red, white, and blue mocks the patriotism that the Klan claimed as its defence” (SAAM, n.d.).

Figure 18: Norman Lewis, Evening Rendezvous, 1962



Romare Bearden (1911-1988), was another eminent artist who experimented with the collage technique to express Black life and culture. Bearden and eleven other artists formed a group called Spiral to discuss how they could contribute to the civil rights movement. Bearden used collage work to express the experiences and the memories of Black life in Pittsburgh, the rural South, and Harlem (SAAM, n.d.). The subject selection varied as he covered a range of issues from field scenes from the south to the streets and clubs of Harlem.

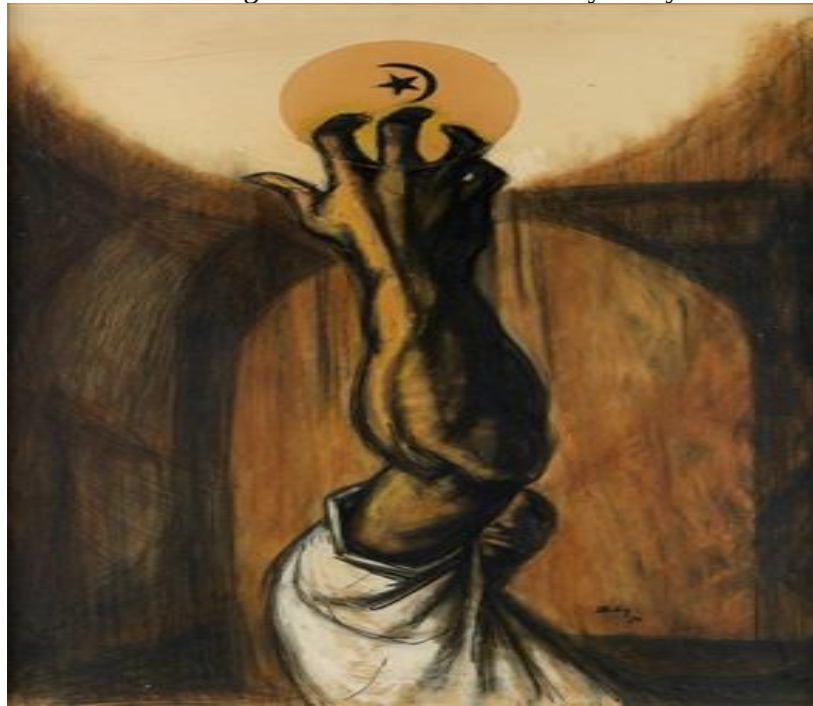
His collage painting *Spring Way* (see figure 19) redefines the experience of Blacks and reflects their strong social conscience (SAAM, n.d.). With his signature collage technique, Bearden expressed the realities and experiences of Black life in the US. Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, Herman Kofi Bailey, Cliff Joseph, and Charles Alston are those African American artists, who worked on a vision of self-determination through artistic expressions. It appears that post-Civil War artists of African American origin used their artistic abilities to further illuminate the Black struggle for rights.

Figure 19: Romare Bearden, *Spring Way*, 1964



The post-Civil War artist and Civil Rights activist, Herman Kofi Bailey (1931 – 1981) gave a new direction to black art, with the philosophy of pan-Africanism. His work was inspired and motivated by the direct involvement in the social and political life of the international black community. His work provides a more global perspective of blackness about birth, life, experience, and death (Lewis, 1978, p. 134). Bailey employed both geometrical and figurative elements to produce iconic power of expression, these features can be seen in his painting *The Unity* (see figure 20) (Bailey, n.d.). This mixed media painting is a symbol of black unity and exhibits a black single figure with a heroic presence trying to reach for the star and crescent. During the late 1960s, many African American artists reacted to institutional racism in the United States. They have used their creativity against what they viewed in US segregated society.

Figure 20: Herman Kofi Bailey Unity 1970



To get the attention of the US large audience, Black visual artists started to use the national flag as a visual symbol to showcase their discontent over the prevailing unjust of African American community. Cliff Joseph (1922-2017) is one of them who raised his voice and protested against societal discrimination against Black Americans. Joseph is highly conscious of the social and political problems of the modern world and highlights these through his creativity. His surrealist painting *My country Right or Wrong* (see figure 21) represented Americans as blinded by US Flag, standing on the skeletons. This painting describes the destruction and violence created in the name of Patriotism or United States imperialism (Lewis, 1978, p. 148).

Figure 21: Cliff Joseph, *My country Right or Wrong*, 1968



It is witnessed that post-Civil War period the expressions became bold, self-expressive, and colour choices became more catchy, appealing, and vibrant. Post-Civil War painting reflected obvious and more abrupt colour changes which, indirectly indicate creativity, greater self-expression, and assertion of African heritage and identity. The Black artists in the post-Civil War period used these lines to become more distinguished and demonstrate their African origin and identity. The changes give a strong feeling of a challenge to the prevalent artistic traditions, quest for distinction and uniqueness, and demonstration of centuries-old African identity and signature. The artists started painting everyday life instead of European subjects, landscapes, and portraits. The subjects depicted vibrancy, greater integration into mainstream life, and the identity of Black Americans. Similarly, the art was used as a medium to bring added respect to the Black community, highlight racial discrimination and advocate for equal rights and status for the Blacks. The art was used to break the stereotypes around Black Americans and educate and inform wider society about African identity. The work and contributions of Black activists and the community were magnified through artwork. This reflects the courage and perseverance of Black artists that made them experiment with new techniques and subjects. This contributed in terms of enriching mainstream American art and simultaneously provided the Black artists a unique identity, which consequently lead to the emergence of Black signature art. This indicates that African Americans used art for self-expression and post-civil art had a strong linkage with their societal condition. This is further strengthened by Dewey's thoughts that art is a way of self-expression and expression that comes from individuals' experiences, living conditions, and societies that surround them.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Afro-Americans, who were brought to the US as slaves, experienced suppression and exclusion. The experiences rooted in slavery did work to constrain the creativity and artistic expressions of African American artists. The use of timid lines, and limited colour ranges, depicted a lack of confidence in experimentation. The study concludes that these expressions were driven by the peculiar socio-economic makeup and experiences (featuring exclusion, discrimination, dependency, and fear) of the Afro-American community in the pre-Civil War period. The post-Civil War period brought significant changes in the socio-economic profile (in terms of access to rights, educational attainments, and economic success) of Afro-Americans. This did start to change their aesthetics and artistic choices. A critical review of the artwork suggests that the artistic expressions and preferences became more identity-sensitive and heritage centric. This became evident from the changes in themes, techniques, and influences. Afro-American art became more impressive, experimental, and unique in terms of its wide range of themes, bold and appealing colour preferences, and strong, rigid, and distorted lines. Moreover, the style form changed from realism and romanticism to impressionism, expressionism, abstract expressionism, and cubism. It appears that the artists took a departure from mainstream influences which had restricted experimentation and limited choices in themes and techniques. Their work gradually moved away from the predominant

European style of painting and started to demonstrate experimentation of blending in the African heritage and life experiences in the US.

The study concludes that the greater integration of Afro-Americans in the mainstream society did contribute to the trigger of a different worldview of the community – in terms of a greater confidence and assertion of unique identity. Their artistic expressions denote greater assertion of unique past, racial identity, and acceptance of differences with the majority group i.e., White Americans. A deeper look at the socio-economic transition of Afro- Americans during the post-Civil War suggests that both social and economic changes reinforced each other. The freedom to move freely i.e., migration, essentially an element of the social sphere, opened up new opportunities for those Afro-Americans who moved to the relatively urban North and consequently contributed to Afro-American economic independence and affluence. The public policy and targeted social development plans e.g., WPA and Freedmen Bureau created an enabling environment and provided the impetus to the acquisition of education, and training amongst minority youth and hence facilitated greater integration into mainstream society. Furthermore, the communal identity became stronger and support mechanisms emerged e.g., Harlem Renaissance Movement, Harmon Foundation, etc, within the community to leverage and channel talent, energies, and creative potential for the greater good of the community.

Art has been a powerful tool for African Americans from slavery to emancipation and later empowerment. In the pre-Civil War period, exclusion, economic dependency, and social discrimination rooted in slavery impacted the Afro-American creativity and disconnected them from black culture. Even African freedmen also remained unrecognized, moreover, European artistic influence on their artwork subdued them from personal expressions. However, their crafts, agricultural skill, cultural dance, and music kept their tradition alive to some extent and contribute to the development of colonial society. In post-Civil War period, the transition in socio-economic conditions, and the emergence of the black urban middle class change their focus toward re-conceptualizing the African-American identity. A surge of black consciousness and to counter negative perception accelerate their efforts to define and glorify a distinctive African American identity in their work. Perhaps an exploration of African identity could give them dignity, self-confidence, status, and recognition that was overlooked by white supremacy for centuries in US society. African Americans artistic choices changed and represented the African-American subjects, African heritage, and communal identity to illustrate a sense of cultural pride. This enables them to integrate and contribute to US mainstream culture and counter the stereotypical images associated with black. The visual image during Harlem Renaissance demonstrates a spirit of the black experience and a new African American identity that later took increasingly political dimensions. The civil rights movement provided the majority of African American artists to do more than celebrate cultural heritage. Now art become for African Americans a vehicle for social and political change as well as a means to fight against segregation policies in US society. Now they embraced art to protect racial equality against an unjust system. African American artists used various styles to express their political ideas.

The study concludes that the post-Civil War economic and social changes in the lives of African Americans did contribute to the emergence of Afro-American signature art. The artwork became a tool for personal expression, communal identity, and to express political ideas – featuring the daily injustices, struggles, and exploitation that Afro-Americans were going through. Moreover, the philosophical thoughts of John Dewey strengthened the argument that art can serve for self-expression that other mediums cannot communicate effectively. Dewey also stresses art's role in building identities and bridging the gap between communities for a peaceful society. As African Americans, the community used art for communal identity to break down the stereotypical image, exclusion, and racial discrimination they have been experiencing for centuries in US society. For them, recognition as equal US citizens can be achieved by highlighting and communicating their concerns. Art as a soft power becomes a powerful instrument for African Americans to bring justice. by addressing their problems. Themes that emerged in pre-and-post-Civil War bring in strong evidence that establishes a correlation between the socio-economic transformation of African Americans and their artistic expressions. The study concludes that the artwork did contribute to unifying the community and galvanizing larger support, which culminated in the realization of the long-standing demand for equal rights i.e., the success of the civil rights movement in 1965.

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