

# SEEING AMERICA: Jacob Lawrence's *Summer Street Scene in Harlem, 1948*



Jacob Lawrence's modernist painting captures the exuberance of post-World War II Harlem.



Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)  
*Summer Street Scene in Harlem, 1948*  
Tempera on gesso panel  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 91.5  
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the  
University of Rochester  
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(ARS), New York

## The Art

Inspired by the outburst of creativity during the **Harlem Renaissance**, especially the sounds of jazz, *Summer Street Scene* celebrates the people and community life of Harlem, New York, in the middle of the twentieth



century. Jacob Lawrence's painting positively throbs with energy. In the foreground seven boys cavort in and around a soapbox car of their own creation. In the middle ground, four children await a sweet-syrup, shaved-ice treat being created by a large, green-shirted man. In the background another child enjoys his ice cone as he peers out from behind a large man in striped pants and green shirt. This man leans on his crutch as he converses with a second large man, who looks directly out of the

painting toward us. Other adults fill the background, the men in varying styles of hats, the women in colorful African-style head wraps. The space behind them is filled in with vibrant flat blocks of color, suggesting buildings.

Lawrence's choice of medium, **tempera** paint on **gesso** panel, contributes to the liveliness and immediacy of the subject. He deliberately chose opaque, water-based paints as his signature medium: the opacity lends itself to flat,

### Glossary

**Harlem Renaissance:** The flowering of African American arts that began in Harlem, NY in the 1920s.

**tempera:** Paint made by mixing ground pigment in a water-based medium such as egg yolk. It is relatively inexpensive but unforgiving, requiring considerable skill. It must be quickly applied, but mistakes are usually impossible to paint over.

**gesso:** Italian for "chalk," is a powdered form of calcium carbonate traditionally mixed with glue and used as an absorbant primer coat.

brilliant effects and complements the “‘hard, bright, brittle’ aspects of Harlem during the Depression” (*Seeing America*, 273). He divides his blocks of color into some areas heavy with paint, and others with the pigment lightly brushed on, allowing the white gesso to show through. His technique results in rhythmic patterns of light and dark. The visible brush strokes—quick dashes of color—themselves evoke a “jazzy” rhythm.

The flat space and angular figures are typical of Lawrence’s style. Depth is suggested primarily by the placement of figures in rows, one behind the other from bottom to top of the canvas. The background colors are as vivid as those in the foreground, the lines are as precise. The size of the figures at the top is smaller, but not consistently so, as the ice-shaving man illustrates. Volume is suggested by overlapping shapes and discrete brushstrokes more than by graduated modeling. Repetition of shapes and colors form patterns that remind us of the rhythmic music of Africa’s indigenous tribal people and America’s migrating, transplanted jazz artists. The colors are intense, vibrant, and dominated with primary and secondary colors grounded with browns, blacks and whites.

The simplified geometric figures and blocks of color reflect Lawrence’s interest in **Cubism** and abstract art. But like the early twentieth-century modernists, Lawrence also draws on the stylistic interpretations of northern Africa. For instance, the profiled heads, the frontal eyes, and the stylized arms and legs reflect the influence of twentieth-century abstract art as well as ancient Egyptian and traditional African art.



### Glossary

**Cubism:** Early 20th century avant-garde art movement in painting begun in Paris characterized by fracturing familiar objects into geometric plans and reassembling them, attempting to render three-dimensions on two-dimensional surfaces.

**Harlem Art Workshop:** Community center supported by the WPA Federal Art Project that brought together and trained the local artists of Harlem.

## The Artist



Jacob Lawrence was born in 1917 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to southern parents. When his parents separated in 1924, Lawrence stayed in foster care in Philadelphia while his mother sought work in Harlem. He joined her there at the age of thirteen. These were years of financial poverty, but aesthetic richness. Lawrence was inspired by his mother’s decorating; their home was rich with bright, vigorously patterned inexpensive items. He received his first art instruction at a community daycare center, and he also had access to the **Harlem Art Workshop** at the New York Public Library. He made frequent trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he delighted and trained his eye with the works of European masters, old and modern, as well as contemporary muralists African and abstract art also claimed his attention.

Lawrence was inspired by the words of philosopher and educator Alain Locke who in 1925 wrote, “the Negro is not a cultural foundling without an inheritance.”<sup>1</sup> He learned all he could about African art, analyzing its form



Jacob Lawrence  
*Self-Portrait*, 1977

Gouache and tempera on off-white wove paper  
22 1/8 x 30 in.

National Academy of Design, New York (1977.15)

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Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

and content with an eye to enriching his own creativity. Lawrence continued to take classes, studying with Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage and attending the **American Artists School** on scholarship.

In 1939–40, he participated in the **WPA/Federal Art Project** and produced *The Migration of the Negro*, a sixty-panel series that went on a two-year national tour.

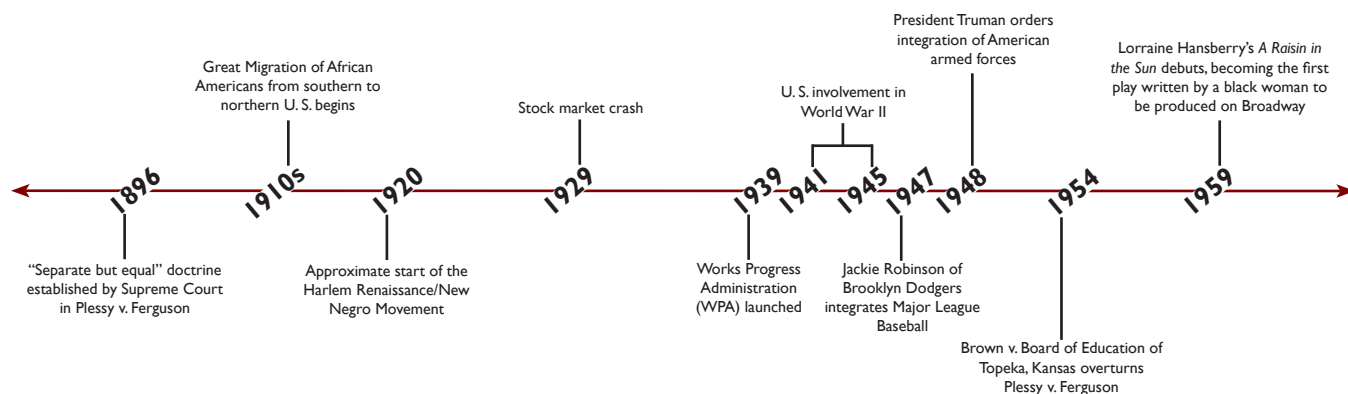
All of Lawrence’s early experiences fueled his enormously productive life. During World War II, he served in the U.S. Coast Guard, first in a segregated regiment, later on a troop ship working as an artist. In these years he produced forty-eight paintings (all, unfortunately, lost) documenting the lives of men overseas. Themes of struggle, identity, poverty, social disorders, political issues, racial divisions, and human commonalities found expression in Lawrence’s paintings, silk-screen prints, and mosaics, as well as in his teaching at the University of Washington. Fortunate to achieve recognition in his lifetime, Jacob Lawrence was the first African-American artist to be represented in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

### Glossary

**American Artists School (1936-1941):** New York City progressive school which stressed that art should be both technically excellent and socially relevant.

**WPA/Federal Art Project:** During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a government agency that employed artists in a variety of media and on a wide range of projects.

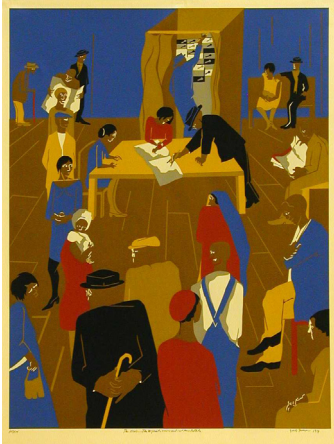
## America



Jacob Lawrence’s life spanned a time of enormous change in America. The lure of jobs in northern factories and service vocations created a massive African American exodus from the southern states to cities like Chicago and New York. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of African Americans in the North grew from one to two-and-a-half million. Although there were race riots, discrimination, and segregation in the North, there were also better opportunities. Northern states had compulsory education laws, and nearly twice as many blacks completed high school there than in the South.

African Americans brought with them not only their hopes and their labor, but also the creativity of their culture. Blues and jazz flourished in Chicago and New York City, especially in Harlem, where a “Renaissance” of music, dance, literature, theater, and poetry emerged in the 1920s and flourished until the early 1930s. But the crash in the economy in 1929 led to a decade of the worst depression the nation had ever experienced. One quarter of the working population was unemployed, and those at the bottom of the economic scale, such as a significant portion of the African American population, often suffered the worst effects.

Artists who participated in the Harlem Renaissance included visual artists Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Lois Mailou Jones and Jacob Lawrence; musicians Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake and Bessie Smith; dancer Josephine Baker; actor Paul Robeson; and writers Langston Hughes and Alain Locke.



Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)  
*The 1920's...The Migrants Arrive and  
Cast Their Ballots, 1974*  
Color serigraph  
Gift of Lorillard, New York, 75.120.8  
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery  
of the University of Rochester  
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World War II and postwar prosperity inspired a second wave of migration of southern blacks to northern cities. To many Americans it became apparent that the principles of equality and justice that the United States defended in the war needed to be instituted at home as well. President Truman ordered the integration of the armed services in 1948. The University of Arkansas admitted the first black woman to its medical school that same year. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision, mandated the end of public school racial discrimination, ruling on the grounds that government must provide equal protection of the law to all citizens, regardless of race.

The political and social landscape of America had changed, and many American artists played active roles in stimulating and recording these developments. Jacob Lawrence's depictions of African Americans lining up to vote or enjoying the summer weather on a Harlem street celebrate these changes.



Unknown photographer  
*A young civil rights demonstrator at the March on  
Washington for Jobs and Freedom,  
Washington, DC, August 28, 1963*  
National Archives and Records Administration  
306-SSM-4B-61-32

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<sup>1</sup>Stella Paul, "Modern Storytellers: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Faith Ringgold," in *Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–). [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/most/hd\\_most.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/most/hd_most.htm) (accessed October 2009).

See also Lowery Stokes Sims, "Jacob Lawrence: Summer Street Scene in Harlem (1948)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 271–74.

## Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

### Observing Detail

Jacob Lawrence said, "My work is abstract in the sense of having been designed and composed, but it is not abstract in the sense of having no human content...I want to communicate...I want the idea to strike right away."<sup>2</sup>

What do you think is the idea the artist wants to convey?

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

How does knowing the title, *Summer Street Scene in Harlem*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you like to ask the artist?

<sup>2</sup>Queens Museum of Art, "Jacob Lawrence." <http://www.queensmuseum.org/education/ps144/galler-y/jl-sum.html>



### Comparing and Contrasting

Almost 30 years separate these two paintings by Jacob Lawrence. How are these paintings, one a portrait and the other a genre scene, similar and how are they different? What words would you use to describe the artistic style of Jacob Lawrence?



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## Exploring the Context/Drawing Conclusions

Visualizing history: Jacob Lawrence's career was devoted to presenting the story of African American life. What story is Lawrence telling with each of these paintings? What information does he include? What does he leave out? Are they historically accurate? What aspect of the African American story does he want to portray?



Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)

*No. 6. John Brown formed an organization among the colored people of the Adirondack woods to resist the capture of any fugitive slave, 1977*

Serigraph

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 91.9.6

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Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)

*The Migration Series, Panel no. 1: During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans, 1940-41*

Casein tempera on hardboard

Acquired 1942

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

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Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)

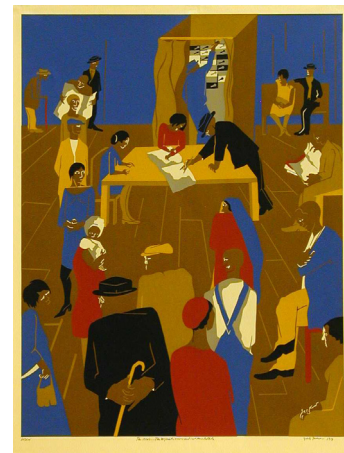
*Confrontation at the Bridge, 1975*

Screenprint

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Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000)

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

Color serigraph

Gift of Lorillard, New York, 75.120.8

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## Exploring the Context/Drawing Conclusions

The people and activity of New York City daily life have fascinated many American artists. What qualities of urban life have these paintings recorded?



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

*Chinese Restaurant*, 1909

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



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Tempera on gesso panel

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 91.5

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Jerome Myers (1867 – 1940)

*Sunday Morning*, 1907

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 98.74

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

## Exploring the Context/Drawing Conclusions

Poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) used words as Jacob Lawrence used paint to capture the life and vitality of the Harlem Renaissance. Among his poems, “Juke Box Love Song,” “My People,” “Dream Variations,” and “Madam’s Past History” are rich in the imagery of Harlem life. What picture do the poet’s words paint? Compare the mood and spirit evoked by the paintings and the poems.

## Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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