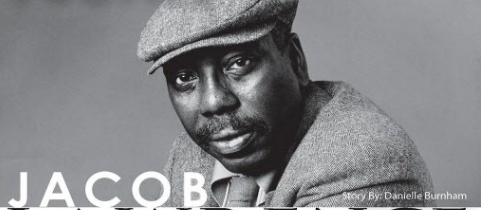


# PROFILE



Story By Danielle Burnham

# JACOB LAWRENCE

## The Revolution Of Art

**Painter Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)** was the first American artist of African descent to achieve widespread, mainstream acclaim in the United States, and his early career successes mark many “firsts” for artists of the African diaspora.

Lawrence’s eternal renown is grounded in his contribution to the landscape of Modern Art. His expansive catalog of work essentially chronicles the course of human struggles along our country’s timeline – from the Great Depression, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the rebuilding of a nation. As a Black artist he knew struggle first-hand, and from his particular perspective he captured history as it was happening. Lawrence came of age in 1930s

Harlem. He was only 20 when he created his first series, a 41-panel series about Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture. Shortly thereafter he created several multi-panel works dedicated to key figures in the struggle against slavery, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown.

Lawrence’s painting style hearkens back to the Harlem Renaissance and remained largely consistent throughout his career. In a style he described as “dynamic cubism”, the images in his work are flattened and angular, and the perspective is skewed. Most of his works were created as a series of panels, which, as you move from one to the next, unfold like a narrative, much like a film. And, even as the

subjects and details change from one panel to the next, the focus is always on the human element.

Lawrence moved to Bed-Stuy in 1943, taking up residence at an apartment on Decatur Street by Malcolm X Boulevard. By this point he had already earned national acclaim for his *Migration Series*, which was exhibited in 1941 at New York’s Downtown Gallery. Not only was Lawrence the first Black artist to exhibit at a New York commercial gallery, but the 60-painting series – a depiction of WWI Black migration from the South to the North in search of work and freedom from oppression – earned him the esteem of the art world almost overnight.

In the 1950s Lawrence moved to Downtown Brooklyn, during which time he played a pivotal role in launching various local artistic initiatives. Most notably, he helped establish the Fulton Art Fair, an outdoor art exhibition held in Bed-Stuy’s Fulton Park. The Fair has run every summer since 1958 and is considered a local historic institution, and a tribute to the legacy of the first Black artists to achieve mainstream acclaim and public recognition for their work.

In the early 1960s, he was inspired by the civil rights struggles in the South to paint works like *The Ordeal of Alice*, which depicts a young Black girl attacked with arrows as she tries to enter a newly desegregated school. Lawrence never formally adopted the

“Black Art” label to describe his work; he painted from his own experience, as if he were “holding up a mirror” to racial injustice.

By the late 1960s, Lawrence’s work began to recall themes he had already started exploring the previous decade in works like the 30-panel series, *Struggle... From the History of the American People*. Lawrence’s focus shifted back toward portrayals of racial harmony and all-inclusive depictions of life in America. In his *Builders* series, Black and White



Migration Series IV 3-1940-1942

people work together in a manner representative of the nation’s efforts to rebuild society.

There is an earnestness to Lawrence’s work, and a poignancy. But, while his paintings often told stories of poverty, injustice, and oppression, they were not tales of resignation or submission. His compositions, which were constructed using vibrant colors and angular shapes, convey a sense of energy and tension – one that speaks to his subjects’ resistance, dignity, and hope.

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