



# JACOB LAWRENCE

## 1917 – 2000

### American Painter

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**Self-Portrait**, 1965 Gouache on paper, 16 x 18 in., Collection of Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence, Courtesy Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, WA.

The Art Heritage Program's Lawrence unit meets the following Colorado Department of Education-Visual Arts Standards (2009)

1. Observe and Learn to Comprehend
2. Envision and Critique to Transfer
3. Invent and Discover to Create
4. Reflect and Connect to Transfer



#### LEARNING TARGET:

- **I know two important facts about Jacob Lawrence.**
- **I can create art inspired by Jacob Lawrence.**

#### SUMMARY

- Jacob Lawrence grew up in New Jersey and Pennsylvania during the 1920's and 1930's. After taking an after-school arts and crafts class as a teenager, he decided to become a painter. (*Discovering Great Artists, Solga & Kohl*)
- During the Great Depression of the 1930's, many Americans were impoverished. Lawrence worked for a government program called the WPA during a time often called the Harlem Renaissance. The WPA helped musicians, writers, and artists get jobs and a jump-start in their work. In 1941, at age 24, Lawrence became the first African- American artist to have a painting included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, a famous New York museum. (*Discovering Great Artists, Solga & Kohl*)

- Jacob Lawrence... “Possessed a brilliant mind, and though he always downplayed the trials and tribulations of race in his personal life, he was one of the most illustrious chroniclers of African-American life in the 20th century. Like the blues, jazz, and hip hop, the art of Jacob Lawrence is quintessentially African American – a reflection of a new, syncretic identity produced by the Middle Passage. And like the blues, Lawrence's work depends equally on the subject of suffering as it does on spiritual rejuvenation.” (Africana: Gateway to the Black World, [www.africana.com](http://www.africana.com))
  - His artwork can be found in nearly 200 museum collections. He received numerous awards including the National Medal of Arts, the NAACP’s prestigious Spingarn Medal, three Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowships and more than two dozen honorary degrees. In 1983, Lawrence was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the highest honor in the humanities in the United States.
  - Lawrence often used a series format to convey narrative content. His fascination with movies during the Depression years inspired his approach to storytelling. For Lawrence, creating a visual narrative involved a process similar to the storyboards used to plan the sequence of a film. Lawrence told his story in the alternating rhythms of hardboard panels, employing every aspect, edge and angle for its physical, social, historical and economic significance. (Whitney Museum)
- a. Lawrence was considered a “Social Realist” because his work concerned social issues and history. “The work of my art involves thinking as well as putting a brush to paper,” said Lawrence. “I can see the images in my head, the details take place when I am executing.” Lawrence also believed what an artist has to say is more important than how he says it. His work usually displayed the following characteristics:
    1. Geometric human figures in a flat, poster-like style
    2. A limited amount of bright, tempera colors, often primaries
    3. Foreshortening, or the use of distortion to solve artistic problems
    4. Large, simplified figures posed to “communicate emotions and feelings”
    5. Recurring images like tools and ladders that symbolize ideas
  - b. Lawrence stated, “I want to record my environment...the activity, the movement, what is around me.” Lawrence believed we are a sum of all the history and experiences that have come before us to shape our environment. Through his work, we learn more about those events, emotions, and the people who brought us to where we are today.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Lawrence was born on September 17, 1917 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He was the eldest of three children. Jacob’s father abandoned the family in 1924, leaving Jacob’s mother struggling to support her young family. They moved to Philadelphia but she was unsuccessful in finding work to support the family, she moved to New York and the children spent several



*Jacob Lawrence (left)  
his mother and siblings,  
1923.*

years, separated from one another in various extended family and foster homes. Eventually, their mother was able to send for her children and moved the family to an apartment home in New York's Harlem district.

Although Lawrence missed the open neighborhoods and playgrounds of his former home, he soon came to appreciate the busy city life of New York. The Harlem area was an exciting, wonderful place to live. A "Renaissance" of art by African American musicians, dancers, photographers and painters was happening, the children frequently played stickball in the streets, pausing their game when a car came through. When he was 13, his mother enrolled him in an after-school arts and crafts program, where he met his first mentor, the artist Charles Alston.

Even as a teenager, Lawrence favored strong, colorful geometric shapes in his artwork. He also enjoyed making illustrated cardboard dioramas. As the Depression deepened, Rosa lost her job and the family went on welfare. Jacob dropped out of school his junior year to work odd jobs to help support his family. He was allowed to register in the Civilian Conservation Corps and worked for two years in upstate New York planting trees, draining swamps, and building dams. When he returned to Harlem, he enrolled in the Harlem Community Arts Center directed by sculptor, Augusta Savage. Lawrence was very shy and felt artwork enabled him to overcome this shyness to communicate with others.

Lawrence noted he never saw an art gallery until he was 18 years old. However, he spent hours exploring the library, the Museum of Modern Art and other free, public, cultural facilities. He stated, "I was inspired by teachers, librarians-everybody in the community was a role model."

He became interested in African-American history under the mentorship of Dr. R.W. Siefert, who encouraged Lawrence to use the unique facilities of the Schoenberg library, which contained resource materials about African-American history. Delving into the resource, Lawrence realized he wanted to become a modern day "griot" or storyteller. It bothered him that history texts and literature books he used in school did not mention African Americans, Native Americans, or other minorities.

With the support and recommendation of his mentors, Lawrence was accepted into the WPA program (Works Progress Administration) a government program providing artists funding to create public works. "The WPA was a school," remembered Lawrence. "It was interesting and mind-stretching to work with lots of different artists. Our materials were provided, and it was a good job when times were bad." Many famous artists were employed this way during the Depression including, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Thomas Hart Benton, N.C. Wyeth and others. The job paid \$23.86 a week, which was a lot of money at the time. Lawrence married a girl he met at the community arts center, Gwen, and credited her as a steady force behind his success.

The first project Lawrence chose to undertake as part of his WPA work was to document the story of Haiti's Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, who in 1804, organized an uprising of slaves and overthrew the French government of what is now called Haiti. To depict the story, Lawrence used Masonite panels as his canvas, because they were cheaper and did not have to be framed. He noted, "I couldn't tell the story in just one painting and there were no

commissions available for murals.” He and Gwen set up all the panels in the series and applied gesso to them. Lawrence took one color and included it everywhere it was going to be on each of the panels. After that color was completed, he repeated the process with another color, and so on. He felt working in this assembly-line fashion allowed him to give a series continuity.

Lawrence completed panel series about Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Harlem, builders, mental hospitals, and the South. His most famous, early career work was the “Migration” series. The 60 panels of the ‘Migration of the Negro’ documents the story of the Great Migration, a period in American history, 1920 –1950, when more than one million southern African Americans moved north. Although the civil war ended slavery, it did little to improve the lives of southern Blacks. They had a hard time getting good paying jobs, quality education, and in many places they were treated poorly. Lawrence researched his project through the Schoenberg library, reading all available documents, diaries, tapes, and books. He also remembered boyhood stories and did oral interviews of people who had migrated. The prestigious Downtown Gallery exhibited the series in 1941, making him, age 24, the first African-American to have his work exhibited in a major New York gallery. The Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased some of his paintings for a permanent collection. The same year, *Fortune* magazine ran a long article on Lawrence and reproduced 26 panels, spreading his fame.

When the WPA job ended, Lawrence won a scholarship to the American Artist’s school in New York. He also received a Rosenwald grant to give him money to continue his work. During World War II, Lawrence was in the Coast Guard and sailed on troop ships between Italy and India.

After his discharge, Lawrence accepted a job as an art professor at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. His success bothered him. Why was his work accepted and he honored when others he felt were equally talented? He became deeply depressed and voluntarily committed himself to a psychiatric hospital. He painted a series of 11 panels about the experience. Lawrence said he found the inner depth of one’s feelings can contain the same amount of struggle as the outer world. He believed “struggle is healthy and beautiful, a sign that we are progressing as human beings.”

Lawrence launched himself back into his career after two years of treatment. He completed more series as well as single paintings. He taught at several universities and art schools (Brandeis, California State College at Hayward, the Pratt Institute, and the Art Students’ League in New York). He concluded his teaching career as an art professor emeritus at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The struggle for civil rights renewed interest in Lawrence’s work in the early 1960s. A retrospective toured 16 cities under the auspices of the Brooklyn Museum. Improvements and advances in the technology of graphics and printing created a much larger market for posters and prints. The work of American artists was in demand worldwide.

At a request from his agent, Lawrence started experimenting with printmaking. He tried many different techniques including lithography, dry point, etching, and silk screening. Lawrence made prints from his existing paintings. The print medium caused him to further simplify his shapes, rearranging some, and intensifying his colors. Almost all the proceeds from Lawrence’s

printmaking work went to educational institutions or non-profit groups.

Lawrence's "Builders" series was the first where he incorporated silk-screen methods. Because he was teaching full-time and still painting, Lawrence would make the basic model and have technicians cut the different screens. Lawrence retained control over the final product. The silkscreen method was the most successful in reproducing the flat, subtle colors of Lawrence's original paintings: "It would be very boring for me to try to copy what's already been done, so it becomes a new work: the same imagery, and the same story, but a new work."

Printmaking allowed Lawrence's work to become widely available to millions of people, reaching new audiences. His subjects came primarily from the African-American community: its history, story telling, and contemporary life. Lawrence's art focused on working people doing their jobs in their communities, overcoming adversities, educating themselves, and achieving. He featured people acting as "builders" of a successful community or leading as heroes to overcome tyranny. His work urges us to take responsibility for our lives and actions...to be the best that we can be. Lawrence documented and dramatized the collective will for freedom. He said he "wanted to be remembered as a person who has made a contribution, who has received and passed on to others." His work is not just about the African-American experience, but human experience.

### **Bibliography and Websites:**

- Skinner, Linda (Feb 1998) Art Heritage unit on Lawrence for MCVSD51
- ArtsEdNet Lesson Plan on Jacob Lawrence: Storyteller. Includes images of the artist's work as well as several lesson plans options to explore: <http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/resources/jacoblawrence/index.htm>
- Whitney Museum of American Art: Jacob Lawrence. An educational and fun site full of great information about Lawrence, including a section for educators: <http://whitney.org/jacoblawrence/>
- The third grade class at Engelmann Elementary School created a page about the Harlem Renaissance and Jacob Lawrence. <http://www.qi.esu10.k12.ne.us/SDGI/Engleman/Harlem/>
- Short biography, links to other resources and images. <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/L/lawrence.html>
- An exhibition of Lawrence's work at the Wadsworth Atheneum. <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/1aa/1aa182.htm>
- The Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum reviewed selected Lawrence works from a recent exhibition. <http://hudson.acad.umn.edu/Lawrence/WAM/jacobtest.html>
- PBS interview with Jacob Lawrence from 1995. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/remember/jan-june00/lawrence\\_6-13.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/remember/jan-june00/lawrence_6-13.html)

### **REFLECT AND CONNECT TO TRANSFER** (VA Standard #4)

***During the last 5 minutes with your students, perhaps as they are cleaning up or while they are creating, take a moment to encourage the students to discuss and review their understanding of Jacob Lawrence:***

#### **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

- 5. What was one thing you learned about Lawrence?**
- 6. How did Lawrence use images and words to tell a story?**
- 7. How will you (did you) use words and images to create your story?**
- 8. What do you wonder?**

## POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

*Observe and Learn to Comprehend & Envision and Critique to Transfer (VA 1 & 2)*

Jacob Lawrence was an American artist who painted stories of African American lives and the struggle for freedom and justice in America. When we look at his art we notice:

- Geometric human figures painted in a flat, poster-like style
- A limited amount of bright, tempera colors, often primaries (reds, blues, yellows) that are the same colors in most of his work. He felt that using the same colors in a series of paintings helped tie them together so they read like a story.
- Foreshortening—he would often distort an image to emphasize something or to solve an artistic problem
- Large, simple figures that communicate emotions and feelings

**Shall we watch for these things in the lesson today?**

### 1. PHOTOGRAPHS:

Jacob Lawrence grew up in New Jersey and Pennsylvania during the 1920's and 30's. He had a younger brother and sister. His father left the family while Jacob was still in elementary school. Because his mother had to move to find work, Jacob and his siblings lived for a time in foster homes. Later, their mother brought them to the Harlem area of New York City to live with her. *Play 90 second video clip <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ac6OZkyYxg>*

### 2. THIS IS HARLEM (Rooftops No. 1) 1942-43, Gouache with pencil under drawing on paper, 15 3/8 x 22 11/16 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

The Harlem area was an exciting, wonderful place to live. African American musicians, dancers, photographers and painters were everywhere! Jacob was a shy and quiet boy and his mother worried about him. When he was 13, his mother enrolled him in an after-school arts and crafts program. Jacob's first art was inspired by the colorful and patterned rugs his mother placed on their apartment floors. He also created colorful art that told the story of the neighborhood where he lived.

### 3. TOMBSTONES. 1942. Gouache on paper, 28 3/4 x 20 1/2 in (73 x 52.1 cm), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

This is another scene of a Harlem neighborhood: a shop selling tombstones next door to an apartment building. An artist works hard to create a style that is unique. Jacob Lawrence developed his own special style with paintings that told stories; he believed what an artist has to say is more important than how he says it.

#### 4. MIGRATION SERIES:

Lawrence was one of the first artists to depict the history and experiences of the everyday life of African-Americans. The Great Migration is a period in American history, 1920 – 1950, when more than one million southern African Americans moved north. Although the civil war ended slavery, it did little to improve the lives of many people who lived in the South. They had a hard time getting good paying jobs, children couldn't attend good schools, and in many places they were treated poorly. Many families chose to move away. They wanted to create a better life for themselves and their families.

- PANEL # 3, "In every town, Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go north and enter northern industry." 1941: This was one of 60 panels in the series. Lawrence's wife Gwen helped him work on this. They put a base coat of paint on 60 boards and then he painted them one color at a time. Lawrence pictured in his mind what each panel would look like and then went through and painted all the black sections, then red sections, etc, until the art worked was finished. He felt the assembly line approach gave the over-all work a connection and flow. When you look at this image, what do you notice? (All figures-- including the birds-- face the same way; they are carrying everything they own...)
- Panel No. 10: "They were very poor." 1940-41. Tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18 in. (30.5 x 45.7 cm) The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

#### 5. MIGRATION SERIES:

- *The Migration Series, Panel No. 34. "The Black Press Urged the People to Leave the South" 1940-41, tempera on gesso on composition board. 18 x 12 in. Museum of Modern Art, NY.*
- *The Migration Series, Panel No. 57: "The female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South" 1940-41. Tempera on masonite. 18 x 12 in. (45.7 x 30.5 cm) The Phillips Collection, Washington*

#### 6. HARRIET AND PROMISED LAND

- *Harriet Tubman Series. No. 7, 1939-40. Casein tempera on gessoed hardboard. 18 x 12 in. Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA*
- *"Daybreak: A Time to Rest" Harriet Tubman theme, 1967. egg tempera on hardboard, 30" x 24". National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*

Lawrence created another series of paintings that tells the story of Harriet Tubman. When he was growing up, there were few history books about African American heroes. He decided to tell these stories through his artwork. Lawrence says, "Harriet Tubman was born a slave and fled her slave masters just prior to the civil war. She organized other slaves and, moving through the Underground Railroad, made nineteen trips from South to North...always following the North Star until she and the other runaway slaves reached the vast, snowy fields of Canada. She was a very daring and brave woman."

Lawrence created images from "Harriet and the Promised Land" several times in his career, first as a series of paintings and later in a printmaking process. Although he used different ways of telling the story, he still used bright, flat colors and foreshortening, a technique used in drawing and painting to give the illusion of 3-dimensional space. Notice which part of the painting appears to be the closest to you, which part looks further away? Do you notice the bugs in the foreground?

**7. IRONERS.** 1943, gouache on paper

**BUILDERS**, No. 3. 1974. Screenprint on wove paper from hand cut stencils, 30 x 22 in.

Lawrence frequently painted people at work. He was fascinated by tools and collected them to hang in his studio. He said, "Tools are symbols of order and ambition to me...they are like sculpture." Notice the way he shows the workers using their bodies as well as their tools to build and work. He often added children and families to suggest that people of all races and ages must work together to build the future. "Some of my paintings show man's struggle, but building shows the beauty of people working together."

**8. THE LIBRARY** 1960. Tempera on fiberboard. 24 x 30in. National Museum of Modern Art, Washington

As a child, Lawrence spent many hours in the library. His family was very poor and libraries were a free source of entertainment. Lawrence said his role models were his teachers, librarians and others in his community. He valued intellectual work or "brain work" as much as he did physical work. He felt libraries were a place where people could come together in quiet, mutual support.

When Lawrence first started painting, he used poster and tempera paints because they dried quickly and were inexpensive. He continued to use the same paint throughout his life. Lawrence used a hard edge/straight edge technique that required a steady hand. He did not use a ruler to make his lines.

**9. CONFRONTATION AT THE BRIDGE.** 1975. 19 ½" X 26": Screenprint on paper from hand-cut film stencils: This print was included in a portfolio that was part of a series of ten produced for the American Bicentennial in 1976.

In 1965, hundreds of civil rights marchers, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., left Selma, Alabama on a peace march to Montgomery. Outside of town, local law enforcement officers with dogs, riot gear and cattle prods blocked the bridge. They claimed the group did not have the proper permits to march. The two groups kept their positions for several days until a court order allowed the marchers to continue. As the result of this incident and others like it, federal law enforcement officers were brought in to be sure everyone received fair treatment.

**10. THE STUDIO** (and closeup) 1977 Gouache on paper 30 x 22 in. Seattle Art Museum.

Jacob Lawrence died in 2000. His artwork is in over 200 museum collections. He taught at the University of Washington for many years. He received many important awards including the National Medal of Arts. Today, Jacob Lawrence is not only known as a great artist, but as a storyteller, historian and art teacher. His imaginative style of flat, colorful shapes makes his paintings seem filled with life.

**REFLECT AND CONNECT TO TRANSFER** (VA Standard #4)

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**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

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- 3. How will you (did you) use words and images to create your story?**
- 4. What do you wonder?**

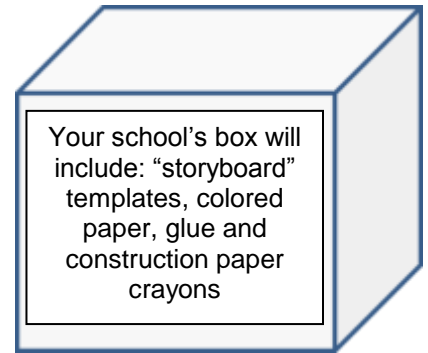
## FEATURED ART LESSON

### Telling Stories with Art (Narrative Art)

*Invent and Discover to Create (VA Standard #3)*

Students create a two- or three-panel art piece that tells of an event or story of their life. Subjects for this narrative series might be:

- My home and family
- My classroom, school, playground
- My neighborhood and friends
- My ethnic background
- A community event (Fruita Fall Festival, Parade of Lights, Dinosaur Days, Farmers Market, etc.)
- A moment in history (you might decide on this and have all the students in your class do the same event, or give them a choice of several)
- Familiar literary stories (read or tell a short story to the students.)



#### Process:

Using colored construction paper and the construction paper crayons, students will create images on the storyboard papers illustrating two or three parts of their event or idea.

Like Lawrence, the shapes should be simple, geometric or organic (squares and triangles, or soft curvy) with simple and minimal detail added using crayons. Students should concentrate on using similar shapes and colors in all of their panels (one storyboard sheet = one "panel"). For instance, if a person in the first panel has a red triangle for a dress, that person should have a red triangle for a dress in all of the panels.

**YOUNGER STUDENTS:** If it is easier for younger students to only do one or two panels, that is fine, but every attempt should be made for first grade and second grade to do more than one panel.

- Each storyboard panel will have lines at the bottom for words to go with the artwork. This narrative can be short, only a few words. The narratives do not necessarily need to be sequential, as Lawrence often did not do that. He often portrayed different parts of the same story.
- You might choose the narrative for these students, and write it in to the pages ahead of time for Kindergarten and/or first grade for speed and ease.

#### ALTERNATE ART PROJECTS:

1. As a class, make a community project: a mural. The mural depicts each student's home or parent's work building cut out and placed upon a large piece of paper, as a community.
2. Lawrence liked to picture people at work. Can the class cooperate to make a mural or series of murals about the workers around them? (At school: teachers, office staff, librarian, principal, lunchroom helpers, bus drivers, etc.) (At home and in the community: parents, neighbors) What career do they choose as an adult?

3. Lawrence exaggerated the size of hands and feet using a technique called foreshortening. Trace around your foot or hand and make a picture out of that beginning.
4. Look at pictures of athletes or figures from Lawrence's books (available from your school library with prior notice.) Can you replicate them in paint or cut paper?
5. Which songs, symbols and phrases evoke emotion and feeling? Identify and practice the use of body language to convey emotions of anger, defeat, exhaustion, elation, concern, sadness, winning, and confidence? Draw a figure displaying an emotion in a color that conveys the emotion? Discuss how emotions can be expressed even when one cannot see another's face.
6. Lawrence loved to include tools in his artwork. Arrange a still life of tools and paint or draw them or make a construction picture.
7. Lawrence employed different perspectives in his work. Sit on floor and looking up at someone, draw what you see. Lie down and look at the same scene. How does it change the view and the size of the objects you see?
8. Paint a scene similar to the landscapes that Lawrence did for the Migrations series. What happens when there's a flood, drought, insects, plague, hurricane, tornado, avalanche, etc? What colors will you use? Why?
9. Can students take a scene or issue from the Civil Rights movement and paint a picture about it? Can they show images to define or describe poverty, racism, discrimination, homelessness, violence, and non-violence?
10. Simulate what it might have been like to live in a segregated community. Issue black armbands or badges or something to mark your minority. Provide a list of rules they must follow and consequences if they do not. Watch what happens. Be sure there is time for discussion of feelings. Create an artwork, based on the experience.

We learned about Jacob Lawrence in Art Heritage.



## ART HERITAGE PROGRAM

We learned about **Jacob Lawrence** in Art Heritage today. Lawrence was an American artist who lived from 1917 to 2000. Lawrence honored historical figures by creating series of paintings about Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and other leaders.

How to Spot a Lawrence painting:

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