

Jacob Lawrence

1917 – 2000

Photographs of Jacob Lawrence

Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, Georgia in 1917 and died in 2000. He moved from Atlantic City, Georgia to Pennsylvania and finally settled in Harlem, New York at the age of 13, where his mother enrolled him in after school art programs so he would have a place to be while she worked. They were migrants, moving from the South to the North.

In 1937, he received his first scholarship for the American Artist School. When he graduated, he was awarded funding from a federal art program that encouraged people to create public art. Lawrence was the first African American artist to be represented in a major commercial gallery. He was also the first to receive mainstream recognition in the U.S.

Self-Portrait, 1977 Gouache and Tempera on paper, 23x31 inch

Here he portrays himself as an artist in his studio in Seattle, WA, where he moved in 1971. He depicted his own face as mask like, and he is holding brushes that represent his profession as a painter. He is smiling, as though he is welcoming viewers, inviting them into his space.

On the left, one of Lawrence's paintings hangs on the wall. It is an image of Harriet Tubman leading the slaves to freedom, from Lawrence's narrative series, The Life of Harriet Tubman (1939-40). Below the Harriet Tubman painting, a figure dressed in blue ascends a staircase. Perhaps this figure is from another of Lawrence's works, or it could be an actual person, or another painted figure. On the right there are more of Lawrence's paintings, including Tombstones (1942) and Cabinet Makers (1946).

The Migration Series, Panel 1, 1940-41

The Migration series is a group of sixty paintings portraying the movement of millions of African Americans, following WWI, from the rural south to the urban north. This event had an enormous impact on his life and in the life of America.

Lawrence's painting technique was unique in that he laid out every panel and painted one color at a time until all the paintings were done. He considered the series a single work of art.

Migration series, Panel 3, 1940-41

To many people, Lawrence's paintings symbolize the search for a better life.

The Migration Series, Panel 24

Child labor and a lack of education were major reasons for people wishing to leave their homes.

The Migration Series, Panel 31

After arriving in the North, the people had better housing conditions, although they were often forced into overcrowded and dilapidated tenement houses.

The Migration Series, Panel 57

The female worker was one of the last groups to leave the South.

The Migration Series, Panel 58

In the North they had better educational facilities. To many people, Lawrence's paintings symbolize the search for a better life.

The Builders (The Family), 1974

The Builders paintings have become some of his most popular. He filled the scenes with his own hand tools and included workers of many colors. Looking over his collection of tools, he considered what "building" meant to him - it stood for creating not just structures but better lives. "Some of my paintings show man's struggle, but building shows the beauty of people working together," he said.

Carpenters, 1977

Lawrence used bright, unmixed colors and geometric shapes in his paintings. When viewing his works, spend some time looking for shapes and dominant colors which may jump out at you! He once said; "I love the manipulation of color, of value, of texture. I guess my thinking at the time was to create continuity.

The Street, 1957

As a child Lawrence's mother enrolled him in an after-school program, Utopia Children's House which is where he began to develop his love for drawing and painting. However, it was Harlem, the bustling city filled with African-American scholars, artists, writers, musicians, business leaders, and average citizens (35,000 black people lived in its 5 square miles) who provided him with subjects and images to paint as a young man and later as an adult. Here he lived in an apartment with his mother and two siblings, and spent most of his childhood pastime exploring the Harlem streets. He would observe the people, bustling activity, and even the detail of every building, such as the fire escapes with iron ladders. These buildings were several stories high and jammed together – unlike his home in Philadelphia.

Harlem Street Scene, 1975

Think about what you typically observe when you are in the city or your community?

Parade

Calling his style "dynamic cubism," he distilled images and experiences into flat, angular forms and bright colors.

Munich Olympic Games, 1972

This poster was commissioned by the Munich Olympic Games Committee. Through exaggeration, he gives us the skillful rendering of body mass and movement. He loved to portray the movement of muscular athletes. And much like his Builders subjects, Olympic athletes meet in a spirit of cooperation.

The Studio, 1977

This is an autobiographical painting of Jacob Lawrence in his studio. Notice how large his hands are, and how he gives this room a sense of depth. The crisp lines and the draftsman like work suggest Lawrence's love of tools and the carpenter's workshop.

Some info from: Duggleby, John. Story Painter, The Life of Jacob Lawrence