

Painted Stories: The Work of Jacob Lawrence

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(Campus Lecture, March 28, 2007)

I was asked to make this talk to help prepare the way for the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, which comes to campus this Thursday, February 8, to translate the work of the twentieth-century American artist, Jacob Lawrence, into choreography...or, as the promotional materials of the Dayton Company call it, “*colorography*.” For just a moment the notion of translating his paintings into dances puzzled me. Perhaps that was only from my great respect for Jacob Lawrence’s distinctive visual language, for the painted form that stories of human struggle and loss and courage find in his work—so true, so powerful, in my mind, that at that first moment I wondered why some *other* form need be found, at all.

Then, I began to look at the paintings, again. Paintings that I had looked at before, but never with this question in mind: “If I were going to perform this painting as a dance, what would I be looking at? What would I be looking *for*?” And then, of course, you see it. In a panel from his 1967 series on the life of Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery, then returned to the South, risking her life many times over to lead hundreds more slaves North to freedom: the change, as your eye moves across the image, from those travelers who are still deep in the forest, held between the verticals of the trees, pushing through water; to those coming into the clearing, stepping up from the water onto dry land, their bodies angled now as sharply as the slope of the mountain, pulled by each other and by the North star; swept onward by Harriet herself (her strength clear in the strong red color, the strong rectangular shape Lawrence has given her) who points the way, brings up the stragglers, and holds her people in an embrace, all at once. You see that this is an image full of movement, of gesture, of bodies positioned and angled in a way that tells you just where each is on the journey from weary determination to hope to joy; and you see it, again, in *Over the Line*, from the same series. This depicts Harriet Tubman crossing the line into Canada, her legs flying—she, herself, flying, picking up her skirts and leaving the earth in some dance of joy and relief, which the birds, happily, share.

And I didn’t search hard for these images by Lawrence; I didn’t spend lengths of time hunting for images that emphasize movement. I opened a couple of my books, I flipped some pages, and there they

were. I don't think I would have quite *seen* the emphasis on movement and gesture and position—at least, I wouldn't have as consciously recognized and identified it to myself—if I hadn't been asked to give this talk. Which, if you are me, teaches you two valuable lessons: One, never forget that there is always more to discover in a painting—change the lens through which you look at it, and you are likely to discover a new work; and two, I think I learned that distinctions I had thought were in place between means of expression, between art forms, are so much more fluid than I had understood. After just a little bit of looking, I saw that the question is not, “Why would you translate Jacob Lawrence’s paintings into dance?” but, “How could you *not* translate Jacob Lawrence’s paintings into dance?” If you allow yourself to see them, if you allow yourself to feel them, you will respond through your body. And that kinetic response is hardly an act that diminishes what he has done; it gives it the greatest respect.

Aside from the wonderful benefit that I have gotten from being asked to give this talk... I think that you would like the benefit of seeing more of the works that will be “danced” on Thursday night, and getting a little more information about Jacob Lawrence, and perhaps a little bit of help with “reading” his visual language. Lawrence was born in 1917 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. After a series of moves, he and his mother and his sister and brother settled in Harlem in 1930, when he was thirteen. He attended federally-funded arts workshops after school where he was taught by artists prominent in the vibrant Harlem cultural community of that time (this was just following the movement of the 1920s popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance) like sculptor Augusta Savage and painter Charles Alston. There he met Harlem Renaissance poets Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay; and there he heard Alain Locke, university professor, philosopher, major voice behind the Harlem Renaissance, who urged young artists like Lawrence to search their own cultural heritage for the subject matter of their art.

Lawrence himself said, of his earliest artistic studies:

There was a certain kind of magic in it—to put something down on a two-dimensional picture plane that would take on meaning. That intrigued me. And I could make decisions: Do I want to use this color, or that color? People like myself very rarely had the opportunity of making decisions. You could make decisions, here. You were in a kind of control, here. And in a very constructive way.¹

Another focal point of the Harlem cultural community was the Arthur M. Schomburg Collection, a division of the New York Public Library and a unique resource for the study of black culture worldwide—a center set up by Arthur Schomburg after a teacher told him that he had no history, he had no culture, because he was a Black Puerto Rican. The Schomburg Collection drew Jacob Lawrence to it; he spent hours there reading and researching and out of those hours were born several series—among them the life of Harriet Tubman; the life of Frederick Douglas, the Maryland slave turned abolitionist,

speaker, and writer; and the series that gave Jacob Lawrence his greatest early success, in 1941: *The Migration of the Negro*, a series of sixty hardboard panels depicting the movement North of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans between the years 1900 and 1930, fleeing the poverty and racist laws and lynchings of the South, and going toward cities like Pittsburgh and Chicago and New York, where the steel mills and the railroads were in need of labor to meet the demands of World War I. At the young age of twenty-three, Lawrence saw this series published in *Fortune* magazine and exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in New York, making Lawrence the first African-American artist to be represented by a major commercial gallery. Half the series was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and half by the Philips Collection in Washington, DC; Lawrence was “the first African American artist to receive sustained support from mainstream art museums and patronage outside of the black community during an era of legalized and institutionalized segregation.”²

I talked about the relationship between art forms—Lawrence’s work relies on a powerful visual language; but also, it relies on the art of narrative, or story-telling. Lawrence grew up listening to stories of the great migration: the hardships of the lives left behind, the journey northward, the lives found in the North, with their own set of hardships. “We are absolutely a people telling stories,” Lawrence said. “It seems like we are born talking and telling people about it. The series came out of that—people talking about people coming up from the South.”³ Personal accounts of Lawrence often describe him as an artist of great stature, a man of great humility. The series came out of “listening to people,” but it also came out of that extensive research that he did for all of his series. Each of the sixty panels in this series has a caption, some of them running several lines long, matching a detailed written account to what is given visually on the panel. For example, a moment ago I mentioned the hardships found in the North. Here is the caption Lawrence wrote for Panel 50 of the *Migration* series: “Race riots were very numerous all over the North because of the antagonism that was caused between the Negro and white workers. Many of these riots occurred because the Negro was used as a strike breaker in many of the Northern industries.” The importance of these captions is suggested by the fact that he wrote all sixty captions first—he clarified exactly the story he wanted to tell—before he ever started drawing.

When he started drawing, though, he first drew all sixty panels—outlining his simple, elemental shapes in pencil—and then laid out the sixty panels and painted them color by color, all at once: He moved through the entire series painting every shape that he wanted to be yellow, yellow; then went back to the beginning and painted every shape that would be blue-green, blue-green; then orange; etc. By working this way—as well as by limiting his range of colors, shapes, and motifs—he ensured, he said, a unity and consistency throughout the series. Just as every person making that journey North had been

part of a larger, powerful movement, he wanted to make clear that every scene in this series, no matter how small and quiet—a woman lying in her bed reading a letter from a relative who has gone North, wondering if she can break free of her fears and follow; a family in their meager cabin wondering the same—claimed its place in this large and profound chapter of American history. “I don’t think a struggle has to be overly dramatic,” Lawrence said in an interview years later. “It can be very quiet. It can be a searching of the self. And I think it’s beautiful, that we all have this capacity to struggle.”⁴

Jacob Lawrence’s style has been characterized very differently, from primitive, or untrained—which is incorrect, as he was trained extensively, in Harlem workshops and studios, later at the American Artists School in New York, and elsewhere—to a “modernist reduction” of form to essentials.⁵ He himself once described his style as “dynamic Cubism.”⁶ His paintings do share with Cubism a flattening of space, demonstrated in a later painting, *The Ordeal of Alice*, 1963, based on a news photograph of one of the nine children being taunted by a mob as she attempted to enter the segregated high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. But the flattening of space is not to make a formal point, or a point about art—that a picture is a flat surface, rather than a view into space—but to intensify the emotion, to have the girl’s innocent courage and what Lawrence called “the irrational hatred”⁷ surrounding her all on one picture plane, so that the viewer might come up against “the nightmare”⁸ (again, Lawrence’s words) that happened that day.

And although, in Lawrence’s work, figures and objects might be segmented into geometric shapes, as is true of Cubism, it is not to make a point about visual perception (that is, to assemble a figure or object or space from differently-angled planes in order to show that we understand what we see from different points of view over time) but to make some emotion or experience sharp, and immediate. In Panel 16 of the *Migration* series is a woman who has lost a loved one to a lynching. All details not essential to your understanding of this moment are suppressed; the greatly simplified shapes are shifted, elongated, upended... whatever distortion Lawrence feels necessary to drop you into this state of mind: a woman for whom reality no longer makes sense, for whom all is precarious, for whom the weight of the world is—at least for this moment—not bearable. In the words of a prominent Lawrence scholar:

Jacob Lawrence has walked a careful line between abstract and figurative art, using aesthetic values for social ends. He has always maintained that art, as one of the highest forms of human endeavor, is too significant a communicative medium to be reduced simply to formal experimentation.⁹

Another art historian who was also a friend of Jacob Lawrence’s said more simply, shortly before Lawrence died, in 2000, at the age of 82, “I don’t think he’s so much concerned about art, as he is about life.”¹⁰

Still another says: “From the beginning of his career, Jacob Lawrence has pointed out the harsh realities of racial oppression, resisting both fantasy and pessimism.”¹¹ *The Migration of the Negro* series ends not with despair but with the determination made clear in its final caption: “And the Migrants kept coming.”

But maybe it is best to give the last word to Lawrence’s wife, Gwendolyn Knight, a fine artist herself: “Jacob Lawrence’s work celebrates the human quality in man. It celebrates the things we can do to better our condition. It celebrates our heroes.”¹² Such as Harriet Tubman, “so bold, daring, and elusive,” Lawrence’s caption for a panel in his 1940 *Life of Harriet Tubman* series tells us, “such a terror to slaveholders,” that a \$40,000 reward was offered for her head—and you might look for her on Thursday, just as intimidated by that as Lawrence shows her to be, sweeping two more slaves onward to freedom.

NOTES

¹ *Jacob Lawrence: An Intimate Portrait*, prod. Grover Babcock and Elvin Whitesides, Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993, videocassette.

² Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 11.

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange,” in *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Washington D.C.: The Rappahannock Press, 1993), 21.

⁴ *Intimate Portrait*.

⁵ Phrase introduced by prominent modernist art critic Clement Greenburg in the 1930s, which refers to a paring-down of imagery to, and emphasis upon, such basic visual elements as line, space, color, shape, etc., used by scholars who place Lawrence’s work in the context of modernism.

⁶ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 156.

⁷ Patricia Hills, “Jacob Lawrence’s Paintings during the Protest Years of the 1960’s,” in *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*, eds. Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Nesbett and DuBois, 11.

¹⁰ *Intimate Portrait*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*