

“African American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now”

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Chicago has been a major center for design practice since the late nineteenth century. As graphic and product design in the city became more professionalized, it was dominated by middle-class white designers. Until recent years, almost all the African-American designers who did work in Chicago, with a few exceptions, operated predominantly outside the city's professional mainstream without recognition by the city's leading design organizations and cultural institutions.

Nonetheless, since the 1920s Chicago has had a rich tradition of African-American design, due to a unique complex of institutions – schools, art centers, businesses, and publications – that have provided both educational and professional opportunities for African-American designers. The fields they have worked in include graphic design and commercial art, advertising, display design, commercial photography, cartooning, lettering and sign painting, exhibition design, interior design, architecture, and the design of industrial products. At the same time, the city has been closed in many ways to African-American initiatives and the success that African-American designers have achieved has been due to their exceptional ingenuity, perseverance, and struggle.

Therefore, we cannot view this history in an ordinary way as a linear narrative of continuous design innovation. Instead it is inextricably bound up with issues of politics, economics, and race. Central to the story are questions of where African-American designers worked and what freedom they had to develop their own identity and voice. To consider these questions, I will use a concept of 'discursive space,' by which I mean a place where someone is able to speak and be recognized for who they are. What characterizes a particular discursive space is the freedom of the individual to speak there from within his or her own identity.

The history of African-American design in Chicago has involved three different discursive spaces; those where African-American designers could express their own identity freely; those where the right to express their identity had to be fought for, and those where they could not speak at all or, if they did speak they could not easily do so as African-Americans. Therefore, we have to consider a complex set of circumstances that both created and limited opportunities for black designers.

First I will discuss black discursive space where African-Americans had the autonomy to express their identity as they chose. Among the major organizations to occupy this space are the African-American newspapers including the *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Enterprise*, *Chicago Globe*, *Chicago Whip*, and *Chicago Bee*. A training ground for journalists as well as artists and photographers, the *Defender*, founded by Robert Abbott in 1905, spawned a long line of cartoonists including L.N. Hogatt, Leslie Rogers, Dan Day, Jay Jackson, Chester Commodore, and Jackie Ormes, the only woman among them. However, cartooning in the black press is not so sharply divided between hard hitting editorial cartoons and more light-hearted comic strips as it is in the mainstream press and thus cartooning within African-American visual culture plays an important social role. I have included cartoonists within a broad definition of design because their work has had a much closer relation to the development of African-American graphic designers and art directors than in other communities.

One of the most important organizations in Chicago's black discursive space is the Johnson Publishing Company, with its family of magazines including *Negro Digest*, *Ebony*, and *Jet*, as well as its book publishing

division. Designers like Herb Temple and the late Norman Hunter built their careers with Johnson Publishing, while others like Leroy Winbush and Vince Cullers gained valuable experience there.

A third component of Chicago's black discursive space is the historic complex of black businesses in Bronzeville. Allan Spear, in his excellent book *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, cites Anthony Overton as well as several others such as Jesse Binga as exemplars of Chicago's first black entrepreneurial class. Despite the burgeoning businesses of Overton and others, there was little response from African-American artists to these new opportunities for commercial work. One exception was Charles Dawson, an artist who graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who as early as 1923, established a studio in Bronzeville to provide illustration, lettering, and commercial art.

Besides working for banks and insurance companies such as Overton's Victory Life Insurance Company, Dawson designed ads for many firms that made cosmetics. For the Poro Schools of Beauty Culture he did a series of newspaper advertisements on Famous Black Beauties in History and Mythology and he drew newspaper ads as well for a company that made a hair straightener called Madagasco. A competitor of Dawson's was C.E.J. Fouch, at the time a principal in the C.E.J. Fouch Advertising Company. In Fouch's drawings, however, there is no sense of the advertisement as a unified design as we see in Dawson's work.

Another source of design activity in Bronzeville, was sign painting and lettering. And here we have long tradition that begins in the 1920s with the work of George Davenport, continues with outstanding sign painters like Frank Phillips and Mentrell Parker Sr., and is still alive today in the work of Vernon Guider.

However, while residents of Bronzeville in the 1920s could see the work of black cartoonists, black commercial artists such as Dawson, and black sign painters like Davenport and Phillips, they would also encounter images created by white designers such as the newspaper advertisements for race records by Paramount and other companies. Comparing these race advertisements with Dawson's ads, it is easy to see how much more dignified African-Americans appeared when drawn by a black illustrator.

Next, I would like to talk about the 'negotiated spaces,' where African-Americans have had to struggle for the right to represent themselves. One example is the Century of Progress Exhibition of 1933-34. While hardly a discursive space that welcomed and celebrated African-American contributions to American life, the exhibition did provide a modest opening for a design contribution - the Chicago Urban League's exhibit in the Social Science Pavilion, which was created by Charles Dawson. It also prompted a related project, the African and American Negro Exhibit which opened at the same time as the Century of Progress at the National Pythian Temple on the South Side.

Exhibit design was central to the planning of the American Negro Exhibition of 1940 which, after considerable political wrangling, was organized by the Diamond Jubilee Exhibition Authority. Funded initially by the Illinois General Assembly, the exhibition combined an aggregate of displays that showcased historical contributions of Negroes to American life. Though intended to produce a positive image of the American Negro, it was done within the integrationist discourse of the Roosevelt administration and, in fact, depended heavily on federally-appropriated funds. Charles Dawson played a central role in designing the exhibition under a tight deadline.

The American Negro Exhibition is extremely important as a design project that was carried out largely by African-Americans. We can understand how the integrationist discourse that shaped it was interpreted visually by comparing the official exhibition poster by Robert Savon Pious, an African-American graduate of the School of the Art Institute, with the cover by the Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas, for a more political journal called *Spark*.

Another 'negotiated space,' where African-Americans worked was the government-sponsored Works Progress Administration, which was created during the Depression of the 1930s and provided situations where white and black artists worked together. A considerable number of African-American artists worked for the Illinois Art Project, a part of the WPA, which included some divisions that related to design: posters, dioramas, applied arts, exhibition design, and advertising. However, even though African-American artists worked in poster division, their images were sometimes drawn by white artists as you see in this poster for the Illinois Writers Project by Cleo Sara, who headed the poster division for a time.

In Chicago, the WPA was instrumental in spawning the South Side Community Art Center, which opened in 1941 and played a central role in the development of African-American designers in Chicago. Today it is the only art center out of approximately one hundred established by the WPA that has survived. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Art Center was a place where African-American artists, young and old, could take classes, show their work, and meet for discussions. Although the Art Center began as a WPA-sponsored project, it redefined itself after the WPA ended and became a place whose programs were no longer shaped by government policies or programs.

Most of the African-American designers who came up in the 1940s and 1950s had some involvement with the Center, either as students, administrators, or participants in the many discussions about art that were held there. The Art Center was probably the most important place where black artists and designers could meet each other and was surely responsible for some of the networking that developed among the few black professionals in the graphic arts. One of the artists who was central to the Center's activities was William McBride, who was an art promoter more than an artist or designer but he did have a strong sense of style and produced important graphic works for the Center's Artists and Models Balls and for other projects such as the Mildred Haessler Dance Company whose program you see here.

And lastly, I want to speak about those predominantly white discursive spaces where African-Americans have studied and worked. First and foremost, they include the schools such as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Institute of Design, the Ray Vogue School of Art, and the American Academy of Art. African-Americans have studied art at the School of the Art Institute for a century and began to study commercial art and product design there with some frequency in the 1950s. The Institute of Design was founded initially as the New Bauhaus in 1937. Beginning in the late 1940s, after the death of its first director L. szl Moholy-Nagy, a number of African-American students came to the school to study both design and photography. These included Eugene Winslow and Fitzhugh Dinkins, Jim Taylor, Ted Williams, and Lacey Crawford. In this photo, you can see Winslow standing on the right and Dinkins sitting next to him. <>As you can see in this student sculpture by Winslow, he was engaged fully with the new language of abstract form that Moholy introduced at the school. Students at the School of Art Institute included Harold Rollins, Don Patton, Vince Cullers, Herb Temple, and Chuck Harrison. Others such as Tom Miller and Emmett McBain studied at the Ray Vogue School of Art or the American Academy of Art where, in the early 1950s, they were sometimes the only African-Americans besides the janitors.

Within Chicago's white discursive space, there was an insidious discourse that challenged the African-American's ability to function professionally in the white business environment. This overt prejudice closed doors for a number of talented African-American artists and designers. In the 1920s and 1930s, we have the examples of Archibald Motley and Ellis Wilson, both eminent artists who graduated from the School of the Art Institute, who were refused work by white design firms. Wilson was told that he would probably be able to work if he could find a white person to front for him.

A figure who inspired many young African-American commercial artists and cartoonists, precisely because he made it in the white commercial world, was E. Simms Campbell, who did much of his work for the white press notably the Chicago-based *Esquire* for which he designed the little Esky man who served as the magazine's logo for many years. Campbell might well have become *Esquire's* first art director had he not been on the wrong side of the color line. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and eventually landed in New York where Arnold Gingrich, *Esquire's* first editor found him. In his memoir, *Nothing But People*, Gingrich praises Campbell's drawings even to the point of writing that he distributed his sketches to white cartoonists in Chicago to use as inspiration.

Even by the 1950s, there were few employers in Chicago who were willing to hire a black designer, although a number of students had proven their abilities in the city's best art schools. After a number of rejections when he left Ray Vogue in the early 1950s, Tom Miller got a job at Morton Goldsholl Associates, one of the city's top design firms. He stayed with Goldsholl for more than 33 years. Though he won numerous industry awards, Miller always remained in the background even though he was responsible for some of Goldsholl's best-known projects such as the redesign of the 7UP packaging and identity program.

When he left the Institute of Design around 1951, Eugene Winslow joined a company that was owned by the father of a classmate. It was not one of the highly visible Chicago design offices where Winslow was certainly qualified to work but rather a more mundane firm that provided over all marketing services for its clients. After some years of working for offices owned by white people, Winslow returned to the black community to play a major role in development of the Afro Am Publishing Company. For the latter part of his career, he worked mainly for black clients as well as Afro Am, where he produced visual materials on outstanding African-Americans for use in schools.

In his career as a product designer in Chicago, Chuck Harrison was fortunate to find several mentors. He had been an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute in the early 1950s and then returned for graduate work in industrial design after his military service. He was the first student in the school's fledgling industrial design master's program but due to a lack of funds, he was unable to continue in the program and eventually found free-lance work at Sears. Harrison was finally offered a full-time job at Sears in 1961. He was the first African-American to be hired as a Sears executive and he remained with the company for thirty two years. Yet, despite his years of accomplished work for the company, Harrison was passed over for a promotion to head the industrial design department.

Leroy Winbush also spent many years working for white clients but as president of his own design firm, which had mostly black employees. As a young man, Winbush landed a position at Goldblatt's Department Store, where he became head of the section that produced window displays for all the company's branches. Initially the only African-American in this office, he learned to maintain a strong sense of professional authority in a white discursive space.

In 1946 he established Winbush Associates, which provided a full service that ranged across concept development, exhibit construction, lettering, and other forms of communication. Winbush had a sizeable facility and hired a large number of African-Americans to work with him. Much of his firm's work was designing window displays for the La Salle St. banks.

Winbush was also one of the few black designers to seek membership in the city's mainstream design organizations, the Society of Typographic Arts and the Chicago Art Directors Club. He became extremely active in both organizations, although it took him seven tries to gain acceptance to the Art Directors' Club where he eventually became President. Winbush occupies a special position in the history of African-

American design in Chicago because of the aggressive and ultimately successful stance he took to practicing in a white-dominated discursive space.

As you can see from my few examples, the story of African-American designers in Chicago is not a simple one. Using the concept of 'discursive space' we can begin to sort out the complex activities that form part of this little known but extremely significant part of Chicago's history.