

art connections

summer 2003

a teacher resource guide

Painting Stories - The Art of Jacob Lawrence

This teacher resource guide provides information and cross-curricular, multi-disciplinary activities for the study of artist Jacob Lawrence.

THEME: *The paintings of Jacob Lawrence tell stories. Stories of enslavement and freedom, of human migration and renaissance, of struggle and of triumph.*
•from *Story Painter, The Life of Jacob Lawrence*

In New York City, the late 1930s and 40s - a period called the Harlem Renaissance - was a time of cultural expansion and exploration. For the first time, black Americans were impacting the world around them, especially in the areas of music, literature, and visual arts.

African-American visual artists were documenting their lives and histories through a variety of media, from collage and sculpture to paint. But no one documented the history of the African-American quite like Jacob Lawrence. Best known for his series of 60 paintings called *The Migration of the Negro*, Lawrence began taking art lessons as a

young man at the Utopia Children's Center in Harlem. His first series of paintings was inspired by the heroic efforts of a black Haitian slave, and at the age of 20, Lawrence completed a series of 41 paintings documenting the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture.

While creating artworks in a series format was not new, Lawrence created his paintings like an author might create the pages of a book, and without words, he told the stories of the African-American people in a compelling and meaningful way.

Lawrence went on to become one of the great 20th century American painters and a true documentarian of history. His paintings can be found in museums around the world, including the Vatican Museum in Italy, home to one of the world's finest art collections.

BACKGROUND: In 1910, nine out of ten African-Americans lived in the southern United States where they had been slaves before the Civil War. After **slavery** ended, and over the course of the next 20 years, millions of black Americans moved northward looking for a better life. Jacob Lawrence was born in 1917 in Atlantic City, NJ. His parents, who were part of this **Great Migration**, met as they were traveling from the southern United States to the north. By the time Lawrence turned 13, his father had left his family, and his mother had moved from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, finally settling herself and her family in **Harlem, NY**. In the 1930s, almost 35,000 African-Americans lived in the five square miles that make up Harlem.

This period in history is called the **Harlem Renaissance**. African-Americans were making important contributions in literature, visual arts, and music. Musicians like **Duke Ellington** and **Louis Armstrong** were playing **swing** and **jazz** for white audiences in the Harlem clubs, and African-American artists and writers were documenting their experiences as black Americans in the United States.

Background, cont:



As a young man growing up in Harlem, Lawrence became disinterested in school - it seemed to him that the history, social studies, and language arts courses being taught were only concerned with white Americans. These stories and individuals meant very little to Lawrence. Then, he heard the story of **Toussaint L'Ouverture**, a black slave who led a revolt and helped to establish Haiti, the first black republic in the Western hemisphere. This was the first time in Lawrence's life that he learned about an African-American hero. At the same time, Lawrence was taking art lessons at the Utopia Children's Center in Harlem, working with his first teacher and mentor, Charles Alston. Lawrence was excited about the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, and in 1937, at the age of 20, he painted a series of 41 paintings that told the story of this African-American hero.



Lawrence was especially interested in paintings that told stories. He studied the works of the great Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, whose **murals** showed working class people with a great amount of dignity and respect. The more Lawrence studied and learned the histories of great African-Americans, the more he wanted to tell their stories through painting. In 1938, while working for the U.S. Government's **Easel Project**, a program created to provide work to poor artists across the United States, Lawrence completed two series of paintings: a group of 32 paintings of runaway slave and **abolitionist, Frederick Douglass**; and, **Harriet Tubman**, an African-American woman who escaped slavery and, without thought for her own safety, led 19 trips from the south to the north on the **Underground Railroad**, leading over 300 slaves to freedom. In 1968, Lawrence wrote a book about Harriet Tubman, using his paintings as the illustrations.



At age 22, Lawrence created *The Migration of the Negro* series, a group of 60 paintings that, "Chronicles the mass migration of Southern blacks to the north in search of work following World War I." These paintings were exhibited in 1941 at the Downtown Gallery in New York City - the first time a major gallery exhibited the work of an African-American artist. People of all backgrounds related to this series of paintings in different ways: the biblical story of Moses leading his people to the promised land; the African-American looking for a better life in the northern U.S.; and the flight of the Jews from Adolf Hitler that was happening at that time in Europe.



Because of the popularity of *The Migration of the Negro* series to people of all backgrounds, both the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC were interested in purchasing the paintings as part of their permanent collections. The paintings were split in half, with the Museum of Modern Art taking the even numbered paintings and the Phillips Collection taking the odd. At the same time, *Fortune Magazine*, one of the largest magazines in the United States, ran a special edition issue on blacks in the United States, and included 26 of the migration paintings. Jacob Lawrence was, at age 23, considered to be one of the great black artists of the 20th century.

Although of African-American descent, Lawrence didn't consider himself to be an "African-American" artist, but a man, who happened to be black, who painted. He wanted his art to be appreciated for "the colors of the paintings, not the color of his skin." Lawrence had help in his success from people of all races and walks of life, and he was able to open the door for other artists, including Romare Bearden. He also introduced many people to great African-American heroes, like Harriet Tubman and Toussaint L'Ouverture.

In 1971, after accepting a permanent teaching position at the University of Washington in Seattle, Lawrence created his *Builders* series, some of his most popular work. This series had many meanings for Lawrence - the building of families and relationships; people working together on a single goal; and man's struggle to create a better life. Often added to these paintings were images of children and families, suggesting "that people of all races and ages must work together to build the future."

Jacob Lawrence died June 9, 2000 at his home in Seattle - he will be remembered as one of the great painters who chronicled the history of the black American.

top to bottom:

This is Harlem, 1942-43.

General Toussaint L'Ouverture, 1937-38.

No. 1: The Migration of the Negro series, 1940-41.

Builders-Family, 1974.

artistic influences on Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence was influenced artistically by a number of different artists, with distinct and individualized styles. Those artists include:



Peasant Wedding Feast, c. 1566/7, Pieter Brueghel the Elder. "... it is Brueghel's work, based on real life observation, that is the more real and human."



The Tortilla Maker, 1926, Diego Rivera. "The importance of the painting lies in its representation of Mexican culture, and the way in which it reflects Rivera's firm convictions about the essential human dignity of people."



Berlin Streetscene, 1930, George Grosz. German expressionist of political and social satire, "This watercolor caricatures the appalling social conditions of post-First World War Germany."

classroom connections

When painting the 60 paintings in the series *The Migration of the Negro*, Lawrence sketched all of the paintings first and then worked on all 60 at the same time, using the same colors from the first painting to the last. In other words, he painted all of the red, then all of the black, etc., until the paintings were complete.

1. Why do you think Lawrence used this technique when working on a series of paintings that told a story?

2. Look at paintings No. 1, No. 12, No. 23, and No. 60 of *The Migration of the Negro* series. Why do you think using consistent colors was important to Lawrence?

3. How are these paintings similar, besides the colors? What are the differences? What does the train station in his paintings sound like? What is the mood of each painting? How would it feel to be one of the people in these paintings?

4. Look at a map of the United States. What states were black Americans leaving? Where were they headed? What route do you think they traveled? What mode of transportation did they use?

5. Research your family history - talk to parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Where did your family come from? Did they migrate to the United States? Draw a series of pictures that tell the story and/or write your family's migration history.

Lawrence liked paintings that told stories. Sometimes, though, the stories he wanted to tell were too big for one painting.

1. Look at *Forward Together*, No. 10 from the *Harriet and the Promised Land* series. Pretend you are a writer for a newspaper, and report what you see in this painting.

2. Think about your favorite story. Can you draw the story? How many individual paintings/drawings would it take to tell the story? Can you tell the story with pictures only, or do you need words, too?

Look at the illustration from the book written by Jacob Lawrence, *Harriet and the Promised Land*. On the page with this picture are the words:

Harriet, grow bigger.

Harriet, grow stronger.

Harriet, work harder.

Harriet, work longer.

1. Why does Harriet need to grow bigger and stronger, and work harder and longer?

2. What is it like outside in this painting? Describe the weather.

3. Harriet Tubman was a slave in Maryland who escaped to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Look at a map of the United States. With your finger, trace the route you think Harriet traveled. How many states did she have to travel through to get to Canada?

Jacob Lawrence's paintings told the stories and experiences of African-Americans in the United States. Look at the paintings *This is Harlem* and *And Harlem Society Looks On*.

1. What things are similar between the two paintings? What things are different?

2. Where is Harlem? Find it on a map.

3. Both of these paintings portray life of African-Americans in Harlem, NY during the 1940s. Do you think they are telling the same story? Or, are they different stories?

4. Write a story about *This is Harlem*. What is happening? Where are the people going? What is going to happen next? After you've written your story, find information about the Harlem Renaissance using the internet or the library. List ten facts about life in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. Does your story portray a realistic look at Harlem life? Compare and contrast the similarities and differences in writing.

5. Harlem was Jacob Lawrence's neighborhood growing up. Draw or paint a picture of your neighborhood.

classroom connections, cont:

6. In *And Harlem Society Looks On*, what is happening? What are the people in the painting talking about? What will happen next?

Look at the painting *The Apartment*. This is the way Jacob Lawrence remembers the apartment where he grew up - his mother hung carpets with bright colors and patterns to cheer up their rooms.

1. Read the poem "Madam and the Rent Man," by Langston Hughes. Who was Langston Hughes? Use the internet and the library to find out why Langston Hughes was able to write about the African-American experience in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance.
2. How do both the painting and the poem paint a portrait of Harlem life?
3. Write a poem about your home. What is special about the place you live? Try to illustrate those things with your words.

As a boy, Jacob Lawrence was very interested in learning about African-American heroes. The heroes he learned about in school were people like George Washington, a great leader of the United States, but also a slave owner. Lawrence didn't understand how someone like George Washington related to his own life and experiences.

1. Look at the painting *General Toussaint L'Ouverture, No. 2*. Is this man a great man? What about the painting tells you he is a hero?
2. Why is *L'Ouverture* a hero? Research in the library or on the internet to find out what is special about this person.
3. Think about a person who is a hero in your life. What traits does that person have that make him or her a hero to you? Can you draw his or her portrait? What things would you include in the portrait to indicate that he/she is a hero?

4. Where is Haiti? Find Haiti on a map and learn about Haiti's history by doing your own research on the internet or in the library.

In *The Builders* series, Jacob Lawrence is interested in people working together to build communities, families, and the future.

1. Look at *Builders* and *Builders-Family*. How are these two paintings similar? How are they different? Do they tell the same story?
2. Look at *Builders-Family*. Where do you think the family is going and why? What are the workers building?
3. Now, look at *Builders*. Do the men in the paintings seem to be working together? What is the mood of this painting?
4. Think about a time when you had to work on a project with another person. Was this easy? Or was it difficult?

bibliography

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**denotes part of Dublin Arts Council's library

vocabulary

abolitionist A person who fought for the abolishment, or end, of slavery.

Duke Ellington Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was one of the most prolific composers of the 20th century. He was born in 1899 and is considered by many to be America’s greatest composer, bandleader, and recording artist. Duke Ellington died in 1974.

Easel Project A government program created to provide work to poor artists across the United States.

Frederick Douglass A Maryland slave who escaped slavery and rose to greatness as an abolitionist, lecturer, writer, newspaper publisher, editor, and diplomat. He was born in 1818 and escaped to New York City in 1838.

Great Migration A period of history in which thousands of African-Americans traveled from the southern United States to the north looking for work and a better way of life.

Harlem, NY A neighborhood in New York City. From 1916 and through the mid-1930s, New York City saw an influx of African-Americans as they migrated from the southern United States to cities in the north. In the 1930s, almost 35,000 African-Americans lived in the five square miles that make up Harlem.

Harlem Renaissance A period of history from the late 1920s to the late 1930s in which the African-American population, due to the migration of African-Americans to northern cities between 1916 and 1926, had great success in the literary, visual, and performing arts. Originally called the “New Negro Movement,” the Harlem Renaissance celebrated the heritage and cultural importance of the African-American population.

Harriet Tubman A slave born in Maryland who escaped slavery in 1849 by travelling to Pennsylvania guided by the north star. Known as fearless, Tubman returned to the south 19 times, utilizing the Underground Railroad and leading over 300 people to their freedom.

jazz Music that combines composed music with improvisation.

Louis Armstrong Born in 1901, Louis Armstrong is thought to be the most influential individual in the development of the musical style called jazz. Louis Armstrong played the trumpet and sang, influencing all other individuals interested in the genre of jazz music.

migration To go from one region to another or one country to another, usually in a large group, or frequently over a period of time.

mural Any painting made directly on a wall.

slave A person who is the property of another and bound to serve him or her without pay.

slavery The practice of owning slaves.

swing A smooth, flowing style of jazz popularized in the 1930s. It is an attack on the notes surrounding the beat, not on the beat itself. In 4/4 time, this means the accents fall more or less on the second and the fourth beats, rather than on the expected first and third.

Toussaint L’Ouverture A black slave who led a revolt and helped to create Haiti, the first black republic in the Western hemisphere.

Underground Railroad A secretive route established to help slaves escaping from the south to the northern United States. Homes along the Underground Railroad would lodge and feed the escaping slaves, helping them to successfully find their way to freedom.