





1

Painter and Storyteller

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) was inspired to paint the everyday life he saw around him as well as to tell epic stories of American history.

Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Lawrence and his family moved to Harlem in New York City in 1930, when he was thirteen years old. Despite the poverty of the Great Depression, African American intellectual and artistic life was flourishing in Harlem, and Lawrence became interested in the arts while he was still a teenager. He began painting in after-school art classes at the Harlem Art Workshops, where he learned about the styles of Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and African art. Charles Alston, Augusta Savage, and other prominent artists in the community who were impressed by his talent and creative vision encouraged Lawrence to pursue art as a career. He enjoyed visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he was particularly drawn to Renaissance art and to scenes painted by Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. By combining these influences, Lawrence developed a style that was both figural and abstract.

Interested in the history, accomplishments, and struggles of black people, Lawrence often painted in series as a way to tell a story. He gained fame for his powerful narratives of the lives of such historic figures as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. He described the journey of those who made the great African American migration from the rural South to cities in the North in search of a better life, while his later works document events during World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. The paintings of Jacob Lawrence express his lifelong concern for human dignity and freedom, and his own social consciousness.

2

Honoring Harriet Tubman

Born a slave on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Harriet Tubman escaped to freedom and ultimately made her way to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During the 1850s and 1860s, she courageously returned to the South nineteen times, helping more than three hundred slaves escape to freedom in Canada.

Traveling under the cover of night, Tubman used the North Star as a guide and followed the Underground Railroad, a network of people that helped slaves escape to freedom. By day, the slaves hid secretly in houses along the route. Risking her life to liberate others, Tubman demonstrated strength, courage, tenacity, and self-sacrifice. She worked as a nurse during the Civil War and later as an advocate for the rights of African Americans and women.

In 1939 and 1940 Lawrence created a series of thirty-one panels that describe moments in Tubman's life. He revisited the subject in 1967, when he wrote and illustrated the children's book *Harriet and the Promised Land* and created independent paintings such as *Daybreak—A Time to Rest*.



"The struggle of the American people is a really beautiful thing. It's a symbol of what can be achieved." Jacob Lawrence

“When the subjects are strong, I believe simplicity is the best way of treating them.” Jacob Lawrence

3 Simplified Color and Form

In *Daybreak—A Time to Rest*, Lawrence conveys Harriet Tubman’s bravery and her role as a protector with his dramatic style of vivid colors, flattened shapes, and simplified forms.

Near the center of the composition Tubman’s face turns upward to the sky, and her body is surrounded by purple and pink cloaks. The night sky came to symbolize Tubman, as Frederick Douglass later described in a letter he wrote to her: “The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism.” Lying on the hard ground, she holds a rifle at the ready for protection. The exaggerated perspective, which makes her feet look enormous, emphasizes the arduous journeys she made. Forming a crescent above Tubman’s head, a man, woman, and baby huddle together closely, resting. Three insects—a walking stick, beetle, and ant—crawl on the large green leaves in the foreground and signal activity at daybreak.

“The Human subject is the most important thing. My work is abstract in the sense of having been designed and composed, but it is not abstract in the sense of having no human content. . . . I want to communicate. I want the idea to strike right away.” Jacob Lawrence



far left: Jacob Lawrence (detail), c. 1950s (photo: Sid Bernstein), Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

left: Portrait of Harriet Tubman (detail), 1880. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

above: Jacob Lawrence, *Daybreak—A Time to Rest*, 1967, tempera on hardboard, National Gallery of Art, Anonymous Gift

“I became so excited then by all the new visual forms I found in Nigeria — unusual color combinations, textures, shapes, and the dramatic effect of light — that I felt an overwhelming desire to come back as soon as possible to steep myself in Nigerian culture so that my paintings, if I’m fortunate, might show the influence of the great African artistic tradition.” **Jacob Lawrence**

Inspired by Nigeria

Lawrence traveled to Nigeria in 1962 on an invitation to teach and exhibit his work. Two years later he returned for an eight-month stay and painted aspects of everyday life, including *Street to Mbari*.

Here, he captures the hustle and bustle of a busy outdoor market. Shops and vendors line the street far into the distance. People young and old buy and sell produce and rolls of boldly patterned fabrics, while women balance wares on their heads. It is easy to imagine the sounds of this crowded market — people chatting, babies crying, goats bleating, chickens squawking, flies buzzing, carts rolling — and to feel the energy of the scene.

Throughout his career, Lawrence preferred to paint with vivid opaque water-based paints (tempera or gouache) on board or paper. He carefully planned his composition by making a line drawing first, and then he filled in each area, one color at a time. The thin white lines that define and give character to eyes, ears, nostrils, fingernails, and toenails are white paper left unpainted. Repeating colors and shapes emphasize the energy and movement of the scene. The colors of the patterned fabrics and clothing mirror the colors on the ground and in the sky. Stripes of brown-colored paint, giving the appearance of corrugated iron roofs, create a visual rhythm across the top of the painting and lead the eye into the distance.



Look

Observe the colors, shapes, and lines in detail.

Colors: What colors do you see? Describe them.

Shapes: What kinds of shapes do you see? Describe them.

Lines: What kinds of lines do you see? Describe them.

Jacob Lawrence, *Street to Mbari*, 1964, tempera over graphite on wove paper, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James T. Dyke

Discuss

Choose a color, shape, or line that you noticed. Consider these questions:

- How does it contribute to the mood of the painting?
- How does it contribute to the way the scene looks?
- How does it contribute to a story the artwork might tell?

Reflect

What new ideas do you have about the artwork?