

## About *The Migration Series*

*I grew up the son of migrants.... My mother and father were on their way north when I was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, so at the very beginning of my understanding of communication with words I was very much aware of the movement.* —Jacob Lawrence

When Jacob Lawrence began painting *The Migration Series* in 1940, it was his most ambitious project to date, amplifying his earlier genre scenes and historical series on Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman. Unlike those previous works, which focus on the exploits of heroic individuals, *The Migration Series* is broad in scope and features the story of African Americans who, like the artist's own parents, had departed the South to seek better lives in the North. The prospect of jobs in northern industry, particularly during World War I, held the promise of escape from financial and social restraints, such as sharecropping and racism, in the South. The movement of nearly one million African Americans from approximately 1916 to 1930 became known as the Great Migration ("Introduction to The Great Migration" — Tab 3). In *The Migration Series* Lawrence describes a mass movement in terms of its causes and effects. He portrays migrants leaving the rural South to escape injustice, discrimination, poverty, and segregation. He evokes a sense of the migrants' hope on their journey north and the realities of their new life in northern cities. As the narrative unfolds from image to image, the vantage point, composition, and details change in a manner reminiscent of film. The series features a constant variety of imagery, with close-ups alternating with panoramic views, and individual encounters contrasting with group scenes. In some panels, figures dominate; in others, the setting propels the story.

## The Journey North

*The Migration Series* begins and ends with panels that portray scenes of migrants traveling by train, a theme that Lawrence expresses throughout. Panel No. 1 introduces the series with an image of excitement, anticipation, and momentum. Lawrence paints a station crowded with people heading to points north: Chicago, St. Louis, and New York. He intersperses images of migration throughout the series: train stations, platforms, suitcases, and masses of people on the move. This repetition creates both a visual refrain and a metaphor for the ongoing determination and resolve of the migrants.

Many aspects of the migrants' experiences are represented. Panel No. 21 shows two family groups waiting alongside train tracks in a sparsely populated rural landscape, looking out towards a nearly empty horizon. Their patient anticipation is suggested by the caption that reads, "Families arrived at the station very early. They did not wish to miss their trains north." Meanwhile Panel No. 45 expresses the migrants' optimism. Looking out from the train window, a family, smiling and expectant, points to the smokestacks that symbolize opportunity. The colorful patterns in their clothes, highlighted by a glowing yellow straw hat, evoke hopefulness.

Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*,  
Panel No. 21, 1940–41.



Only once, in Panel No. 5, is a train pictured alone. Here the train seems to be a powerful force illuminating passage through the night. Smoke sputters behind it as a triangular cone of light beams ahead, a metaphorical symbol of the migrants' determination.

There is also a correspondence between travel by rail and by foot. Motion and anticipation are dramatically conveyed in Panel No. 3, where the pyramid of people, gazing beyond the picture's edge, echoes the pattern of the birds flying above. The human caravan is mirrored by the migratory flock. Lawrence conveys the migration north not as a mere step, but as a long journey.

### Hardship in the South

In many panels in the first half of the series (Panel Nos. 1 through 30), Lawrence addresses reasons for leaving the South. He includes images of failing crops, segregation, discrimination, poverty, and bleak educational opportunities for African Americans. Among these images is Panel No. 9; its caption states, "... the boll weevil had ravaged the cotton crop." The insects, which Lawrence had seen only in reproductions, are pictured as black forms atop vulnerable cotton plants. Panel No. 13 portrays an unharvested landscape baking under a blazing sun, while the caption for Panel No. 11 reads, "Food had doubled in price because of the war [World War I]." The image shows a single candle lighting the inside of a bare room, where a mother cuts into a slab of fatback—an inexpensive piece of pork—to feed a malnourished child who gazes in wide-eyed hunger. Panel No. 17 is layered in symbolism: the plight of African Americans in the South is manifest by two tenant farmers who, weighed down by their heavy load, look up at a white



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel No. 29, 1940-41.

planter, looming unburdened before them. The farmers' heavy load might be read as a symbol of the South's racist economic system that trapped African Americans in a cycle of back-breaking labor, meager pay, and little hope for the future. Panel No. 19 also conveys segregation, with white and African American figures at separate water fountains. A gray field divides the landscape, leaving one fountain below, in a brown landscape nearly devoid of turf. The grassy area above contains the presumed whites-only fountain.

### Spreading the Word

In addition to showing the means of moving north, Lawrence also conveys how the message of hope was communicated to those in the South. In Panel No. 33 the caption reads, "Letters from relatives in the North told of the better life there." Lawrence also painted scenes showing labor agents recruiting African Americans. One such image is Panel No. 29, in which a labor agent, his white skin visible only in a thin band of color between his hat and jacket, recruits southern African Americans in a stark room. Other panels show southerners reading about the Great Migration in the African American press.

## Collective Voice and Human Drama

The writer W.E.B. Du Bois identified the Great Migration in a 1917 article published in *The Crisis* (Primary Source 34) as a mass movement motivated by the aspirations of the African American working class. Correspondingly, Lawrence often portrays crowds—waiting for trains, lining up to vote, walking in droves, or sleeping in groups in a crowded tenement. *The Migration Series* is a community history. Lawrence also tells a story that oscillates between the individual experience and that of the masses. In Panel No. 33, a child kneels on the bed of a female adult (perhaps a mother or sister). The older woman reads aloud from a letter, conveying a scene of intimacy and tenderness. The figures are connected by the shared color of their clothes and the child's pose as she is read the letter's news. In Panel No. 15, a lone mourner is seated near a hangman's noose, representing the horrific act of lynching. The seated figure curls inward while the individual's red garment is cast into dramatic contrast against a gray sky and barren brown landscape, creating an expression of intense isolation and despair. Even in scenes that feature a single person, Lawrence does not individualize his figures; rather, they represent collective experience.

## Arrival in the North

The shift in subject from the South to the North occurs halfway through the series. In Panel No. 31, Lawrence portrays the starkest possible contrast to the southern landscape: row upon row of windows and walls fill the picture plane with no sky above or earth below. Lawrence goes on to depict the reality of the migrants' experience in the North, portraying

hope and job opportunities, along with new hardships and disappointments. Panel No. 47 reads, "As the migrant population grew, good housing became scarce. Workers were forced to live in overcrowded and dilapidated tenement houses." Lawrence visually conveys the housing shortage by making an acute contrast. Compressed into a small section of the picture's space, Lawrence depicts numerous sleeping figures in an otherwise spare room with a high, single window. Typical of Lawrence's style, hardship is balanced by beauty and warmth. The artist places the sleeping family under several colorful quilts. Lawrence likens the image to his own childhood experiences living in Harlem:

*Our homes were very decorative, full of patterns, like inexpensive throw rugs, all around the house. It must have had some influence, all this color and everything. Because we were so poor the people used this as a means of brightening their life. I used to do bright patterns after these throw rugs; I got ideas from them, the arabesques, the movement and so on (Wheat, 1986).*

But there were harsher realities as well. Panel No. 49 presents a new form of segregation. Both races dine in the same room but are divided

Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel No. 31, 1940–41.



by golden stanchions. Panel No. 51 shows buildings dramatically bursting into flame, while the image's caption refers to the often violent response to increased African American presence in northern cities.

Still, the last panels in the series convey hope and a sense of progress. Panel No. 59 reads, "In the North they had the freedom to vote," and includes a police officer who appears to protect voting rights. The series ends with a refrain of perseverance: "And the migrants kept coming."

### Making *The Migration Series*

Prior to completing *The Migration Series*, Lawrence had never traveled to the South. His understanding of the Great Migration was informed by the memory, experiences, and resources of his community. Harlem was home to thousands of African Americans who, like Lawrence's parents, had come north in the late teens and early 1920s. In addition, as with his earlier historical series, Lawrence conducted research at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library.

#### Primary Source 3

Researchers in the Division of Negro History, Literature, and Prints, 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, 1930s.



In 1927, a black Puerto Rican, Arthur Schomburg, sold his famous collection of African and African American books, art, clippings, posters, and other artifacts to the Carnegie Corporation. They, in turn, donated it to the Negro Division of the New York Public Library, 135th Street Branch. Since then the library has been considered an outstanding archive for the study of African American culture and history. In 1940, the year Lawrence began his work on *The Migration Series*, the library was renamed the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture).

At that point, there were only sociological studies on what would become known as the Great Migration. Emmett J. Scott's book *Negro Migration During the War*, published in 1920, was probably an important source for Lawrence. In his grant application to the Rosenwald Fund, Lawrence divided his series into eight themes, six of which were based on the chapter titles of Scott's book, such as "Causes of the Migration," "The Spread of the Migration," and "The Effects of the Migration on the Negro." While Lawrence did not strictly follow an outline in the execution of his series, these headings provide a sense of the momentum that Lawrence was attempting to achieve in revealing the causes and effects of the Great Migration.

### Lawrence's Process

In 1940 with the proceeds of a Rosenwald Fund Fellowship, Lawrence rented his first studio, a space large enough to prepare and lay out the 60 panels that would comprise the series. Lawrence's process was systematic and methodical. He wrote panel captions from his



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*,  
Panel No. 13, 1940–41.

initial research, often with the help of fellow Harlem artist and his future wife Gwendolyn Knight. He then developed drawings to accompany each of the 60 captions. During this process he and Knight prepared the hard-board panels with layers of gesso in the traditional method used by early Renaissance masters. Lawrence drew all 60 compositions before beginning to paint. Partly for economic reasons, Lawrence preferred inexpensive, opaque, water-based tempera paints. For *The Migration Series*, he used casein tempera (a milk-based, water-soluble paint). He painted the series all at once, color by color—starting with ivory, black, and burnt-umber browns, and moving to cadmium red, orange, and yellow.

Frequently, the thin layers of paint atop the gessoed ground—pitted with microscopic air bubbles—enhance the effects of Lawrence’s brushwork. These dry brushstrokes juxtaposed with fluidly contoured passages of opaque color cause dramatic contrasts. For instance, in Panel No. 45 the colorful attire of migrants arriving in the industrial North is contrasted with the austere wooden table of the train car in which they sit. Similarly, in Panel No. 13 the dry brush technique is used to indicate the parched soil of an abandoned southern field.

Generally, the panels contain shapes of even, matte color arranged in strong contrasts, dramatic gestures, and bold patterns. Searing in their immediacy, the works show only essential imagery. Flattened, angular forms, strong diagonals, and contrasts of light and shadow contribute to a sense of dynamism. Throughout *The Migration Series*, Lawrence carefully uses flat shapes of color to create a sense of pattern and rhythm. In the railroad station in Panel No. 1, he conveys movement through the rhythmic repetition of black, dark green, and cool blue forms painted on a diagonal. Strategically placed and repeated areas of hot red and bright yellow animate the composition. The cooler colors, such as blacks and dark greens, are more plentiful and are painted in complementary patterns of black buttons on green coats and visa versa. The overall effect of color and shape is that of fast-paced movement and momentum. The diagonals are echoed by the crisscross of lattices in the background, a pattern that is broken up by the strong horizontals of the signs on which the names of cities are written. Lawrence described his desire to create imagery that captured the rhythm of travel:

*It could be a bus; it could be a train; and it’s a long arduous ride when these people came. I tried to create a staccato-like rhythm over and over and over again [with] the shapes as they move.... I build on the geometry and I love it. I love the mystery of it along with the figurative element and the manipulation of color, of value, of texture. I guess my thinking at the time was to create continuity (Turner, 1993).*

Lawrence wanted the sixty individual panels of *The Migration Series* to function as a single, visually unified, work of art. The limited color palette and Lawrence’s technique of applying colors one at a time enabled him to keep the

panels consistent and bring the work together as a whole. Lawrence intentionally unified the color, shape, and patterns of *The Migration Series* to reinforce the power of the migrants' experience as a single force.

## The Influence of the Harlem Renaissance

The 135th Street Library served as more than just a research center for Lawrence. It also functioned as a source of inspiration because it housed Aaron Douglas's mural *Aspects of Negro Life* (Primary Source 47). Douglas was a painter of his community's history, and he inspired Lawrence to become a contemporary African American griot, or storyteller.

In turn, Douglas and many of the other artists of the Harlem Renaissance were influenced by its foremost philosopher and theoretician, Alain LeRoy Locke. Locke was a philosophy professor at Howard University, but his

interests were broad. One of his passions was African American art, and he served as its most influential critic and patron. In 1925, Locke published his seminal work, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which urged contemporary African American artists to distinguish themselves by tapping into their African heritage, African American folk traditions, and their own communities as sources of inspiration. While still a teenager, Lawrence was introduced to Locke by his art teacher Charles Alston. Locke's writings and ideas reinforced the youthful Lawrence's enthusiasm for African American culture and the streets of Harlem as subject matter.

Lawrence was also influenced by another important figure of the Harlem Renaissance, the poet and writer Claude McKay. A Jamaican immigrant, McKay gained prominence for his blunt assessment of the realities of racism and poverty in African American life (Primary Source 43). He was politically active and moved comfortably in white radical and African American intellectual circles. As a young man, Lawrence met McKay when he first joined the Harlem Renaissance artist collective known as the "306 Workshop" (Primary Source 48). Later in the early 1940s, they both lived in the same building on 125th Street. Lawrence described McKay as a mentor: "He was an older man, and I always appreciated him because he spoke to me like a peer. . . He would wander into my studio, and I would go to his place and talk. He was a very tough fellow, and very critical of our whole social environment, critical of whites, critical of blacks" (Wheat, 1986). Evidently, Lawrence's unsparing vision of the causes and effects of the Great Migration as recorded in *The Migration Series* impressed McKay. In 1941, McKay gave Lawrence an inscribed copy of his

### Primary Source 47

Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934.



autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937). McKay's inscription read, "For Jacob Lawrence, a peerless delineator of Harlem scenes and types" (King-Hammond, 2001).

### Lawrence's Sources, from the Streets of Harlem to the Museums of Manhattan

Lawrence was nurtured by Harlem's artistic community. While his influences were broad, of primary importance was the art of Charles Alston, his instructor and mentor from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) workshop. Lawrence witnessed the creation of one of the 306 Workshop's first projects, the installation of Alston's mural *Magic and Medicine* at the Harlem Hospital. This image was consistent with both Alston's interest in showing heroic African American figures and Alain LeRoy Locke's philosophy of making connections between African imagery and the contemporary African American experience.

Alston's mural was also philosophically linked, in terms of its social content and direct and accessible visual language, to the social realist movement in the United States and to the politically charged murals of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. The social realist movement, which peaked in the 1930s, conceived of art as a vehicle for progressive political and social change with the struggle of the working class as a source of inspiration. Lawrence would later recall, "I think it was a period of this kind of encouragement in art—the country was very social minded—and I think the big influences were in the art, the Mexican painters" (Turner, 2001). In 1940, Lawrence met Orozco while the latter was painting a mural for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York titled *Dive Bomber and Tank* (Primary Source 13). Lawrence asked him, "Where's your sketch, where's your detail?" Orozco told Lawrence that he did not need a sketch (Turner, 2001).

#### Primary Source 13

José Clemente Orozco, *Dive Bomber and Tank*, 1940.





The *Fortune* article had been arranged by the prominent New York art dealer Edith Halpert. A visionary art patron and dealer, Halpert wrote to Locke after reading his newly published book on African American art. In her letter she expressed an interest in working with other art dealers to organize a multi-gallery exhibition of African American work. Locke responded, "Have you seen the work of Jacob Lawrence?" Halpert was dazzled by *The Migration Series* and decided to feature it at her Downtown Gallery exhibition, "American Negro Art," in December 1941. The opening gala was held on December 8, 1941, but was overshadowed by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor the day before. The dramatic entry of the United States into World War II caused the other gallery owners to cancel their African American art exhibitions. Consequently, Halpert's show was the only one of the planned exhibitions to be realized.

From this initial collaboration, Halpert became Lawrence's art dealer. In the winter of 1942, MoMA and The Phillips Collection (then The Phillips Memorial Gallery) expressed interest in purchasing the series. Eventually, each museum agreed to purchase half of it, with The Phillips Collection obtaining the odd-numbered panels and MoMA acquiring the even-

numbered ones. This solution enabled both museums to have panels from the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative sequence (Primary Source 10). MoMA quickly organized a national tour of the entire series that lasted three years before concluding in New York City in the fall of 1944. By that time, Jacob Lawrence was arguably the country's best-known African American artist.

### Universal Appeal

Although Lawrence certainly saw *The Migration Series* as an artistic statement about the African American experience, he also wanted the series to convey the universal acts of migrating and immigrating. In a nation comprised predominantly of immigrants, Lawrence's *Migration Series* is a particularly resonant story. It suggests that through conflict and struggle, change will inevitably occur, and that in change, something valuable is lost but also gained. While there are no historic individuals identified in the series, the human drama remains paramount as a document of a universal experience. Indeed, *The Migration Series* can be seen in terms of even broader shared experiences: taking risks and facing the unknown in search of a better life.