Life

Painter, storyteller, and educator Jacob Lawrence had a successful career that spanned more than six decades. His art confronted the realities of 20th century African American experience, from everyday life to historical subjects.

1917: Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, NJ; his parents both came from the South as part of the Great Migration.

1930: At age 13, Lawrence, his mother and two younger siblings moved to Harlem, NY. There, Lawrence began his study of art at the Harlem Community Art Center with Harlem Renaissance artist Charles Alston.

Late 1930s – early 1940s: Lawrence took part in Harlem’s dynamic, multi-generational art community, which included Alston, Augusta Savage, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Romare Bearden, and his future wife, Gwendolyn Knight. In 1941, the artist gained widespread recognition for his 60-panel series, *The Migration of the Negro*. At that time, Lawrence became the first African American artist to be represented by a major American art dealer, Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery, and he began showing his work in national and international exhibitions.

1943 – 1945: During WWII, Lawrence served as a war artist in the U.S. Coast Guard, where he produced over fifty works of art. Lawrence was a member of the first fully-integrated military vessel, the Sea Cloud, and many of his Coast Guard paintings portray African American and white seamen working and recreating together. In the fall of 1944, Lawrence received a brief shore leave to attend the opening of his solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

1946: Josef Albers invited Lawrence to teach at the Black Mountain College (BMC) Summer Art Institute. This was his first teaching position, and the experience was a key influence on his future career as an artist and educator.

1950s – 1960s: Lawrence maintained an active career as a painter and teacher, holding positions at numerous schools, including Pratt Institute, the New School, the Art Students League, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Brandeis University. In 1964, the artist was invited to exhibit and teach in Nigeria.

1971: After he accepted a position as a tenured professor of drawing and painting at the University of Washington, Jacob and his wife Gwendolyn moved to Seattle permanently.

1980s – 2000: Lawrence retired from teaching in 1983. He continued to make paintings as well as prints and murals. He received multiple honors including the National Medal of Arts in 1990. In 2000, Lawrence died in Seattle at age 81. That same year, Over the Line, the comprehensive, two-volume catalogue raisonné of Lawrence’s life and work was published by the University of Washington Press.
Lawrence at Black Mountain College

During the 3rd annual Summer Art Institute held in July and August of 1946, Lawrence taught a painting course two mornings a week, which gave him time to observe Josef Albers’s design and color classes and relax within the picturesque landscape of the college’s Lake Eden campus. He taught alongside a diverse group of visiting artist instructors including collagist and painter Jean Varda, sculptor Leo Amino, advertising designer Leo Lionni, and photographer Beaumont Newhall, all of whom, like Lawrence, used modernist techniques and the figure in their work. The presence of Lawrence and two African American art students at the 1946 summer program was part of the college’s effort to integrate their rural southern campus. It was previously believed that Albers hired a private train car to help the Lawrences avoid experiencing legalized segregation. However, research for this exhibition revealed this story to be misleading. In fact, the couple traveled in a sleeper compartment on an overnight train, the same accommodation offered by Albers to the other faculty coming from NY. It is likely that the Lawrences began their return trip north in a segregated train car.

“I would like to be remembered as a fine artist – as an artist that made a contribution – in both form and content. And as an artist that has contributed something to the quality of life.”

Legacy

Lawrence stated that the Bauhaus theories he gleaned from observing Albers teach at Black Mountain were the most important for his own future career as a teacher. “When I teach,” Lawrence said, “I am definitely a descendant of the Bauhaus. I don’t stress content. I stress understanding the plastic, abstract elements and being aware of what you can do with them.”

The Jacob Lawrence exhibition also features three newly commissioned, multi-media artworks that respond to Lawrence’s paintings, teaching, and legacy in a contemporary context: Animator/filmmaker Martha Colburn’s four-channel video projection of her film Hammer-Camera-Scissors (The Workers of Jacob Lawrence), composer/performer Tyondai Braxton and installation artist Grace Villamil’s mixed media and soundscape, Search for Function and writer/interdisciplinary artist Jace Clayton/DJ Rupture’s video and performance piece, The Jacob Lawrence of Jacob Lawrence.

Images in order of appearance: Jacob Lawrence in c. 1939 working on a panel for his series The Life of Frederick Douglass, photograph by Kenneth F. Space, courtesy of The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation; Jacob Lawrence, South African Gold Miners, 1946, gouache on paper, Flint Institute of Arts, © 2018 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY; Nancy Newhall, Gwen and Jacob Lawrence at Black Mountain College, 1946, vintage gelatin silver print, © 2018 Estate of Beaumont and Nancy Newhall/Scheinbaum & Russek, Ltd, Sante Fe, NM; Film still from Hammer-Camera-Scissors (The Workers of Jacob Lawrence) by Martha Colburn.

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