

JACOB LAWRENCE [1917–2000]

17a

The Migration Series, no. 57, 1940–1941

Jacob Lawrence did not need to look far to find a heroic African American woman for this image of a solitary black laundress: his mother had spent long hours cleaning homes to support her children. Both she and the artist's father had “come up” — a phrase used to indicate one of the most important events in African American history since Reconstruction: the migration of African Americans out of the rural South. This exodus was gathering strength at the time of World War I, and fundamentally altered the ethnic mix of New York City and great industrial centers such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh.

Lawrence was born in New Jersey, and settled with his mother and two siblings in Harlem at age thirteen. Harlem in the 1920s was rich in talent and creativity, and young Jacob, encouraged by well-known painter Charles Alston and sculptor Augusta Savage, dared to hope he could earn his living as an artist. “She [Augusta] was the first person to give me the idea of being an artist as a job,” Lawrence later recounted. “I always wanted to be an artist, but assumed I'd have to work in a laundry or something of that nature.”



17-A Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), *The Migration of the Negro Panel no. 57*, 1940–1941. Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12 in. (45.72 x 30.48 cm.). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. Art © 2006 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The subject of the migration occurred to him in the mid-1930s. To prepare, Lawrence recalled anecdotes told by family and friends and spent months at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library researching historical events. He was the first visual artist to engage this important topic, and he envisioned his work in a form unique to him: a painted and written narrative in the spirit of the West African griot — a professional poet renowned as a repository of tradition and history.

The Migration Series was painted in tempera paint on small boards (here, twelve by eighteen inches) prepared with a shiny white glue base called gesso that emerges on the surface as tiny, textured dots. Lawrence, intent on constructing a seamless narrative, chose to work with a single hue at a time on all sixty panels. He used drawings only as a guide, painted with colors straight from the jar, and enlivened his compositions with vigorous brushstrokes that help further the movement of the story. The captions placed below each image are composed in a matter-of-fact tone; they were written first and are an integral part of the work, not simply an explanation of the image.

Lawrence often described the migration as “people on the move,” and his series begins and ends with crowds of people at a train station (a potent symbol for growth and change in American history; see 15-A, 16-A, and 18-A). In the first panel, people stream away from the viewer through gates labeled “Chicago,” “New York,” and “St. Louis”; in the last one, they face us, still and silent, behind an empty track. The caption, which states, “And the migrants kept coming,” renders the message sent by the painting ambiguous and evocative. Are the migrants leaving us, or have they just arrived? What is our relationship to them?

Lawrence also asks those questions of the laundress, who appears toward the end of the series. Her monumental, semi-pyramidal form, anchored between the brown vat containing a swirling pattern of orange, green, yellow, and black items and the overlapping rectangles of her completed work, is thrust toward us by her brilliant white smock. With head bent in physical and mental concentration, she wields an orange dolly, or washing stick, in a precise vertical: a powerful stabilizing force in the painting, and a visual metaphor for her strength and determination.

Lawrence showed *The Migration Series* in Harlem before being invited to bring it to a downtown setting that had previously displayed only the work of white artists. The exhibition received rave reviews and Lawrence's acceptance by the art world and the public was confirmed when twenty-six of the panels were reproduced in *Fortune* magazine. Lawrence had intended the series to remain intact, but agreed to divide it between two museums, the even numbers going to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and the odd numbers to the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Allow the students to study this painting, paying attention to all the the parts of the composition.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Ask students what they think this woman is doing.

She is stirring laundry with a washing stick.

Encourage students to try standing and holding their arms like the woman in this painting.

What do they know about this woman from this painting?

She is a strong and hard-working, dark-skinned woman.

E | M

What shapes do you see in this painting?

There are rectangles and irregular rounded shapes.

What do the large rectangles and the irregular rounded shapes represent?

The large rectangles are laundry drying, and the irregular forms are laundry being washed.

E | M | S

Lawrence painted all the panels for *The Migration Series* at the same time, one color at a time. How did this affect the way the series looks?

Because the same colors are on each panel, the panels seem unified.

Have students discuss where Lawrence repeated colors in this painting.

INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Ask students who was migrating in *The Migration Series*. Where were they going?

African Americans were moving from the South to the North.

Why were they leaving the South?

They were seeking a better life with higher-paying jobs.

What type of jobs had African Americans traditionally done in the South?

They were farm laborers and domestic workers, although some were professionals, such as doctors and teachers.

What type of jobs were many migrants hoping to find in the North?

Many were seeking factory jobs.

E | M | S

Ask students how Lawrence learned about scenes from the migration.

He listened to his family and friends' stories, and he researched historical events from this time period in the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library.

M | S

Help students find Harlem on a New York City street map. (It is just north of Central Park.) Ask students why Jacob Lawrence's art was first exhibited in Harlem.

He lived in Harlem, where many African Americans lived.

What was significant about Lawrence being asked to exhibit his art in a downtown gallery?

Previously, African American artists had been excluded from downtown galleries.

Have students compare Jacob Lawrence's image of a migrant mother with Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother* (18-B). What does each artist emphasize about the lives of these women?

Lawrence emphasizes the hard manual labor that this woman is doing, while Lange emphasizes a mother's care and concern for her children.

S

Ask students why Lawrence was like a West African griot. (A griot is a professional poet who perpetuates history and genealogy through tales and music.)

Like a griot, Lawrence tells the story of a people through art.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: the Great Migration; Harlem Renaissance; the Great Depression

Historical Figures: Marcus Garvey; Langston Hughes; Booker T. Washington; W. E. B. DuBois

Geography: Southern sharecropping states (Miss., Ala., Ga., Ark., S.C., N.C., Fla.); Industrial cities of the North (Detroit, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Boston)

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: "Theme for English B," Langston Hughes (secondary); *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Richard Wright (secondary); *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (secondary)

Music: jazz