

## Gwendolyn Knight (1913–2005)

Married to Jacob Lawrence for 59 years, Gwen Knight Lawrence was also a lifelong artist and her husband's most highly valued critic. Like Jacob Lawrence, throughout her career Gwen Knight remained unswayed by abstract expressionism and other trends that moved through the art world. Though she shared Lawrence's interest in figuration, her method was more spontaneous and her subject matter more personal. She charted her own creative path in a characteristically independent way.

Gwen Knight was born in Barbados in 1913. When she was seven, her widowed mother entrusted her to close friends who brought her with them to the United States. In 1926, at the age of 13, Knight moved with her foster family from their first home in St. Louis to Harlem, where her developing interest in the arts flourished in the creative atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. Growing up among freethinkers, the young Gwen was an avid reader, a lover of dance, theater, and opera, who eagerly took in the burgeoning cultural activity of Harlem. For a time her family lived in an apartment building on Seventh Avenue that was also home to the great jazz musicians Billy Strayhorn and Ethel Waters.

Knight attended Wadleigh High School, one of the few integrated schools in New York and one with a reputation for good scholarship. Her first formal study of art came at Howard University, where she studied with the painter Lois Maillou Jones and with printmaker James Lesesne Wells. Knight noted that women painters were not taken very seriously at Howard

at the time, however, and when her stay there was cut short by the Depression at the end of her second year, she returned to Harlem.

In Harlem, Knight became a daily participant in the workshop of sculptor Augusta Savage, director of the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts and later of the Harlem Community Arts Center, which was funded by the federal Works Progress Administration. In Savage, Knight found a mentor, and Savage's studio became a second home. Savage helped her develop technical skills and a way of using the figure as a base in her compositions, incorporating structural and emotional narrative components. "By looking at her," Knight said, "I understood that I could be an artist if I wanted to be." It was through Savage that Knight first came into contact with Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Charles Alston, Ralph Ellison, Alain Locke, Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden, and other writers, thinkers, and artists at the heart of Harlem's cultural ferment.

In the mid-1930s, Knight went to work for the WPA's Fine Arts Project, assisting graphic designer and painter Charles Alston with a mural in the children's ward at Harlem Hospital. In 1934, in Alston's studio, she met Jacob Lawrence. They were married in 1941, forming a strong and enduring partnership.

One of Knight's favorite New York haunts during those years was Alfred Stieglitz's An American Place gallery, then home to Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe, among others. In *Never Late for Heaven: The Art of Gwen Knight*, Curator Sheryl Conkleton notes that Knight's

early images “reveal some affinity with that of early modernists who were interested in painted equivalents for their emotional experiences, such as Arthur Dove and Georgia O’Keeffe, both of whom were favorites of Knight. Although surrounded by advocates for various kinds of pictorial renovation of African and African-American history and culture, Knight persisted in pursuing a less narrative idiom. . . . As her work developed, Knight became more committed to the interpretation and communication of visual delight in the world around her. It superseded the need to tell a story or to explore the larger meaning of what it meant to be a modern painter.”

While not as prolific as her husband, throughout all of her travels with Jacob Lawrence over the following decades Knight kept up a life of active engagement with art, continually reading, studying, and painting. Knight was stimulated by her exposure to Josef Albers and other artists during a stay at Black Mountain College in 1946, where she taught informal dance lessons while Lawrence taught art. Returning to New York, Knight strengthened her understanding of the relationship between dance and design while studying with the New Dance Group, led by members of Martha Graham’s company.

In 1949, Knight took a job at Conde Nast, working in its library and magazine archives. She remained with Conde Nast for over a decade, helping to provide some financial stability for the couple while Lawrence assumed a series of temporary teaching positions. During this time she studied design at New School of Social Research with Alexei Brodovitch. Following a stimulating and productive sojourn with Lawrence in Nigeria in 1964, Knight again took classes in New York, working with a group of women painters. Her work from this period includes a number of closely studied portraits.

Knight exhibited increasingly in the late 1960s; her work was included in “Portrayal of the Negroes in American Painting,” at the Forum Gallery in New York in 1967, along with works by Hughie Lee-Smith, Raymond Saunders, Ernest Crichlow, and Lawrence.

In 1971, when Jacob was offered a full-time tenured position at the University of Washington, the Lawrences moved to Seattle. In Seattle, Gwen Knight Lawrence became an active member of the cultural community, serving on committees of the Urban League and the Seattle Chapter of the Links, as a member of the King County Arts Commission, and on numerous arts panels and juries. A few years after moving to Seattle, she joined the Francine Seders gallery, which also represented Jacob Lawrence. Knight’s first solo exhibition was at the Seattle Art Museum in 1976. From the mid-1970s onward, her work gained a growing audience and recognition in the Northwest and beyond, with exhibits in venues in Georgia, Oregon, and Washington, D.C.

Ms. Knight continued working until 2001, turning in her late work to a series of lyrical monoprints that captured her interest in improvisation and movement. In 2003 a retrospective of her work appeared at the Tacoma Art Museum. The exhibition was the occasion for the monograph *Never Late for Heaven: The Art of Gwen Knight*, by Sheryl Conkleton and Barbara Earl Thomas. The book was published by the University of Washington Press in association with the Tacoma Art Museum. DC Moore Gallery in New York City presented their first exhibition of her work in 2004.