

68: Jacob Lawrence *Summer Street Scene in Harlem* (1948)

Lowery Stokes Sims

Certainly one of the foremost American artists of the twentieth century, Jacob Lawrence not only was the principal chronicler of the transitions in the African American community, but also a stylistic innovator whose contributions are still to be fully recognized. *Summer Street Scene* is an exuberant, abstracted depiction of a highly animated street in Harlem during the late 1940s.¹ In the foreground a group of seven boys attempt all at once to ride a scooter undoubtedly fabricated from a wooden box and some cast-off wheels. In midground at the right a man leans into a block of ice to scrape off refreshing scoops that will be flavored from the bottles of syrup on the cart. Three small very expectant children can be seen behind the cart, their faces partly obscured by the syrup bottles. One lucky child is already enjoying this cool treat behind the man in a green shirt and striped pants, who leans on a crutch. In the most distant plane of the composition promenading adults—who occasionally stop to greet one another against intimations of urban architecture—form a background to these vignettes.

The subject is an extension of Lawrence's body of work in the late 1930s and 1940s chronicling the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North between 1913 and the outbreak of World War II. This protracted social upheaval may be considered the pivotal event in the history of African Americans in modernism. As art historian Sharon Patton has written, there was "a sense of optimism, a revolt against traditional values and an exploration of new ideals." With that change of locale, not only were African Americans able to ameliorate their economic, political, and social condition, but they could also create new lifestyles from their clothes, their speech, their living spaces, and the way they worshiped. These "new Negroes" expressed a "renewed racial pride, expressed in economic independence, cultural and political militancy."²

Lawrence himself was part of this migration, relocating to Harlem with his mother from Atlantic City in 1930 around the age of thirteen. As *Summer Street Scene* clearly indicates, he was particularly sensitive to the condition of the African American working class as an important societal force and subject matter. This is evident in his work from the beginning of his mature career in the mid 1930s. In addition to the epic stories of black freedom fighters such as Toussaint L'Ouverture (1938), Frederick Douglass (1939), Harriet Tubman (1940), and John Brown (1941), Lawrence also dealt with the more immediate and local political and economic backdrop for black American life in Harlem in works such as *Street Orator's Audience* (1936, Tacoma Art Museum). His Harlem Paintings of 1942 deal with the dire conditions of tenement living, high rents, fire hazards, latch key kids, as well as the will to work, go to school, and find solace in religion. In the post-World War II era the determination of African Americans to avail themselves of educational and economic opportunities is seen in compositions such as *Shoemaker* (1945), *The Seamstress*, *Watchmaker*, *Cabinet Maker*, *Steelworkers*, *Radio Repairs*, and *Stenographers*, all of 1946.³ Lawrence would continue to chronicle both symbolically and anecdotally the state of African Americans in the building trades, which he captured in an ongoing series of paintings entitled *Builders* (1946–98).



Jacob Lawrence,
1917–2000
Summer Street Scene in Harlem
(detail), 1948
Tempera on gesso panel,
20 1/8 x 24 1/8 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
91.5
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In *Summer Street Scene in Harlem* Lawrence captures the recreational aspects of life in Harlem; such images are important vehicles for humanizing, even normalizing the perception of black life. Usually the raucous, dissolute life of back-room juke-barrel houses and urban after-hours blues and jazz joints is a favorite and familiar image of black life (as, for instance, in Lawrence's *Gamblers*, ca. 1954, also in the Memorial Art Gallery's collection). Lawrence, like his slightly older contemporary Romare Bearden, reminds us of the more intimate, private joys and heartbreak of black life. *Summer Street Scene* demonstrates the easy fluidity that Lawrence had reached with regard to organizing color, form, and pattern in his work during the second half of the 1940s. This facility evolved from his practice as a young student of making pictures inside cardboard shipping boxes,⁴ which would explain the sense we have in his paintings of each scene occurring within the imaginary box that characterizes perspectival studies in Western painting particularly since the Renaissance. He would hold steadfast to his first media—gouache and tempera—ascribing his continued use of these to the physical qualities of gouache that he thought complemented the “hard, bright, brittle” aspects of Harlem during the Depression.⁵



Lawrence eschews atmospheric effects—for instance, the perception that colors pale in the distance (or the back of the box)—for flat color shapes. Space is conveyed through a network of overlapping flat shapes and forms that exist like cut-outs or props in a real-life tableau. Their strong rectangular and ovoid shapes express solidity. Suggestions of volume or modeling (such as the folds of clothing) are conveyed in discrete, simplified colors and shapes: the darker green shades of the shirts of the boy at the left and of the man on crutches; the grey shades in the white shirts and in the cart and wheel of the ice seller; and the variegated browns and blacks of the clothing on other figures. Lawrence began to manifest these signature stylistic elements in his late teens.

Because Lawrence's artistic career was incubated in Harlem outside of the nexus of vanguard circles in lower Manhattan, it is not easy to pinpoint the source of his style. Certainly it can be catalogued along with several anti-academic technical strategies employed by modernist artists. These include the geometric symbolism of tribal arts and the unselfconscious fluidity and aberrant approach to space and proportion seen in the art of self-taught/folk/outsider artists. In fact the skill Lawrence developed in exploiting rhythmic repetition in form and color derived directly from his awareness of “similar patterns in the [Harlem] cityscape around him.”⁶ He has noted the “endlessly fascinating patterns” of “cast-iron fire escapes and their shadows created across the brick walls,”

the “variegated colors and shapes of pieces of laundry on lines stretched across the back yards [and] the patterns of letters on the huge billboards and the electric signs,”⁷ “fraternal and social organizations marching in the streets of Harlem in resplendent uniforms of all colors and lavishly trimmed with gold,”⁸ and home decorations of “brightly colored ‘Oriental’ rugs covering the floors,” so that, Lawrence observed, “you’d think in terms of Matisse.”⁹ All of these elements are present in *Summer Street Scene*, as golden yellows, reds, greens, and purples are set off against browns, blacks, and whites. These in turn are balanced within the composition, each color serving as a punctuation point leading the eye through this sensuous, cacophonous composition: the green shirt of the boy laying off the scooter at the bottom of the composition leads to his cohort at the left and then to the man on crutches off center at the back of the composition, thence to the ice man at the right.

(Facing page)
Jacob Lawrence,
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1948
Tempera on gesso panel,
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Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
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Gwendolyn Lawrence
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Jacob Lawrence,
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Jacob Lawrence,
1917–2000
Gamblers, ca. 1954
Tempera on gesso panel,
9 x 12 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
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Lawrence's characteristically flat shapes and use of patterns are indeed reminiscent of the reductive figuration of Henri Matisse or late cubist compositions by Picasso.¹⁰ Like many of his contemporaries Lawrence was also schooled in African art following the prescription of Alain Locke, who in his influential essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," published in the 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, urged black visual artists to look to African art for inspiration and guidance in their search for an art connected to their African heritage. He singled out qualities such as "a classic background," "discipline," "style," and "technical control" as qualities to be emulated, noting that artists could profit from the "almost limitless wealth of decorative and purely symbolic material" in African art. "The African spirit...is at its best in *abstract* decorative forms,"¹¹ he concluded. Jeffrey Stewart has written that Lawrence's work demonstrated a "use of African design principles and ornamentation to create surface tensions,"¹² and as seen in *Summer Street Scene in Harlem* he used not only the convention of African art, but also the adaptations of those conventions in Western modernism to capture the dramatic elements of any activity of any one of his figures.

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