

Jacob Lawrence came of age during the Harlem Renaissance. He was surrounded by a galaxy of brilliant people including W.E. B. Dubois, founder of the NAACP, and outspoken writer on racism; Alain Locke who wrote *The New Negro*, a book that called on artists to construct positive images that rejected racist stereotypes, Langston Hughes, the poet who used jazz and blues rhythms in his poetry to celebrate being a negro, blues singers Bessie Smith, jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald, anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, and many more.

Lawrence had the opportunity to study art at federally-funded workshops during the 1930s with major artists like painter Charles Alston, and sculptor Augusta Savage. It was also in Harlem that he met his future wife, the artist Gwen Knight. He would also have been inspired by the sweeping murals of the Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, both of whom were working in New York City in the 1930s. Aaron Douglas completed his most famous mural, *Aspects of Negro Life*, in 1934 at the Schomburg Library where Lawrence frequently did historical research. Douglas constructed narratives with modern principles flattened space and bright colors with a reference combined with the symbolic abstractions of African art, an approach which would contribute to Lawrence's own approach to art.

Lawrence made a rapid ascent as an artist. He began by painting "American scene" images of Harlem, like *Street Orator's Audience* (1936) that emphasized the real life of the streets of Harlem that he saw around him. By 1941 he was already recognized and had completed five historical series, four of them about the life of heroes in African American history, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 1938, *Frederick Douglass*, 1939, *Harriet Tubman*, 1940, and *John Brown* 1941. His fifth and most famous series, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1941 concisely represented the economic and social forces that led thousands of ordinary people to migrate from South to North in the early twentieth century.

During the 1940s and 1950s Lawrence continued to depict Harlem, as well as adding new themes, the Navy, the War, and the South, based on his personal experiences and commissions. The next historical series, *Struggle . . . From the History of the American People Series*, 1954-6 followed the Brown Vs Board of Education 1954 desegregation ruling. *No. 13 Victory and Defeat* depicts "Passing the Sword of Freedom" at Yorktown, during the revolutionary war; several works address the struggle for freedom by slaves. Ten years later, *Struggle II, Man on Horseback*, 1965, depicts a brutal attack during the Civil Rights movement: a baton wielding policeman rides on a horse with bloody feet baton who stomps on protestors. The electric energy of the black and white line highlighted with red dramatizes the violence. *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, documents a specific event when Civil Rights marchers from Selma to Birmingham, lead by Martin Luther King, were brutally turned back by the police. Lawrence has indicated the tensions with the jagged shapes in the sky and under the bridge: the open jaw of a single dog confronts the dense group of marchers.

In 1971 Jacob Lawrence and Gwen Knight moved to Seattle, Washington where he became a tenured professor at the University of Washington. He moved to a small house near the University with a studio upstairs, *The Studio*, 1977, a location that only two years earlier had been declared legal for African Americans. Soon after his arrival he was invited to create a new historical series on the story of George Washington Bush, African American pioneer. The five panels (originally intended to be larger works) detail

the pioneering trek West by the wealthy Missouri farmer who funded six wagons on the Oregon Trail. The dominant image conveys the swirling river waters of the Continental Divide. An entirely new subject for Lawrence, the energy and complexity of the panels is an example of his willingness to transform his style in response to the demands of the subject. Another unrealized commission is represented by two small maquettes, *Debate I and II*, 1987. Lawrence withdrew from mural commission after the murals of his colleague, Michael Spafford, were censored by the State Legislature.

During his years in Washington State, Lawrence was a celebrity artist who received many commissions for posters and murals. Best known is his Kingdome mural *Games*, 1978, ten steel panels which celebrates huge-limbed sports players of many racial mixes in the foreground and their cheering fans surrounding them. Lawrence uses scale to highlight the drama while also subtly foregrounding integration in sports as another milestone of change. The *Games* mural builds on many representations of games in Lawrence's career, here represented by *Chess*, *Eight Ball*, and *A Bid of Four Hearts* all from 1999.

Lawrence continued to work thematically with subjects from much earlier in his career, particularly Libraries and Builders. First represented as part of his series on the "Black Belt" commissioned by *Fortune Magazine* in 1947, the subject reappears often as a metaphor of positive action. *Builders* is here represented by four examples from the 1980s. As a group they present kaleidoscope compositions with complex diagonals and intricate spatial relationships. They are also part of a long term theme of blacks actively pursuing various types of professions, such as *Lawyers and Clients*, 1994. The Supermarket was a theme that Lawrence pursued specifically during his years in Washington State, probably because they were rare in Harlem. Here a series from 1994 includes *Tools*, *Fishes*, *Meats*, *Used Books*, and *Celebration*. In combination they convey the specific spirit of Seattle at the end of the twentieth century.

Another series illustrated John Hersey's book accounting the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. *Hiroshima* 1983. Elongated figures, in the throes of extreme suffering indicated by strong pinks and reds pursue everyday activities like flying a kite or sitting in a park.

Throughout his life Jacob Lawrence constantly responded to new subjects, new challenges, and new circumstances. His commitment to representing both the realities and the successes of African Americans is paired with his extraordinary ability to constantly alters his expressive compositions in response to changing subjects and emotional situations. While he is best know for his early historical cycles, his entire career, with all of its variations, is honored in this small exhibition as a tribute to his full complexity as a major American artist.