New Exhibit "Harlem Renaissance: As Gay as It was Black"

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In the 1920s and 1930s, New York City's Harlem was the focal point of the so-called New Negro Movement, which sparked the Jazz Age and an incredible revolution in art, fashion, literature and music. According to the preeminent African-American historian Henry Louis Gates, the Harlem Renaissance was "as much gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these."

Many artists of the Renaissance were white, but others such as writer Langston Hughes (below) and singer Bessie Smith referred to same-sex attractions in their work. Their art, as well as other artists, are featured in a new exhibit, "The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay as It Was Black" at Florida Atlantic University.

Rod Haywood at The Sun Sentinel:

"The photo panels highlight writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, singer Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, dancer Josephine Baker, comedian Jackee "Mamie" Mobley and many others who populated the north Manhattan neighborhood during an era when the Negro was in vogue," as Hughes once said. But gays - regardless of race - were not so fashionable, even as they sometimes captured the spotlight and ran with it, earning influential articles in Ebony and Jet magazines and The New York Times.

It is only in the last 10 years that scholarship has examined how many gays, lesbians and bisexuals (many of the participants in same-sex affairs were married, some several times) contributed to the movement. Pop culture hasn't caught on yet, although in 2004 the movie "Brother to Brother" swept the indie festival circuit, winning six major awards, including best fiction feature, at the Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival. The film resurrects Bruce Nugent, Zora Nosie Kaplan, Langston Hughes and Wally Thurman.

And:

"Although Harlem at the time was a black gay counterpoint to Greenwich Village and its population of white gays, intellectuals and artists, the vibrant racial expression of that era gave gays of color an additional hurdle to clear. Imagine if you had that triple threat: black, a woman and a lesbian," said Jack Rudoff, executive director of the Stonewall Library Museum Archive in Fort Lauderdale. "You are deeply repressed. But there is a place like Harlem and you could be there with your own kind. So they did and it had an effect on the view of feminists and the art that came from there."

We analyzed Brother to Brother's importance for MTV/LOGO-owned Logo. Read all about HERE. The images at top and right are from the other important gay film on that era, which surprisingly not mentioned here: Isaac Julien's "Looking for Langston."

Shane Vogel, author of The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance, says the Renaissance offered freedom to black artists:

"The goal was to further depictions of black life by black artists, which included defining themselves sexually through art, writing, and dance. Many artists explored those themes in their work very openly."

"The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay as it Was Black" was organized by the Stonewall Library Museum Archive in Fort Lauderdale. The exhibit runs May 11-June 30 in Florida Atlantic University's Wimberly Library Atrium in Boca Raton.