

One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Migration North

April 3–September 7, 2015
Museum of Modern Art, New York



Jacob Lawrence. The Migration Series. 1940-41. Panel 40: "The migrants arrived in great numbers." Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12" (45.7 x 30.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

In 1941, Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) completed a series of 60 small tempera paintings with text captions about the Great Migration, the multi-decade mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North that started around the 1910s. The early part of the migration ran through 1930 and numbered some 1.6 million people. Lawrence himself had moved to Harlem when he was thirteen years old, having lived previously in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. His mother had been born in Virginia and his father in South Carolina, so he would have been personally familiar with the migration from members of his own family.

Within months of its making, the series entered the collections of The Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Memorial Gallery (today The Phillips Collection), with each institution acquiring half of the panels. Lawrence conceived of the series as a single work rather than individual paintings, and worked on all of the paintings at the same time, in order to give them a unified feel and to keep the colors uniform between panels. He wrote sentence-long captions for each of the sixty paintings explaining aspects of the event. Viewed in its entirety, the series creates a narrative in images and words that tells the story of the Great Migration.

Lawrence's work is now an icon in both collections, a landmark in the history of modern art, and a key example of the way that history painting was radically reimagined in the modern era. *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North* reunite all 60 panels for the first time at New York's Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019) in 20 years.

Along with Lawrence's series, the exhibition also includes other accounts of the Migration from the era, including novels and poems by writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright; music by Josh White, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday; photographs by Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Gordon Parks, and Robert McNeill; sociological tracts by Carter Woodson, Charles Johnson, Emmett Scott, and Walter White; and paintings by Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, and Charles White. The range of works in the exhibition sheds light on the ways in which Lawrence drew upon and transformed contemporary models for representing Black experience in America.