

Harlem Community Art Center

Individual Landmark

290 Lenox Avenue



Harlem Community Art Center. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

The Harlem Community Art Center was created in November 1938. Its opening was attended by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who welcomed the community's new hub for creativity. During its brief tenure, the Harlem Community Art Center had a tremendous impact. Many of its students became artists who took pride in their culture and community. Paintings created by students at the Center often depicted scenes of Harlem—it was as if the students looked out a window and drew what they saw in the street.

The Center was a place for the Harlem community to receive education in the arts for free, or at little cost. It was organized by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and headed by Augusta Savage. Children and adults clamored to be a part of the wide variety of art classes taught by teachers of varying ethnicities. The students were diverse as well, ranging from established Harlem painters to maladjusted children from New York psychiatric hospitals, who benefitted from the Center's creative activities.

Jacob Lawrence, the influential African American artist who depicts Harlem life in many of his paintings, attended programs at the Center, and often taught classes. Lawrence also exhibited some of his work for fellow community members to view. The influence of the Center and its blending of art and the Harlem community can be seen in works like the "The Photographer," painted by Lawrence in 1942. In this painting, Lawrence depicts a black man photographing a wealthy black family in the middle of a crowded street in Harlem. This scene demonstrated that art was no longer just a hobby for the rich and famous, but an activity for the everyday man, uniting people of every race and social status.

Although the Harlem Community Art Center lasted for only 16 short months, its mission inspired a new organization called the Harlem Arts Alliance. Starting in the same building that housed the Harlem Community Art Center, but currently located at 229 West 135th Street, the Harlem Arts Alliance continues to preserve and promote multi-ethnic and multi-cultural artists and art organizations in Harlem and surrounding communities.