

A Library in Harlem

Lesson Plan
Middle School ELL

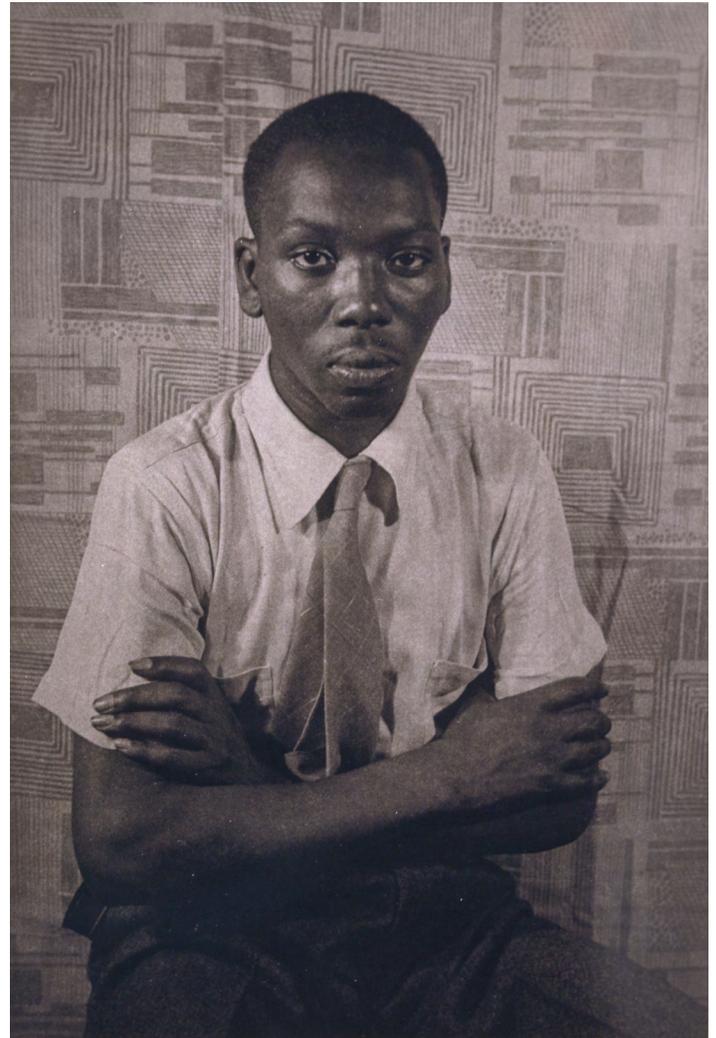


Born in New Jersey in 1917, Jacob Lawrence grew up in Harlem in the 1930s, experiencing both the Great Depression and a historic period of cultural and artistic innovation lead by Black artists and intellectuals, the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem was an active cultural center and and as a teenager, Lawrence became interested in the arts while attending an after-school program, where he drew simple geometric patterns and made diorama-type paintings from corrugated cardboard boxes.

Jacob Lawrence
The Schomburg Library, 1986–87

**STUDIO
MUSEUM
HARLEM**

Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)
Jacob Lawrence, from the portfolio
“O, Write My Name’: American
Portraits, Harlem Heroes,” 1941,
printed 1983
Photogravure
22 x 14 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem;
Museum purchase 1985.2



At the Harlem YMCA, Lawrence met Charles C. Seifert, a Black, self-styled lecturer and historian who had collected a large library of African and African-American literature. Seifert encouraged Lawrence to visit the Schomburg Library in Harlem to read everything he could about African and African-American culture. Eventually Lawrence would spend hours in the library researching legendary Black figures and events to use in his paintings.

As the Great Depression worsened, Lawrence dropped out of high school to work and help support his family. By the late 1930s he took more art lessons at the Harlem Community Art Center and began painting his earliest Harlem scenes. His subject matter would expand to include the challenges endured by African Americans and the lives of important Black figures such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. He also made several series of paintings about crucial events in the African-American experience in the United States, such as the Great Migration from the South to the North.

Lawrence’s paintings express his lifelong concern with human dignity and freedom. His images portray the everyday reality, struggles, successes, and joys of African-American life. His style is representational and combines vivid, often discordant tempera colors with a flattened, fragmented treatment of form and space. Lawrence said, “My pictures express my life and experience. I paint the things I know about and the things I have experienced.” Lawrence died in the year 2000.

Objective

Students will learn about the life of Jacob Lawrence and will discuss the importance of building a supportive community.

Guiding Prompts

After reading the introductory text and looking at the artwork reproduction, think about:

- How reading became important for Jacob Lawrence
- The kind of community Lawrence found in Harlem
- The choice of historical events and figures as subject matter for his paintings

Art Project

Think about a place where you enjoy spending time. How do you remember it? What colors would you use to depict it? Follow the suggested prompts to create your own version of this place.

Materials:

9 × 12-inch paper for sketching
9 × 12-inch Bristol board for final project
Pencil and eraser
Black marker
Colored pencils and markers
Red, blue, and yellow acrylic paint
Small and medium paintbrushes
Paper towels

Procedure:

1. Sketch the place you want to make on the paper with pencil. Add details and review.
2. Place the paper over the Bristol board and trace over it. Press hard enough to leave an imprint on the board.
3. Lift the paper and choose one or two colored pencils or markers to color the background. Then fill the tracing with black marker. Add details if necessary.
4. Choose two different brushes and colors to paint over the rest of your picture. Consider the angle and speed of application.
5. Let your artwork dry.

Vocabulary

Diorama

A scenic, three-dimensional representation in which sculptured figures and lifelike details are displayed, usually in miniature, so as to blend indistinguishably with a realistic painted background.

Drop out

To withdraw from participation or membership, to quit; to withdraw from high school or before completing a course.

Expand

To increase the extent, number, volume, or scope of; to express at length or in greater detail.

Historian

An expert in history; a writer of history, a chronicler

Legendary

Of, relating to, or characteristic of legend or a legend; well known, famous.

Migrate

To move from one country, place, or locality to another.

Struggle

To proceed with difficulty or with great effort; to make strenuous or violent efforts in the face of difficulties or opposition.

Tempera

A type of paint made by mixing colored pigments with a water-based material such as egg yolk.

Treatment

Something (such as a product or technique) used in treating, enhancing, or improving the performance, condition, or appearance of a person or an object.

Opening Questions

After reading the text, answer the following questions:

- Where did Lawrence learn about art and history when he was young?
- What was a message he wanted to convey in his paintings?
- Whom did he chose to paint in his portraits? Why do you think he chose them?
- Describe the artwork: What is happening? What kind of place is this? What kind of colors is Lawrence using? How would you describe the style of the objects and figures in the print?

Match the words on the left with their synonyms on the right

Crucial	experience, suffer, go through
Discordant	broken, fractured, shattered
Endure	bright, colorful, lively
Flattened	aggravate, deteriorate, damage
Fragmented	important, significant, decisive
Lifelong	flat, even, smoothed
Representational	continuing, long-lasting, permanent
Vivid	dissonant, contradictory, different
Worsen	authentic, graphic, figurative

Answer Key

Crucial: important, significant, decisive
Discordant: dissonant, contradictory, different
Endure: experience, suffer, go through
Flattened: flat, even, smoothed
Fragmented: broken, fractured, shattered
Lifelong: continuing, long-lasting, permanent
Representational: authentic, graphic, figurative
Vivid: bright, colorful, lively
Worsen: aggravate, deteriorate, damage

Closer Observation

Take a closer look at the print and spend some time observing and noticing details:

- How would you describe the way the people look?
- What do you imagine a day at this place is like?
- What kinds of books do you think there are in this part of the library?

Reflection

Think about a place or places, other than school, where you go to learn about new things, and then write a paragraph or two about it or them. How did you learn about the place(s)? What do you like about it or them? What is the atmosphere like? Who goes there?

Video

Click on the link below to learn about the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The video was made for its ninetieth anniversary. Consider how it impacted Lawrence when he was going there in the 1930s. Watch the whole video once, and if there are any words you didn't understand watch it again with the closed captioning turned on.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI-_YpgtwgY

If you need more context, look up Harlem, the YMCA, the Great Depression, or the Harlem Renaissance to find out more about these places and this time period.

For additional practice, watch a second video about one of Lawrence's series. Consider the historical events that informed these paintings. Watch the whole video once, and if there are any words you didn't understand watch it again with the closed captioning turned on.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivDIAoQHHJs>

Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Lawrence

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jacob-lawrence-2828>

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1468.html>

<https://studiomuseum.org/article/jacob-lawrence-harlem-icon-and-national-treasure>

<https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/architect>

<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/artist/about-jacob-lawrence>





Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000)
The Schomburg Library, 1986–87
Serigraph

27 3/4 x 21 1/2 in.

The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Altria Group, Inc. 2008.13.4

© 2021 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation,
Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York