

CHARLES HENRY ALSTON, American (1907-1977), b. Charlotte, North Carolina. Youngest of 5 children. Father died when he was 3. Mother later married Harry Bearden, uncle of artist Romare Bearden. Romare Bearden and Alston referred to each other as cousins. Alston spent most of his childhood in New York.



EDUCATION/INFLUENCES

- Offered a scholarship to Yale University School of Fine Arts but chose to attend Columbia University.
- BA from Columbia in 1929 and MA from Columbia's Teaching College. Later attended Pratt Institute (1944-45) to study commercial art to earn more money.
- Influenced by Mexican muralists Jose Clement Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Did several murals himself. Influenced by African Art, Picasso and Modigliani.

BIG IDEAS/THEMES

- Was a teacher as well as an artist. Encouraged and fostered a young Jacob Lawrence at his first job as Director of the Boys' Program at the Utopia House in Harlem.
- Founded Studio 306 in Harlem which offered classes for children and adults. It became a center for black artists, writer, actors and musicians. Alston also taught Charles White, Bob Blackburn as well as Bearden and Lawrence. Studio 306 eventually became the Harlem Artists Guild.
- Pioneer-1st African-American to teach at the Art Students League. 1st African-American supervisor of the WPA. 1st African-American to be appointed to the Art Commission of NYC, which awarded public sculpture and mural commissions. During WWII, Alston worked for the Office of War Information drawing cartoons to encourage African-American support for the war. The cartoons showed contributions by African-America to the war effort.
- 1950s-finally got recognition as an abstract painter when one of his paintings won a national juried competition and was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- His style varied throughout his career but the influence of African art was often detected. He didn't like to be pigeonholed. Figures have angular features like African masks. Paintings often have sculptural qualities.
- Themes were pretty consistent: the family, the blues, African themes and protest. Alston's subjects were always connected to the African American culture.

KIA Work-*Untitled (Couple)*, 1945

- In this work, Alston combined Cubist, Abstract and Figurative painting techniques to capture a brief interlude between a musician and a patron. The setting depicted was likely based on Alston's experience in one of the dozens of NYC Jazz cafes. Alston had intimate knowledge of jazz and its leading musicians during the Harlem Renaissance. Friends with Duke Ellington and even illustrated an album cover for him.
- He began painting Jazz themes in 1930 and returned to the topic in 1950.