

# Art in America

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PRESS RELEASE

## Jacob Lawrence DC Moore

For its sixth and most ambitious exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's work, DC Moore assembled 47 paintings from the artist's estate and numerous private collections, many surfacing in public for the first time in decades. Nearly all of the small-to-medium paintings were hung in chronological order, providing a comprehensive survey of Lawrence's development between the years 1936 and 1999.

Lawrence (1917-2000) typically worked in gouache and tempera on paper or board, consistently setting broadly defined figures against colorful, semi-abstract backgrounds that resist spatial illusionism and achieve an impressive graphic punch. In an essay for the exhibition's catalogue, Patricia Hills describes subtle changes in Lawrence's style over the years, including the advent of decorative patterns that crept into some of his paintings of the 1950s. But an evolution of subject matter was the more obvious trajectory of this show. Early streetscapes of Harlem in the 1930s gave way to scenes of everyday life in the Deep South in the years following World War II. While maintaining a focus on African-Americans, Lawrence, in later bodies of work, gradually abandoned the anecdotal observations of Social Realism for more emblematic images of architects at work and children playing games.

The show also demonstrated that outstretched arms are a recurring motif in Lawrence's work, endowing many of his paintings with dynamic, zig-zagging compositions. As one moved from painting to painting, those multivalent gestures also conveyed a variety of narratives. In *Rummage Sale* (1948), for example, Southern black poverty is telegraphed by several figures holding secondhand garments aloft and digging through a box of old shoes.



Jacob Lawrence: *Rummage Sale*, 1948, egg tempera on board, 24 by 20 inches; at DC Moore.

Embodying the pursuit of knowledge, a young man with enormous arms pushes a bin filled with books across the foreground of *The Library* (1966). Far more expressive are the thrusting arms of rebellious slaves in two excerpts from a series titled "Struggle . . . From the History of the American People." The numerous raised and clenched fists in these 1955 paintings presage the symbolic gesture of the Black Power movement by at least a decade.

As this exhibition—which was subtitled "Moving Forward"—made abundantly clear, Lawrence managed to distill African-American experience and history into meaningful body language, and mostly used vigorous, emphatic gestures to convey a sense of struggle toward a better life. But a handful of quieter paintings like *The Travelers* (1961), in which a black family parts with its hefty luggage to rest on a bus depot bench, remind one that the social progress chronicled by Lawrence throughout his career was, to say the very least, exhausting.

—Matthew Guy Nichols