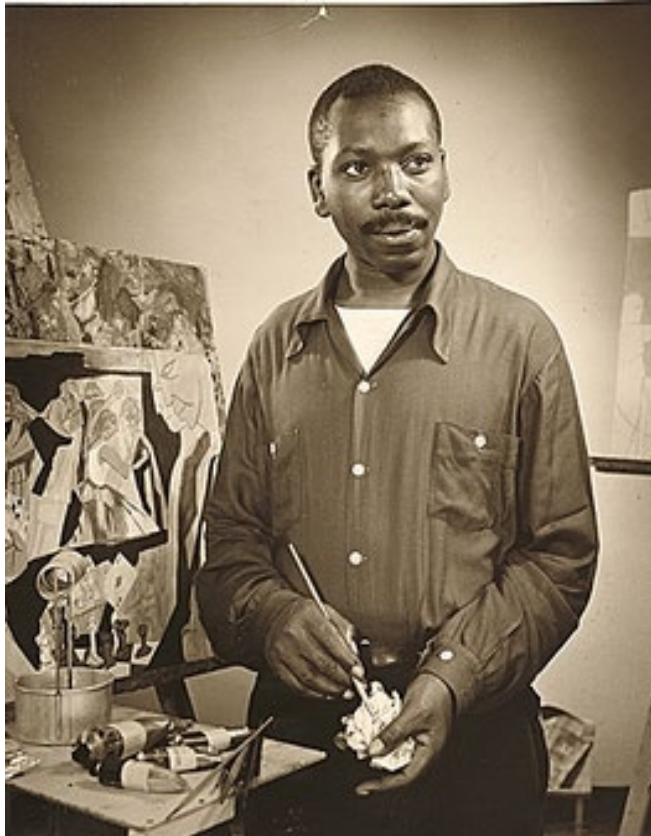


*Fall for Fine Arts 2: African  
American Artists*

**Jacob Lawrence**



## **Jacob Armstead Lawrence -**

Born September 7, 1917 in Atlantic City, New Jersey - Died June 9, 2000 in Seattle, Washington

First nationally recognized African American artist, whose narrative paintings and prints told stories of African American history and life.

# The Great Migration

Lawrence's family was part of the Great Migration. They moved to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and eventually New York.

**The Great Migration – (about 1916 - 1970.)** Millions of African Americans moved out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest and Western states in search of a better life and future.

Lawrence moved to Harlem, New York when he was a young teen, during a time known as the **Harlem Renaissance (about 1910-1935)**.

Both the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance influenced Lawrence's work!

This image is part of a larger 60 panel series of paintings by Lawrence titled, "The Migration Series" (more about on page 7)



60-panel The Migration Series

The Migration Series Panel no. 3, 1941

**The Harlem Renaissance (about 1917-1930)** – an inspiring, richly blooming growth and activity in black arts and cultures that celebrated African-American music, literature, poetry, art, culture...which expressed the dignity, heroism, and determination of blacks and their rich heritage.



This is Harlem, 1943

The people, sights and sounds of Harlem inspired Jacob throughout his life and career.

Lawrence said: “Our homes were very decorative... full of pattern, like inexpensive throw rugs, all around the house... all this color... Because we were so poor the people used this as a means of brightening their life... I got ideas from them.”

**Notice, that in all his pictures, the blacks and browns are juxtaposed with vivid colors, often the primary colors of red, yellow and blue!**



The Apartment, 1943

Lawrence said: "It wasn't wonderful for our parents. For them it was a struggle, but for the younger people coming along like myself, there was a real vitality in the community." The people of Harlem "talked to us about our history, engaged and encouraged us. They were proud of everything we did."

In February 1938, Jacob displayed his art in a solo exhibition at The Harlem YMCA on 135th Street.



Tombstones, 1942

Tells story of the life cycle; painted before he was drafted.

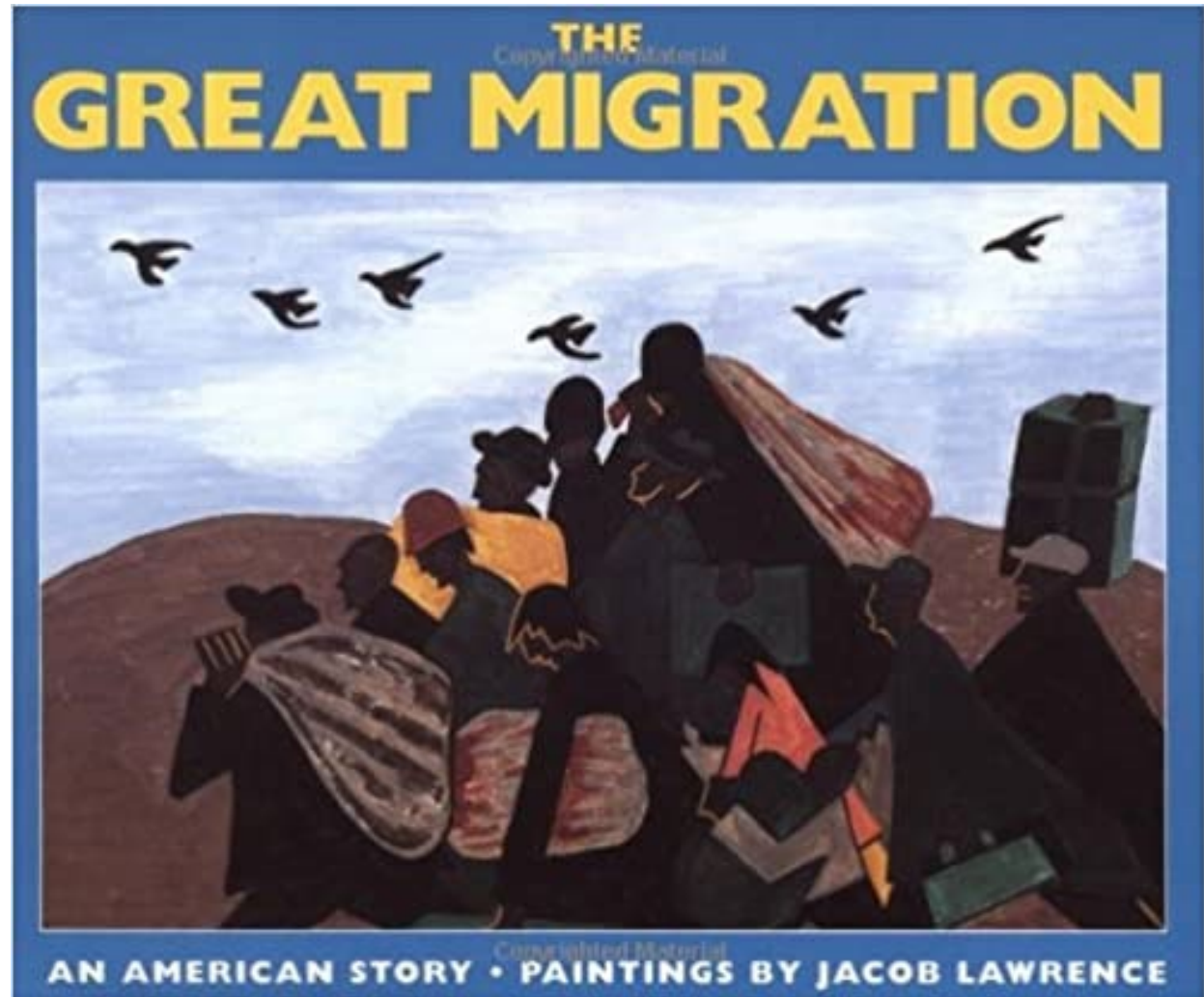
At the young age of 23, Lawrence gained national recognition with his 60-panel *The Migration Series*, which tells the stories with images and captions of The Great Migration. The much desired 60 painting series was purchased jointly by the [Phillips Collection](#) in Washington, D.C., and the [Museum of Modern Art](#) (MoMA) in New York, within months of completion. I believe all immigrants (making up so much of America) can relate to the human condition of migrating. “His art explores the human condition, the African American experience, American history, and themes of social justice” (-<https://www.arts.wa.gov/about/>).



See it online: <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>

In the 1990s the images and captions were published in this book, which you may borrow from the Los Angeles Public Library - to go service during this time: [www.lapl.org](http://www.lapl.org)

Or you can see this favorite read-a-load of mine online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThQysPt-3KE> by Rebeca Baudille





As a narrative painter, Lawrence believed that you cannot “tell a story in a single painting.” Lawrence is known for creating most of his works in a series or group. Although he is famous for his Migration Series, he created many others like the War series (now lost) and the Struggle Series (see here: <https://www.pem.org/jacob-lawrence-the-american-struggle-panels> ).

However, for over 50 years, he was fascinated by the Builder series.



Builders #1, 1972

Lawrence first painted scenes of builders and tools as early as 1946.

He revisited these themes many times over for 50 years, especially later in his life.

Lawrence liked the ideas of human potential and creative effort...

building things of beauty, harmony....



The Builders, 1947



Cabinet Makers, 1946



Builders No. 2, 1968

In paintings like *Builders No. 2*, he portrayed building as a communal activity and appealed for racial harmony, while at the same time reminding everyone that African Americans made significant contributions to American society.....

*“I like the symbolism of the [builder]. ... I think of it as man’s aspiration, as a constructive tool.”*

The same creative energy that builds can also create social change.





Builders Three, 1991

## Let's Play, I SPY Tools!

*“Tools are very beautiful...  
a symbol of uplift...  
a symbol of achievement.”*

-Jacob Lawrence



screwdriver	hammer	nail/ screw	saw	carpenter's divider	drill	wrench	plane	level



The Builders (Family), 1974

What do you see in the background? Yes, builders. In the foreground there is a family. Look at their hands. They are all holding hands. When you hold someone's hand you create something beautiful. Perhaps love, unity, protection...

*... The hand  
itself is a  
beautiful tool.*

Jacob Lawrence

What are you building, or putting effort into making or creating?

As a student, what are your tools? Paper, pencil, book...



The Shoemaker, 1945



The Seamstress, 1946



## The Artist

Notice his hands. One hand is under his chin, as if holding an African wooden Mask. Look at the other hand. What is in the foreground of it? Paint brushes. What is in the background of it, jars with lids for paint or water? Lawrence not only said that the hand is a beautiful tool but that tools are an extension of the hand. The Artist is in the foreground and behind him in the background we see other paintings, shelves or a bookcase (upper right) where there are tools and sketches, tubes of paint, a rag. Notice the colors: The browns and blacks contrast with bright colors. Notice the shapes.



Self-Portrait, 1977

Circles and ovals for his head and jar lids, triangles for part of his hands and tips of paint brushes, squares and rectangles for the table top, artwork, shelves. Organic or free flowing shapes for his shirt, the rag. Lawrence called his art style Dynamic Cubism, maybe because of the expressive movement of the simple geometric and organic shapes. He also used [Social Realism](#) and modern abstraction to create compelling stories of African American experiences and the history of the United States.

Compiled by Aida Bartoletti and Kim Woo in January 2021 using WikiArt, Wikipidea, Britannica Kids, Gale Elementary, The Builders By [Clayton DeKorne](#) [retrieved form [https://www.jlconline.com/projects/the-builders\\_o](https://www.jlconline.com/projects/the-builders_o)]

Whitney Museum of American Art

<https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/meet/>

Museum of Modern Art <https://www.moma.org/artists/3418>

Smithsonian American Art Museum <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jacob-lawrence-2828>

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Jacob Lawrence. Artist Interviews

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdXz\\_D8t\\_qs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdXz_D8t_qs)

Lawrence, Jacob (1917-2000) and Gwendolyn Knight (1913-2005) by Barbara Earl Thomas <https://www.historylink.org/File/5120>

Saint Louis Art Museum <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/21216/>



Tools, 1977 Lithograph by Jacob Lawrence

*What we will make in today's art class -*

Gather paper, pencil, paints or colors...etc. Make sure your pencil is sharp. Then gather 3-7 object tools to trace and draw. These tools can be student tools, arts tools, cooking tools, home improvement tools...etc.

Create a composition with these tools of your choice. Play with the arrangements till you find a composition you like. You may want to photograph your favorite arrangements so you don't forget a design you stumble upon.

Here are photographs of my compositions:

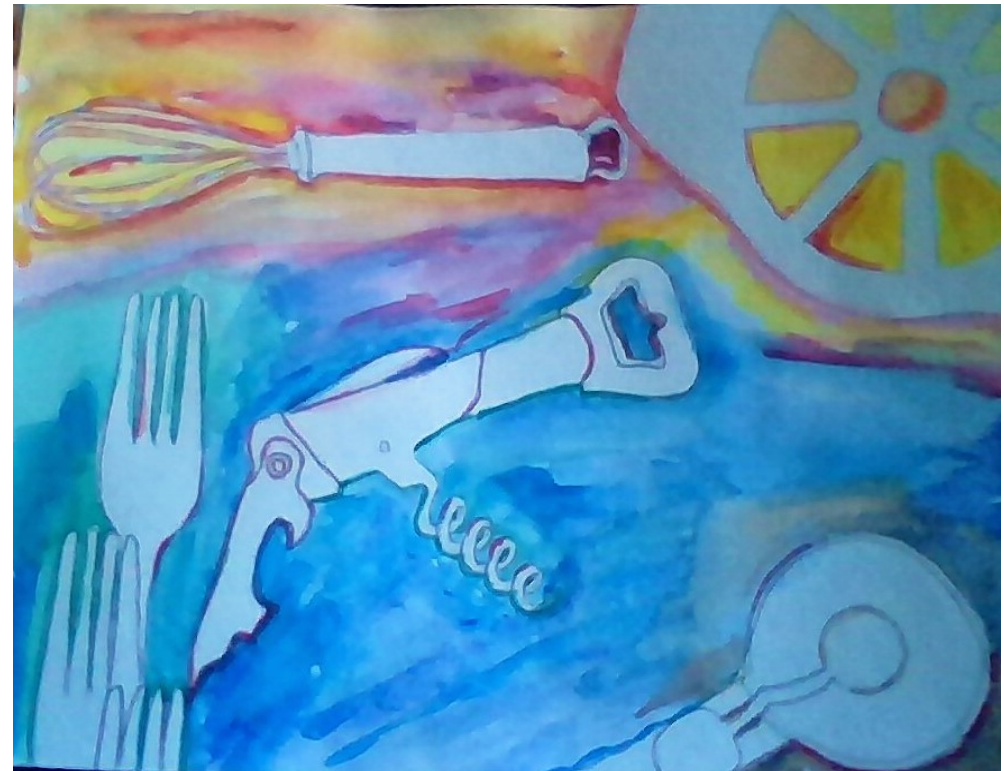


Some of your objects can come off the page, like the handles of the pliers. Some of your objects can overlap....



Your compositions can be vertical/portrait or horizontal/landscape.

After you trace your tool shapes; paint or color in.  
Choose to color in the negative or the positive space or both.  
In this example, I colored in the negative space that the tools made. If I would have colored the object itself that would be the positive space. Instead I painted around the objects and filled in the negative spaces with colors.





Here, the positive space is colored. With some tools (ruler etc.), you may wish to fill in the details because the tracing will only give you the basic outline.

If your objects overlap, you may want to color those shapes differently as in the example below of multiple spoons, forks, knives and straws.





*Now it's Time to Make your Masterpiece!*

Enjoy!

Email me a picture of your work. It is the same email you used to receive the link for this class.

Submitted works will be entered in our online art exhibit at the “durantlibray” Instagram site.

You may use the same zoom link for our other classes on February 19 and 26. We will not be meeting on the 12<sup>th</sup>, but I will email you biographical videos and a self-guided art lesson for that week's featured artist.