

THE NEW YORK SUN

THURSDAY, JUNE 3, 2004

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## GALLERY-GOING

By DAVID COHEN



The man and wife show at DC Moore of the late, legendary Jacob Lawrence and his nonagenarian widow, Gwen Knight, offers a rare, welcome chance to see a small overview of works by Ms. Knight, culled from her recent traveling retrospective organized by the Tacoma Art Museum.

These works stretch as far back as a poignant 1945 landscape that recalls her native Barbados, which she had left at the age of 7. It also includes portraits and life studies of accomplished naturalism.

Lawrence is represented by works on paper, including a complete set of the 1986 screenprints based on his 1938 narrative sequence of paintings on the life of the Haitian black revolutionary hero, Toussaint L'Ouverture.

As the peerless pictorial storyteller of African-American history, Lawrence was a natural for printmaking, "the democratic art." His work was "graphic" in various senses of the word: powered by flat forms and emphatic lines, his images are emotionally articulate, visually immediate, compositionally uncluttered.

Lawrence's art was "primitive" in a highly sophisticated way. He forged an expressive style suited to his mission, to

tell his stories with urgency and charisma, in a way that was collectively rather than personally expressive. He also managed at once to be visually inventive and witty about the implications of his style. A painting in gouache and tempera, "Other Rooms" (1975), is energized by spatial compressions and by pulsating areas of singing, open color, both features that seem indebted to Matisse: the almost-abstract baby, at once awkward and exquisite, recalls the late cut-outs. A further Matisse allusion — the acanthus leaves in the decorative embellishment on Toussaint's uniform — takes on added symbolic resonance, for "the black Napoleon" was, as Lawrence's caption declaims, "dreaded by the French."

You could say that Lawrence borrowed from a jazz-inspired Frenchman to depict in his own distinctive style a black hero who borrowed revolution from the French to fight them for independence.

