
Art Review

Jacob Lawrence's African American Migration Series: 1915 to the 1950s

Hwa Young Caruso & John Caruso Jr.
Art Review Editors

Lawrence made the Migration Series to tell an important story that had been previously overlooked. He once said, "I do not look upon the story of the Blacks in America as a separate experience to the American culture but as a part of the American heritage and experience as a whole."

MoMA Learning

The continuing struggle for racial equity in America, a social reality currently all too visible in the media, has made the MoMA exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's 60 works especially poignant and relevant. The exhibition, retitled



One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North, ran for six months between April and September in 2015. Most of the conflicts depicted in Lawrence's small scale (12" X 18") casein tempera on hardboard artworks tell the recurring story of historical *de jure* segregation and contemporary *de facto* prejudice and discrimination against people

of color.

The exhibition organizers, Ms. Leah Dickerman, MoMA curator of painting and sculpture, and Ms. Jodi Roberts, curatorial assistant, placed Lawrence's 60 sequentially numbered works on the walls of one room with 10 digital stations in the center that provided ancillary materials about each painting. This exhibition was inviting and informative. In adjacent rooms were similar artworks, audio recordings, photographs, books, phonograph records, and videos of some of America's most famous Black intellectual, cultural, and entertainment icons. Many of these notables from the Harlem Renaissance—Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Henry Bannarn, Charles White, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright,

Langston Hughes, and Dorothea Lange—were mentors, friends, and supporters of Lawrence.

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), the most widely acclaimed African American artist of the 20th century, was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and spent most of his life in Harlem where he began studying art at the age of 14. Between 1938 and 1941, his creative talents and keen perception of human emotions intertwined with historical events resulted in five major sequential narrative life stories. A total of 186 paintings depicted the struggles for freedom and equity by enslaved Africans, Black Americans, and their supporters. These five pictorial life stories in panels contain common and unifying visual elements that evoke a deep, resonating, and abiding struggle against racism, segregation, prejudice, and discrimination.

Lawrence began the series in 1938 with *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1938), followed by *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1939), *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1940), and *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), and concluded with *The Life of John Brown* (1941). Lawrence described his modernist style as “dynamic cubism” enriched by pure colors from Harlem street life similar to two-dimensional Cap-Haitien paintings. Lawrence also worked as a graphic illustrator for magazines and newspapers.



demographic shift.

Lawrence did extensive historical research in the 135th Street New York Public Library before beginning his sketches and composing descriptive titles for the series. He painted on hardboard using casein tempera directly from containers and moved from work to work in a patchwork process until he ran out of one color and then opened another container. This piecemeal cumulative flat pattern primitivist style restricted individual expression and placed the emphasis on the content of each



The 60 works in the Great Migration Series use repetition in construction and expression. The epic exodus series begins with a train station scene in Panel 1, titled “During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes,” and concludes with Panel 60, titled “And the Migrants Keep Coming.” The 58 panels in between explain and detail the reasons for the push-pull

painting's message. The brilliance of his works is the universality of communication using glyph-like images which captured and expressed complex socio-political realities in simple terms. There is little confusion about what Lawrence boldly says in each painting, although the historical nuances enrich the aura. The faces are blank and the bodies drawn in sharp angular geometric forms.

The presiding theme of this exhibition is based on the push-pull 60-year migration of six million rural African Americans fleeing from the former Confederacy to new lives in Northern, Midwestern, and Western cities. In 1900 more than 90% of Black Americans lived in the South; by 1960, 47% had fled from poverty and oppressive Jim Crow segregation.

Lawrence's paintings reflect migration experiences detailed in Emmett J. Scott's "Negro Migration during the War" (1920), which Lawrence used to compose his magazine-style painting captions. Scott described the mood of the Black exodus participants: "They left as though they were fleeing some curse; they were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket and they left with the intention of staying."



Lawrence's series detailed the oppressive life Blacks endured in the South after slavery ended and Jim Crow segregation deprived them of civil rights and denied them equal public services. After devastating floods and boll weevil infestation in the mid-1920s, which decimated cotton crops in the South, Black sharecroppers lost the ability to support their families at survival levels. The results of their hard labor

as sharecroppers left them at the mercy of White landowners and overseers who often cheated them after the crops were harvested. If they remained in the South, under Jim Crow they faced economic enslavement. Panel 17, titled "The migration was spurred on by the treatment of the tenant farmers by the planter," shows a White supervisor solely determining the amount of payments for tenant or sharecropping Blacks. The panel has a soothing blue sky suggesting tranquility, but the squinting White overseer and the impudent gaze of a Black farmer who was warned to avert his eyes when dealing with White authority figures reflect the burdens of exploitation.

In Panel 24, titled "Child labor and a lack of education was one of the other reasons for people wishing to leave their homes," Lawrence set a scene from Ancient Egypt where enslaved children work harvesting cotton. The patterned baskets, dress, and landscape resemble a desert scene rather than a Southern plantation. This panel illustrates Lawrence's command of patterned colors which he learned as a child, copying intricate rug patterns with crayons, to create a third dimension. The baskets leap off the hardboard in a simplified two-

perspective painting. This work is based on an Old Testament justification (Exodus 7:16) for the Great Migration. Lawrence uses the lyrics of “Go Down Moses” (circa 1853), an African American spiritual, calling upon the Egyptian Pharaohs to “let my people go.”

The oppressive life under Jim Crow included every aspect of existence. Blacks were



routinely arrested, fined and imprisoned by White-only police, juries, judges, and other public officials for minor offenses. The criminal justice system denied Blacks service on jury duty and discounted their testimony in criminal cases. In



Panel 22, titled “Another of the social causes of the migrants’ leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation,” one can feel the palpable weight of being judged guilty until proven innocent. If they dared to defy authority, they faced lynching at the hands of an enraged White mob who turned ritualized murder into a social event. In Panel 15, titled “Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this,” a solitary grieving Black female is reminiscing about the horrors of lynching and the ominous threat of another murder with impunity occurring should Whites feel threatened.

Some 4,000 Blacks were lynched between 1880 and 1950 in the South.

The hostile life during legalized apartheid constituted the push element in Lawrence's series of panel paintings. He illustrated the pull attractions of the North, Midwest, and West and carefully delineated between the promises of a better life and some of the hostility and rejection Blacks faced which were common to all immigrants and newcomers. The pull for leaving an economically decaying agricultural South was employment in booming industrial areas stimulated by World War I. Blacks were relegated to performing semi-skilled and unskilled labor and forced to work long days for minimum wages. There were ample opportunities for Black males and females but the jobs were arduous and wages low, as shown in Panel 4, titled "The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after all others had been exhausted and panel 57



The female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South." When they arrived in urban areas, Blacks lived in boarding houses and tenements. In both paintings the faces are hidden, the bodies sharpened, and the expressionless activities confirm the boredom of repetitious and often dangerous manual labor.



Lawrence was careful to balance between the positive and negative aspects of life outside of the South. Newspaper, radio programs, and churches often omitted the difficulties faced by the new arrivals who were immigrants in their own nation. Lawrence's panels showed improved housing, better diet, voting rights, and free public education in Panel 58, titled "In the North the Negro had better

educational facilities." Access to education was a significant factor for leaving the South where public and private schools were racially segregated. The Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 was supposed to ensure that the *de jure* separation of races included equal accommodations, but in every instance inferior facilities, unqualified employees, and minimal funding was provided to Blacks young and old. When segregated public schools and colleges were built for Blacks, they were staffed with unqualified teachers who worked under White authorities. Their schools were given used textbooks, desks, and chairs discarded by the White schools. Even the prosperous and successful urban



Black bourgeoisie viewed their rural relatives with disdain in Panel 53, titled “The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness.” Blacks are subjected to social segregation in restaurants in Panel 49, titled “They also found discrimination in the North although it was much different from that which they had known in the South.” In the North, Blacks encountered *de facto* segregation in housing, employment, and other basics in life. There were many benefits, but Lawrence refused to depict their new life as a heaven on earth or fulfilling a Biblical prophecy.



Lawrence captured vivid scenes of racial violence in Panel 51, titled “In many cities in the North where the Negroes had been overcrowded in their own living quarters they attempted to spread out. This resulted in many of the race riots and the bombings of Negro homes” and Panel 52, titled “One of the largest race riots occurred in East St. Louis.” White resistance and resentment led to violent race riots directed against Blacks

by indigenous Whites who quickly forgot they were the descendants of recent immigrants to the Promised Land. There were major race riots in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in the cities and industrial areas where the Black migrants settled. Hundreds died and were injured, and Black neighborhoods and businesses were looted and burned by White mobs. Most of the fighting was over employment and housing. Whites felt threatened by Blacks who would work for lower wages. Blacks experienced discrimination because they were not allowed to join the labor unions who represented the manufacturing skills they possessed or acquired.



Conclusion

MoMA’s six-month comprehensive and informative exhibition reunited Lawrence’s *Migration of the Negro* series that were divided and purchased by the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. in 1942. Today, historical forces affirm his epic narrative life stories of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, the Black

Migration, and the Harlem Renaissance, culminating in the 2008 election of America's first Black president. Responding to one of America's largest demographic shifts, Langston Hughes (1902-1967), the Black poet laureate, published a collection of poems in 1949 entitled *One-Way Ticket* illustrated with woodblock prints by Jacob Lawrence. In his first stanza of *One-Way Ticket*, Hughes paints in words what Lawrence poetically painted in his migration series about the Black exodus.

One-Way Ticket

I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East-
And not Dixie.

(Langston Hughes, 1949)

Acknowledgement

Materials and reproduced images from the 2015 *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North* exhibition are from the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection to which we are grateful.

Artworks

1. Panel 1 *During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
2. Panel 4 *The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after all others had been exhausted*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
3. Panel 15 *Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.

4. Panel 17 *The migration was spurred on by the treatment of the tenant farmers by the planter*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
5. Panel 22 *Another of the social causes of the migrants' leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
6. Panel 24 *Child labor and a lack of education was one of the other reasons for people wishing to leave their homes*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
7. Panel 49 *They also found discrimination in the North although it was much different from that which they had known in the South*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
8. Panel 51 *In many cities in the North where the Negroes had been overcrowded in their own living quarters they attempted to spread out. This resulted in many of the race riots and the bombings of Negro homes*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
9. Panel 52 *One of the largest race riots occurred in East St. Louis*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
10. Panel 53 *The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
11. Panel 57 *The female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
12. Panel 58 *In the North the Negro had better educational facilities*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
13. Panel 60 *And the Migrants Keep Coming*, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in.
14. Extensive descriptive materials of the 60 artworks in the exhibition and other works by Jacob Lawrence are digitally accessible from:
 - a. The Museum of Modern Art
<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/panel/1/intro>
 - b. The Phillips Collection
<http://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/migration-series>
 - c. The Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence Research Center
<http://www.jacobandgwenlawrence.org/>
 - d. MoMA Learning: Jacob Lawrence
http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/search?query=lawrence

Resources

The Southern Diaspora

<http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/diaspora/bibliography.htm>

African American Migration Resources

<http://library.howard.edu/content.php?pid=257155&sid=2163101>