

# JACOB LAWRENCE

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

*“My belief is that it is most important for an artist to develop an approach and philosophy about life—if he has developed this philosophy, he does not paint on canvas, he puts himself on canvas.”*

—Jacob Lawrence, 1946

Jacob Lawrence was born on September 7, 1917, in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He lived his very early years in Pennsylvania and moved with his family to Harlem in New York City at the age of thirteen.

Between 1932 and 1934, Lawrence studied at the Harlem Art Workshop under Charles Alston, its director. For a few dollars a week, Lawrence rented a small space to work in an area of Alston’s studio. While studying at the center, he would listen to the conversations of people like writers Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Alain Locke and dancer Katherine Dunham. As Lawrence was much younger, he was not included in their discussions; however, their words influenced and encouraged him greatly. He took pride in the achievements of his fellow African American artists.

Lawrence soon developed his own unique style. He used Cubism to escape from illusionism, and inspired by African sculpture, painted subjective constructions of line, color, and form on a flat surface. In 1938, he joined the WPA Federal Art Project for eighteen months. Lawrence was required to create two paintings every six weeks, for which he was paid \$23.86 per week. This enabled him to establish himself as a professional artist.

Lawrence’s first narrative series consisted of forty-one paintings and told the story of Toussaint L’Overture and Haiti’s fight for independence. The series was appropriately titled *The Toussaint L’Overture Series*. The completed series was shown at a gallery on Vesey Street in Manhattan, his first show outside Harlem. While working on the WPA project, Lawrence painted two other series of works.



# VOCABULARY

migration

community

urban

rural

discrimination

segregation

Harlem Renaissance

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Wheat, Ellen Harkins. *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990.

Both were based on American abolitionists who lived during the Civil War, the *Fredrick Douglass Series* (1938–39) and the *Harriet Tubman Series* (1939–40).

In 1943, Lawrence was drafted into the United States Coast Guard just as the country entered World War II. Upon returning from sea, he resumed painting familiar subject matter—his neighborhood. Soon after, Lawrence was invited to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Well-known artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage also taught at the college. While working under Josef Albers, the head of the art department, Lawrence became greatly inspired by him. After returning to New York he began work on the *War Series*, which consisted of four panels. During the 1950s, while he was teaching art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Lawrence continued to record more urban scenes. Many of the street scenes from this period reflect the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.

In 1960, the Brooklyn Museum held Lawrence's first major retrospective. Soon after this exhibition, he was invited to Nigeria by the American Society of African Culture and the Mbari Club of artists and writers. He found the trip so stimulating that he returned to Africa in 1964 to live and work for eight months. While there, he created eight paintings and several drawings. One of these, *Meat Market*, highlights the bright light, hot sun, and exciting atmosphere he experienced while in Africa.

Returning to New York, he continued exploring the subject matter of civil rights activities in the South. These paintings were very dramatic and sometimes violent. Lawrence's accomplishments were widely acknowledged throughout the 1960s, and in 1965 he was elected to membership to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

In 1967, he was approached by a publisher to illustrate a children's book. He was allowed to choose his own subject matter, and chose the story of Harriet Tubman. The book, called *Harriet and the Promised Land*, had seventeen full-page illustrations, accompanied by the story in verse. In 1970 he also illustrated *Aesop's Fables* for the same publisher.

In 1971, Lawrence was asked to take a permanent position as a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. It was there that he created the *Builder Series*, a group of work more graphic in style than his earlier works. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s he became increasingly respected as one of the most influential African American artists of his time. Jacob Lawrence died on June 9, 2000 at the age of eighty-two in Seattle.

## ABOUT THE ART

*"My pictures express my life and experience. I paint the things I know about and the things I have experienced. The things I have experienced extend into my national, racial, and class group. So I paint the American scene."*

*Fruits and Vegetables* is one of many street scenes Lawrence painted during his career. Inspired by his surroundings, the painting depicts and represents his affection for the city. In this colorful painting, he shows the everyday life of the marketplace. He captures the women and children as they go about their daily shopping. Paying tribute to his heritage he paints the faces of the shoppers to resemble African masks.

# CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

## SOCIAL STUDIES

What was The Harlem Renaissance? How did it influence Jacob Lawrence's work? Compare your community today with the way it was in the past. How has it changed?

## LITERATURE

Jacob Lawrence wrote and illustrated children's books. Read Jacob Lawrence's *The Great Migration*, *Harriet and the Promised Land* and *Aesop's Fables*. Also read Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* and *Dinner at Aunt Connie's*. How are their pictures storytelling?

## MATH

Jacob Lawrence used geometric shapes such as lines, cubes, squares and circles. Create a painting using these shapes.

## SCIENCE

Jacob Lawrence mixed his own pigments for paint. Experiment making your own paint using everyday items such as egg whites, water and Kool-Aid. Create a painting.

# CRITICAL THINKING

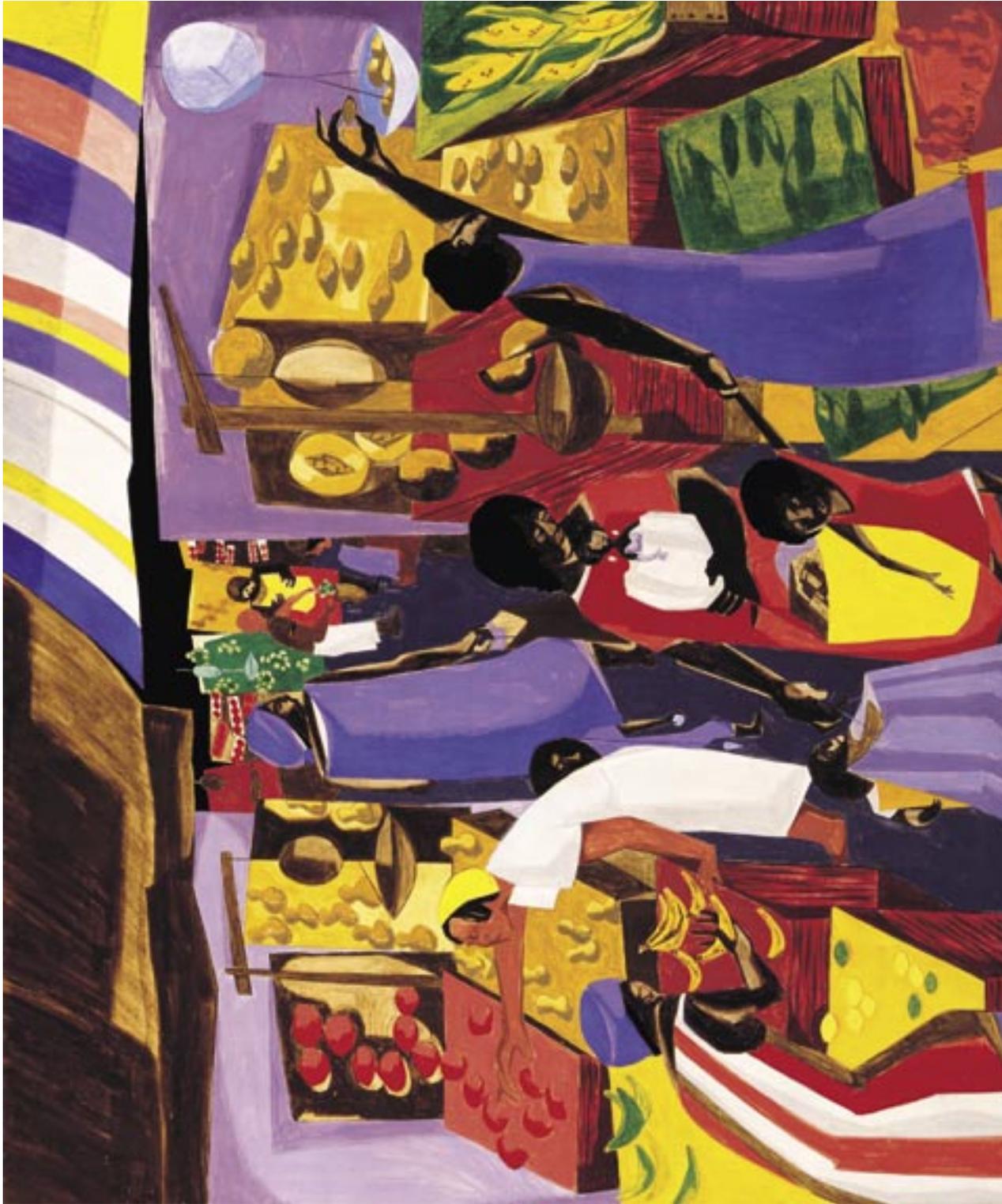
What does Jacob Lawrence's Harlem series say about the people living at the time?

Did these images influence American life?

How are the images in his painting similar?

How are his pictures storytelling?

How has inner city life changed since then?



Jacob Lawrence, *Fruits and Vegetables*, 1959, Mr. and Mrs. Harry S. Leyman Endowment, 2003.260  
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