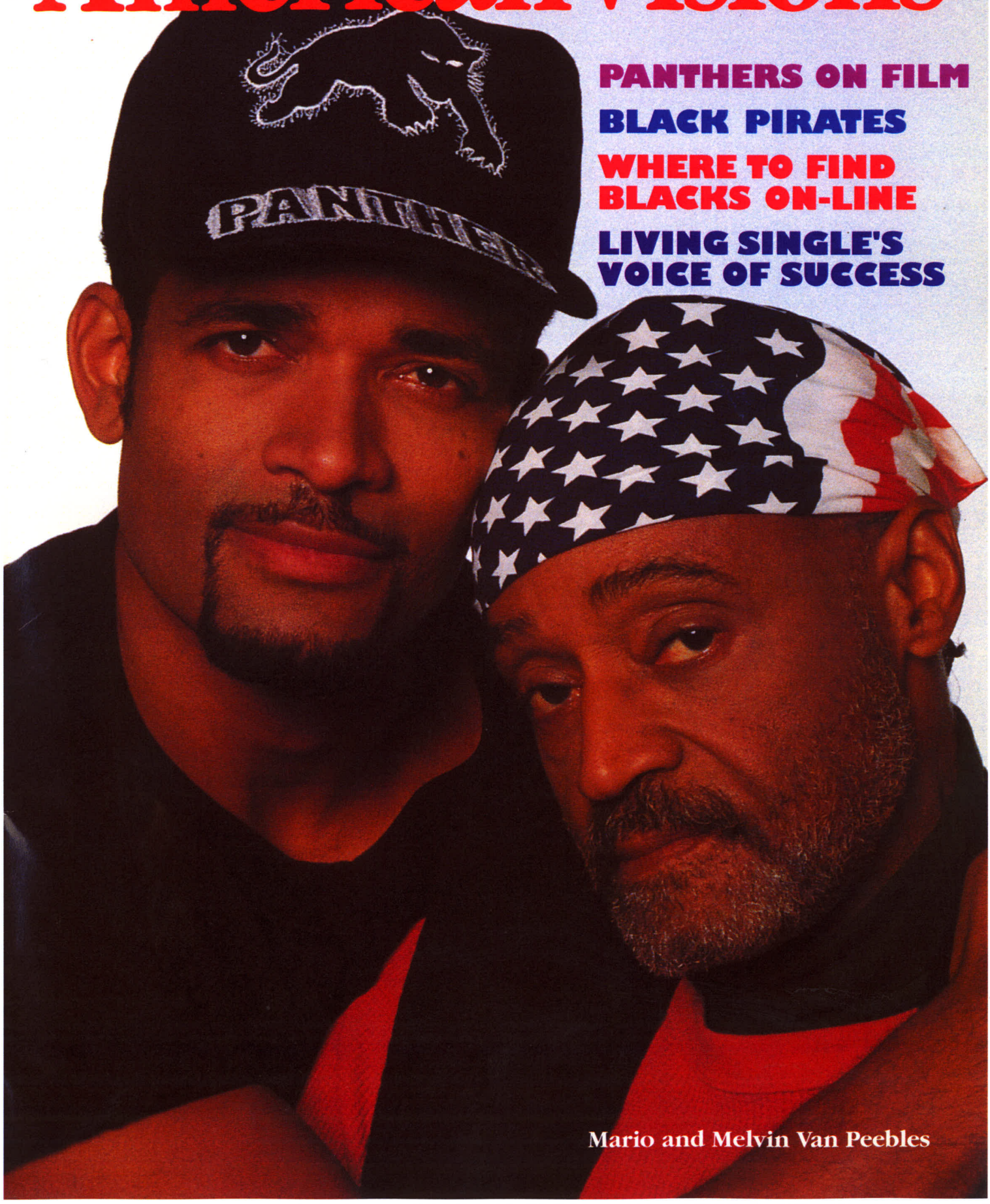
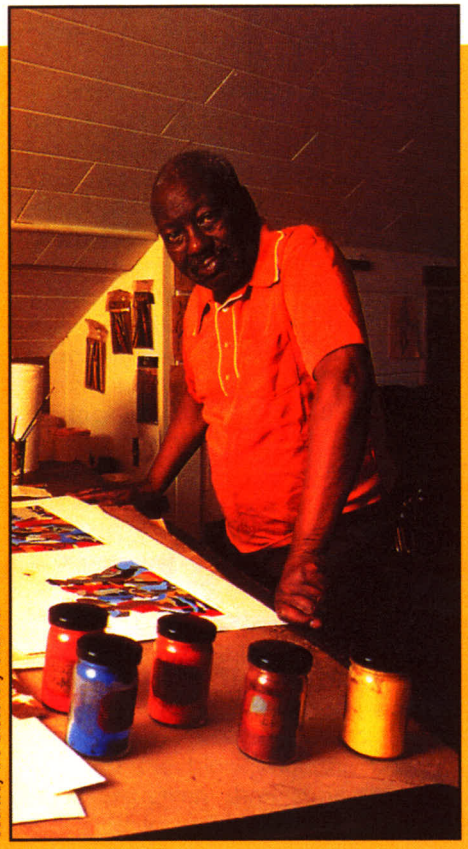
THE MAGAZINE OF AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE

$3.95 APRIL/MAY 1995

# American Visions





Courtesy the Discovery Channel

*Jacob Lawrence.*

# THE HOMECOMING OF JACOB LAWRENCE

*by Sharon Fitzgerald*

Photo by Edward Owen/Courtesy Phillips Collection

"Whenever my wife and I come to New York and are driving through Harlem," says the 77-year-old artist Jacob Lawrence, "I think this was the inspiration of much of my work. The pattern, the texture, the people from the Caribbean, the Puerto Rican stores, it's all a part of that. As you ride along, you see the signs, the people on the street. ... I don't want to overromanticize it, because there are a lot of things that you don't want, but there are a lot of things that you do. A part of my growth, my early paintings, dealt with this kind of form. I have never forgotten that."

To attend the recent opening of "Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series" at the Museum of Modern Art, Lawrence traveled 3,000 miles from his present home in Seattle to New York City, which was his home base for 41 years. Neither he nor his wife of 54 years, artist Gwendolyn Knight, displayed the slightest bit of jet lag. They are as at home in the limelight that follows artists at candlelit receptions as they are on the extroverted island of Manhattan. Their sustained warmth—sincerity combined with attentiveness—transcends the miles and accomplishments and years.

At the entrance to the exhibition, there is a black-and-white photograph of the artist as a young man. Despite the collegiate attire, this portrait of Lawrence appears, in size and significance, much larger than life. He is seated at a drawing table, applying brush to paper. Behind the gaze of this 24-year-old resides a story that he is destined to articulate. On the plain white surface before him, he has begun to do so with clear, concise strokes.

In 1940 and '41, the years during which Lawrence painted his "Migration of the Negro" series, little attention was being paid to the narrative power of art, and even less consideration was given to the epic relocation of America's black citizens. Lawrence's creation changed all of that. His sequence of 60 paintings guided viewers along the journey—fraught with disappointment, hope and courage—that African Americans took from the rural South into the North's urban quagmire.

The stories Lawrence had been told of black people's struggles united masterfully with his vision of their strength and determination. He considered the series to be in fact one painting beheld at separate stages; in his hands,

*The "Migration of the Negro" series, 1940-41, panel 3: "In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North and enter into Northern industry." Lawrence arrived in Harlem at the start of the Great Depression. "The storytellers were all around us. The street corner speakers, the soapbox orators, teachers, our parents. We would hear stories in Sunday school. It was a deep conveyance of what we were going through as a people."*

this exodus of his people became a tour de force.

"During the World War, there was a great migration north by Southern Negroes," reads the artist's caption to the first panel. Beneath three signs, marked "Chicago," "New York" and "St. Louis," a seamless throng of chocolate brown people presses forward, separating only at the passageways that indicate their destinations. Their faces are without discernible features; individuality is conveyed by the shape, tilt or carriage of a head, the curve of a bosom. Most are dressed in earth tones, and, of course, there are hats: black bowlers, a red baseball cap, a black top hat, a red turban. Only behind the railway station's latticed fence does one glimpse the pale blue promise of sky.

"I don't think in terms of history in that series; I think in terms of contemporary life," Lawrence has said. "If it was a portrait of something, it was a portrait of myself, a portrait of my family, a portrait of my peers. In that way, it was like a still life with bread, a still life with flowers; it was like a landscape."

It has been 54 years since the impassioned griot Jacob Armstead Lawrence Jr. sallied forth into the

# JACOB LAWRENCE

spotlight of modern artists. From the start, he astonished critics with his virtuosity. He inspired audiences, who immediately recognized the purity of his artistic talent and purpose. He took a life slated for anonymity and created a world in which not only he, but all African Americans, would have a powerful identity.

Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, N.J., on September 7, 1917. His mother, Rose Lee, had departed from her Virginia birthplace to live in New Jersey, where she met and married Jacob Lawrence, a railroad worker from South Carolina. Shortly after their first child, Jacob, was born, the couple moved to Easton, Pa., where their daughter, Geraldine, and second son, William, were born.

Hard times followed the family. The marriage ended, and Rose Lawrence set out with the children for Philadelphia. Unable to make ends meet, she placed Jacob and his brother and sister in temporary foster homes and went to New York to find work. She brought them to live with her in Harlem in 1930. "We were a part of that migration," Jacob Lawrence recalls.

Courtesy Midtown Payson Gallery

*"Man with Flowers," 1954. "Painting becomes a language through which I express my response ... to my environment ... to people." Color, pattern, line and texture are the means—and symbolism the result—of interpreting what Lawrence sees. "I am fortunate that my work can be appreciated on various levels. You see the story, you see color. You know that there is a figure—a person with a hat, a dress or a suit."*

Folks expected the world of Harlem. The name alone suggested a fusion of hustle, style, achievement and survival. This crowded, fast-paced community provided Rose Lawrence with neither economic security nor a safe haven in which to raise her children. Especially concerned that Jacob, a quiet teenager, would be susceptible to the dangers of street life, she enrolled the children in the Utopia Children's House, a local settlement that provided an after-school program of meals and activities. It was here—under the tutelage of the artist Charles Alston, then a graduate student at Columbia University—that Jacob Lawrence began to create.

"I took carving, leatherwork, woodwork—things of that sort," Lawrence says. "Charles Alston had a great influence. I liked to make papier-mâché masks, and he introduced me to names like W.T. Benda, the famous mask maker. I liked color. I liked paint. I liked design. I wasn't thinking of becoming a professional artist; I really didn't know what that was."

Alston realized that Lawrence's intense curiosity, independence and intuition were propelled by a tremendous gift. Recalling the play of color and design exhibited on his mother's area rugs, Lawrence boldly juxtaposed shapes, colors and tones. Fascinated by the hu-

Photo by Manu Sassonian/Courtesy Schomburg Center

*"The Curator," 1937. Lawrence's "history paintings" were influenced by his research at the 135th Street Branch Library, later renamed for bibliophile Arthur Schomburg. "The painting is not an exact portrait of Schomburg," he once wrote, "however, many years ago I spent much of my time at the Schomburg collection, and the library did inspire me to paint this picture."*

man and architectural patterns of everyday Harlem, he took large cardboard boxes, removed the tops, opened the sides, and painted street scenes on the stagelike walls. The same muse that inspired Lawrence's papier-mâché masks—months before he first viewed African sculpture—was transporting him into the unknown worlds of social realism, theater design and abstractionism.

"I decided it would be a mistake to try to teach him," Alston later explained. "He was teaching himself, finding his own way." Instead, as Lawrence's first mentor, Alston provided the necessary materials and answered the younger artist's questions about techniques and methods. Having discovered his medium in water-based colors, Lawrence continued to pursue his craft at the Harlem Art Workshop.

The Great Depression also influenced Lawrence's development. He dropped out of New York's Commercial High School after two years and in 1936 joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, where he spent six months in upstate New York, helping to build a dam. He then returned to Harlem, determined to make a living. During the day, he busied himself with assorted odd jobs; at night, he painted. By this time, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its Federal Art Project were having a visible impact on the nation's cultural growth. Within Harlem alone there were four separate workshops devoted to art instruction.

"With every negative, there is a positive," says Lawrence. "It's ironic, but we were going through the Depression, and many of us benefited. There have always been those who objected to any federal support of the arts and artisans, but the few years that the Federal Art Project was in existence was one of the most creative periods in the history of the United States."

At the suggestion of Alston, Lawrence began taking free classes at the Harlem Community Art Center, run by sculptor Augusta Savage. During this period, his affinity to uptown syncopation found clear expression in his art. His take on Harlem was riveting. The geometric forms which had long intrigued him became brownstones and front stoops, ladders and streetlights and people. Lawrence filled, but did not clutter, his compositions. He established drama and movement with his spontaneous, albeit precise, placement of line and maintained simplicity with his use of flat, complementary colors.

"The people of the Harlem community led and encouraged me—people who were not necessarily involved in the visual arts," says Lawrence. "I would go to the Apollo Theatre, and I would see the big bands and the chorus girls, all the colors taking place. I would see the comedians, who would tell

# JACOB LAWRENCE

wonderful stories of great pathos about what was happening in Harlem."

At 306 W. 141st St., Lawrence discovered still more sources of inspiration. "Three-o-six," as it came to be known, had been a deserted barn until Alston, with the help of painter and sculptor Henry "Mike" Bannarn, converted it into the new home of the Harlem Art Workshop.

Artists and art students came in to work or take classes, but 306 was also a hothouse for cultural dialogue among writers, musicians, actors, dancers and other artists. On a given evening one might encounter Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Rose McClendon, Aaron Douglas, Ernest Crichlow, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Canada Lee, Frank Fields or Countee Cullen. It was here that Lawrence met fellow artist and future wife Gwendolyn Knight, who had studied with Savage and was then a part of the WPA's Harlem Hospital murals project.

"It was like an open house, like a university without the walls," Lawrence recalls. "You know, these things are sort of overromanticized in retrospect, yet there was a wonderful spirit, a flow. There was an interest in what was going on in the arts, outside and within the black community.

"People would talk about the challenges of the theater; someone else would talk about the visual arts; musicians would talk about their challenges. Those like myself who might have been too young to participate in this kind of exchange would overhear these stories. It was only in retrospect that I realized how I benefited from this experience."

"Everyone lived in Harlem," adds Gwendolyn Lawrence. "You had the benefit of intellectuals and people with money, political people, activists, church people. In our day, you had to be influenced by all of these forces because they were right there with you; you were living with them."

In spite of his youth and comparative inexperience, Lawrence was encouraged by those artists at 306, who, like Alston, approached his unique talent with enthusiasm, but without intrusion. "The older artists were content to leave me alone to develop," Lawrence says. "If I put six fingers on a hand, they didn't tell me, 'That's wrong.' They told me, 'Make sure that the sixth finger works in place.' I don't prescribe this for all student-teacher relationships, but for me it worked."

Jacob Lawrence often describes Augusta Savage—a leader both among artists and within the community—as the person who stepped in and made his later success possible. The occasional sales of his paintings to friends, local teachers and librarians were not sustaining him, and his mother had started urging him to take a job in the post office, one of the few secure positions available to blacks. When Savage learned of these difficulties, she took him to the WPA Federal Art Project and had him signed on for the easel project. With the standard weekly salary of $23.80, he was at last a professional artist.

"If Augusta Savage hadn't insisted on getting me onto the project, I don't think I ever would have become an artist," Lawrence has stated. "I'd be doing a menial job somewhere. It was a real turning point for me."

Lawrence turned on a dime. His first narrative series, "Toussaint L'Ouverture," received widespread exposure in 1939, when—at the urging of Howard University professor Alain Locke, artist Elton Fax, and Harmon Foundation Director Mary Beattie Brady—the Baltimore Museum of Art reserved a separate room for all 41 panels at its landmark exhibition of African-American art.

From 1938 to 1940, Lawrence followed his epic

## Current Exhibitions

When the "Migration" series was first exhibited in 1941, there was immediate interest in its acquisition. However, Jacob Lawrence had decided that he did not want the series to be scattered. After the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., began competing for its purchase, it was decided that they would divide the works evenly, with the Museum of Modern Art receiving the even-numbered panels and the Phillips taking the odd-numbered ones. The current traveling exhibit, initiated by the Phillips Collection and sponsored by Philip Morris, is reunites all of the paintings in the series for the first time since 1972.

**"Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series"**

New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art
(212) 708-9480
Through April 11

Atlanta
High Museum of Art, Midtown
(404) 733-HIGH
April 25-June 25

Denver
Denver Art Museum
(303) 640-2295
July 15-September 9

Chicago
Chicago Historical Society
(312) 642-4600
September 22-November 26

**"Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of Narrative Paintings, 1938-1940"**

Hampton, VA
Hampton University Museum
(804) 727-5308
Through July 31

account of the Haitian revolutionary with two more historical series—the first, a 32-panel exploration of the life of Frederick Douglass, and the second, a 31-panel chronicle of the courageous Harriet Tubman.

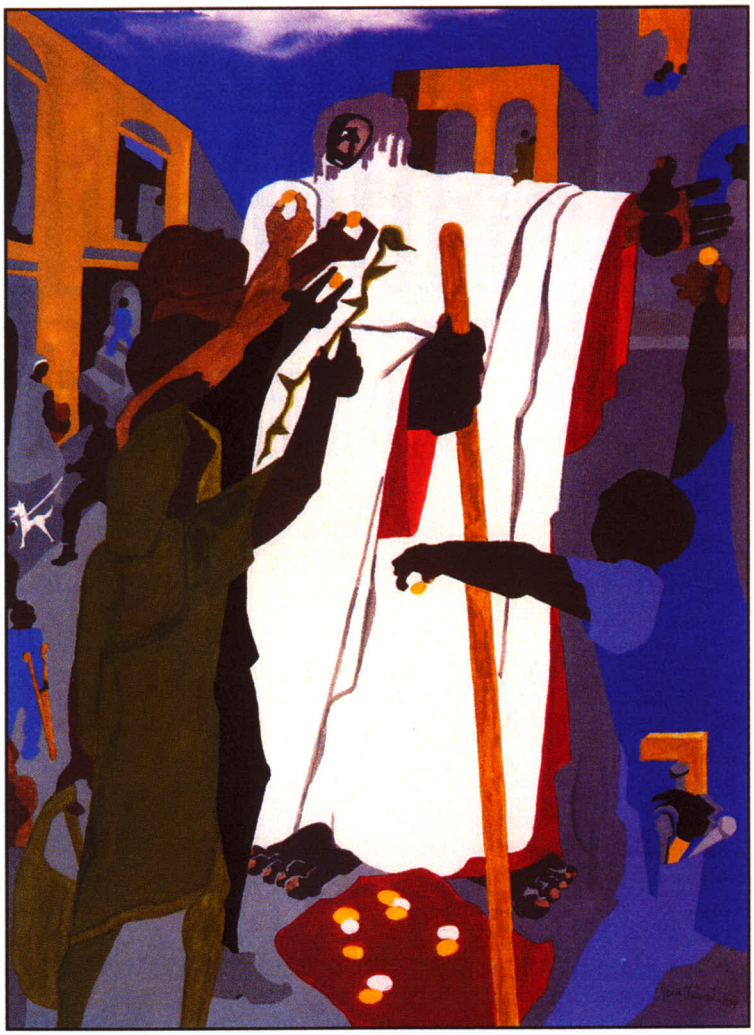
But it was his next project, the "Migration of the Negro" series, that established his position in the art world. Response to the series was stunning by all accounts and unprecedented for the work of an African-American artist. *Fortune* magazine devoted six pages in its November 1941 issue to a display of 26 panels and to an essay describing the movement of blacks as an American saga. Edith Gregor Halpert first displayed the complete series at her prestigious Downtown Gallery. A few months later, the exhibition began a national tour at the Museum of Modern Art.

Over the past five decades, there have been several retrospectives and countless solo exhibitions devoted to Lawrence's early and subsequent work; he is represented in all of the nation's leading collections. He holds chair 41 in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, one of 50 highly prized, lifetime appointments given to masters of this nation's art and literature. In 1970, he became the first artist to receive the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP.

In 1974, when Pope Paul VI was invited to select an American artwork for the Vatican Museum's collection, he asked for a creation by Jacob Lawrence. President Jimmy Carter requested that he paint the picture of his 1977 inauguration. Lawrence has taught in several of the country's leading art schools, including the Pratt Institute and the Art Students League, and he recently retired as a full professor from the University of Washington in Seattle.

During his latest visit to New York and the Museum of Modern Art, Lawrence attended two other openings at which his art alone was displayed. The Whitney Gallery at Philip Morris had mounted the "War" series, 14 panels created while he served in World War II; the Midtown Payson Gallery had emptied its walls to display an overview of 44 works—from the early painting "Street Orator" (1936) to portions of the series "Struggle: From the History of the American People" (1955-56) to such recent creations as "The Barefoot Prophet of Harlem" (1994).

"I would not say that I am surprised by the reception I have received," Lawrence says of his life's accomplishments, "but I have been very happy. Gwen and I would be content just to work. I think that those of us who are in the arts are fortunate in that we tend to need to search. That is a part of our philosophy. Therefore, you continue to grow and to realize your full capacity as a human being. It is a quality of life. That is what I think is feeding us."



Courtesy Midtown Payson Gallery

*"The Barefoot Prophet of Harlem," 1994. It was the "immediacy ... and beautiful surface" of water-based paints that captured Lawrence's imagination. Living in Seattle has cast new light on his vision. "All environments are beautiful, but different. In the East, I worked with more prismatic, or full, color. Out here, the space is different; we get a beautiful color range, a grey-tonal color, that I did not get before."*

---

*Sharon Fitzgerald is a freelance writer in New York City. Her last articles for* American Visions, *"Catalyst Camille" and "Dishing Up Cosmic Slop," appeared in the December/January 1995 issue.*