

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle—A remarkable exhibition

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Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle, at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, January 18, 2020–April 26, 2020; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, August 29, 2020–November 1, 2020; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama, November 20, 2020–February 7, 2021; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington, March 5, 2021–May 23, 2021; Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., June 26, 2021–September 19, 2021.

A timely and long overdue exhibition, *Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle*, reunites the remarkable series of paintings known as *Struggle: From the History of the American People* by Lawrence, the famed African-American artist, for the first time since they were completed in 1956.

While the panels may be small—each is only 16 inches by 12 inches—the story they tell possesses great scope. Originally intended as a visual narrative of the history of black people in the United States, Lawrence’s conception changed over the course of several years spent in a Harlem public library researching histories, memoirs and newspapers for the project.

Lawrence explained, “I came to appreciate the rich and exciting story of America and of all the peoples who emigrated to the ‘New World’ and contributed to the creation of the United States ... so it seems that this project has ceased to be the story of the Negro people in America and become the story of the American people.”

The series’ inventively imagined episodes lend the 30 panels a tremendous freshness. These include one of Paul Revere’s famous midnight ride, on April 18, 1775, in which the horse seems at least as anxious as the rider to warn the mutinous colonists that “The Redcoats [British soldiers] are coming!” Another panel, devoted to the Boston Massacre in March 1770, centers on the figure of mortally wounded Crispus Attucks, a seaman and fugitive slave, who was one of the first rebels killed by British fire.

Lawrence’s series shows that people of African and Indigenous descent were not only present, but active participants in the struggles out of which the United States was formed. The first panel entitled ... *Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?* is a dramatic clash of diagonally raised fists depicting Patrick Henry’s impassioned speech to the second Virginia Convention in 1775. While acknowledging the contradiction between the founding principle that “all men are created equal” proclaimed by men who may themselves have held slaves or at least tolerated slavery, Lawrence does not dismiss the founding fathers as mere hypocrites. Rather he presents the revolutionary implications of such principles which would continue to galvanize struggles throughout the 40-year period Lawrence covers in his series, as well as beyond.

Indeed, in visualizing these critical moments in America’s past,

Lawrence was acutely conscious of—and incorporated allusions to—contemporaneous civil rights struggles. For instance, Henry’s accusatory finger recalls a widely seen news photograph of murdered black youth Emmett Till’s uncle, Mose Wright, courageously pointing out Till’s abductor in court in 1955.

The brilliantly sinister panel depicting American Revolutionary War traitor Benedict Arnold whispering coded secrets in the British commander’s ear recalls the treacherous intimacy of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his chief counsel Roy Cohn seen in congressional hearings televised in 1954. The ongoing denunciations of leftist artists and intellectuals accused of being Communists before the House Un-American Activities Committee were no doubt in Lawrence’s mind when he imagined Arnold. While never called to testify, Lawrence was certainly on the FBI’s watch list for the socially critical aspect of his work. Indeed one can’t help but interpret his insistence on the “American-ness” of African Americans, indigenous people and immigrants as a pointed response to McCarthyism and the Cold War.

The *Struggle* series is all the more notable in that the period of the 1950s was artistically the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, characterized by gestural uses of raw paint to communicate an artist’s internal moods in a highly subjective response to the intense, painful political and social situation. In contrast, Lawrence turned toward history as an integral component of and subject for artistic creation. He developed a style that he termed “dynamic cubism,” employing simplified forms and a limited color palette that was distinctly modern while remaining representational. Although his chosen format would always be small panels, as best suited to his narrative purposes, his instinctive affinity was for the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and particularly Jose Clemente Orozco, both stylistically and in their approach to social struggle.

Lawrence’s attraction to history painting remained consistent over the course of his long career. His earliest paintings were series about abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L’Ouverture. Lawrence was only 23 in 1941 when his *Migration Series* established him as the first African-American artist to win gallery representation and a national reputation. Working in egg tempera paint, which dries rapidly, he composed the panels in advance and applied each color in turn to all of them to create a vivid and unified chronicle of the movement of African Americans out of the Jim Crow South to find greater economic opportunity in the industrial cities of the North.

One of the panels in which interconnected figures crowd ticket windows marked Chicago, New York and St. Louis epitomized the series’ original title *And the Migrants Kept Coming*. Lawrence’s parents were among the estimated 6 million people to make the move

between 1916 and 1970. Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1917, Lawrence spent some time in foster care in Philadelphia after his parents divorced in 1924, till he reunited with his mother and siblings in Harlem, the neighborhood in New York City known as the Black Metropolis.

The 1920-30s was the period of the Harlem Renaissance—a flowering of artistic and cultural life significantly influenced by left-wing ideas and the impact of the Russian Revolution—in the rapidly growing black community fueled by the Great Migration. Lawrence would come to know many of the leading figures in this circle—Howard University professor Alain Locke, writer and poet Langston Hughes, novelists Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, and artists Aaron Douglas, Charles Alston and Augusta Savage.

Alston and Savage in particular were formative influences. After dropping out of high school, Lawrence studied at Alston's Harlem Art Workshop, funded by the newly formed Works Progress Administration (WPA). Savage recommended him for a scholarship to the American Artists School and a paid position with the WPA in 1936. Established under Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression, the WPA provided training and employment for a generation of artists, many of whom were active politically in left-wing causes as well as socially critical in their artistic work. Lawrence's depictions captured the "hard, bright, brittle" aspects of Harlem during the Great Depression—the poverty, segregation, class distinctions and emergent labor struggles, along with the vibrancy—of African-American life in the North.

By the time he painted his *American Struggle* series, Lawrence was at the height of his artistic career. He had been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1945. In 1946, Josef Albers, a leader of the German Bauhaus movement, invited him to teach at Black Mountain College, the progressive institution in North Carolina. Upon his return to New York, he obtained a faculty position at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He would continue to teach at various prestigious institutions for the rest of his career.

That he was also at the height of his artistic powers is evident in the compositional inventiveness of the 30 panels of the *Struggle* series. Whether it is the weary figures of the Continental Army hunched against the cold, the sweat beads dripping from the brows of the delegates to the Constitutional Congress or the pillar-like Erie Canal builders who appear to be holding the entire engineering feat up with their conjoined arms, each panel contributes to the sense of what it means to struggle collectively to realize the principles upon which the United States had been founded.

The pointed message of the series that the "unalienable" right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" was an ongoing struggle, as well as the decisive shift away from socially engaged art over the course of the 1950s, may account for the work's relative obscurity despite Lawrence's international stature. After *Struggle* was exhibited by his dealer Charles Alan at the Alan Gallery in 1958, he had hoped to find a buyer who would let the series travel around the world as part of a Cold War publicity campaign. Lawrence himself wrote that he hoped his paintings would "serve in some small way to further enlighten those who come in contact with them of the struggles, contributions, and ingenuity of the American people."

However, the complexity and contradictions of the struggle he depicted would make it hard to find a buyer. The original purchaser sold off the panels individually; a couple were acquired by museums, but most were dispersed among private collectors. Several are in unknown locations and a few are completely missing. By coincidence,

a visitor to the exhibition when it was on view at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City realized she had seen one of the missing panels at her neighbor's house. Acquired at a charity auction, it was Panel 16 depicting Shays' Rebellion, an uprising of farmers in Massachusetts following the Revolutionary War, entitled *There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to.—Washington, 26 December 1786*. It is to be hoped that other missing panels may surface as a result of the exhibition.

The use of passages from letters, speeches and petitions as titles lends the panels an additional first-person immediacy. The title of Panel Five, a vertical composition of muted brown and black figures striving upward with a clash of sword blades, derives from the petition of slaves to the Massachusetts Bay House of Representatives in 1773:

"We have no property!

We have no wives!

No children!

We have no city!

No country!"

Their call resonated with all layers of the oppressed—black and white of all nationalities—in 1956 when Lawrence created the series, no less than it did in 1773. Lawrence's realization that there is no history of African Americans separate and distinct from America's history as a whole is a refreshing contrast to the racist nationalism that is ceaselessly promoted in contemporary artistic and intellectual circles. The *American Struggle* stands as Lawrence intended it, as a symbol "showing man's constant search for the perfect society in which to live," which is all the more relevant today.

Organized by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, where it was exhibited at the beginning of 2020, the traveling exhibition went on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City after the COVID-19 shutdown of cultural institutions was lifted at the end of the summer. It is currently on display at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama and will travel to the Seattle Art Museum and The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., before it closes in September 2021.

It is possible to see the exhibition online.



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