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Jacob Lawrence, “Moving Forward: Paintings, 1936–1999”

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DC Moore Gallery, through Mar 22
(see 57th Street area)



During his lifetime, Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) was acknowledged as the country's foremost “Negro artist”—a distinction that speaks volumes about the society he worked in. He showed with Edith Halpert, an early champion of American Modernism. MoMA and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. acquired different halves of his “Migration Series,” an emotionally stunning document of the movement of African-Americans from the rural South to the industrial North.

As this densely hung career survey makes clear, Lawrence painted what he knew: the experience of the “American Negro working class” (his words), in a spare, flat style inflected by Social Realism and the rhythmic geometry of Synthetic Cubism. His subjects ranged from scenes of poverty in his native Harlem and of sharecroppers in Georgia to integrated crowds celebrating Jimmy Carter's 1976 inauguration.

At their best, these works have a simplicity and directness that elicit deep empathy. *Harlem Diner* (1938) is rendered in earthy tones and spare forms that reinforce the exhaustion of drawn faces and the misery of hunger. In *The Fur Coat* (1948), the uniform brown of a child's stiffened corpse stands out startlingly against the red of a blanket. However, other pieces, like *The Swearing In No. 1*, the painting of Carter taking the oath of office, seem too illustrative and corny in their “Kumbaya” feeling. Indeed, Lawrence's post-'60s work lacks the impact of his earlier achievements, as if he lost his passion as he aged, and as life grew easier for African-Americans. Still, the first-rate pieces on view here give some sense of why Lawrence was not only the nation's foremost black artist, but one of its best, period.—*Joshua Mack*