

Amy Helene Kirschke. *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. x + 296 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21813-1.



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When W. E. B. Du Bois accepted the invitation by the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910 to edit its magazine *The Crisis*, he knew art would be integral to its campaign against racism. The magazine's mission was no less than to shape a collective memory among an oppressed people whose past had been obliterated by the dominant white culture. As *Art in Crisis* author Amy Helene Kirschke explains, the historian Du Bois knew that African Americans "needed to remember the past if they were to change the future" (p. 17).

As the first book to examine Du Bois's use of imagery to create racial pride and convey moral outrage, *Art in Crisis* offers important insights into the history of visual journalism as well as the contributions of one of the twentieth-century's most significant black periodicals. A master wordsmith, Du Bois also understood the soaring evocative power of imagery in constructing collective memory. Decades before "image" became the *leit-motif* of American politics, Du Bois unsheathed its power in *The Crisis*, carving out what Kirschke terms a "visual vocabulary" for instructing read-

ers about their cultural contributions and collective experience in the United States (p. 226).

Kirschke, an associate professor of art history and African American studies at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, employs more than one hundred illustrations and a handful of photographs to demonstrate the primacy of images in the campaign for racial justice in *The Crisis* throughout Du Bois's twenty-three years as editor. The images retain their power nearly one century after their original publication, and Kirschke frames them in an analytical context that illuminates the pioneering role of Du Bois, *The Crisis*, and black art in creating a foundation for the mid-century civil rights movement. She uses *Crisis* art skillfully to show how Du Bois used the ugly and the beautiful to empower African Americans. Her analysis of the primacy of imagery in Du Bois's campaign offers new insights into one of the towering figures of the early civil rights movement.

Du Bois had elbowed above humble beginnings to become the first African American to receive a doctoral degree at Harvard University. He

was a prolific writer, perhaps best-known for *The Souls of Black Folk*, a groundbreaking collection of essays about the black experience published in 1903. The Atlanta University professor also became an impassioned spokesman for a new generation of young civil rights activists who rejected the accommodationist views of educator Booker T. Washington in favor of a more aggressive demand for equal rights. The strongest chapter of *Art in Crisis* delves into the magazine's unflinching look at lynching. The book reproduces shocking photographs from charred corpses hanging from trees, even more repulsive because of the giggling white crowds casually clumped around the atrocities. In March 1912, *The Crisis* published statistics stating that 1,521 lynchings had occurred in the past twenty-five years. Lynching continued largely unabated for the next two decades, when the magazine was among a minority of media that decried this national disgrace. It used graphic cartoons, graphs, maps, drawings, and photographs, as well as words in its crusade. "3,496 Crucified," a cartoon in the February 1923 issue, for example, depicts a lynching victim hanging Christlike from a cross surrounded by a pile of skulls as a "black mother" weeps at the sight (p. 87). "The Black Prometheus Bound" shows an eagle in an Uncle Sam suit protecting a flock of vultures labeled as southern states as they pick at their victims' guts. "Truth" glares at the spectacle (p. 92). Kirschke makes the important point that Du Bois recognized lynching as a "profoundly significant political mobilizing force." He "used the imagery to convert a shameful secret into a catalyst" (p. 114). Kirschke makes a strong case that Du Bois was a master of the propagandist power of imagery.

That imagery also proclaimed black is beautiful. Kirschke sheds light on Du Bois's call for a black aesthetic, art by black artists that depicted the black experience, as part of his quest to forge a black American identity. He liberally employed visual symbols of Africa to persuade readers that the continent was the cradle of western civilization. Regal and joyous imagery of Ethiopian and

other African cultures provided an empowering antidote to the buffoonish imagery of blacks that populated mainstream media. Du Bois also aspired to forge a greater sense of collective identity across the African diaspora by showcasing African-inspired art. Egyptian iconography often graced the pages of the magazine, such as in Aaron Douglas's art deco inspired illustrations. (Kirschke also is the author of *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* [1995].) As Kirschke notes, Douglas was one of many black artists frequently commissioned by *The Crisis*, making Du Bois a significant patron of the Harlem Renaissance art movement. The book offers instructive brief biographies of ten of these artists, including the best known, collage artist Romare Bearden, as well as an informative short section on the evolution of American political cartoons.

Art in Crisis also delves into the tensions between Du Bois's celebration of black folk art and his middle-class elitism, as evidenced by his theory about the "Talented Tenth," which held that only the best and brightest among African Americans could and should lead the race into the twentieth century. Although he championed black folk art, Kirschke points out, he was wary of its earthier aspects and did not publish it in *The Crisis*. Du Bois chose his imagery carefully to craft his version of the African American experience, demonstrating his claim that history is a malleable social construction.

Art in Crisis, in fact, is provocative not only for its vivid look at an important chapter of American history but also for its ruminations by a great historian on the power of history. "One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over," the author quotes Du Bois. "The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth" (p. 228).

The book's greatest shortcoming is that Kirschke's analysis flags by the final chapter, which addresses how *The Crisis* used imagery to address such issues as education, gender, war, and labor. The text in this chapter seems little more than a string of redundant descriptions of its illustrations. Those illustrations, however, speak volumes. *Art in Crisis* would be an enlightening secondary text for undergraduate or graduate courses in visual communication, the dissident press, and journalism history.

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