



Alain Locke

ART OR PROPAGANDA?

Harlem, Vol. I, No. 1

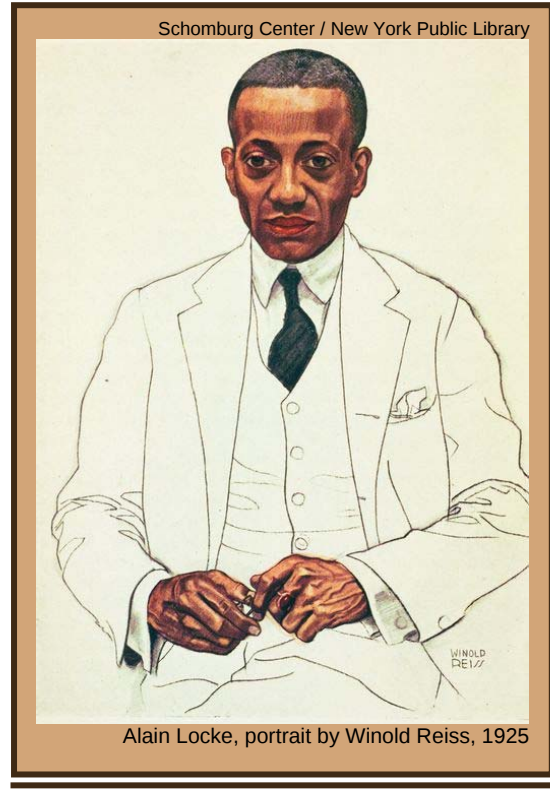
November 1928

Artistically it is the one fundamental question for us today, — Art or Propaganda. Which? Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing? I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment.

We have had too many Jeremiahs, major and minor; — and too much of the drab wilderness. My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naive or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression, — in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda.

The literature and art of the younger generation already reflects this shift of psychology, this regeneration of spirit. David should be its patron saint: it should confront the Phillistines with its five smooth pebbles fearlessly.¹ There is more strength in a confident camp than in a threatened enemy. The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way.

Our espousal of art thus becomes no mere idle acceptance of “art for art’s sake,” or cultivation of the last decadences of the over-civilized, but rather a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and of its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living. Not all of our younger writers are deep enough in the sub-soil of their native materials — too many are pot-plants seeking a forced growth according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public. It is the art of the people that needs to be cultivated, not the art of the coteries. Propaganda itself is preferable to shallow, truckling imitation. Negro things



National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Originally published in the first volume of the literary journal *Harlem*, November 1928. Reprinted in Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976/1994). Footnotes and image added by NHC. Portrait of Locke by Winold Reiss in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/imagecredits.htm.

¹ 1 Samuel 17: Biblical account of King David's victory over the Philistine warrior Goliath.

may reasonably be a fad for others; for us they must be a religion. Beauty, however, is its best priest and psalms will be more effective than sermons.

To date we have had little sustained art unsubsidized by propaganda; we must admit this debt to these foster agencies. The three journals which have been vehicles of most of our artistic expressions have been the avowed organs of social movements and organized social programs. All our purely artistic publications have been sporadic. There is all the greater need then for a sustained vehicle of free and purely artistic expression. If HARLEM should happily fill this need, it will perform an honorable and constructive service. I hope it may, but should it not, the need remains and the path toward it will at least be advanced a little.²

We need, I suppose in addition to art some substitute for propaganda. What shall that be? Surely we must take some cognizance of the fact that we live at the centre of a social problem. Propaganda at least nurtured some form of serious social discussion, and social discussion was necessary, is still necessary. On this side; the difficulty and shortcoming of propaganda is its partisanship. It is one-sided and often pre-judging. Should we not then have a journal of free discussion, open to all sides of the problem and to all camps of belief? Difficult, that, — but intriguing. Even if it has to begin on the note of dissent and criticism and assume Menckonian scepticism³ to escape the common-places of conformity. Yet, I hope we shall not remain at this negative pole. Can we not cultivate truly free and tolerant discussion, almost Socratically minded for the sake of truth? After Beauty, let Truth come into the Renaissance picture, — a later cue, but a welcome one. This may be premature, but one hopes not, — for eventually it must come and if we can accomplish that, instead of having to hang our prophets, we can silence them or change their lamentations to song with a Great Fulfillment.

² *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, a literary and arts magazine founded by black writer Wallace Thurman, folded after its second issue.

³ Henry Lewis Mencken, founder and editor of *American Mercury* (1925-1933), was famed for his satirical and acerbic commentary on American society.