



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Celebrating Black History Month

The Work of Jacob Lawrence

by Charles Swaney, Museum Docent

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) exploded onto the Harlem art scene in the 1930s and became one of the foremost black American artists by age twenty-four. He was born in Pittsburgh to Jacob and Rosa Lee Lawrence, who separated in 1924. Jacob and his two younger siblings were placed in foster care in Philadelphia for three years, but re-united with their mother in Harlem in 1930. Jacob's first exposure to art occurred when his mother enrolled him in after-school classes at the Utopia Children's Center (1920–present), where he was taught by Charles Alston (1907–1977). Young Jacob was initially drawn to copying with crayons patterns such as those in the carpets of his home. Family finances caused him to drop out of school at age sixteen and go to work in a printing plant and a laundromat, but Lawrence did not give up on art. Again under Alston's guidance, he continued his pursuits at the Harlem Art Workshop, located in the basement of the 135th Street branch of the New York City Public Library. Lawrence displayed his work for the first time in a 1934 group exhibition, where he met Charles Seifert (1879–1949), a historian of African American culture. Seifert encouraged Lawrence to learn about Black history through the then "Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints," a significant collection of materials at the NYPL 135th Street branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). It was there that Lawrence also experienced the mural series *Aspects of Negro Life* by Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), a commission for the Public Works of Art Project, which was completed in 1934 for the reading room of the facility.

Lawrence was entering into a period of great creativity by 1936. He rented space at Alston's studio at 306 W. 141st Street, which had become a meeting and work space for African American artists and writers. There Lawrence met Aaron



Portrait of Jacob Lawrence from *American Artists in Photographic Portraits from the Peter A. Juley & Son Collection* (Washington, D.C. and Mineola, New York: National Museum of American Art and Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), compiled by Joan Stahl.

*Note similarity of pose with that of Roman Johnson in his painting, *Self-portrait*.



Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979)

Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South, 1934

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYC

(Formerly the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library)

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/aaron-douglas/an-idyll-of-the-deep-south-1934>

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Douglas, Romare Bearden (1911–1988), and Augusta Savage (1892–1962), in addition to writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Though rejected by the federally funded Works Progress Administration (WPA) because he was underage, Lawrence was accepted the following year, and would collaborate with both Alston and Savage, assisting the former with his mural series at the Harlem Hospital. Lawrence had his first solo exhibition at the Harlem YMCA in 1938, exhibiting a painting series on Harlem. That same year, his series of 41 paintings of Toussaint Louverture (1743–1803), the Haitian general who led a revolution against French domination, was displayed at the Baltimore Museum of Art. He followed that with two additional series on Harriet Tubman (exhibited 1938–39) and Frederick Douglas (exhibited 1939–40).

In 1940 Lawrence received a grant of \$1,500 from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to complete his next and best-known work: *The Migration Series* (1941). These 60 panels depicted the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North. He married the artist Gwendolyn Knight in 1941, and she assisted with the didactics for the *Migration* works. Lawrence followed with a twenty-one-panel series on John Brown (1942). By age twenty-five, Jacob Lawrence had completed five major series centered around the history of the Black community.

During World War II Lawrence enlisted in the Coast Guard and saw action overseas, painting scenes of battle (now lost) and also producing his *War* series, completed in 1946. That same year he was recruited by Josef Albers (1888-1976) to the faculty of Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina. This was Douglas' first experience with the Jim Crow South, and Albers took great care to protect Jacob and Gwendolyn, both when teaching and when traveling to and from the school.

Lawrence's rapid ascent to the pinnacle of the African American art scene took a crippling toll on his psyche, and he was voluntarily committed to a mental health facility in 1949. At Hillside Hospital in Queens, he completed a series of paintings in which he sympathetically portrayed depression. In the 1950s, he produced a thirty-panel series, *Struggle: from the History of the American People*, an alternative look at American history, which was controversial because of its political nature and could not be sold to a museum. Teaching appointments followed at the Pratt Institute (1958–1970) and the New School for Social Research (1966–69). He accepted a full professorship at the University of Washington (1971–1986) and lived in



Bruce Talamon (American, b. 1949)
Jacob Lawrence from the series *Songs of My People*, 1990
Silver gelatin print
Gift of Dr. D. Michael Cheers/New African Visions, Inc. (95.6.117)

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Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000)
New York in Transit, 2001
Murano glass mosaic
Times Square-42nd St station, NYC subway (<https://mfta.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/lawrence-times.jpg>)

Seattle until his death from lung cancer in 2000. Lawrence’s last major commission was for the New York City subway system. *New York in Transit*, a large mosaic of Murano glass, was completed after his death.

People in Other Rooms (Harlem Street Scene) reflects Lawrence’s lifelong attachment to Harlem, though the work was executed when he was a professor at the University of Washington. The scene depicted is lively and crowded with people, their organic forms dramatically contrasting with the geometric angularity of the street and buildings. Among the figures is an elderly man who stands out in a black suit and stylish hat. He ambles forward with a bright red cane, while next to him a young girl in a white dress jauntily walks a miniature dog. A musician strides seemingly to a beat as he carries a guitar. In the midst of the activity, a toddler chalks the street, while background and peripheral figures add to the overall dynamism. Strong colors are typical of Lawrence’s work, and here primary colors compliment deep brown skin tones. Lawrence was depicting the Harlem he knew and loved, from his youth to his later years, when he returned for visits. It is the Harlem where he first read about the history of Black people and set that history onto panels, where he encountered many influential artists, writers, and thinkers, who profoundly impacted his life and artistic output. In turn, the work of Jacob Lawrence profoundly altered the history of American art. ■



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000)
People in Other Rooms (Harlem Street Scene), 1975
Serigraph on paper
Acquired with funds from the estate of Holly Burgess (2015.17)