

# The painter Jacob Lawrence

Clare Hurley  
31 May 2002

Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence, *an exhibition at the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, May 27-August 19, 2001; Whitney Museum of American Art, November 8, 2001-February 3, 2002; The Detroit Institute of Arts, February 23-May 19, 2002; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 16-September 8, 2002; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, October 6, 2002-January 5, 2003*

Jacob Lawrence is the most acclaimed African-American artist of the twentieth century, and the current exhibition is the most comprehensive of his work.

Lawrence was the first black artist to be represented by a major commercial gallery—his *Migration of the Negro* series of 60 small panels was exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in New York City in 1941 when he was only 24 years old. Throughout the 1950s and '60s his work was exhibited regularly in contemporary art venues. He received many grants and honorable degrees and held teaching posts at Black Mountain College, Pratt Institute and the University of Washington. Today his work is represented in over 200 museums including the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Studio Museum of Harlem and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Lawrence achieved all of this at a time when most African-American artists were denied even a modicum of professional consideration. The artist died in June 2000.

Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1917, at one stop along the route of his parents' migration from the South to New York City, he began painting as a teenager in the 1930s at an after-school program at the Utopia Children's House in Harlem with teacher Charles Alston. He continued to work with Alston at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Harlem Art Workshop at the 135th Street Public Library from 1934 to 1937. In 1938 he dropped out of high school and was employed in the WPA Federal Art Project as a painter in the easel division. His earliest works (c. 1935-38) depict typical scenes of Harlem working class life—a parent coming upstairs with a bundle of groceries and children running down to meet her, people on the subway, children on a fire escape. In content they reflect the artist's observation of and identification with his world. Lawrence is reported to have told an interviewer in his later years, "I am the black community."

Through the WPA, for a brief time, a federally funded program supported painters who wanted to express the textures and rhythms of working class life. Often, like Lawrence, they came from working class backgrounds themselves. When Charles Alston started a new WPA workshop at 306 West 141st Street, Lawrence accompanied him. "306," as it came to be known, was a guild-like workshop where artists worked together as masters and apprentices, not as isolated individuals. Furthermore, artists at "306" perceived themselves as integral participants in the local community, giving expression to its experience. Other artists who worked there were the writers Claude McKay (an observer at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922), Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, musician Aaron Douglas and painter Henry Bannarn.

Lawrence found particular kinship with the aesthetic assumptions of the Bauhaus movement, which were encouraged at "306," and which he was

later to develop working directly with Joseph Albers (one of the younger generation of Bauhaus artists who had taken refuge in the US during World War II) at Black Mountain College in 1946. Humble materials (Lawrence worked almost exclusively in poster paints), limited colors, simplicity of form, an emphasis on arrangement of color and shapes rather than representation, are the hallmarks of Lawrence's work from this period, not merely as a style but as a statement identifying himself with his audience. "My work almost grew out of the way an unsophisticated person would work with a flat kind of pattern, color, but not academically."

He and others at "306" expressed a distaste for the Abstract Expressionist artists working contemporaneously in the '40s, viewing their experiments with technique as elitist and esoteric. Instead they identified with the Mexican muralist movement's epic depiction of human society as developed through history; Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco had worked in New York in the '30s. Alston had watched Rivera paint his mural at Rockefeller Center, later removed for its depiction of Lenin as a central figure. Lawrence's choice to work on a small scale but in series was his attempt to build a similarly historical and comprehensive picture of his social environment. He painted series about the lives of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, as well as abolitionists John Brown and Harriet Tubman.

Lawrence's *Migration of the Negro* series (1941) was displayed in its entirety at the Whitney Museum in New York, the first venue of this retrospective. The 60 small panels were hung one after the other in a long line around four walls of a large gallery so that the viewer had to migrate from panel to panel. The pictures and subtitles tell the story of the northward migration of over a million black people from the American South from 1916 to 1930 due to deteriorating agricultural conditions, Jim Crow racism and the demand by northern industry for labor.

In this series Lawrence depicts fields alternately bare from drought and sodden with floodwater. An empty noose and a grieving figure indicate lynching. A single black figure swinging a sledgehammer to hit a large blue nail is subtitled: "The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after others had been exhausted." Under the painting of a couple with bowed heads sitting over an empty bowl one reads simply, "They were very poor." Several panels depict crowds at the railroad station swarming through gates marked for New York, St. Louis, Chicago. These serve to punctuate the series, and repeat the refrain that the migration gained momentum, the poor kept moving north.

One panel shows cattle in the Chicago stockyards; in another a molten splash indicates steel mills. The crowded beds of a dormitory show that living conditions in the urban North were not much better than those in the rural South. Discrimination, segregation, the supercilious treatment by the nascent black bourgeoisie are all here. Here also are the riots that resulted from Negroes being used as strike-breakers and the bombing of Negro homes when the people crowded into ghettos sought to move out.

One final and compelling image of a single female figure dressed in white stirring a mass of colored cloth is entitled "The female worker was one of the last groups to leave the South." The subtitles are descriptive in an attempt to establish a tone of objectivity, but the effect of

understatement at times backfires, creating a bathetic and disingenuous simplicity instead.

This raises more general problems bound up with Lawrence's work. His work is often powerful in intent. The cumulative effect, for example, of the *Migration* series is moving. However, the flat shapes and the bright and restricted palette of colors can be ultimately disappointing aesthetically.

One of his best scenes of Harlem life (which Lawrence continued to treat throughout the 1940s), *Ironers* (1943), shows three identical laundresses in alternating poses hefting and pressing the blocks of metal irons onto colorful clothes, the patterns of which are repeated in the stripes and squares of the background. The massive brown arms and club-like hands fuse with the irons themselves, the awkward twisting of the shoulders seek to communicate the physical exertion involved, and the melding of human with tool.

The French Impressionist Edgar Degas likewise painted laundresses. Over the course of thirty years, from the late 1860s through the 1890s, he painted many different images of women working with heavy irons amidst sheets that appear to dissolve into their own steamy atmosphere. In Degas' painting *Women Ironing* (1884-1886, of which two versions exist) one woman is lifting her arm to push back her hair. She yawns widely and grasps the neck of a bottle to take a drink, while her companion continues hunched over her iron. The painting elicits the viewer's identification with her weariness and suffocation in an intimate way.

Lawrence's laundresses evoke no such response. The repetition of the same figure, without features, in uniform white dress and mob-cap emphasizes the loss of all individuality in this labor. Yet the figures miss the struggle to maintain individuality and dignity within alienated labor, which Degas' images capture.

In showing the universal, art cannot resist the particular. However, Lawrence seeks an aspect of human experience undifferentiated by the individual, epitomized by the fact that he never seems to paint specific faces, or even faces at all. Heads are bowed, turned away, blank, or schematic in features. *Library III* (1960) with a child looking at the viewer through the overlapping intersection of people reading, of books and shelves, is one of the few instances of a direct gaze in Lawrence's work. The human condition that he depicts is one of interlocking and inseparable form. Lawrence's own sense of individuality is bound up to the point of absolute identification with the "community."

Such identification seems to have taken its toll at times. Confusion about identity permeates Lawrence's work through the 1950s in strange hollow pictures of clowns, masks, entertainers. Not only is illusion their subject, there is something that feels illusory at the heart of these pictures, as though there is nothing behind the empty masks. It was also at this time that Lawrence was hospitalized briefly for psychiatric disorders.

The collective experience with which Lawrence identified was one of nearly four centuries of slavery, oppression, discrimination and exploitation. No one might be better positioned to understand the contradiction at the heart of American society, the hypocrisy of its proclaimed ethos of freedom, equality and "justice for all" than a black American.

In 1943 Lawrence was drafted into the US Coast Guard as steward's mate, serving meals to white officers on a segregated ship. He did a series of paintings about his wartime experiences, more somber in color, except for the discovery of a vivid electric blue that hadn't been on his palette before. He primarily painted the crew but like his laundresses, in no specifically individual way.

There are a couple of attempts to depict the anguish of combat, a flurry of white and black hands, a morose-looking soldier sitting with bowed head. But the painter's images continue to employ a relatively unresourceful visual lexicon which relies on simple and direct correspondence (bowed head = sadness, etc.).

The problems of the war paintings trouble the whole of Lawrence's work: a difficulty communicating personal emotional immediacy within a political/historically specific framework. Furthermore, as the progressive impulse of early modernism with which Lawrence was initially allied developed from Abstract Expressionism into various forms of art for art's sake, the work of those like Lawrence who continued in an accessible "realistic" vein tended to become unadventurous and passé in technique and formal concern.

The perceived dichotomy between formally advanced artistic experimentation and art designed "for the masses," now accepted as a natural state of affairs, is a problem bound up with the political traumas of the twentieth century. What the most advanced artists had accomplished in the 1910s, '20s and '30s—the bringing together of the most advanced social views and the most advanced artistic approaches (poetic, complex, modernist) in the work of the surrealists, early Soviet artists, German writers and playwrights—was severely damaged by the Stalinists and their theories of "proletarian culture," "socialist realism" and so forth."

One might say that poetry was beaten out of "realism," the formally advanced was banished from the art designed for the "masses"; and the "avant-garde," in its turn, turned its back on or was excluded from contact with the masses and social concerns. Artists like Lawrence suffered from this. He identified with and wanted to remain close to the mass of the black population; to do so, he apparently felt, required eschewing certain complications and remaining rather simple in his approach. Perhaps his own artistic limitations predisposed him to accept those parameters.

Even within the realm of socially committed art, Lawrence's position was a difficult one. On one side, he was subject to the criticism of not being radical enough, and on the other censored by the white establishment, on which he was dependent, whenever he included anything even remotely suggestive of the violence of the black experience. Illustrations for a children's book about abolitionist Harriet Tubman originally included Harriet holding a gun in one picture, and walking through a field of snow with a bloody foot in another. Neither was included in the final book, which ended up a saccharine affair.

The latter of the two censored illustrations was exhibited at the Whitney retrospective. It catches a viewer's attention immediately; it numbers among Lawrence's striking images—a blank paper-white field is traversed by a huddled group of ragged figures, led by one, presumably Harriet, under whose foot on the snowy page are scarlet drops of red.

Lawrence tended to mask his criticism of American society in obscure allegory: in *American Revolution* (1963), dogs with big teeth snarl in weird masks. Or he chose less controversial subjects to critique, for instance illustrating the John Hersey novel *Hiroshima*, almost 40 years after the fact, in 1982.

A final group of paintings, completed intermittently from the late 1960s till his death in 2000, return to the heart of Jacob Lawrence—daily life in Harlem in moments of leisure and work: *Typists* (1966), *The Pool Game* (1970), *Carpenter* (1977) among others. It is a bit disconcerting to have so little sense of an artist's development—without knowing the dates it would be impossible to know these hadn't been painted in the 1940s. But there is also a sense of consistency, of confidence and commitment in his tie to this world. There continues to be the same emphasis on locking the human figures into their physical surroundings to the point where they are indistinguishable one from the other.

Despite their formal limitations, these paintings communicate what is best in Lawrence's work: a vision of the organic integrity of work, usually of a craft nature—construction, carpentry, shoe-making, the work of the artist himself. They are well-intentioned, capable, occasionally remarkable, as was the artist who created them.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**