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Shows That Matter: Jacob Lawrence at MoMA

BY NOELLE BODICK | APRIL 29, 2015



Jacob Lawrence's "In the North the Negro had better educational facilities."

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WHAT: ["One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Works"](#)

WHEN: Through September 7

WHERE: The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York

WHY: At first, they appear in one solid mass. Dozens of bodies crushed together, slanted forward, weighed down by traveling cloaks and luggage, sometimes a baby. Before them stand three ticket counters — to Chicago, New York, and St. Louis.

"During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes," the accompanying text reads. And so opens Jacob Lawrence's sweeping suite of 60 panels chronicling the mass exodus of African Americans from the cotton belt to urban centers of the north, the historical event writer W.E.B. Du Bois called "social evolution working itself out before our eyes." The tempera paintings produced in 1941 — just 10 years after Lawrence's own family uprooted to Harlem — have been reunited at the Museum of Modern Art for the first time in 20 years. (When they were sold, all the even-numbered panels went to MoMA and the odd-numbered ones to the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC.)

Today, especially, their reunion offers consolation to the present, illustrating a collective struggle to achieve socially meaningful power. The prescient artist planned for as much. "Having no Negro history makes the Negro people feel inferior to the rest of the world," he said in 1940. "I didn't do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe these things tie up with the Negro today."

Then just 23, Lawrence fused the conscientious social vision of the Mexican muralists like Diego

Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco with the flat planes of Cubist painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. As a result, he produced an abstract portrait of a people in motion, though often physically and spiritually burdened — whether lugging traveling bags on a train, shriveled in grief because of lynchings, or heads bent in prayer over a simple pan and spoon. But also under pressure, here, was what historian C. Vann Woodward once called the “indefinite duration of any set of social institutions.” Towards the end of Lawrence’s series, [three girls](#) in the north wearing short, sassy dresses reach up to solve arithmetic problems on a chalkboard; in the [next panel](#), an orderly line forms of African Americans waiting to vote.

The associated peripheral exhibitions cycle through Lawrence’s theme of racial injustice in the form of books (by Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes), photographs (by Ben Shahn, Helen Levitt, Gordon Parks), and songs (by Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Josh White). MoMA has also invited [10 contemporary poets](#) to recharge Lawrence’s history through poetic ekphrasis.

And indeed, the story deserves a fresh telling. “Another of the social causes of the migrants’ leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation,” reads a panel illustrating a chain gang. Then as now, intimidating white officers raise batons, a judge looks down superciliously onto black defendants, black men’s murders go unpunished — all then cause for the migrants’ flight north, cities that once represented solace.

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