

Jacob Lawrence at the Crocker

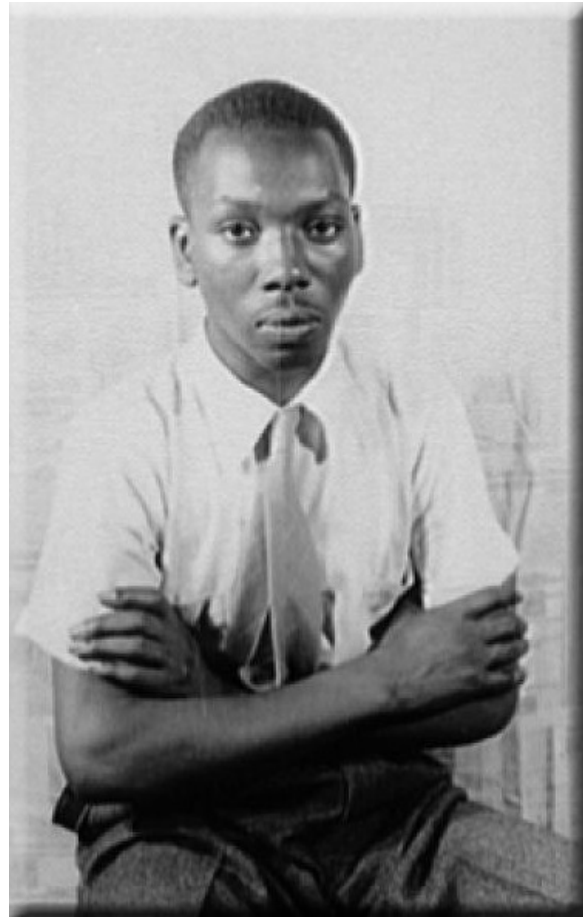
by Carol Bernard Hoffman, DSPE

My good friend, Betty (of whom you will hear more when I present the story of “My Mural,” coming soon), recently decided that she wanted to see the Jacob Lawrence show at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. It is close to Davis, but it entails a freeway on which I do not feel capable of driving. “Certainly,” I replied to her invitation to join her and her older son, Marcel. I knew I had heard of this artist, but his identity had joined the large cast of characters who sat musingly in my old, fading memory banks.

So, at 10:00 a.m. last Thursday, off we went. It was supposed to rain, but the weather was fine, and Marcel was driving. Betty voiced her desire to see the works of this artist before the exhibit left the area. Apparently, Lawrence’s works had been at this museum for a while. Betty was, of course, a member but stood in a long line to have her ticket punched. I went to the empty counter for those of us who had dropped our memberships. As I asked the young woman where the Jacob Lawrence show was located, she looked up quickly with a sharp smile—so suddenly that it jarred my memory, and I remembered the identity of the artist. The show, she told me, was on the third floor.

I was now able to look forward to seeing, again, the much-awarded and appreciated works of this black artist who had appeared on the art scene at just the right time and with the perfect artistic ability to be recognized when our country wanted to celebrate the works of black artists.

As we left the elevator, I could see that the show filled the five large rooms that were usually occupied by traveling shows. Upon a quick study, I regretted that there were benches in only two of the rooms. Ah, well. My friend and I would manage with some planning. After all, Betty was young, only 86 compared to my 91; so we both had to allow for the differences in our available stand-up times whenever we joined each other for shows.



Jacob Lawrence¹

I recognized Lawrence’s style as I approached the first group. The museum was showing mainly his prints, such as silkscreens, lithographs, and etchings. Although the technique for each was distinctive, the results looked similar. Most of them were based on 41 paintings. The sizes of the paintings weren’t given, nor who had made the transference; but since they were all so similar, I assumed Lawrence himself had made the transferences. At any rate, I hoped so. The prints were all about 20 x 26 inches, not counting the mats or the frames, which were all done very professionally.

The first group of artwork dealt mainly with horses and figures: black or brown human figures, and black or white horses. The shapes



Poster Design, Whitney Exhibition (1974)
by Jacob Lawrence²

were angular, yet graceful. The forms of the horses were interrupted by the shapes of the human figures that were standing in front of or sitting on them. It was delightful to follow the movements of the forms in their spatial placements. The figurations were all flat; there were no visible brush or implement strokes. A milk-chocolate brown and sometimes a flat-black filling was given to the figures of the black people. The few white men, not many women at all, were sometimes created with a flat white or an ecru shade.

Jacob Lawrence was born in 1917 and died in 2000. Much of his work was done in his sixties, but many pieces were completed in his eighties. The horses seemed to be done when he was starting out as a young man, and the beauty that he felt for them seemed reasonable as the subject matter for a young man. Several of the sections

had inserts of various awards for illustrations of black workers he had created for various industries.

The groupings that displayed the art Lawrence completed in later stages of his life differed in colors and in subject matter. The horses pretty much disappeared. Lawrence settled on showing the positions of different workers as well as their equipment. Builders were prevalent in one group. They were shown on parts of ladders and reaching with pieces of lumber or bricks to place them on different levels. The colors were more varied as he grew older and were even brighter and more vivid in later years. Occasionally, a drawing would be shown. These delighted me, in particular, because drawing is a favored method of mine, and I could appreciate the variations. I even wished for more Lawrence drawings and imagined how I might have progressed with several of his pieces.

I was able to use the benches when I needed them and to see some of the work close enough to study it when I was seated, but I was tempted to request that the desk add one in each room. Maybe next time.

Several days before we went on this adventure, I had begun to enlarge a drawing of my own in which, for the first time in ages, I had used color. I planned a flat presentation of acrylic shapes separated by a varied width of black ink lines. It occurred to me that it might appear to have been influenced, because of my sudden use of flat color,



The Seamstress by Jacob Lawrence³


by the work of this artist. Was it going to be necessary for me to announce to all and sundry that this was not the case? Then I thought that perhaps “all and sundry” would have neither noticed nor cared about it, anyway.

The three of us each finished our separate tours and joined each other in the dining area, where we had a welcome lunch with white wine. It

was a nice way to discuss our not-so-varied interpretations of the art show. As we progressed homeward, the clouds increased and became quite dark. When we approached my house, it poured huge drops. I couldn’t help but laugh as I became drenched on the way to the door.

The next day, I was ready to work on my new piece.

NOTES

1. Wikipedia contributors, “Jacob Lawrence,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jacob_Lawrence&oldid=896734402.
2. Robin Wander, “Stanford’s Cantor Arts Center Presents Solo Exhibition of Jacob Lawrence’s work, *Promised Land*,” Stanford Report (March 30, 2015), Stanford University, <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/march/lawrence-promised-land-033015.html>.
3. “Jacob Lawrence,” NAACP Voices from Paris, TX (September 7, 2011), <http://paris-tx-naacp.blogspot.com/2011/09/jacob-lawrence.html>. 

“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 put paint on canvas, he puts himself on canvas.”

—Jacob Lawrence