

# African American Art: Jacob Lawrence



In *Street to Mbari*, (tempera over graphite on wove paper) Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) captures the flurry of a busy outdoor market in Nigeria. Shops line either side of the street while a maze of vendors awaiting discovery fills the distance. The viewer becomes part of the scene amidst a crowd of people, young and old, buying and selling. One can almost hear babies crying, chickens squawking, and people chattering as they discuss fabrics and produce. A cacophony of primary colors heightens the sense of commotion. Rolls of fabric show off different patterns and color combinations. Strips of corrugated iron in varying sizes and colors form the shops' roofs and create a visual rhythm across the top of the painting.

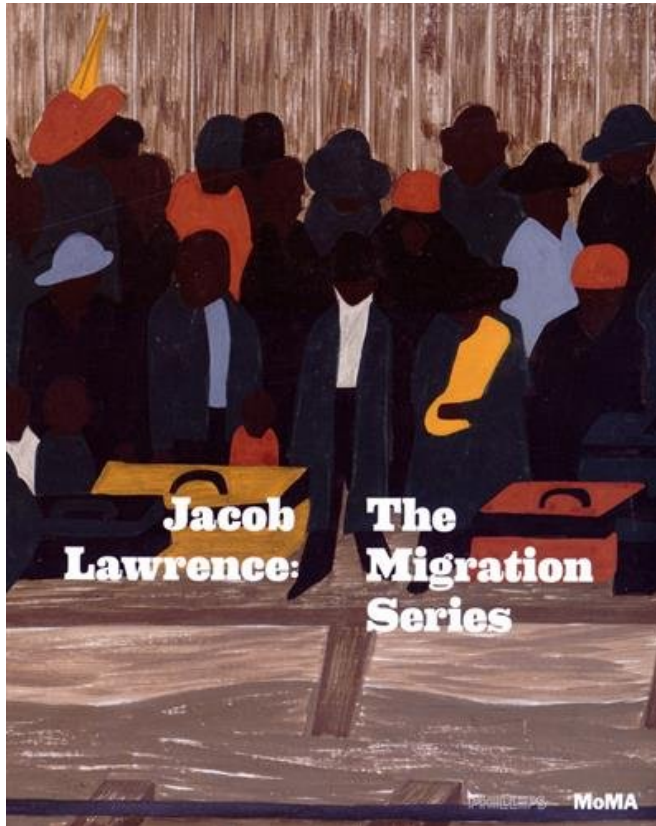
Lawrence first studied African art as a young man in New York during the Harlem Renaissance. In 1962 he traveled to Nigeria on an invitation to exhibit his work. In describing the trip, he said, "I became so excited then by all the new visual forms I found in Nigeria—unusual color combinations, textures, shapes, and the dramatic effect of light—that I felt an overwhelming desire to come back as soon as possible to steep myself in Nigerian culture so that my paintings, if I'm fortunate, might show the influence of the great African artistic tradition." It was during a second trip there in 1964 that Lawrence completed *Street to Mbari*.



*Daybreak—A Time to Rest* (tempera on hardboard) by Jacob Lawrence is one in a series of panel paintings that tell the story of Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913), the famed African-American woman who freed the enslaved using a fragile network of safe houses called the Underground Railroad. This abstracted image emphasizes Tubman's bravery in the face of constant danger. Lying on the hard ground beside a couple and their baby, she holds a rifle. Her face, pointing upward to the sky, occupies the near center of the canvas, her "body" surrounded by purple. Tubman's enormous feet, grossly out of proportion, become the focal point of the work. The lines delineating her toes and muscles look like carvings in a rock, as if to emphasize the arduous journeys she has made. Reeds in the foreground frame the prone runaways. Three insects (walking stick, beetle, and ant) are signs of activity at daybreak.



*The Capture*, 1987  
color screen-print on wove paper by Jacob Lawrence

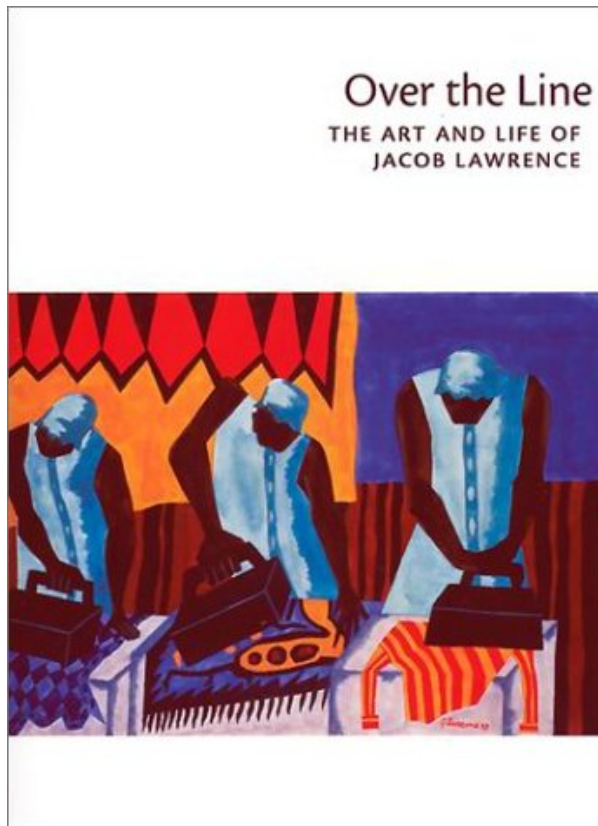


Dickerman, Leah and Elsa Smithgall. *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015, pp.192, ISBN: 087070964X.

In 1941, Jacob Lawrence, then just twenty-three years old, completed a series of sixty small tempera paintings with text captions about the Great Migration. Within months of its making, Lawrence's Migration series was divided between The Museum of Modern Art (even numbered panels) and the Phillips Memorial Gallery (odd numbered panels). The work has since become a landmark in the history of African-American art, a monument in the collections of both institutions, and a crucial example of the way in which history painting was radically reimaged in the modern era. In 2015 and 2016, marking the centenary of the Great Migrations start, the panels will be reunited in exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art and then The

Phillips Collection. Published to accompany the exhibition, this publication both grounds Lawrence's Migration series in the cultural and political debates that shaped the young artist's work and highlights the series' continued resonance for artists and writers working today. An essay by Leah Dickerman situates the series in relation to heady contemporary discussions of the artist's role as a social agent; a growing imperative to write and give image to African American history in the late 1930s and early 1940s; and an emergent sense of activist politics. Elsa Smithgall traces the exhibition history of the Migration panels from their display at the Downtown Gallery in New York in 1941 to their acquisition by MoMA and the Phillips Collection a year later. Short commentaries on each panel explore Lawrence's career and painting technique and aspects of the social history of the Migration portrayed in his images. The catalogue also debuts ten poems newly commissioned from acclaimed poets written in response to the Migration series. Elizabeth Alexander (honored as the poet at President Obama's first inauguration) introduces the poetry project with a discussion of the poetic quality of Lawrence's work, as well as the impact and legacy of the poets in his orbit including Claude McKay and Langston Hughes.

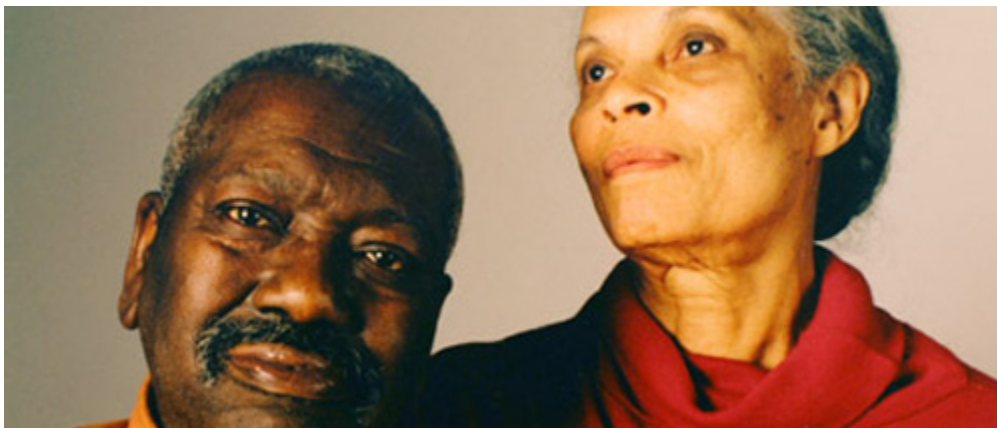




Nesbett, Peter T and Michelle DuBois, eds. *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001, pp.286, ISBN: 0295979658.

This work includes essays by eight distinguished art historians examining Jacob Lawrence's art as it speaks so powerfully to different audiences. It is the first multi-author, in-depth probe of the artist's entire career: the nature of his work, his education, the critical climate in which he worked, and his use of materials and techniques. It reproduces, in full color, more than 200 works, most of which have not been published in color, or at all, in other books on the artist. An extensive chronology, collating events in his life with his public reception -- including selected exhibitions, publications, honors, and awards -- is illustrated with family photographs. Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) spent his childhood in New York City, attending classes at the Harlem Community Art Center and the American

Artists School, and later working for the Federal Art Project. While still in his twenties Lawrence exhibited his paintings at major museums across the country, including the Phillips Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he became the first African American artist represented in the permanent collection. He lived, painted, and taught in New York City until 1971, when he moved to Seattle to join the faculty of the University of Washington. He was the recipient of numerous awards including the National Medal of Arts. The paperback edition of *Over the Line* is published in conjunction with a major exhibition opening at the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, on May 26, 2001, and traveling to the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence

## **Resources: Jacob Lawrence**

Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence Foundation  
<http://www.jacobandgwenlawrence.org/>

Jacob Lawrence, Computer Science Department, University of Washington  
<http://www.cs.washington.edu/building/art/JacobLawrence/>

Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight papers, 1945-2005,  
The Smithsonian Archives of American Art  
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/jacob-lawrence-and-gwendolyn-knight-papers-9121/more>