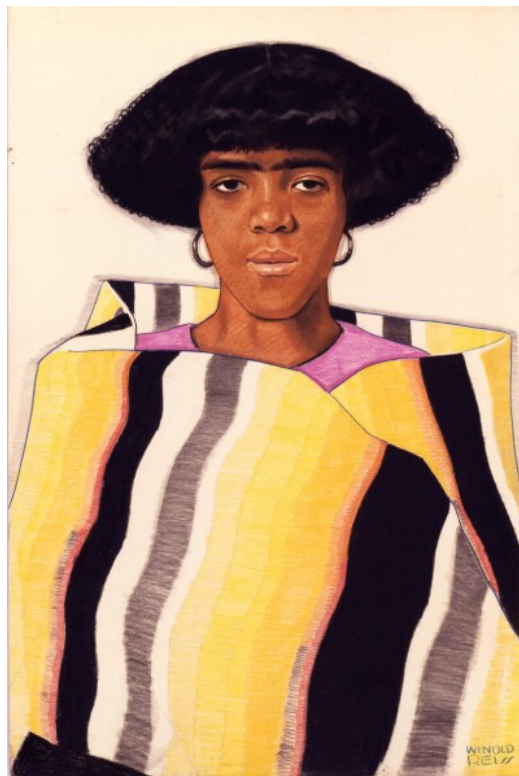


“Folklorist of the Brush and Palette”: Rare Winold Reiss Exhibition Features Distinct, Illuminating Portraits of Harlem Figures

by [Victoria L. Valentine](#) on May 3, 2018 • 8:58 am



WINOLD REISS, “Harlem Girl with Blanket,” circa 1925

FORTY WORKS BY A HARLEM LEGEND are on view in midtown Manhattan. [“Winold Reiss Will Not Be Classified”](#) at Hirschl & Adler gallery presents works spanning the German American artist’s four decade career. **Winold Reiss** (1886–1953) was variously considered an artist, designer, illustrator, architect, printmaker, and muralist. The exhibition, the first comprehensive presentation of Reiss’s work in three decades, features oil paintings, watercolors, pastels, prints and drawings that capture a range of subjects, including a handful of works about Harlem.

Reiss famously made portraits of W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke. Nearly a century ago, Locke edited a special issue of *Survey Graphic* dedicated to black artistic expression. The March 1925 edition of the social science journal was full of essays by writers and intellectuals such as Du Bois, Albert C. Barnes, Arthur Schomburg, who were shaping the cultural discourse, and selections by young African American poets, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Anne Spencer, and Jean Toomer, who would come to define the Harlem Renaissance.



The seminal publication was both a literary and visual record. Titled [“Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,”](#) the issue was illustrated by Reiss, who contributed stylized portraits of Harlem figures, Art Deco graphics, and a cover portrait of Roland Hayes, the composer and tenor vocalist regarded as the first internationally recognized African American concert performer. Hayes was 37 at the time and inside the publication his portrait was captioned, “Roland Hayes: Whose achievement as a singer symbolizes the promise of the younger generation.”

A section titled “Four Portraits of Negro Women” featured four full-page illustrations by Reiss. “Harlem Types,” a three-page spread devoted to portraits of a range of subjects, includes text by Locke. About the artist and his work, he wrote:

His art owes its peculiar success as much to the philosophy of his approach as to his technical skill. He is a folk-artist of the brush and palette, seeking always the folk character back of the individual, the psychology behind the physiognomy. In design also he looks not merely for decorative elements, but for the pattern of the culture from which it sprang. Without loss of naturalistic accuracy and individuality, he somehow subtly expresses the type, and without being any the less human, captures the racial and local. What Gauguin and his followers have done for the Far East, and the work of Ufer and Blumenschein and the Taos school for the Pueblo and Indian, seems about to be done for the Negro and Africa: in short, painting, the most local of arts, in terms of its own limitations even, is achieving universality.

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— Alain Locke

After the *Survey Graphic* project, Locke published a follow up book later that year. “The New Negro” (1925) featured writings by Hughes, Cullen, Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston, among many others. Reiss was enlisted to illustrate this historic volume, too, along with Miguel Covarrubias, and Aaron Douglas, who was a student of Reiss.

Decades later, the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery (NPG) explored the artist’s vast body of early 20th century portraits. [“To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss”](#) (1989–90) featured his images of African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, both well-known figures and ordinary men and women. The portrait of Hayes that appeared on the cover of *Survey Graphic* was on view in the exhibition. Jeffrey C. Stewart authored [the catalog](#) published to accompany the NPG show. “Harlem Girl with Blanket,” a striking portrait of an African American woman with an angular bob, graces the cover of the catalog.

Stewart discussed the timeliness of Reiss’s Harlem portraits and the skill and sensitivity he brought to the illustrations. In the introduction to [the catalog](#) he wrote: “A German immigrant had ironically stumbled onto a Black American community suddenly brimming with racial consciousness and a desire for dignified self-representation. Yet this meeting was more than fortuitous, for Reiss had always been interested in documenting racial types as a means to illuminate the distinctions and integrity of different ethnic groups. His restrained, objective renderings became mirrors that reflected both individuals and the culture they embodied.”

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— Jeffrey C. Stewart



WINOLD REISS (1886–1953), “Composition IV,” n.d. (tempera on paper, 19 7/8 x 14 7/8 in.) |
Courtesy Hirschl & Adler

THE SON OF A PAINTER, Reiss was born in Karlsruhe, Germany. Early on he studied with his father and then received formal training in Munich, where he studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Applied Arts. He was in his late 20s when he emigrated to the United States in 1913. Based in New York, he designed hotel and restaurant interiors. Exploring the West that animated his childhood, Reiss traveled to Montana where he made portraits of Native Americans. On a six-week adventure to Mexico, his subjects were Mexican revolutionaries and descendants of the Aztecs. During a trip home in 1921, he captured compelling Germans and Swedes he encountered. Back in New York, his portraits depicted Asian American artists and students and Harlem’s ordinary citizens and cultural elite.

Concurrent with the Harlem issue of Survey Graphic, 37 portraits of Harlem’s African American residents by Reiss were exhibited at the New York Public Library on 135th Street (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). According to Stewart, the show was the first-ever major presentation of black portraits in New York City.

The exhibition at Hirschl & Adler is also a groundbreaker, the first gallery show to consider the artist’s broad oeuvre in 30 years. While Reiss is not widely known, select curators, scholars, and collectors are very familiar with his work.

I asked Hirschl & Adler how the exhibition came about and Tom Parker, the gallery’s associate director, gave me the backstory. “We always knew of Reiss’s work but did not become deeply engaged with it until we did a show in 2002 of work by one of his students, Ruth Light Braun (1906–2003). It was in that context that we reached out to the Reiss estate and learned more about the full range of Reiss’s work,” Parker said by email.

We were struck by the quality and beauty across so many mediums and subjects. The artist was so versatile and seemed extraordinarily adept at everything he tried. The estate’s commitment to scholarship and to the artist’s legacy has made them a pleasure to work with. We’ve wanted to do a show for more than a decade and finally the timing and situation was right as we inaugurate [our new space](#) in the Art Deco-designed Fuller Building.

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The works on view are sourced from the artist’s estate, private collections, and the gallery’s inventory. The artist’s Harlem works, including “Harlem Girl with Blanket,” compose a fraction of the exhibition. Nonetheless, Hirschl & Adler emphasizes their importance when considering the full-measure of Reiss’s practice and influence.

“Starting in 1925, Reiss painted memorable, and in some instances, iconic, portraits of such stalwarts of the Harlem Renaissance as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, and Zora Neale Hurston among a host of others. But not all of Reiss’s portrait subjects were prominent figures. As he had always done, in all the places he traveled and worked, Reiss painted portraits of people whose faces ‘spoke’ to him. ...While Reiss’s portraiture was important to the Harlem Renaissance, it was by no means his sole contribution to this seismic cultural upheaval. He was also the teacher of Aaron Douglas (1899–1979). The style that Douglas devised under Reiss blended influences from African sculpture and masks along with contemporary European currents like cubism. Douglas went on to become the iconic artist of the Harlem Renaissance. Reiss’s modernist incorporation of African art forms into his contemporary designs permeated the entirety of the Harlem Renaissance’s visual aesthetic. Interpretation of Harlem Jazz I (private collection) along with Untitled are among a group of his so called ‘imaginatives,’ ink drawings that convey the brio, the exhilaration, and the urbanity of jazz in graphic form. The inclusion of African masks and other forms signal Reiss’s ethnographic interest in non-Western arts and cultures, and his belief that a new American art could be formed out of their artistic traditions.”

Reiss is represented in the collections of [many institutions](#), including the National Portrait Gallery where his [image of Hayes](#) is currently on view. It is rare, however, to see his work in a commercial gallery. [“Winold Reiss Will Not Be Classified”](#) presents a unique opportunity to experience the German-born artist’s distinct vision of the American subject. **CT**

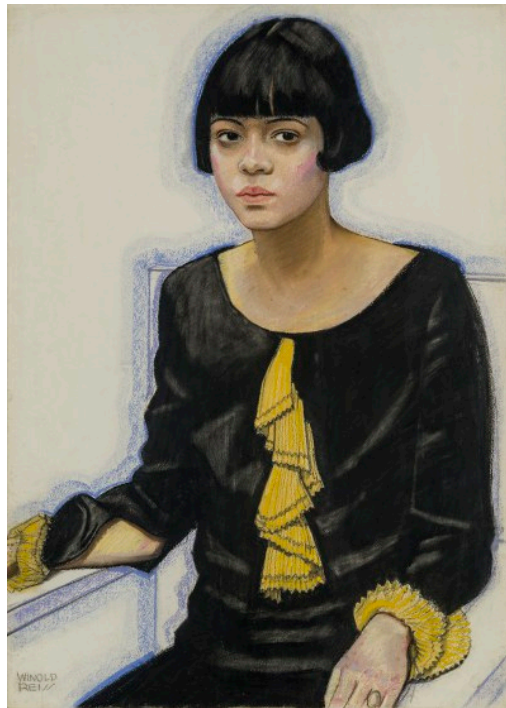
LEARN MORE [about Winold Reiss](#) on the website maintained by his estate

TOP IMAGE:

WINOLD REISS (1886–1953), “Harlem Girl with Blanket,” c. 1925
(pastel on illustration board, 29 3/4 x 20 in.) |
Private Collection, Courtesy Reiss Archives

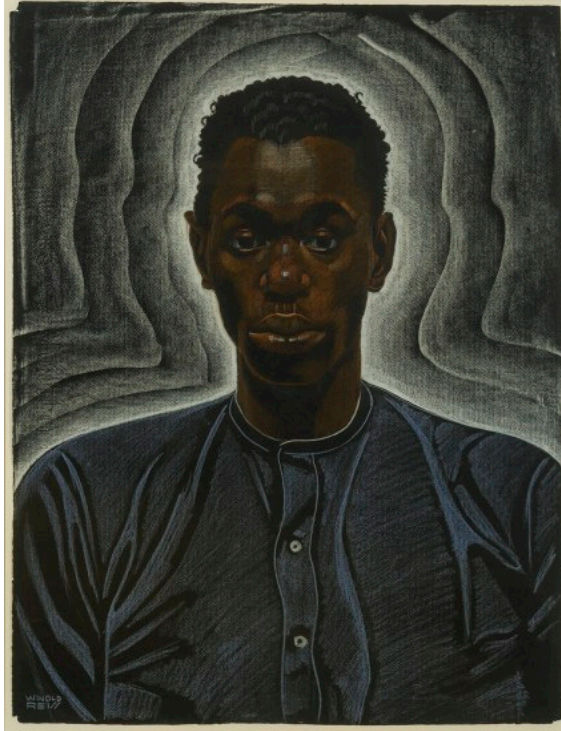
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[“The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke”](#) a biography by Jeffrey C. Stewart features a portrait of Locke by Winold Reiss on the cover. [“To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss”](#) documents the National Portrait Gallery exhibition curated by Stewart. In 1980, Black Classic Press, a black-owned publisher in Baltimore, re-published Locke’s 1925 edition of [Survey Graphic](#).



WINOLD REISS (1886–1953), “Portrait of Sari Patton,” 1925 (pastel on Whatman board, 30 x 21 1/2 in.) |
Courtesy Hirschl & Adler

Hirschl & Adler: “Portrait of Sari Price Patton, 1925, reveals a young woman who is the epitome of chic—strikingly attractive, tastefully coiffed and elegantly dressed in keeping with the latest standards in refined jazz-age beauty. Serious and self-possessed in mien, Patton is very much a representative of the elite strata of Harlem society, a group that was widely expected to generate the leadership that would lead the American Negro to an approaching future of legal equality and equal economic opportunity.”



*WINOLD REISS (1886–1953), “Short Haired Young Man in Collarless Shirt,” n.d.
(color pencil on black paper, 25 x 20 in.) |
Courtesy Hirschl & Adler*



*WINOLD REISS (1886–1953), “Harlem at Night,” 1925 (ink on paper, 19 3/4 x 14 3/4 in.) |
Private Collection, Courtesy Reiss Archives*