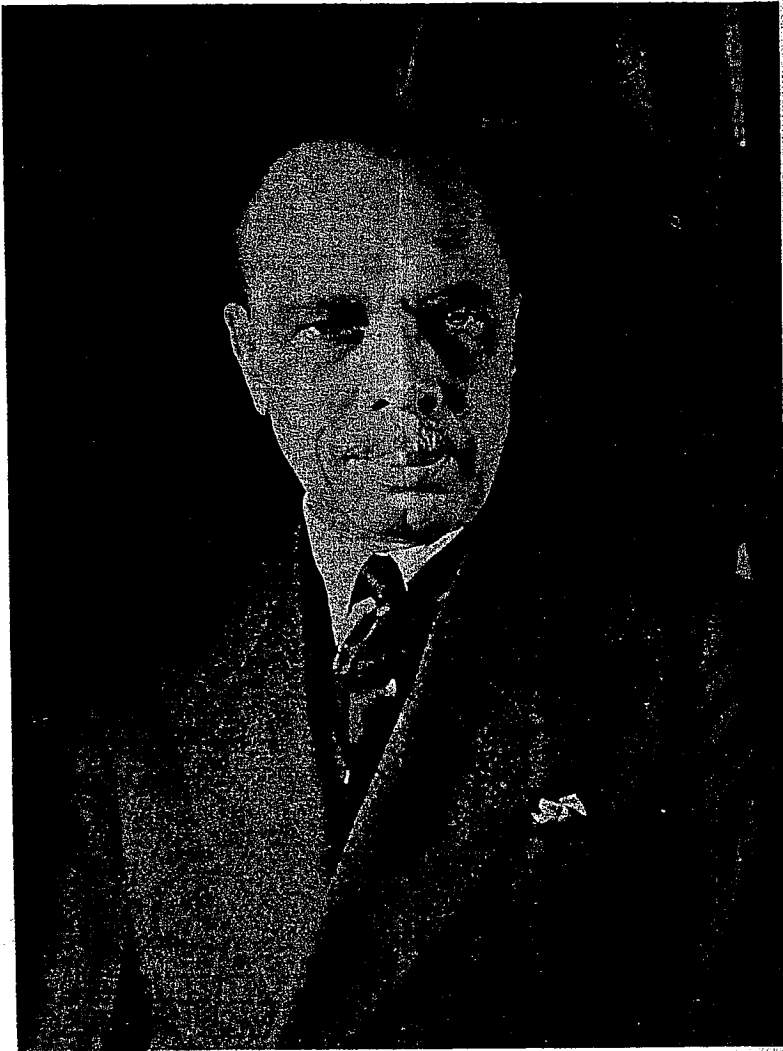


- NYPL CUV papers  
- articles in Vanity Fair 1920s  
- The Crisis, July 1942



JAMES WELDON JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL VAN VECHTEN  
DECEMBER, 1932.

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# GAZETTE

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## THE JAMES WELDON JOHNSON MEMORIAL COLLECTION OF NEGRO ARTS AND LETTERS

AN understanding of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in the Yale University Library depends on the novel *Nigger Heaven*. That book, written by Carl Van Vechten in 1925 and published by Alfred A. Knopf the following year, is the key. The books, manuscripts, letters, pamphlets, papers, clippings, phonograph records, and photographs assembled in the Collection are essentially an expansion of research materials accumulated by a meticulous white writer while preparing a story of Negro life in America—a story centered around Harlem at a time when that community was first being hailed as the new capital of black America. Certainly few works of contemporary fiction have been more thoroughly documented. (before or after writing?)

To go back still further, two impulses appear to have been at work in the building of this unusual collection. The first was Carl Van Vechten's instinct or habit of gathering things. "I have *always* collected," he once wrote in a letter to a friend. "I began with *stamps* and *birds'* eggs and went on to cigarette pictures and autographs. All these collections before I was fifteen. . . . It was not until I was long past forty that I found myself with any reasonable amount of money; often, indeed, I was poor, but things *stick* to me somehow."

As a writer of essays, as a critic of the arts—he was once employed in the music department of the *New York Times*; later he became dramatic editor of the *New York Press*—and as chronicler of the sophistication of his era, his range has been uncommonly wide, his opportunities for this sort of activity exceptional. Somewhat after

! This is an amazing story, esp since he knows its history

the fact he has recognized the impulse as "a craze for documentation." The diagnosis is obviously sound.

His novels reflect the same passion. It is explicit in the semi-autobiographical *Peter Whiffle*. "Life," says Peter at one point, "is made up of a collection of objects. . . . All great art is a matter of cataloguing life, summing it up in a list of objects. This is so true that the commercial catalogues themselves are almost works of art." The hero, as you may recall, was engaged in writing a book about the names of the things he had collected. Moreover, his chief benefactor when life became complicated was an uncle who was also a collector, "not of anything special, just a collector." This rich bachelor, a graduate of Williams College, was as acquisitive of homespun coverlets and obsolete musical instruments as he was of first editions of Horatio Alger, Jr., and G. A. Henty. He also treasured a copy of *Cudjo's Cave*, a novel which, significantly, he had read so many times "he had found it necessary to have the volume rebound."

Not content with these or a great many other implications for collectors, the author arranged to have a later edition of that modern classic illustrated and covered with literal evidence of his own thoroughness in this direction, including Ralph Barton's map of Paris and many photographs of cafés, fountains, bookstalls, gardens, bars, people, statues, even posters mentioned in the text.

Some of the collections which have resulted from this energy are already known. Mr. Van Vechten has given thousands of letters to libraries. Over three hundred of Gertrude Stein's came to Yale, along with an almost complete set of Stein writings in typescript. The New York Public Library has received for its theatre collection the boyhood pack of cigarette pictures, college themes written by Carl Van Vechten while under the instruction of Robert Morss Lovett at the University of Chicago, and other materials. Less well-known perhaps, but equally revealing, are the collections which remain on his shelves. His Gertrude Stein books and magazine appearances are perhaps the most extensive anywhere. He has a library of French books in which a host of the contemporary writers are represented by presentation copies. There is an extensive library of books on art.

Also, a large music library, a thrilling theatre collection, a library of books about cats (another subject on which he has himself written with wonderful authority), and a curious collection of books by women, beginning with Ouida in first editions and returning by way of Elinor Wylie, Rebecca West *et al.* to the Gertrude Stein things already mentioned.

The second of the impulses behind the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale is, of course, Carl Van Vechten's long-standing interest in Negroes. When and how this started cannot be fixed precisely. It took a definite shape at the University of Chicago around 1902, but Mr. Van Vechten's own impression is that "I had always been interested in the Negro." In any case, two or three of his college themes, now in the possession of the New York Public Library but sealed during his life, deal with Negroes. It is also a matter of record that he became acquainted with Carita Day while he was still a student at the University. This, it may be presumed, was a fortunate introduction to the colored world of that day, for Carita Day, a statuesque stage figure, was to her generation approximately what Lena Horne is to the present. Later Carl Van Vechten met Bert Williams, when the latter was playing in the *Follies*.

In view of these acquaintances it is not surprising that Mr. Van Vechten's first published articles on the subject of the Negro were concerned with the theatre. These commenced to appear while he was on the *Press*, 1912-13. "The Negro Theatre," a chapter in the volume *In the Garret* (Knopf, 1920), perhaps stems from this period, being based on pieces originally done for the *Press*. As a piece of writing on the Negro, however, that essay belongs to Mr. Van Vechten's outside-looking-in period and does not have his complete approval at present. He thinks, in fact, that one of its main contemporary values is to offer "indubitable proof of what education can accomplish in racial matters." To get the force of this, the chapter should be read as a footnote to *Nigger Heaven* (written five years later) and as a companion piece to the articles Mr. Van Vechten contributed to *Vanity Fair* after he had started work on the novel. "Prescription for a Negro Theatre," October, 1925, belongs to this

second group, as do also the articles about blues singers and the notes by which he presented Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen to readers of the magazine.

Then there were introductions to books by and about Negroes, among them the one which blessed *The Weary Blues*, Hughes's first book. In each of the above there were fondness, understanding, and the clear implication that an appreciation of these artists and their works does not require that anybody put anybody else at his ease. The approach was so simple it was mistaken by some for an esoteric interest, the result of an exotic taste and an effete attitude. Today the terms are different, and these trail-blazing writings begin to take on a new meaning. However that may be, they were all building up to the novel *Nigger Heaven*, and (quite inadvertently) to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, founded by Carl Van Vechten.

By that time, certainly, the conditions had been created. Already it was inevitable that the collection which resulted would be strong in materials relating to Negroes in the twentieth century, weak in historical lore—the controversy about slavery, for example, was virtually ignored. As a collection, it would be primarily influenced by aesthetic values, only incidentally by what is known as “the race problem.” As a view of Negro life, it would unfold from within; in other words, it would be a highly personal collection, rich in association items and abounding in records of warm friendships across an artificial gulf. Indeed, it would affirm in every item, in every inscription and autograph, in every calling card and invitation, in every packet of interracial correspondence, that there is no gulf—unless one chooses to imagine one. By the spring of 1941 the Collection had approximately reached its present size, and on the 29th of May Mr. Van Vechten wrote a note to Bernhard Knollenberg:

Some time ago we discussed briefly the possibility of my giving the Yale University Library my Negro books and papers. If you still want them I've decided to go ahead with this idea. . . .

Mr. Van Vechten enumerated the kinds of materials included in the collection and alluded to minor and major conditions affecting the

acceptance of the gift. He advised that the collection be named The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, founded by Carl Van Vechten; “I think this name would be of material assistance to you in assembling future material from others.” Finally, he proposed to start shipping the material a little at a time, beginning around July 1. The additions, he suspected, would continue the rest of his life, “for even after the present collection is all on its way to New Haven, further material will rapidly accumulate.”

The gift was accepted, and the Yale Library thereby came into possession of a collection unique in many ways. Most striking of these perhaps are the ones which grow out of the central idea. As has been pointed out, the Collection is built around research materials accumulated during the preparation of a book. The book, moreover, was a novel—a novel describing a segment of American life previously unexplored in fiction. It was essential that the background be thoroughly documented. It was natural that much of this documentation should be of the evocative kind that has meaning for a creative writer. Thus the abundance of photographic material is explained, and likewise the bulging scrapbooks, the assortments of music, the concert and theatrical programs, the packs of calling cards and the handbills, the bulletins and posters, the bales of newspaper clippings and the boxes of manuscript, the phonograph records and the catalogues of records, the greeting cards and signatures, and above all the letters.

The influence of *Nigger Heaven* and other writings of Carl Van Vechten on Negro expression and on the acceptance of that expression in the United States is worth noting, too. It is reflected in this collection in a dozen ways. Mr. Van Vechten, who had already formed the habit of aiding and abetting genius (he had much to do with the establishment of such careers as George Gershwin's and Igor Stravinsky's, and he contributed to the revival of Herman Melville), was actively involved in the launching of Paul Robeson and Ethel Waters. He showed Langston Hughes's poems to Margaret Case at *Vanity Fair* and to Alfred A. Knopf the publisher. These instances are merely typical, but they account for the great quantity of Robeson lore, the complete set of Ethel Waters phonograph records (some

i.e. this is what  
the collection  
represents about  
itself

of them unusually rare), and the boxes and boxes of Langston Hughes's letters and first drafts.

The books of the collection, as agreed upon by Mr. Knollenberg and Mr. Van Vechten, are drawn from two rather broad categories: 1) all books by writers with Negro blood, 2) the best of the books about Negroes written by white authors. Among the former, for example, one discovers a complete set of Charles W. Chesnutt's books, each volume containing a long autobiographical inscription. Paul Laurence Dunbar is completely represented by first editions. Presentation copies of all the James Weldon Johnson books are included; each of these is personally inscribed to Carl Van Vechten, and most are in mint condition in the original dust jackets. This author is further represented by pamphlets, clippings, musical settings of his poems, photographs, phonograph records, and an excellent series of letters. Similarly represented by books, fugitive writings, and association items are Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, George Schuyler, Eric Walrond, Zora Neale Hurston, C. L. R. James, Nella Larsen, Sterling Brown, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay (including the rare *Constab Ballads*), Alain Locke, Rudolph Fisher, William Stanley Braithwaite, W. E. B. DuBois, Richard Wright, Walter White, Booker T. Washington, William Attaway, Waters E. Turpen, etc.

The books by white authors who have treated Negro themes in one way or another include Edward Sheldon's controversial play *The Nigger*, Du Bose Heyward's stories and plays, Leonard Merrick's *The Quaint Companions*, Dorothy Baker's *Young Man with a Horn*, William Dean Howells' *An Imperative Duty*, George W. Cable's *The Silent South*, including "The Freedman's Case in Equity," (a most provocative essay, considering its date and authorship), the first edition of *Uncle Remus*, the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo*, and various works by Gilmore Millen, Ellen Glasgow, Paul Green, Willa Cather, Nancy Cunard, and others.

The treasures of this collection are not of the usual kind. They include such items as original manuscript scores of William Grant Still's musical compositions, the music of W. C. Handy—most of

in first editions inscribed to Carl Van Vechten—and music and manuscripts by Harry T. Burleigh. Then there are the manuscripts of Zora Neale Hurston's books, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, and Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*. And most important there are the photographs by Carl Van Vechten.

In his "Notes for an Autobiography" (*The Colophon*, September, 1930) Mr. Van Vechten tells how, as a cub on Hearst's *Chicago American*, he was "deputed to fetch photographs of persons in the news," an occupation at which he was so successful that he was unable to detach himself from it till he left for New York in 1906. What he does not say is that he had exhibited a talent for photography as early as 1895. Neither does he say in *The Colophon* (perhaps because the idea had not yet occurred to him) that a year or two later he would give up writing and devote all his time to reviving that neglected gift. The results, as reflected in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, are impressive.

There are more than a dozen boxes of Mr. Van Vechten's own superb photographs of notable Negroes in the Collection. Each box contains about forty portraits, each handsomely mounted. The names of the individuals represented include Joe Louis and Henry Armstrong, Marian Anderson and Dean Dixon, Rose McClendon and Lena Horne, Bricktop and Cab Calloway, Richmond Barthé, Countee Cullen, and others by the score. The boxes which have been made to accommodate these photographs are themselves a vivid feature of the Collection.

The motive behind the whole idea has been neatly set forth by Mr. Van Vechten himself (*The Crisis*, July, 1942):

It seemed to me then that this Collection of mine could not only be made immediately useful at Yale (the first white college in the North, I believe, to make any determined effort to secure such material) but also might become an active and growing source of propaganda, for no student, hitherto uninformed on the subject, could read these letters, the inscriptions in the books, or even the books themselves, without asking himself, and others, many questions.

The future of the Collection is at this date a matter of speculation. That it belongs next to the American Literature Collection would seem almost obvious. Perhaps it should be in an adjoining room.

Given such a setting, it is hard to foresee any future—no matter what happy rapport between native American groups may follow better education, more favorable currents of history, and increased goodwill—when the materials gathered here will not offer a certain fascination to scholarship.

ARNA BONTEMPS

↓  
doesn't become  
Carlyle's GOETHE MASK *water with 1969*

THE following Carlyle letter is one of more than a score—all bearing on Goethe or his works—in the Yale William A. Speck Collection of Goetheana. It is so characteristic of Carlyle's robust thinking and expression that it deserves to be more widely known. I cannot vouch for it that this letter has not been published. In my diligent search for it I was forced to enter the most puzzling maze my researches have ever bid me enter; when I finally emerged I could post no gain beyond the definite impression that the Carlyle field of research was positively bedeviled. But the brief story of the Goethe mask, I feel sure, has never been told.

5, CHEYNE ROW, CHELSEA  
LONDON, 23 DECEMBER, 1824

MY DEAR SIR

Mrs Rich delivered me the Mask of Goethe which you were so very kind to send me by her. I have fixed it advantageously on one of my Bookshelves, where daily, for a long while. I hope, it will remind me in a beneficent manner of you and of him. Many thanks are due from me. This is, of all the portraits, medals &c which I have seen of Goethe, by far the most eloquent representation of him to me: a strange shadow of the very face itself, as it looked and lived in the world; a veritable fragment of the Past Appearances (to me the most important of them all for some centuries), strangely surviving here, now when they are gone, all melted into Formlessness again, into the Still Sea again! It is very tragic, very significant to me.

I return you many thanks; all the more grateful as I have not yet the happiness of being personally known to you. Your great Art with all its resources could hardly have furnished me a more interesting Product than this very simple one. For one does ask of your Art this fundamental question: How did great Men and great Phenomena which we have never seen, look? This answered, if it could be completely answered, all were answered that the Plastic Artist has

charge. Your Gift is very valuable, and greatly enhanced by the kindness of your procedure to me in respect to it.

If you ever come to England I shall bespeak the pleasure of making acquaintance with you; as certainly, if I ever come again to Paris, I will not fail to go in quest of one so favorably shadowed forth to me in this and in many more important ways.

A benevolent lady Madame Baudrand is a friend of yours; to whom I will desire you to offer my regards.

Wishing you right good speed in your noble enterprises, "Ohne Hast aber ohne Rast":—

I remain, Most sincerely yours

T. CARLYLE

To whom the letter was addressed, I have been unable to discover. I had thought of David d'Angers, but I could in no way satisfy myself that he was the artist in question. Nor was I, in the beginning, positive of the type of mask that so delighted Carlyle. Schulte-Strathaus' monumental work\* contents itself with the likenesses of the living poet, with the one exception of Friedrich Preller's sketch of Goethe on his death bed. Among the items reproduced in this volume are two masks of the poet made from life; the first is by Karl Weisser in 1807, and the other by Friedrich Schadow in 1816. The question now immediately rose up to vex me: of which of these was the Carlyle item a reproduction? Beyond Schulte-Strathaus, Goethe iconography becomes a pathless area; sheer chance alone could bring me to my goal. Experience and judgment strongly cautioned against a further approach from the Goethe side.

The first step from the Carlyle angle seemed a natural one. In 1932 Sotheby issued a catalogue† in which many items from the Carlyle House—including pictures—were listed for auction. Yale had secured some important numbers from this sale. But the catalogue proved to be maliciously silent on the Goethe mask. Had it not been included in the sale? If so, it must still be among the items at 24 Cheyne Row. The riddle, however, was soon to resolve itself. Over the years the

\* *Die Bildnisse Goethes*. Herausgegeben von Ernst Schulte-Strathaus, 1910.  
† *Catalogue of Printed Books, Autograph Letters, Literary Manuscripts, Oil Paintings, Drawings and Engravings, Works of Art, China, Furniture, &c. Formerly the Property of Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881, and now Sold by Order of the Executors of His Nephew, Alexander Carlyle . . . by Messrs. Sotheby & Co. London [1932].*