Meta Warrick Fuller: A Female Perspective in the Harlem Renaissance

Grace E. Nelson
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Introduction:

The Harlem Renaissance was a collaborative movement, involving writers, performers, and visual artists who worked to promote the image of African Americans in the early 20th century. These artists wrestled with their identities as Americans and as people of the African Diaspora. Their work often alludes to Africa, and typically also alludes to tension between their two identities. Prominent figures including Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois paved the way for African Americans to use art to combat racial inequalities. In his essay “Enter The New Negro,” Alain Locke calls for African Americans to turn to the arts to overcome racial oppression. Locke had decided that “African Americans would save themselves politically through the creation of the arts.”\(^1\) Du Bois also understood that the arts were highly valued in America, and increased access to artistic education paired with the development of a black aesthetic was key to social progress.\(^2\) Du Bois worked to give artists a means to do so by promoting African American involvement in various expositions and exhibitions. Meta Warrick Fuller was one of few female artists working in this era. Fuller’s identities as both an African American and a woman made both her career and her success unlikely, but these identities served as powerful influences on her work.\(^3\) Fuller was supported by the encouragement of Du Bois, who called on her to create one of her most famous sculptures, *Ethiopia*, for the America’s Making Exposition of 1921 (Figure 1).

The art historian Renée Ater notes that her interest in Fuller began with the sculpture *Ethiopia* because she wanted to understand why the work had become a primary object of focus in studies of Fuller. This paper demonstrates that *Ethiopia* exemplifies much of what made Fuller’s career important. The sculpture and its commission demonstrate influence from the prominent African American figure Du Bois, who worked to elevate black culture in America.
Fuller’s depiction of *Ethiopia* comes from a place of truth and experience that she was able to articulate having lived the experience of being an African American woman. *Ethiopia* stands for a fair depiction of a black woman, for the identity conflict felt by the people of the African Diaspora, and for the importance of giving a voice to artists with different stories to tell. The prominent display of the sculpture in the 1921 America’s Making Exposition for which it was commissioned allowed the sculpture to stand for the awakening of this marginalized group.

Education and Influences:

Fuller’s race and gender made her education both unlikely and remarkable. After the Civil War, there were more opportunities for women to pursue professional art careers. Schools were reluctant to turn down female students because they were valuable sources of revenue. Fuller received a three-year scholarship to attend the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts (PMSIA), which is now the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She started classes in 1896, studying courses that were standard in nineteenth century art schools, which emphasized the acquisition of technical expertise. Fuller also studied French and attended lectures on art history, perspective, original design, color harmony, and anatomy and that her diaries from this period “reveal a happy young woman engaged with her friends, school, and church.” Even though female students were accepted, they still faced barriers. Schools were known to direct women toward decorative arts because painting and sculpture were considered masculine, and male instructors and students were known to respond to female students with hostility. Critics disparaged them as “girl art students” and “women artists,” and they had limited access to nudes in life drawing classes. Fuller’s artistic education continued and improved after PMSIA when she, like many young artists in the early twentieth century, headed to Paris.
In Paris, Fuller found opportunities that had not been available to her in America. She took private instructions in Paris and later enrolled at the Academie Colarossi, where she was able to work from live models in classes that included both men and women. She was advised by the American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens that most Americans who came to Paris needed to study life drawing and that she should not take any sculpture classes for six months. In Paris, Fuller visited and learned from the collections of both sculpture and painting at the Louvre, Musée de Cluny, and Luxembourg Museum as well as the public monuments in the city. The city afforded Fuller new freedoms; she could set her own hours, meet colleagues, and immerse herself in her work without distractions. Ater explains that the ability to make her own choices during this period was liberating and that this three year interlude in Paris “set her apart from many African American women of her generation and class who were constantly chaperoned, who married immediately after finishing high school or college, or who worked as teachers in black schools.” Paris continued to provide opportunities for Fuller throughout her stay, and it was in Paris that she had meetings that would come to define her as an artist.

One of these meetings was with the sculptor Auguste Rodin, whom Fuller had been determined to meet. The German painter Jelka Rosen wrote a letter of introduction to Rodin on Fuller’s behalf. Rodin’s “emotive and sensual aesthetic” and “modernist approach to content and form” were especially attractive to Fuller. Rodin’s influence freed her from the constraints of academic sculpture and lead her to find new methods of expression in three dimensions. She returned to some of the darker themes she had worked with at PMSIA, where her work had been described as being inclined toward the gruesome. Fuller’s work evoked strong emotions, and Rodin’s “impressionistic modeling” influenced her own handling of surfaces; she started to leave signs of her hands having worked in the materials. Rodin’s influence on Fuller can be
demonstrated through the compositional similarities between Rodin’s *Crouching Woman* and Fuller’s *The Talking Skull* (Figures 2-3). Fuller’s bronze figure emerges from its base in a similar expressive manner, recalling both Rodin’s technique and artistry. Ater notes that later, African American biographers often wrote about Fuller’s meeting with Rodin as a “transformative encounter between master and anointed student” and also described Fuller as a “‘genius’ on par with Rodin.”

Fuller’s life in Paris had been productive, full of opportunity, and influential for her artistic career, but upon her return to the United States, Fuller found that her identities as both black and female clashed with her artistic aspirations. When she returned to Philadelphia in 1902, Fuller was met with rejection. Galleries told her that they were looking to buy “Old Master” paintings and were not interested in domestic work. Ater suggests that this explanation concealed the real reasons for Fuller’s rejection. She writes that the gallery system “validated a masculine ideal of creativity and genius” and excluded women from the art market. Ater also notes that race would have played a role in rejection because American life had become more segregated and focused on white superiority and black inferiority.

Fuller’s artistic career was put on hold altogether when she and her husband started their family. She met Solomon Carter Fuller in Boston in 1906 and agreed to marriage, though she required a long engagement so that she could continue her artistic career. After their marriage in 1909, Fuller’s identity as a woman stood at odds with her identity as an artist. Ater notes that Fuller often had to “subordinate her identity as an artist to that of wife and mother” and this made the conflict between the public and private spheres she inhabited difficult to negotiate. As a married woman with children, Fuller was expected to take care of the home. Middle-class women like Fuller’s peers considered the home a “feminine site of purity and virtue” and black
women bought into the idea that mothers were important as “caretakers of the home and thus caretakers of the race.” Fuller was under great cultural pressure to forsake her identity as an artist for that of a mother, at least temporarily.

The paradoxical political context of the time gave new life to Fuller’s career. Two different world views existed in the Progressive Era. Progressives pushed for social and economic reform, however, they were not as concerned with civil rights as their agenda let on. They often overlooked civil rights and “endorsed segregation as a means to mitigate social conflict and maintain social order.” Race was a “blind spot” for Progressives, who ultimately asserted ideas of black inferiority and white superiority. This political climate provided the context for Fuller to focus her work on racial issues.

Fuller became involved in social justice movements, bringing together her identities as an African American and as a woman to inform her work. She was a member of the Equal Suffrage League in Framingham and participated in suffrage marches. She used her artistic talents to create a medallion for the league to use for fund-raising. Fuller was also involved in protests against the screening of The Birth of a Nation. In 1916 she became involved with the Woman’s Peace Party, and the message of peace resonated in her artistic work. Fuller’s activism translated into her artwork when she learned about the lynching of a pregnant woman, Mary Turner, in the magazine Crisis. She memorialized Turner in sculpture, depicting her neatly coiffured and fully dressed while holding her child (Figure 4). It had been common to see brutal depictions of male lynching in prints and paintings, but Fuller opted for a depiction that would emphasize “the power of Turner’s spirit.” Turner’s figure emerges from the tumultuous base, and later Fuller would depict the figure Ethiopia similarly emerging from her wrapped base.
America’s Making Exposition:

One effort to combat social issues took the form of participation in expositions. Expositions and World’s Fairs were used to signal the strength of the United States from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Art played a significant role in these expositions starting with the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition. Artists were invited to participate and received commissions to create sculptures and murals. Planners incorporated art that “celebrated a distinctive American artistic vision” and promoted works as “means to cultivate order, morals, and proper conduct.”24 African Americans had been invited to participate in designated ways. For example, the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair limited their participation to “Colored American Day.” The 1895 Atlanta Exposition had a separate Negro building, which was funded with government appropriations. The exposition “established a precedent for black exhibits in separate spaces.”25 It was followed by later expositions including the 1897 Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition and the 1901-2 South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Exposition. Thomas Calloway and W.E.B. Du Bois saw expositions as an opportunity to make a case for “true enfranchisement of African Americans.”26 Ater explains the significance of African American participation in such exhibitions:

Public discussion of the ‘Negro problem’ during the Progressive era generally understood that term to mean the educational, social, political, and economic disparities of African Americans relative to the white population in the post-slavery era…Exhibitions at world’s fairs and expositions gave black elites the opportunity to show, with empirical evidence, how they had solved the ‘Negro problem’ by self-improvement and social uplift.27

Calloway and Du Bois sought out Fuller to play this role of demonstrating self-improvement and social uplift specifically for the America’s Making Exposition in 1921.

Fuller first met Calloway and Du Bois in Paris. They had been in the city to organize and install the American Negro Exhibit at the Palace of Social Economy for the Paris Exhibition
Universalle of 1900. Du Bois called on Fuller one night and invited her to a dinner for African Americans who were visiting the exhibition. As exhibit organizer for the “Americans of Negro Lineage” section of the America’s Making Exposition, Du Bois called on Fuller again. The exposition was seen as an opportunity to present black history and culture, and Fuller’s sculpture could do so from a place of personal experience and truth. For Du Bois, Fuller’s life experience, including her social standing, education, faith, and upbringing, qualified her to be a member of the “Talented Tenth,” the segment of the African American population whom Du Bois viewed as uniquely fit to lead the race. Du Bois thought Fuller was perfectly suited to create art for the African American community, and through her work, she would contribute to a “new image of African Americans in the early twentieth century.”

Ethiopia:

Art historian Pauline De Souza cites Fuller’s training and experience as having enabled her to create the representational figure for the exposition: Ethiopia (Figure 2). Fuller’s neoclassical training enabled her to create a body whose physiognomy reflected the ethnographical scholarship available in the nineteenth century. De Souza explains that commonplace stereotypes were based on body shape and physiognomy; thick lips and the size of a person’s skull would “describe the character of a negro and define him or her as untrustworthy” and that archaeology tended to bolster these ideas, describing the culture and lifestyle of “’primitive’ people as stagnant.” Part of the overall mission of the Harlem Renaissance was to challenge such ideas, and Fuller was sought after because she could “fairly and convincingly portray black history and the black body.” Ethiopia is the featured image for the section of the exposition’s book on “Americans of Negro Lineage,” and the sculpture is described as a “symbolic statue of the emancipation of the Negro race.” This was not exactly what Fuller had
intended. She described her intentions for the statue: “Here was a group (Negro) who had once made history and now after a long sleep was awaking, gradually unwinding the bandage of its mummied past and looking out on life again, expectant but unafraid and with at least a graceful gesture.”

Fuller’s access to information about African art inspired and informed the depiction of the allegorical *Ethiopia*. She explained that the reasoning for the Egyptian motif was that the most brilliant period of Egyptian history was the period of the Negro kings, alluding to the Kushite kings in Egypt from 712 to 664 BCE. Fuller would have likely learned about this history from the magazine, *Crisis*, which had published excavations of Egyptian and Nubian art in the Sudan. Fuller would have also likely seen the collection of Egyptian artifacts at the Louvre while she lived in Paris. In Framingham, she would have had access to the collection at Boston’s Museum of Art, which held the statue of King Menkaure and his queen at the time (Figure 5). In 1911, *Crisis* reported on archaeological excavations in the Sudan and informed readers of the discovery of the ancient city of Meroe. Ater argues that access to these resources contributed to Fuller’s realization of the figure of *Ethiopia*.

The America’s Making Exposition was focused on the contributions of immigrants to American society and on a “Progressive message of nationalism, unity, patriotism, and social order.” The Exposition was intended to promote an image of American unity through display of contributions and achievements by each group living in American. The Exposition was timely. Fear, distrust, and xenophobia had swept the county during the Red Scare of 1919-20. The Exposition was intended to foster good citizenship and advocate social harmony, but a belief in the supremacy of American culture underscored the rhetoric of the exhibition. African Americans had been invited to participate as “honorary immigrants,” and this interpretation of
history was not lost on the African American planners. However, they took the opportunity to participate through the ‘Americans of Negro Lineage’ section to present black history and culture. Participation in the exhibition was part of a continued fight for civil rights, including full rights of citizenship and empowerment. The exposition book states that the exhibit was intended to symbolize the origin of the race in Africa and demonstrate its progress in America, noting contributions of labor, personal service, and music with more recent increases in population, literacy rates, teaching positions, and money spent on education in 53 years of freedom.

The title *Ethiopia* refers to both a historical and current connection to the African continent. Ater explains the all-encompassing nature of the title:

*Ethiopia* emerged at the nexus of African Americans’ intense interest in Egypt as well as in Ethiopia as essential ingredients in shaping social consciousness and in creating a positive and profound history. In order to fulfill the desire for a future in American society, the past had to be excavated for signs of the important positions of blacks in the creation of civilization.

*Ethiopia* is an allegory, and a symbol for the duality of identity that Harlem Renaissance artists sought to portray. Fuller’s *Ethiopia* drew attention to the “longevity of black culture heritage and bridged past achievements with present aspirations.” The sculpture was placed at the entrance to the Americans of Negro Lineage section and served as its focal point. *Ethiopia* has been interpreted as a Pan-Africanist work, and as “symbolizing a reawakening of African diasporic identity.” Ater argues that Fuller’s sculpture “reconceived the black body and history and proposed a modern black identity,” which gives the figure continued resonance.

After a 1998 show on the Harlem Renaissance, Art Historian Richard Powell made the following observation about Fuller’s *Ethiopia*:

This figure, looming from a cocoon-like sculptural base, gave concrete form and signification to the uprooting and resettlement process experienced by blacks in the early twentieth century… This diasporal-wide arousal, akin to a reawakening, was the rediscovery of an African identity that had been submerged under decades of peonage, servitude and stultifying tradition, but was now freed from a chrysalis-like state in order
to explore and interact with an industrialized world and see the self and other peoples of African ancestry in a new light.\textsuperscript{45}

Powell’s observation illuminates Ater’s idea about why Ethiopia embodies an identity that continues to resonate with audiences. She writes, “In the twenty-first century, Ethiopia prevails as a powerful symbol because it importantly locates black history in time and space, and it continues to epitomize the soul and self-determination of the peoples of the African Diaspora.”\textsuperscript{46}

Ater’s treatment of Fuller seeks to solidify Fuller’s place in history as one of the most important African American artists.


3 She was Meta Vaux Warrick before her marriage to Solomon Carter Fuller. See fn 17. For continuity and clarity, I refer to her as Fuller throughout.


5 An Independent Woman: The Life and Art of Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968) (Boston: Danforth Museum of Art, December 16, 1984- February 24, 1985)


7 Ater, "Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia", 56.
8 Ater, Remaking Race and History, 16.
9 Ibid., 16-17.
10 Ater, Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia, 56.
11 Ater, Remaking Race and History, 17.
12 Ibid., 20.
13 Ibid., 18-19.
14 Ibid., 14.
15 Ibid., 18-19.
16 Ibid., 20.
17 Ibid., 23.
18 Ibid., 25.
19 Ibid., 11.
21 Ibid., 3.
22 Ibid., 32.
23 Ibid., 33.
24 Ibid., 4.
25 Ibid., 4-5.
26 Ibid., 5.
27 Ibid., 5.
29 Ater, Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia, 58.
30 Ibid., 58.
32 Ater, Remaking Race and History, 35.
33 "The book of America’s Making Exposition."
34 Ater, Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia, 59.
35 Ibid., 59.
36 Ibid., 59.
37 Ibid., 59.
38 Ibid., 53.
39 Ibid., 65.
40 Ibid., 55.
41 "The book of America’s Making Exposition."
42 Ater, Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia, 78.
43 Ibid., 55.
44 Ibid., 53.
46 Ater, Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia, 78.
Bibliography


Figure 1: Meta Warrick Fuller, *Ethiopia*, 1921, bronze 67x16x29 in
Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library
Figure 2: Auguste Rodin, *Crouching Woman*, 1906-8, bronze

Figure 3: Meta Warrick Fuller, *The Talking Skull*, 1939, bronze
Figure 4: Meta Warrick Fuller, *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, 1919, painted plaster
15 x 5 ¼ x 4 ½ in
Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket
Figure 5: Egyptian Old Kingdom, King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490-2472 B.C.E., greywacke
142.2 x 55.2 cm
Boston Museum of Fine Arts