



Jacob Lawrence

FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

In creating his artwork, Jacob Lawrence referred to the issues that affected him and his community, showing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation needed to make a change. This can be seen as civic engagement.

- » What are the issues that affect you in your local community (school, city, state)? From this list of issues, create a persuasive work of writing and visual art that would enlighten people to the issue(s) and inspire them to take action. The written and visual pieces should build on each other and not tell the same story.

Jacob Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on September 7, 1917. His mother Rosa Lee a domestic worker from Virginia and his father a railroad cook from South Carolina. In 1924, Lawrence's parents separated and he and his sister moved to Philadelphia with their mother. In 1927 his mother went to New York without the children and it would take three years for her to bring Lawrence and his siblings to Harlem. At the Harlem Art Workshop, Lawrence took after-school art classes with Charles Alston and other prominent artists in the community. There Lawrence developed his own unique style that combines both figural and abstract elements.

Drawing from the classics, Lawrence's early works adapt the tradition of "history painting." This is a term that describes paintings that derive their subjects from the Bible, mythology, secular literature, or historical events. History paintings are not necessarily accurate or documentary descriptions of actual events; they can also be allegorical. Lawrence's early works tell the stories of prominent figures in American history who were of particular interest to African Americans. Toussaint L'Ouverture and Harriet Tubman were two of his first subjects.



"The struggle of the American people is a really beautiful thing. It's a symbol of what can be achieved. You read our history and what we've gone through and the sacrifices that we Americans have made in general and what we have achieved. We haven't always been successful but I think that we have made great strides ... I would like my work to be a statement not only concerning the Black experience but the American experience of the struggle. The Black experience, the immigrant experience, the Native American experience, all these make up the American experience."

JACOB LAWRENCE



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

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Jacob Lawrence, *Ambulance Call*, 1948,
Tempera on board, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)

Later, instead of turning for inspiration to historical subjects from long ago, Lawrence turned to more recent events. Between 1940 and 1941, a 23-year-old Lawrence painted a set of 60 panels titled *The Migration Series*. These paintings tell the stories of African Americans who journeyed from the rural South to the urban North between the World Wars in search of a better life, a movement known as the "Great Migration." *Ambulance Call* continues in this vein. In Lawrence's signature style of bright colors and flattened images, *Ambulance Call* shows a street scene. Ambulance attendants lift a stretcher carrying a figure covered in white sheets. A paramedic stands by, monitoring the patient. Surrounding this trio is a densely packed crowd of spectators, whose downcast eyes and sad expressions suggest that they are not anonymous onlookers but rather a close-knit community of neighbors, friends, and family. In the 1940s, the Harlem Hospital was the only facility in New York City that admitted black patients. Consequently, African Americans waited significantly longer to get medical treatment than did their white counterparts.