

Participation in Government: The Role of the Artist in a Democratic Society

Jacob Lawrence
American, 1917–2000

*The 1920s...The Migrants Arrive and
Cast Their Ballots*, 1974
Color serigraph

Gift of Lorillard, New York, 75.120.8



With high hopes, hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated to northern states between 1915 and 1920. The north offered more economic security as well as an escape from the harsh, segregationist Jim Crow laws of the south. The artist wrote about his print, commissioned on the occasion of the American Bicentennial Celebration:

Among the many advantages the migrants found in the north was the freedom to vote. In my print, migrants are represented exercising that freedom.

In this relaxed scene, most likely in Harlem, voters chat or read while they wait their turn. The voters represent a cross-section of the community – elderly, young, dressed in work clothes and suits. Emphatic diagonal lines lead to the back of the polling place, where one voter signs in and another uses the voting machine – important symbols of enfranchisement.

This type of machine, the brainchild of Jacob Myers, was first used in Lockport, New York, in the election of 1892. In the 1896 election, over sixty-five were used in Rochester. The machine was intended to ‘protect mechanically the voter from rascaldom’! Myers is buried in Mount Hope Cemetery.

Classroom activities:

Describe what you see in the Lawrence print.

- Who are the people?
- What are they doing?
- Where are these people?
- When is this?
- What colors does the artist use?

Jacob Lawrence used lines, colors, shapes and patterns to portray his subjects.

- How many patterns of lines or colors or shapes can you find?
- How has Lawrence chosen to fill the picture space?
- How does the artist suggest motion and action?
- How does Lawrence use color to suggest mood?
- How has Lawrence used diagonal lines to create perspective?
- How does Lawrence move your eyes around the different images?
- Where is the central focus of the painting?

What is the story Lawrence is telling in this painting?

- What sounds do you imagine hearing in this room?
- What time of day is it? Time of the year?
- What happened yesterday?
- What will happen to these people tomorrow?
- What are the people saying and thinking?
- Write a dialogue for two of the characters.
- What would you name this print?

Research the struggle of the African Americans to vote from the 15th Amendment to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Research the history of the voting machine. What do we use today?

For other artists' views of the election process, see *Election Night* by John Sloan and *County Election*, an engraving by John Sartain based on the painting by George Caleb Bingham.

Research the life and the art of Jacob Lawrence.



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