

Interpreting Space: The Rebirth of Meta Warrick Fuller

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Meta Fuller is regarded as a key artist in both the canon of African American art and the Harlem Renaissance. Fuller's sculpture, *Ethiopia Awakening*, has been highlighted for its symbolism of the Egyptian lineage of African Americans, as well as its representational qualities of an emerging African American society. During the early twentieth century, many African American scholars, particularly W.E.B. Dubois, felt strongly about their Egyptian lineage, believing that proving it as their ancestry would give them a more prominent and respected place in Western society.ⁱ With this as his objective, Dubois commissioned Meta Fuller to create a sculpture that would be the central piece in the America's Making Exposition held in New York City in 1921. The exposition was to highlight the various contributions that immigrants had bestowed upon America. Fuller agreed, but chose to follow her own artistic conceptualizations in regard to the sculpture instead of Dubois' detailed account of what he had in mind for the piece. After Fuller had completed the work, Du Bois and other organizers of the expositions described it as "a symbolic statue of the emancipation of a race."ⁱⁱ It is my observation, however, that it was not merely the subject matter that catapulted the sculpture to fame, but critically, its installation within the space of a national exposition.

This paper highlights three major expositions Fuller took part in; The Jamestown Tercentennial (1907), The Emancipation Exposition (1913), and The America's Making Exposition (1921). The focus will be on understanding how in the installation of her sculptures in the expositions, Fuller was able to engage the power of space and use it to her advantage, even

ⁱ Norman Coombs. *The Black Experience in America* (published electronically: Norman Coombs, Project Gutenberg, 1993).

ⁱⁱ Renee Ater. "American Art." *American Art*, 17, (2003): 12-31.

in ways that evoked, if not narrated, autobiographical qualities of *Ethiopia Awakening*. In making this argument, I shift the prevailing scholarly treatment of Fuller's art from the ways it signifies race, to how its treatment or use by Fuller engages the development of her professional life while simultaneously highlighting her contributions to African American culture.

Some of the key concepts pertaining to my argument concerning the critical use of space by Fuller – notably in relation to her transition of subject matter from race to the inclusion of autobiographical qualities in her exposition pieces - lie in the writings of Tim Cresswell. In his book, *Place, a short introduction* (2004), Cresswell discusses the idea of using a space in order to assert identity – particularly in the face of global processes and movements.ⁱⁱⁱ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, expositions became important cultural sites from which to disseminate 'new' knowledge to the world. They were viewed as a place where scholarship took the form of objects that could be visually consumed by the public.^{iv} Fuller used exposition spaces as places to highlight both a collective African American cultural identity as well as a personal identity. Cresswell also describes place as a way of “seeing, knowing, and understanding the world.”^v Fuller's sculptures and dioramas allowed viewers to see and understand the struggles and successes of African Americans in Western society through her art. Finally, the placement of *Ethiopia Awakening* allowed for the culmination of the assertion of a cultural as well as personal identity in the understanding of the power of placement in a space – a concept that Fuller became aware of through the placement of her prior pieces both in the Jamestown Tercentennial as well as the Emancipation Exposition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Cresswell. *Place, a short introduction* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

^{iv} W. Fitzhugh Brundage. “Meta Warrick's 1907 “Negro Tableaux: and (re)presenting African American Historical Memory”. *The Journal of American History*, 89 (2003): 2-33.

^v Cresswell, 11.

Expositions were important mediums for conveying both scholarly thought and ideas of race. Although African Americans had to often endure being merely an addition to another building, they would eventually succeed in acquiring their own space in order to fully portray their race and all of its accomplishments. The booming popularity of expositions in the southern United States began with the First Atlanta International Cotton Exposition in 1881, which has been described as “an exhibition of the potentialities of the future.”^{vi} Following in the footsteps of the Atlanta Exposition, in 1884, New Orleans held The World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial – the first exposition to set aside a space specifically for an African American department. The 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition was the first exposition to grant African Americans their own building, a huge step in the sense that they now had control in how their race was represented and viewed by visitors.^{vii}

Those taking note of the growing influence of expositions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included many elite and respectable scholars – including W.E.B. Dubois. Dubois witnessed another African American elite, Booker T. Washington, give a powerful speech that would later be labeled “The Atlanta Compromise” at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. This speech catapulted Washington to national fame, and he was hailed a hero in northern as well as southern newspapers. In light of Washington’s success, Dubois became aware of the powerful importance and influence that expositions held in regard to the perception of cultures. Dubois’ concerns focused on the struggle to change the ways African American people were perceived geographically, economically, socially, and above all

^{vi} Winton, 34.

^{vii} Winton, 35.

ethnically.^{viii} One exposition that in particular made an impression on Dubois in light of his concerns was the 1900 Paris Exposition. Dubois believed its artistic representations of African American people and their culture represented a savage and primitive people with no varying levels of class or accomplishment – the same stereotypes Dubois wanted eliminated from the Western perception of his people. Dubois’s strong reaction to the 1900 Paris Exposition combined with the success that followed Washington after his speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition helped to inspire his intense involvement in future expositions. Dubois recognized the power of these spaces in their ability to generate opinions and give rise to strong emotions and feelings toward a culture. In light of this, he would soon employ Fuller to aid him in creating a sculpture for the America’s Making Exposition of 1921; a sculpture that would label Fuller as well as her space in the exposition as ‘genius’.

Prior to Fuller’s showcase in New York, the artist took part in two other expositions that were also pivotal in her career – The Jamestown Tercentennial and the Emancipation Exposition. At the Jamestown Tercentennial that opened on April 26, 1907 in Norfolk, Virginia, Meta Fuller brought something new and refreshing to the visual representation of African American people. Earlier in her career, Fuller studied in Paris where her art primarily centered on mythical and biblical subject matter.^{ix} After viewing the Paris exposition of 1900 and being introduced to Dubois, she began to take on the plight of her race in her art. The Jamestown Tercentennial was the debut of Fuller’s work focusing on the African American race in an exposition setting. Fuller’s contribution was a series of dioramas designed to give a “chronological survey of the African American experience” as well as “expand the repertoire of representation of the African

^{viii} Shawn Michelle Smith. *Photography on the Color Line* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

^{ix} Brundage, 7.

American past.”^x Her dioramas were the first images that viewers saw upon entering the exhibit; therefore her pieces would set the tone for the rest of their viewing. Fuller created fourteen tableaux, each with quarter-life-size plaster figures set against painted canvas backdrops. Covering 1500 feet of space, the piece offered viewers a chronological survey of the African American experience in which “scenes ranged from a tableau of a fugitive slave to a depiction of the home life of the modern, successfully educated, and progressive negro.”^{xi} Fuller’s pieces were hailed as the highlight of the Negro building, winning a gold medal in the historical art category.^{xii} This eminently successful piece would help set the stage for *Ethiopia Awakening*.

In addition to the Jamestown Tercentennial, Fuller’s participation in the National Emancipation Exposition in 1913 would prove to be a turning point in Fuller’s life and career – particularly in light of her collaboration with Dubois. At his request, Fuller created a remarkable sculpture for the exhibition to be held in New York City. This piece not only played an important role in the exposition but also in Fuller’s career. She had married in 1909 and during the next five years she gave birth to three children. During this period she moved from Philadelphia to Massachusetts, leaving most of her work in storage in Philadelphia. In 1910, a fire broke out in her Philadelphia warehouse, destroying both her art and her tools.^{xiii} This devastating event stalled her career until Dubois’ request that she produce a sculpture for display in the 1913 Emancipation Exposition.

The exposition was the first of its kind to be completely devoted to the successes and advances of African American people since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in

^x Ibid., 2.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Renee Ater, “Race, Gener, and Nation: Rethinking the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller.” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2000), 63.

^{xiii} Ibid., 67.

1863. The exposition was held in New York City at the Twelfth Regiment Armory from October 22-31, 1913.^{xiv} A pseudo-Egyptian temple was placed in the center of the exhibit, and Dubois chose to place Fuller's eight foot tall sculpture, *Emancipation*, in the center of the temple. The sculpture was described as completely dominating the other pieces in the exhibit by size as well as by the treatment of form and subject matter.^{xv} *Emancipation* was truly a powerful piece around which exposition goers had to circumambulate to view it in its entirety. It consisted of three upright and for the most part nude figures standing against a tree-like form. It is important, however, to mention that what clothing was there was not ripped or torn, thus alluding to the fact that there is a pride that they feel about their body – not the embarrassment or feeling of subordination that might accompany the image of ripped or torn clothing. In order to understand the significance of this portrayal, Fuller's piece can be compared to Thomas Ball's *Freedmen's Memorial to Abraham Lincoln* at Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C., described by Rene Ater as "the most noted and notorious sculpture commemorating the Emancipation."^{xvi} Ball's sculpture includes a partially dressed black male kneeling at the feet of a fully clothed and fully upright Abraham Lincoln. Although the subject matter ultimately revolves around African Americans and their freedom, the space is owned by Lincoln, or white Americans. In her sculpture, *Emancipation*, Fuller gives the power to the African Americans for the purposes of an exposition setting; knowing that it would be viewed by large numbers of white as well as black Americans. Fuller knew how powerful a piece could be in the placement of expositions from the space that her dioramas occupied at the entrance of the Negro building at the Jamestown Tercentennial.

^{xiv} Ibid., 68.

^{xv} Ibid., 73.

^{xvi} Ibid., 77.

Although it was Dubois' decision to place *Emancipation* in the center of the temple in the exposition, Fuller was aware of the importance of dominating the center of the room.

In addition to a first hand account of the importance of the placement of her pieces in exposition spaces, Fuller was likely influenced by the scholar Freeman Murray. A long time friend of Dubois, Freeman Murray, also took note of the importance of the placement and success of *Emancipation* in the exposition. Renee Ater notes, "Interested in the symbolic function of sculpture, Murray felt that the location of sculpture in public spaces spoke to communities about who they were and what they considered important."^{xvii} Murray was an important figure of the early twentieth century in that he was a scholar, a writer, and one of the founding members of what is known today as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Murray became a supporter of the work of Meta Fuller following the Emancipation Exposition, and corresponded with her throughout the writing of his book, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture*.^{xviii}

Taking note of the successful reception of Fuller's *Emancipation* sculpture, Dubois again requested the assistance of Fuller to create a piece for the America's Making Exposition of 1921. This sculpture would become the defining piece of her career. The event was in New York City and focused on the contributions of immigrants to American society.^{xix} Dubois originally approached Fuller with a rather detailed image in mind of what he wanted. His sculpture included a face with closed eyes and on the cheek a slight trace of tears. Bare black arms and hands held a crystal globe named MUSIC in the left and one marked LABOR in the right.^{xx}

^{xvii} Ibid., 82.

^{xviii} Ibid.,84.

^{xix} Ibid., 156.

^{xx} Ibid.,15.

More important than the description of what he wanted the sculpture to look like, however, were his intentions to make the piece, again, the central figure of the exhibition.^{xxi}

Fuller eagerly accepted the commission but her sculpture would greatly differ from Dubois' ideal. Fuller created what would be her defining piece, *Ethiopia Awakening*. The sculpture was not on as massive a scale as her previous piece for the Emancipation Exposition but the message it conveyed was grander. The sculpture depicted a woman whose bottom portion is wrapped in mummy-type bandages, and whose top portion is draped in ancient Egyptian apparel, complete with an Egyptian headdress. Her head is turned to her left, and tilted at a small angle as if to be looking at something. Her right hand is placed on her chest, and her left arm is flush with her body. The bottom portion is rooted and stoic, whereas the top portion employs a more free flowing and emerging quality. The allusions to Egyptian and Ethiopian roots are obvious in this piece; yet other elements have not been discussed.

The America's Making Exposition was seen as an opportunity to construct a more noble public identity for African Americans, again underlining Cresswell's argument that space is used in order to assert identity. However, Fuller used what she knew would be the central figure in order to assert her own identity as well as fulfill Dubois expectations. While the piece does indeed reflect the notion of an emerging African American culture, it also shows a woman emerging free from physical constraints, which may allegorize her emergence from constraints in her life. By this, I am referring to the fire that was discussed earlier that destroyed both her tools as well as sixteen years of work. Fuller retracted from making art, and focused on her family. Ater also describes Fuller's marriage as constraining in that her husband was "concerned that her

^{xxi} Ibid.,164.

art was not ‘proper’ as defined by the elite social class of which he was a part.”^{xxii} In light of this, I feel that Fuller created the figure in *Ethiopia Awakening* to portray not only the African American race, but also her rebirth to the public in her artistic career. Thus, the female figure in this sculpture can be read as an allegory for the emancipation of the African American people, as well as the emancipation of Meta Fuller. Fuller successfully engages the space of the exposition not only in the placement of the sculpture in order to assert her agendas, but also in the construction of the sculpture itself. The figure seems to unwind into space, up from the confining bandages that create the lower portion of the piece. The version of the sculpture created by Fuller bears a stronger sense of freedom than the closed-eye, sedentary version Dubois had envisioned. Being placed in the center of the exhibit, Fuller successfully engaged space on an allegorical, autobiographical, as well as an artistic level.

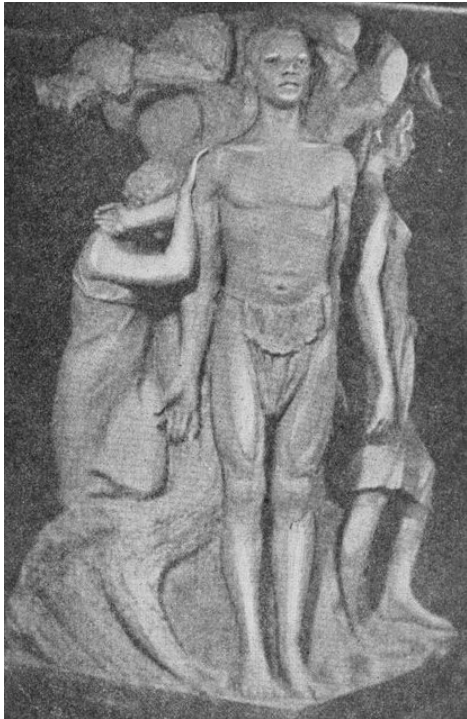
Fuller was armed with the knowledge of the importance of the spatial placement of objects from both the reception of her previous exposition pieces and the ideas expressed by Murray regarding the symbolic functions of sculpture in public places. Referring back to Tim Cresswell’s writings of the idea of using space in order to assert identity, *Ethiopia Awakening* successfully achieved just that in the America’s Making Exposition for Fuller, as well as Dubois. Dubois’ aim was to highlight the idea that African Americans had a strong Egyptian lineage, and were not merely the outcome of white Americans bringing slaves over from Africa. Fuller’s piece played many roles in the assertion of identities for Dubois, African Americans, and the artist herself. The exposition space became the place where Fuller activated her rebirth into the art world as well as a self-portrait.

^{xxii} Ibid.,199.

Images



Meta Warrick Fuller, *Ethiopia Awakening*, c. 1921, Bronze, 67 x 16 x 20 inches (170.2 x 40.6 x 51 cm). Image Courtesy of Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.



Meta Warrick Fuller, *Emancipation*, c. 1923. Image Courtesy of General Research and Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

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