

Jacob Lawrence
1917 – 2000



Jacob Lawrence, one of the most important artists of the 20th century was born in 1917 and is best known for his series of narrative paintings depicting important moments in African American history. His parents were part of the Great Migration of African-Americans from 1916 – 1930. One million people left the rural South for the urban North during his period looking for a better life.

Lawrence was introduced to art in his early teens when his mother enrolled him in the Utopia Children's Center, which provided an after-school art program in Harlem. By the mid-1930's, he was regularly participating in art programs at the Harlem Art Workshop and the Harlem Community Art Center where he was exposed to leading African-American artists of the time including Augusta Savage and Charles Alton.

At the community art centers, Lawrence studied African art, Aaron Douglas's paintings and African-American history. Jacob Lawrence loved color. He used bright, bold color to dramatize the one-dimensional aspect of his paintings. This flat appearance is Lawrence's signature style. Lawrence also liked to tell stories with his paintings. His paintings told the stories of black history or the stories of his own life experiences.

With the help and encouragement of Augusta Savage, Lawrence secured a scholarship to the American Artist's School and later gained employment with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) working as a painter. Lawrence was able to survive as an artist thanks to the government sponsored WPA, which hired writers, artists and musicians to document American history.

Lawrence began painting in series format in the late 1930's, completing 41 paintings on the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the revolutionary who established the Haitian Republic. Other series followed on the lives of abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and John Brown.

In 1940, he received a fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund and he started his Migration Series. The Migration of the Negro, one of his best known series was completed in 1941 and included 60 paintings based on the migration of the African-American from the rural South to the urban North.

In 1941, at the age of 24, he became the first African-American artist to cross over the "color line" and exhibit his work in galleries and museums that had previously only showed the works of white artists.

In 1964, Lawrence visited Africa, which inspired his Nigerian Series (1964-1965). In 1971, he moved to Seattle to teach at the University of Washington. Starting in 1993, Lawrence illustrated many books for children about African-American history. The most widely acclaimed African-American artist of this century, Lawrence continued to paint until his death in 2000.