

Jacob Lawrence dead at 82: a major American painter

Fred Mazelis
16 June 2000

Jacob Lawrence, who died on June 9 at the age of 82, was a significant American painter. His work was rooted in US history, particularly in the struggle against slavery and racial oppression. Shaped by the great changes of the first half of the twentieth century, his painting has lost none of its power at the opening of the twenty-first.

Sixty years ago, Lawrence was the first black artist to achieve prominence in what was still a largely segregated art world and society as a whole. For the past six decades he has remained the most celebrated African-American painter, past or present.

Lawrence was born on September 7, 1917 and his formative years were the 1920s and 30s. These were the years of the great black migration, which saw one million people move from the rural South to the urban North in the period between 1916 and 1930.

The 1920s also saw the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, the artistic and cultural awakening within the rapidly growing black community centered in the neighborhood just north of Manhattan's Central Park. Lawrence was to meet most of the major figures in this cultural circle, including Howard University professor Alain Locke, writer and poet Langston Hughes, novelists Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, and painters William Johnson and Aaron Douglas.

Locke urged black writers and artists to turn to African and folk traditions, a conception used by some to argue for a kind of cultural nationalism and separatism. Meanwhile, however, the Great Depression spurred a turn toward broader political struggles on the part of black intellectuals. Langston Hughes and others began to focus on the struggle against racism as part of a universal struggle for social equality. Lawrence's whole body of work places him squarely in this tradition of humanism and social struggle. As one art historian wrote in the catalogue for a major retrospective of Lawrence's work in 1974: "There is something monolithic about Jacob Lawrence and his work, a hard core of undeviating seriousness and commitment to both social and Black consciousness.... He has at the same time continued to insist on the larger human struggle for freedom and social justice in all the world and for all people."

Lawrence's mature style had already crystallized by the late 1930s, when he was in his early 20s. He began to work on narrative cycles, producing 30 or more paintings devoted to a single subject. He achieved major prominence in 1941, when he was only 24 years old, with the exhibition of his series of 60 paintings entitled "The Migration of the Negro." The Museum of Modern Art in New York and The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC both expressed interest in these paintings, and in 1942 they were sold, each institution taking half of the total.

Diverse influences contributed to the unique style of this young artist. Lawrence was shaped by international artistic trends and social struggles. Among those he looked to were the great Mexican muralists, especially Jose Clemente Orozco.

In addition to his association with major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Lawrence studied as a teenager in the Harlem Art

Workshop, funded by the newly-established federal Works Progress Administration. In 1936 he enrolled at the American Artists School, where he met artists who were political activists involved in the Scottsboro case, the frame-up of nine black youth in Alabama on rape charges. During this period Lawrence also met the painter Gwendolyn Knight, who was to become his wife and who survives him, after 59 years of marriage.

The earliest work of Lawrence, from 1935, reflects the political ferment of these years. It satirizes life in Harlem during the Depression. He depicts poverty, poor health care, police harassment, evictions and racial discrimination.

But the young painter never saw his art as simply the vehicle for a political statement. He fought to master the whole history of painting, walking the 60 blocks between his home and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to learn from the work of such Renaissance masters as Botticelli and his contemporaries in fifteenth century Italy.

Other influences were such leading American artists as Stuart Davis, whose cubist-influenced style bears some resemblance to Lawrence's work; Romare Bearden, one of the best-known African-American painters; Charles Sheeler, the leader of Precisionism, with its focus on technology and industry; and Ben Shahn, who was close to the Communist Party in this period and did much work on social and political subjects.

Lawrence forged a unique and original style. He combined the tempera technique (pigment mixed with a binder consisting of egg yolk thinned with water) with a cubist style. All of his work was unmistakably modern, but remained within the framework of realism and figurative painting at the same time.

A few years before his death Lawrence came close to spelling out his own aesthetic credo when he told a critic approvingly that, with Orozco, "you had both content and form, social content and abstract form." This unity of abstraction and social realism was also characteristic of Lawrence's work, and something he shared with other artists of the period between the First and Second World Wars.

In 1938 Lawrence was able to obtain a position with the WPA's Federal Art Project, working in the easel division. Over the next 18 months, while the federal government provided at least some support for struggling artists, the young painter produced two narrative series, on the lives of abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Earlier, in his first major narrative series, he had produced 41 paintings on Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian revolutionary who led the struggle for Haitian independence in the early years of the nineteenth century.

The Migration Series was and remains the most famous of Lawrence's works. Parts of it have been exhibited on numerous occasions. The entire series was brought together in the middle of the 1990s, for the first time in 20 years, in a traveling exhibition organized by the Phillips Collection that also came to New York City.

Lawrence had never visited the South when he painted the series, but that did not prevent him from understanding his subject. As he explained

in an interview in 1992, “I grew up the son of migrants.... My mother and father were on their way North when I was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, so at the very beginning of my understanding of communication with words I was very much aware of this movement.”

With the help of a fellowship, Lawrence rented his first studio, providing enough space to lay out all 60 panels of the work. As in all of the narrative cycles he had painted, the individual paintings were each accompanied by captions.

The Migration Series begins and ends with images of the railroad station. The first 30 panels deal with South and the journey to the North, scenes of the railroad station reappearing from time to time along with the refrain, “And the migrants kept coming.” This repetition is used by the artist to drive home the scope and relentless logic of the big movement of masses of people.

The South from which the migrants sought to flee is vividly depicted. In panels 6, 7 and 8, for instance, Lawrence presents a series of bleak agricultural scenes. Panel 11 shows a room with a single candle providing light, an undernourished child eating an inadequate meal. The caption reads, “They were very poor.” The simple words gather strength from the accompanying image and from its placement in the series as a whole.

The paintings reveal that far more than poverty fueled the migration. Panels 14, 15 and 16 show, in succession, two figures before a judge, then a noose dangling from a bare tree limb, then a close-up of a grieving woman.

The second half of the series goes on to the North. Here Lawrence shows with tremendous power that the migration did not solve the problems of the impoverished and exploited African-American, but only shifted the terrain of the struggle. He shows Chicago's stockyards and, in panel 45, Pittsburgh's steel mills, with a family hopefully pointing to the factories that they expect will bring them decent lives. The very next panel, however, shows a labor camp, with eight sleeping in one room, the dark gloom relieved only by a colorful quilt brought from the South. Other panels show black workers being tricked into taking jobs as strikebreakers.

Lawrence shows that, even in the segregated South, the struggle was not simply a racial one. In one panel he shows a prison window whose bars are gripped by two white hands, and the caption reads, “The South.” A simple metaphor thus shows the real purpose of segregation in dividing and exploiting the entire working class.

The series concludes with a look at the new black neighborhoods in the North. Here too Lawrence shows that the struggle did not end with the migration, and that it was not only a racial one. He depicts emerging class divisions—the wealthy in top hat and furs, along with the newcomers ignored by the black middle class.

In the long career that followed The Migration Series, Lawrence explored other forms, including limited edition prints and large scale murals, but he did not substantially alter his basic themes of history and urban life.

During the Second World War, after being drafted into the Coast Guard, he served on board the first racially integrated ship in US naval history. Allowed to paint full-time, he chose the ship's crew, rather than heroic images of combat or officers and ships, as his subject. One result, completed after the war, was The War Series, a cycle of 14 images which includes a depressed black soldier, a boat full of wounded men, and a mourning mother.

In the 1950s, with the prominence of abstract expressionism, Lawrence swam “against the stream” in certain respects. He continued to deal with social themes and to produce figurative painting. During the 50s and 60s he produced a narrative series on early US history and work on contemporary subjects, including the civil rights struggles. He was criticized by some as insufficiently radical, but this had little to do with genuine radicalism or serious art. Lawrence was consistent in his outlook,

and did not join in the sometimes-fashionable expressions of nationalism and separatism. He traveled to Africa, and even lived there briefly in the 1960s, but returned to the US after eight months.

Teaching also took up much of Lawrence's time, partly in order to make a living but also because he wanted to give the benefit of his experiences to subsequent generations. His teaching career had started in the 1940s, when the German-born artist Josef Albers, a leader of the Bauhaus who had been forced to flee after the Nazis came to power, invited Lawrence to Black Mountain College, the progressive institution that had been set up in the 1930s in North Carolina, and which provided a creative environment for many young writers and artists in the two decades of its existence.

Lawrence later taught at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, at The New School for Social Research and the Art Students League and, from 1971 until his retirement in 1986, at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The artist continued to work until the end of his life, though afflicted with a variety of serious ailments. His murals can be seen in Chicago, Seattle, Howard University in Washington, DC, and the Addabbo Federal Building in New York City. Three years ago he designed a 72-foot mural that is scheduled for installation at the Times Square subway station in New York in 2001.

Lawrence's work is now represented in nearly 200 museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem. He has been the subject of three major retrospectives, at the Brooklyn Museum in 1960, the Whitney Museum in New York in 1974, and the Seattle Art Museum in 1986. The Phillips Collection in Washington is scheduled to mount a retrospective next year.

This week *The New York Times*, following its obituary article for Lawrence, published an unusually warm personal appreciation of the artist by its chief art critic, Michael Kimmelman. Kimmelman pays tribute to Lawrence by quoting him on one of his favorite paintings, Sassetta's “Journey of the Magi” at the Metropolitan Museum. Lawrence spoke of the artist's “simplicity” and explained that this did not mean it was easily arrived at. Alongside the formal rigor is an “emotional authenticity,” a phrase which Kimmelman declares “describes [Lawrence's] own work in a nutshell.”

This enabled Lawrence to deal with “common black people whose lives he showed to be heroic,” to “tell universal stories bigger than any particular man or movement,” to “illustrate dignity through struggle.” Kimmelman also points out that Lawrence's work is “joyful.” This is not too strong a word. There is something deeply, not superficially, optimistic about his achievement, and it is connected to his ability to connect to the aspirations of masses of people. The emotional authenticity is the expression of a man who has a deep feeling for the struggle for human progress. As the artist told a biographer about a decade ago, “We don't have a physical slavery, but an economic slavery. If these people, who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer their slavery, we certainly can do the same thing. They had to liberate themselves without any education. Today we can't go about it in the same way. Any leadership would have to be the type of Frederick Douglass.... How will it come about? I don't know. I'm not a politician. I'm an artist, just trying to do my part to bring this thing about.”

The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, founded last year, is devoted to the creation, presentation and study of American art, with particular emphasis on the work of African-American artists. More information about the work of the Foundation and the work of Jacob Lawrence can be obtained at www.jacoblawrence.org



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact