The Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts movement spanned the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and is considered an artistic extension of the Black Power movement. Black Arts movement writers aimed to produce explicitly political art and saw the artist as a political activist. Though it began in New York, the Black Arts movement was a national movement. The Black Arts movement was also an intellectual and academic movement that changed how African American literature was valued and studied. Black Arts movement writers were focused on telling the stories of the past and recovering the work of formerly unknown artists as well as exploring the diversity of contemporary Black experience. Black Arts movement artists also frequently used African American Vernacular English. The Black Arts movement included drama, poetry, and prose. Key figures of the Black Arts movement include Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Larry Neal. The Black Arts movement is unique among modernist artistic movements because of its political and social engagement. The Black Arts movement influenced writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. The Black Arts movement inspired minority writers from other historically oppressed groups.

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), who founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965, is widely considered the initiator of the Black Arts movement, though Black Arts movement was born out of many political and artistic groups in New York City in the mid-1960s. The assassination of Malcolm X is seen as catalysts to the Black Arts movement. In addition to the political influence of the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement was influenced by writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B, DuBois, and Langston Hughes.

Black Arts movement artists were concerned with showing the beauty, dignity, and complexity of Black experience. Black Arts movement writing was by Black artists for the Black community. While exploring the effects of racism, Black Arts movement writers were not concerned with doing so in a way that made such effects palpable to white audiences. Black folk culture and Black roots music, blues, and jazz were celebrated and used as sources of inspiration. The Black Arts movement also explored the global ramifications of racism, colonialism, and capitalism.

The Black Arts movement served as a gateway between modernism and postmodernism. The aesthetics of the Black Arts movement was a major shift away from the dominant aesthetics of the time, New Criticism. Unlike the aesthetics of New Criticism, the aesthetics of the Black Arts movement was grounded in social and political problems. Though the Black Arts movement has been criticized for misogyny, many important women writers whose work explored the intersection of gender, race, and class were involved with the movement, and many later Black feminist writers were greatly influenced by the Black Arts movement.

References and further reading:

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