



HARLEM RENAISSANCE

THROUGH AN LGBTQ LENS



A talented singer, dancer, and pianist, Gladys Bentley achieved great fame and wealth while at the same time transgressing gender norms. Dressed in her signature top-hat and tuxedo, Bentley headlined shows in the Cotton Club and the Apollo Theater.

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Writer, painter, and actor Richard Bruce Nugent was one of the only Harlem Renaissance artists who was open about his sexuality. Inspired by African culture, Nugent embraced a silhouette aesthetic in his artwork.

Richard Bruce Nugent (American, 1906-1987). Dancing Figures, ca. 1935.

Gift of Dr. Thomas H. Wirth, gift of Frederick J. Adler, by exchange, bequest of Richard J. Kempe, by exchange, and gift of Abraham Walkowitz, by exchange



Poet Countee Cullen was educated, religious, and able to appeal to both Black and White audiences. Several of his poems alluded to same-sex relationships. Cullen married, and later divorced, W. E. B. Du Bois's daughter, Yolande.

Carl Van Vechten Photographs, Library of Congress

A'Lelia Walker, daughter of self-made millionaire Madam C. J. Walker, was the host of lavish parties in her home on 136th Street in Harlem. A'Lelia's gatherings were a safe haven for people with diverse identities.

A'Lelia Walker's townhouse and beauty parlor

Byron Company (New York, N.Y.) / Museum of the City of New York. 93.1.1.10845



Bessie Smith was known as the "Empress of the Blues." According to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, she "was the highest-paid black performer of her day and arguably reached a level of success greater than that of any African-American entertainer before her." Smith had relationships with both men and women.

Carl Van Vechten, photographer. Portrait of Bessie Smith, Library of Congress

In the only issue of the literary magazine *Fire!!*, Richard Bruce Nugent published "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," the first published short story with homosexual themes by an African American. Other contributors to *Fire!!* included Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Bennett.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, published in 1926, with artwork by Aaron Douglas.

