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Jacob Lawrence: Mainstream Acceptance Rooted in Widespread Misunderstanding

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The American art world is elitist. This has never been and never will be a secret. Less often remembered is the fact that the art world is also a part of mainstream culture. As such it is subject to many of the same prejudices and biases that have plagued America as a whole. Racism against African-Americans in the opening decades of the twentieth century was as great a problem within artistic circles as it was within mainstream society. Therefore, it was vitally important when Jacob Lawrence, with his series “The Migration of the Negro,” not only became the first black artist to gain recognition from a mainstream, white gallery, but that he did so with a series focused on a narrative central to African-American history.1

Lawrence’s mainstream acceptance was largely due to a series of fortuitous encounters with rare members of the art world who were able to see his talent over his skin color. In 1940, Lawrence applied for, and received, his first grant from the Rosenwald Foundation, an organization founded in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears.2 Rosenwald contributed generously to many philanthropic pursuits throughout his life and took a particular interest in the advancement of African-Americans. Although his funding was directed primarily towards the construction of schools in economically disadvantaged portions of the south, he was also known for providing artist grants like the one received by Lawrence.3 The money was specifically intended to fund Lawrence’s creation of the series “The Migration of the Negro,” the work responsible for garnering him widespread recognition.

Equally important to the historical narrative of this artwork was Jacob Lawrence’s relationship with Alain Locke, “a philosophy professor and critic who became a major chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance.”4 Locke not only encouraged the black artists with whom he was in contact to use their work to explore their cultural identity, he was also integral to their efforts to disseminate their work to a wider audience. Lawrence first met Locke during his teenage years when he was creating his early works in the legendary “306 Studio” of his mentor Charles Alston.5 It was Locke who, in 1941 while Lawrence was on his honeymoon with fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight, brought “The Migration of the Negro” series to the attention of Edith Halpert, the innovative and incredibly influential dealer at New York’s Downtown Gallery.6 And so, Lawrence became the first African-American artist to receive representation from a well-known and stereotypically white gallery. Although Lawrence gained acceptance early in his career and maintained his place in the art world in the many decades to follow, his acceptance by the Downtown Gallery, and the museums that gained notice soon after, did not come without a host of racially grounded limitations. In his famous “Migration” series, Lawrence combined a modernist formal aesthetic with an expressionistic approach to personal and culturally-loaded subject matter. Although galleries and museums promoted his work, the critical writing of the period, as well as of the following two or three decades, showed a certain narrow-mindedness in the way his work was analyzed and understood. On one hand, he was very distinctly labeled a Negro artist. On the other, critics made many attempts to understand him within the context of the leading Regionalist and Social Realist artists of the day. It was not until Abstract Expressionists came to the forefront of the art scene in the mid-twentieth century that Lawrence’s true importance as the link between the European Modernists and the American Abstract Expressionists was realized.
Realist trends prevailing among contemporary white American painters. The universality of his forms and his themes and the relationship between his work and the early twentieth-century European Modernists were largely underestimated. Despite his widespread acceptance, people’s understanding of his work was limited as a result of the racism ingrained in American society. It wasn’t until after the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the Civil Rights movement that Lawrence’s work began garnering the critical notice it deserved. In order to understand what aspects of Lawrence’s work were largely unnoticed, it is imperative to first understand the elements of his work that led to his initial acceptance by members of the mainstream art elite. It is especially important to understand why Lawrence was in particular who gained this acceptance. Why did Lawrence gain widespread recognition so quickly while members of the artist community from which he came worked in relative anonymity for African-Americans were citizens in name only, in reality they were much more citizens of their own tightly-knit, richly storied sub-community.

much longer? The answer comes largely in the form of Edith Halpert. The solo show of Jacob Lawrence’s work went largely unnoticed, it is imperative to first understand the elements of his work that led to his initial acceptance by members of the artist community from which he came worked in relative anonymity for African-Americans were citizens in name only, in reality they were much more citizens of their own tightly-knit, richly storied sub-community.

many of Harlem’s best art-decorating in large part from a long tradition of textile making. Another element common associated with Black art was the formal presentation characteristic of African tribal masks, which had been canonized by Picasso’s early Cubist experiments and later incorporated into his mature work. Lawrence’s use of the imagery in “The Migration of the Negro” series dealt with the racial injustices of past and present but did not dwell upon them. Instead, Lawrence focused on the positive potentialities of the mass migration northward, through adequately still with a consciousness that life in the north came with its own special brand of hardships for African Americans. This can be seen, even in the panels in which Lawrence handled the most subjective matter, he prudently chose those elements to heighten the least horrible element of each scene.

Specifically, panel fifteen of his series focused on the potbellied barman in the bar where Lawrence showed, Halpert continued forward with her original vision, effectively launching the career of Jacob Lawrence.

Halpert’s influence, however, was not the only factor at work. It is of significance that the pieces forming Lawrence’s “Migration of the Negro” series were in essence very different from the work produced by many of his African-American contemporaries. Undeniably, Lawrence’s work was framed in traditional and personal African-American narrative and esthetic and exhibited some of the formal primitiveness largely attributed to African art. However, at its core “The Migration of the Negro” was a monochrome and black art expression in the form of Picasso’s early Cubist experiment and later incorporated into his mature work. Lawrence’s use of the imagery in “The Migration of the Negro” series dealt with the racial injustices of past and present but did not dwell upon them. Instead, Lawrence focused on the positive potentialities of the mass migration northward, through adequately still with a consciousness that life in the north came with its own special brand of hardships for African Americans. This can be seen, even in the panels in which Lawrence handled the most subjective matter, he prudently chose those elements to heighten the least horrible element of each scene.

Specifically, panel fifteen of his series focused on the potbellied barman in the bar where Lawrence showed, Halpert continued forward with her original vision, effectively launching the career of Jacob Lawrence. The narrative construction of Lawrence’s “Migration of the Negro” also played an integral role in his ability to garner widespread, mainstream acceptance. Early critical writings focused on perceived connections between his “Migration of the Negro” and the work of American Social Realists, and to a lesser extent, Regionalists. Pervasive racism prevented most Americans from recognizing the artistic potential and importance of work characteristically in black America. Consequently, it goes without saying that at the time the phrase “American culture” referred almost exclusively to the culture of white America.

Therefore, the specific scenes Lawrence chose to illustrate in “The Migration of the Negro” were of utmost importance to his success: Leslie King-Hammond states that “Lawrence drew thematic inspiration from his immediate environment,” while many of his contemporaries drew inspiration from memories of their “fictive experiences in the South.” The imagery used in “The Migration of the Negro” series dealt with the racial injustices of past and present but did not dwell upon them. Instead, Lawrence Lawrence chose to highlight the pain and loss such conflicts created. Moreover, the phrases he paired with the painting emphasized his belief in the possibility that the injustice and pain of the past has the potential to lead to positive change. In Lawrence’s construct, fear pushed African-Americans to migrate northward, but in the end afforded them the opportunity to create a better life. Panel fifteen is but one example of many; overall Lawrence chose to define racially sensitive situations positively rather than in negative terms. In doing so, he was able to create a body of work that addressed important social and personal issues without alienating a white audience. In his “Migration” series, Lawrence cataloged an important part of America’s history without hyperbolically victimizing or vilifying either party involved. Moreover, he did so more successfully than his contemporaries, which helps to explain his acceptance in contrast to the overwhelming lack thereof. Such racial sensitivity was imperative to his achieving a positive reaction from a white general public, such narrative structure was nothing new in the tradition of art history. It dates back, at the very least, to the medieval biblical frescoes that cover many of the church walls in Italy. Additionally, Lawrence’s work bore little to no resemblance to the work of either the Social Realists or the Regionalists. Given the tenous nature of the connections made between Lawrence’s work, why did critics accept him? Again, the focus turns to Edith Halpert. She had the Social Realists and to a lesser extent, the Regionalists, and the Social Realists had legitimized the place of narrative in the tradition of American Social Realism. Lawrence’s Afro-American forms was a reason for racially biased critics to dismiss Lawrence’s work. All they had to do was to find a way to make his work fit in with the narrative and formal trends popular at the time, and by doing so, they essentially guaranteed his initial popularity within mainstream art circles. Lawrence achieved popularity but not understanding. Ironically, by drawing connections between Lawrence’s work and the work of the contemporary Social Realists, critics effectively masked his originality and prevented him from understanding the universalism, also central to the Modernist’s explorations, truly at work in Lawrence’s work. The narrative aspect, and the Social Realists had legitimized the place of narrative in the tradition of American Social Realism. Lawrence’s Afro-American forms was a reason for racially biased critics to dismiss Lawrence’s work. All they had to do was to find a way to make his work fit in with the narrative and formal trends popular at the time, and by doing so, they essentially guaranteed his initial popularity within mainstream art circles. Lawrence achieved popularity but not understanding.
The schools and the subway cars and the water fountains, segregation occurred but equally rarely followed. The mainstream art world was willing to accept the work of an African-American, but only so long as they were al- lowed to characterize the artist, and his art, as different. Different, inevitably meaning lesser. It would be decades until critics and art historians fully understood the true formal and narrative importance of Lawrence's body of work and “The Migration of the Negro” series in particular. This begs the question, then, of how Lawrence kept a prominent role in the creation of his racially sensitive works. As a result, the critical universality of Lawrence's work was not fully understood until Lawrence—his work was viewed. He understood, and in his narratives to being of one school and his narratives to being of one school. Surely, I am in part guilty of the tendency, but also show how much still remains unappreciated. It is not until the Abstract Expression- 

Separate but equal was not just for schools and subway cars. It was for the art world as well. And as it was for the schools and the subway cars and the water fountains, segregation occurred but equally rarely followed.

now famous stroke, admitted: “I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions.”

Early Modernists sought for a universality of their aesthetic, their idioms, their narratives, worked towards creating work that contained universally understandable emotional content. Though the concept that early writings on Abstract Expressionism, predominantly those by leading critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, as depictions of African-American histories. They failed to understand the universal impli-

Figure 3: “The Migration of the Negro: Panel 11” by Jacob Lawrence