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Jacob Lawrence:

MAINSTREAM ACCEPTANCE ROOTED IN WIDESPREAD MISUNDERSTANDING



Figure 1: "The Migration of the Negro: Panel 60" by Jacob Lawrence

By Catherine Higgins

Harlem Renaissance artist Jacob Lawrence garnered critical acclaim in large part due to widespread misunderstanding of his work. He was mislabeled a Social Realist, which afforded him early and sustained popularity, but also created a limited understanding of his work and legacy. 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.

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 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 went largely unobserved. 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 went 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 it was Lawrence in particular who gained this acceptance. Why did Lawrence gain widespread recognition so quickly while other members of the artist community from which he came worked in relative anonymity for

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much longer? The answer comes largely in the form of Edith Halpert. The solo show at the Downtown Gallery that established Lawrence's career was originally to be part of a multi-gallery showing intended to showcase the work of many of Harlem's best artists. However, every other gallery originally involved pulled out one by one, mostly due to economic factors, until Halpert's exhibition of Lawrence's "Migration of the Negro" was all that remained. Rather than cancel the showing, Halpert continued forward with her original vision, effectively launching the career of Jacob Lawrence.⁷

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 narratives, and exhibited some of the formal primitiveness largely attributed to African art. However, at its core "The Migration of the Negro" was art produced by a black artist rather than Black art.

African and African-American art were traditionally thought of as decorative, deriving in large part from a long tradition of textile making. Another element commonly associated with Black art was the formal primitivism characteristic of African tribal masks, which had been canonized by Picasso's early Cubist explorations in the first decade of the twentieth century. Although both of these aspects were present in Lawrence's "Migration of the Negro," they were not the defining characteristics of this series, as they were in the works of many of his contemporaries. For example,

the work of fellow Harlem artist Ernest Crichlow featured a much greater degree of abstraction than that of Lawrence. The focus of Crichlow's work became the abstracted elements themselves rather than the objects comprised by those elements. The abstraction was no longer a means to an end, as it was for Lawrence; it was an end in and of itself. Such focus on compositional and decorative concerns was identified as being "more African" than work that was constructed in other modes, based on different structural and narrative concerns. Not surprisingly, Crichlow's first solo show did not come until 1960, almost twenty years later than that of Jacob Lawrence.⁸

Racism was so ingrained in the cultural fabric of 1940s white America that art

originating purely from traditionally African formal conventions dealing with the histories and cultural norms of African-American citizens was not seen as an integral part of American culture. African-Americans were citizens in name only; in reality they were much more citizens of their own tightly-knit, richly storied sub-community. Their historical narrative, and the art produced in reaction to and as a result of it, was seen as distinctly separate from American history, and was, to many, largely unimportant to the culture and historical narratives of America. It goes almost without saying that at the time the phrase "American culture" referred almost explicitly 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 "lives and experiences in the South."⁹ 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 focused on the positive potentialities of the mass migration northward, though admittedly still with a consciousness that life in the north came with its own special brand of hardships for African-American migrants. However, even in the panels in which Lawrence handled the most sensitive subject matter, he prudently chose to illustrate the least hostile element of each scene.

Specifically, panel fifteen of his series focused on the harsh realities of lynching (see Figure 2). Lawrence chose to position an empty noose above a mourning figure rather than portraying a lynched figure or a hostile lynch mob, the latter of which was the choice made by several of his contemporaries who handled similar themes. The caption for the panel read, "Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at



Figure 2: "The Migration of the Negro: Panel 15" by Jacob Lawrence

first left immediately after this."¹⁰ Rather than focusing on the hostile interactions between white supremacists and African-Americans, 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 catalogued 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 their overwhelming lack thereof. Such racial sensitivity was imperative to his achieving a positive reaction from a white general public.

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 characterized purely as Black art. Consequently, by relating his work to that of already-mainstream white artists, critics essentially sanctioned general acceptance of Lawrence's work.

In reality, the associations drawn between Lawrence and the artists comprising the Social Realist and Regionalist schools were facile at best. This is not to say that his work bore no relation to the works of the Social Realists and Regionalists. However, it was not nearly as deeply related to the works produced by artists of those movements as early writings on "The Migration of the Negro" indicated. Like the artists of those movements, he composed "The Migration of the Negro" so that it formed a linear narrative unfolding from the first panel to the sixtieth. However,

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 stylistically to the work produced by either the Social Realists or the Regionalists.

Given the tenuous nature of the connections made in an attempt to validate Lawrence's work, why did critics accept him? Again, the focus turns to Edith Halpert. She had the foresight and the power to push Lawrence and his work to the forefront in 1941. The critics had to say something. By this point the aesthetics of African primitivism had become sufficiently well-known and accepted by the New York art scene due to the overwhelming success of Picasso and Braque's Cubist project, and the Social Realists had legitimized the place of narrative in the tradition of American art. As a result, neither content nor form was a sufficient reason for racially biased critics to dismiss Lawrence's work. All they could think 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 marginalized Lawrence. They were unable to understand the universalism, also central to the Modernist's explorations, truly at work in Lawrence's panels because they were blinded by color. His aesthetic was in part primitive, thereby allowing critics to label him a "Negro artist."¹¹ The narrative aspects of his work afforded critics the opportunity to compare him to the Social Realists. However, he was never considered a member of the Social Realist movement. This was due in part, I hope, to the fact that his work was not truly of that school, but in reality the distinction appears to be mostly racially drawn. Separate but equal was not just for schools and subway cars. It was for the art world as well. And as it was for



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

the schools and the subway cars and the water fountains, separation occurred but equality rarely followed. The mainstream art world was willing to accept the work of an African-American, but only so long as they were allowed 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 art world despite the limited understanding of his work and his work's true significance. The answer is multifaceted. In part, he did not. His work became secondary to the purely formal work of the Abstract Expressionists, a movement that reached maturity around the year 1950. Narrative work no longer had a place in the elite art world.

Lawrence, nevertheless, did not disappear from view completely, due in large part to the

work he produced during a nine-month stint as a patient in a New York psychiatric ward.¹² During this time the balance between formal and narrative elements in his work began to shift, with a greater emphasis placed on the decorative surface patterning he created within his compositions. Auspiciously for Lawrence, the acceptance of early Abstract Expressionism that occurred in the five years following the original acceptance of his "Migration of the Negro" series had significantly altered critical opinions of the primitive. The primitive aesthetic had come to be legitimized as an academic style, no longer viewed solely as the work of an uneducated people or a style appropriated by early Modernists to imitate the work of an uneducated people. Critics slowly began to understand the relation between Lawrence's abstracted forms and those created by the early twentieth-century European Modernists. What before had been attributed to a racially-based development came to be seen instead in its relation to a greater global narrative of art history.

Critics began to write about the similarities between Lawrence's simplified, flattened forms and the ones used earlier by Matisse and Cezanne.¹³ The similarities between Lawrence's work and the work of these two Europeans are particularly evident in their figural treatments. All three artists tended to simplify their figures in general forms and then render them with one flat, solid color. In Lawrence's "Migration of the Negro" series this is most evident in the panels in which he renders crowds of migrants, particularly the first panel and the sixtieth one (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, the expressionistic quality of Lawrence's narratives came to be seen in relation to the works of the German Expressionists rather than in relation to the works of the American Social Realists. His use of vibrant saturated color to render scenes of Harlem street life bore particular similarity to the way in which Ernst Kirchner, of the Die Brücke arm of German Expressionism, constructed pictorial representations of urban life.

However, the relation between Lawrence's work and the work of early European Modernists still represents only a partial understanding of the true vitality and importance of his work. The full importance of Lawrence's work continued to be misunderstood. Critics still vainly attempted to classify Lawrence as belonging to one movement or another. Although elements of Lawrence's work do relate to, and derive from, elements characteristic of other movements, it is effectively impossible to characterize his work within any one of these movements. It is the symbiotic coexistence of seemingly disparate art historical trends within Lawrence's "Migration of the Negro" that gave the piece its power. This is also exactly the reason his work did not begin to be fully understood or appreciated until decades afterward.

Although the rise of the Abstract Expressionists overshadowed Lawrence's continued artistic production at first, it eventually came to be largely influential in the development of a renewed critical interest in his abstracted narratives. This influence was due in large part to the ways in which both Lawrence and the leading Abstract Expressionists spoke about their work in interviews, and in the case of the Abstract Expressionists those interviews that focused specifically on the emotional content of their work. Notably, interviews with the Abstract Expressionists focusing on the emotional quality of their work did not begin in earnest until the early 1970s, more than a full decade after large-scale interest in the movement had waned. The delay resulted from the fact that early writings on Abstract Expressionism, predominantly those by leading critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, were more concerned with the complete lack of representational base in the works of the Abstract Expressionists, and it came to be assumed that their work was not grounded in any emotional narrative. Rosenberg went as far as to dub them the "American Action Painters," effectively delineating their collective body of work as one focused on formal process rather than conceptual or contextual meaning.

It was not until the Abstract Expressionists themselves began to speak about their work that it became evident that their work was about more than formal process. The fact that the link between the work of the early European Modernists and the American Abstract Expressionists was hinged on the transitory work of Jacob Lawrence was discovered because of the eventual discussions that developed about the intellectual preoccupations behind the Abstract Expressionists' formal explorations. It has been long accepted that the artistic production of the early European Modernists centered on their desire to distill art into its universal forms. They sought to create an ahistorical kind of art, an art centered in objective qualifications rather than subjective ones. Less well known and less accepted were the aims at universality driving the artistic production of many of the Abstract Expressionists. Mark Rothko, "in a

as depictions of African-American histories. They failed to understand the universal implications of Lawrence's stories. However, it is this very universality that allows Lawrence's work, particularly "The Migration of the Negro" series as it was created just before the rise of the Abstract Expressionists, to exist as the best link between the early century work of the European Modernists and the mid-century work of the Abstract Expressionists.

The critical universality of Lawrence's work was not fully understood until Lawrence began to grant more interviewers the opportunity to speak with him in the 1980s and early 1990s. Lawrence had always been characteristically terse about his work. He made comments indicating his displeasure with being understood in racially limiting terms; however, he made no attempt to change how his work was viewed. He understood, and in part accepted, the racial limitations of the age

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now famous tirade, admitted: "I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions."¹⁴

Early Modernists strove for a universality of form while the Abstract Expressionists worked towards creating work that contained universally understandable emotional content. Though both groups sought to discover the presence of universal truths in art, there outwardly appeared to be little similarity in their aims. This is where the true importance of Jacob Lawrence's work is revealed. Lawrence made use of the stylized, universal forms championed by the European Formalists. He also created universally applicable narratives. Early critical analysis of his work, tainted by the biases of racism, viewed his narratives

in which he lived.¹⁵ The Civil Rights movement, however, changed America. A new critical eye was brought to the work done by African-American artists and in particular to the work of Jacob Lawrence. As a result, Lawrence began to speak more openly about his work.

In doing so, Lawrence revealed the universal aims that existed as the impetus for the creation of his racially sensitive works. In a particularly telling interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., Lawrence discussed his belief that his work did not deal solely with African-American development. He saw African-American development as being an integral part of American development as a

whole. Gates also asked Lawrence if his art developed as a reaction to an internalized Du Bois-ian double consciousness derived from existing simultaneously as an African-American and an American. Lawrence's answer was extraordinarily telling. For Lawrence, no double consciousness or double history of the African-American existed. Each side of consciousness was integral to the American narrative and each was also dependent on the other for existence.¹⁶ His work was not about the black experience; it was about the human experience, and "The Migration of the Negro" was not solely about the Negro migration, but about the causes and implications of the migration of any peoples.

It took the development of the Abstract Expressionist movement as well as the uprising of the Civil Rights movement for Jacob Lawrence's true place within the historical narrative of art history to be realized. In his work, Lawrence brought together the formal abstraction and the narrative expression characteristic of the two disparate trends of early Modernism. His narrative sequence in "The Migration of the Negro," as well as in many of his other works, successfully framed an essential piece of African-American history in a context weighted with universal implications. Early misunderstandings led to Lawrence's widespread acceptance. Critical revisions in how Lawrence's work has been viewed not only reveal its true implications and importance, but also show how much still remains to be understood. Art critics still do their best to categorize Lawrence, to attribute his styles and his narratives to being of one school or another. Surely, I am in part guilty of the same despite my goal of breaking through such limiting boundaries. Only when Lawrence is seen as a transitory figure who dealt not with African-American narratives but with human ones and as an artist whose work developed as a reaction to, and a culmination of, many different threads of artistic development will the racial bias which has tainted the understanding of his work for so long truly have been lifted.