

In contrast to a cosmopolitan Harlem that was formative for Jacob Lawrence, James W. Washington, Jr. (1911-2000) grew up in the rural mill town of Gloster, Mississippi during the height of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan. It was a time fraught with danger for young black men, as James Washington Jr. recounts in his unpublished autobiography. “I remember living in fear most of the time. When I was very young my father had to get out of town. Suddenly ... I never saw my father again.”

He had a dizzying succession of jobs as a young man, but he used each one as an opportunity to learn something about life. His mother observed him taking an old shoe apart and apprenticed him to a shoemaker. He recalled, “From that day on [he was fourteen] I used my imagination to accomplish things other people assured me were ‘impossible.’”

By the time he was seventeen, he had already been hired by the Civil Service, a source of employment that would last off and on until 1960. In 1938 the Federal Works Progress Administration invited Washington to assist with an art class at the Baptist Academy in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Since he was not allowed to show his work with white artists, he created the “first negro art exhibition sponsored by the WPA division of recreation in the state of Mississippi.” Several examples of those drawings and paintings of churches in Vicksburg such as *Travelers’ Rest* (1938) are included here. He was relegated to representing subjects in the “negro” part of town, but he chose the most imposing structures he could find to develop perspective and color. His study of art was based on “correspondence courses, books, observation and self instruction.”

Washington moved to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1941 to be closer to his mother. *My Mother’s Room, Little Rock* (1941) is a lovingly observed interior with a subtle construction of space using soft colors. Along with many other southern African Americans, he was transferred to the Pacific Northwest in 1944, in his case with the Civil Service. Washington, a visual note taker, documented his journey as in *Empire Builder Lounge Car* (1944) painted en route North from California, or soon after. Its plunging linear perspective with a high viewpoint echoes the drama of the trip for him.

At the Bremerton Navy Base, he lived in segregated housing and worked in a high-stress job as an electrician wiring warships and communications systems. Requesting a transfer, he moved to Seattle and set up a shoe shop at Fort Lawton. He intricately details the shop in *The Shoe Shop, Fort Lawton* (1950).

In 1944, work in hand, Washington approached the Frederick and Nelson Department Store Gallery, whose director, Theodora Harrison, was a major figure in the development of Northwest art and artists at that time. She invited him to show, and introduced him to Mark Tobey, among others. Washington studied with Tobey between 1945 and 1947 and he later recalled accompanying Tobey to a Baha’i meeting: “we would discuss life and you know the conversation would be food for thought for both of us.”

While racism kept many doors closed in 1948, Washington began working through his church – Mt. Zion Baptist –where he established an integrated Art Show that continued for 13 years. He encouraged participation by both Black and White artists, and included prominent painters like Kenneth Callahan, then curator at the Seattle Art Museum.

Locally and nationally Washington became part of the fabric of his community, settling along with his wife Janie Rogella Washington, in a home and studio in Seattle's Central District, tucked along the edge of Madison Valley. He joined Artists Equity Seattle in 1950, immediately becoming the secretary, and later serving as president (1960 to 1962). In 1953, flying to St. Louis as a delegate, he was inspired to paint two experimental works: *Missouri Landscape* and *Mother Earth Viewed from Flight 8*. Each was a fragmented landscape, with thick, solid blocks of color constructing a flat space seen from high above. In the second painting he included the wing of the plane and a framing window.

Washington depicted his struggle with racism in three major works. *The Making of the UN Charter* (1945), uses flattened space, centripetal composition, collaged newspaper clippings, and skeletal body parts to express the idea that Blacks died for the idea of freedom in World War II, but were denied a place in their own country as stated in human rights declarations at the United Nations.

*The Chaotic Half* (1946), a low-relief woodcarving recalled Washington's frightening Southern childhood and his hope for a better future. The hand of the black voter reaches for the ballot box, while behind a diagonal line is a hooded Klansman, a noose, a crucifix and an all-seeing eye.

*Democracy Challenged (Lynching)* (1948) expressed Washington's disillusionment with the persistence of the Klan and the lack of opportunities for blacks. He incorporated news clippings with a reference to the Klan. The scale of justice, drawn with a white line, encircles the three blacks and lynches them, while on the other side it lassoes the Statue of Liberty. These images demonstrate Washington's willingness to experiment with difficult subject matter.

Along with being active in the community and his church in Seattle, Washington traveled extensively. In 1951, he met Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the famous Mexican muralists, but a more particular creative awakening came when he picked up a small volcanic stone at the ancient Mexican site of Teotihuacan. *Young Boy of Athens* (1956) was carved from that soft volcanic stone. Washington was beginning a new creative direction.

After a trip to seventeen countries in Europe and the Middle East in 1962, Washington carved *Jomo Kenyatta*, a portrait of the man then soon to be leader of an independent Kenya.

Like Jacob Lawrence he chose subjects from both African American history and the Civil Rights movement. In 1969 he was commissioned to make a *Rotunda of Achievement* :

six portrait sculptures, from granite blocks, of famous African Americans including George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

From the mid 1950s until the end of his life, Washington focused more and more on stone sculptures. The fist ranged from the size of a fist to monumental boulders for public spaces. *Bird with Covey* (1963-65), a mid-sized work, is both intimate and grand. The large bird protects her young using her body, which follows the contour of the rock itself.

In his smallest works, like *Young Falcon* (1976) or *Young Gray Squirrel Sunning* (1981), Washington carves a single small animal or bird. In the largest works, he combines references to nature with symbols from the Masons, the Bible, science, and numerology to convey the idea of a shared humanity and spirituality. His public works can be seen throughout the Northwest, and many of them are only a short walk from the Northwest African American Museum.

His last portraits were *Homage to Mark Tobey* (1976) and *Study of Self* (1976). Made in basalt, these low-relief profiles suggest two world-views. In the former, Tobey looks outward, supported by symbols. In the latter, Washington faces toward a small bird that seems to protect and inspire him.

Washington's stone sculptures convey security and freedom, two qualities difficult to attain, particularly for a black person who grew up and came of age in the Jim Crow South. He transformed the restrictions of his life into opportunities for inspiration as seen in his passionately creative paintings and sculptures.