

Art in America

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PRESS RELEASE

Jacob Lawrence at DC Moore

Back in the 1940s, Jacob Lawrence was considered the most important black artist in America. During this period Lawrence produced "The Migration Series," a visual saga of epic proportions that set down in advanced pictorial style the African-American diaspora to America's northern cities. By decade's end, Lawrence had begun exploring another fertile theme: the "Builders," a rich humanistic subject he would return to again and again throughout his career. In September 1998, Lawrence finished 12 new gouache-on-paper paintings on the subject of the "Builders"—works whose special mission it is to serve as reflections on the stubborn hope of human agency.

Lawrence has spoken publicly of his childhood fascination with the local carpenters he grew up with in Harlem. This early interest in carpentry led Lawrence to collect tools for their innate esthetic interest, much as the poet Pablo Neruda obsessively collected the figureheads of ships. "Many hand tools haven't changed for centuries," Lawrence has said of the tools he depicts in his "Builders" series. "You look back on paintings of the early Renaissance and you see exactly the same tool; it hasn't changed. It's like an extension of the hand."

Another measure of valuable continuity is Lawrence's essential style: the "dynamic cubism" of his flat, cartoonlike shapes, his use of primary colors, the characteristic tilt in perspective that channels energy and movement into his compositions—attributes shared by every one of the gouaches in this exhibition.



Jacob Lawrence: *Man With Still Life*, 1998, gouache on paper, 24 by 13 inches; at DC Moore.

Broadly suggesting notions of the social, works such as *Four Men* (1998) and *Stained Glass Windows* (1994) depict groups of smiling, struggling laborers engaged in what is, essentially, a collective experience. But many of the images portray single carpenters, often captured in highly symbolic poses. *Man With Still Life* (1998), a case in point, pictures a solitary figure straining toward tools and a bowl of fruit, both of which are just out of reach. Other paintings, including *Builder With a Pear* (1998) and *Man With Beard* (1998), underline more personal concerns, evoking the ideals of striving, balance and wisdom— notions traditionally the province of the single reflective mind.

Conceived as a cohesive body of work, the paintings in the exhibition were executed simultaneously to ensure a maximum of consistency. Not surprisingly, they share among them Lawrence's essential philosophy, nurtured by a lifelong commitment to the values of humanism and pictorial exploration.—*Christian Viveros-Fauné*