



The Libraries Are Appreciated, 1943, by Jacob Lawrence



The Libraries Are Appreciated
1943
Opaque watercolor over graphite on textured cream wove paper
14 3/4 x 21 5/8 inches (37.5 x 54.9 cm)

Jacob Lawrence
American, 1917–2000

Let's Look

- Describe the setting of this scene. Where could this be taking place?
- What do you notice about the colors, lines, and shapes in the painting? What patterns can you find?

Let's Look Again

- How do you think the people in this picture feel about reading? How do you know?

About the Painting

Three people sit at a table, surrounded by colorful books that fill bright green shelves. The books are stacked in different ways, so that their red, yellow, blue, and black spines create patterns with vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines. The people lean forward, absorbed by their reading. Each person reads to themselves, with their eyes focused on their book. However, they sit together and share a common purpose. Tall, arched windows frame the blue sky outside, flooding the room with light and reminding us of the worlds that books open for their readers.

This painting depicts the 124th Street branch of the New York Public Library, located in the heart of Jacob Lawrence's Harlem neighborhood. Libraries were vital centers of learning and culture for the community, and for Lawrence, who visited them frequently and painted them many times. Like his peers, Lawrence learned about African American history and culture in libraries, since it was not taught in public schools at the time. His research deepened his understanding of his own background and also provided rich subject matter for his art.

"My pictures express my life and experiences. I paint the things I know about and the things I have experienced." — Jacob Lawrence

The Libraries Are Appreciated is the twenty-eighth image in a group of thirty called the *Harlem Series*. The paintings show everyday life in Harlem, from its busy streets filled with buildings and billboards, to people enjoying leisure activities such as dancing, playing games, and shooting pool, to the harsh realities of poverty and prejudice. The country's lingering economic depression caused hardship for many Americans, but Harlem's black citizens also faced racial discrimination in housing, city services, and employment. Lawrence captured both the joys and the struggles of this era. He used bold, primary colors, abstracted shapes, and striking compositions to tell these stories in a clear and captivating way.

Many of the people in Lawrence's paintings are anonymous, which allowed his art to resonate with African Americans living all across the country. His stories were their stories. As he explained, "Most of my work depicts events from the many Harlems that exist throughout the United States. This is my genre. My surroundings. The people I know . . . the happiness, tragedies, and the sorrows of mankind as realized in the teeming black ghetto."

About the Artist

Acclaimed as a painter, storyteller, and educator, Jacob Lawrence spent his career interpreting the lives of African Americans. Like many southern black citizens, his parents moved to the northern United States in the beginning of the twentieth century, hoping to find better jobs and racial equality. Lawrence grew up in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York, where his family settled when he was thirteen. Despite widespread poverty in Harlem, the neighborhood abounded with creativity—jazz musicians, writers, and artists all contributed to a lively cultural environment. As a teenager, Lawrence took art classes in an after-school program and later at the Harlem Art Workshop. He also studied original works of art, often walking sixty blocks to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Lawrence's artistic style was influenced by his vibrant Harlem community. As he described, "All these people on the street, various colors, so much pattern, so much movement, so much color, so much vitality, so much energy." He focused on the black working class as well as important figures and narratives from American history. He often portrayed these stories through series of paintings, such as *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1939), *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1940), and *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), which brought him professional success at the early age of twenty-three. Throughout his long career, he gave voice to generations of African Americans and preserved their stories with beauty, power, and grace.



Jacob Lawrence, July 31, 1941, by Carl Van Vechten

Telling Our Nation's Stories

Of all the authors whose books Lawrence discovered at the library, one of the most influential for him was W.E.B. Du Bois. A scholar and civil rights activist, Du Bois argued that African Americans could only succeed if they demanded equal education, fought for their right to vote, and spoke out against social injustice. Like Lawrence, Du Bois recognized the absence of African American stories from the history books and knew that must change. As Lawrence said, "I do not look upon the story of Blacks in America as a separate experience to the American culture but as part of the American heritage and experience as a whole."

Lawrence's iconic paintings proclaimed the stories of African Americans as significant, inspiring, and integral to the country's history. He painted the working class persevering through adversities and participating in civic and political life. In *The Libraries Are Appreciated*, people take their education into their own hands. Knowledge is power. In *The 1920s: The Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots* (right), citizens make their voices heard by voting. People of all ages are present: a mother holds her baby, and an elderly man supports himself with a cane. Women, who gained the vote in 1920, account for nearly half of the figures. Several people read the newspaper while they wait in line, keeping informed about current events. In both pictures, black Americans actively pursue a brighter future for themselves, their families, and the wider community.

In 1905, Du Bois said, "Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States." What do you think he meant? Why do you think Lawrence and Du Bois felt that education and political engagement were so important for the black community?

How do these paintings reflect these ideas? How do they relate to our lives today?

Learn More

These picture books offer more information about Jacob Lawrence:

- Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, A Young Artist in Harlem* by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts
- The Great Migration: An American Story* by Jacob Lawrence
- Kid Artists: True Tales of Childhood from Creative Legends* by David Stabler



The 1920s: The Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots, 1974, by Jacob Lawrence

Image credits (left to right): Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Louis E. Stern Collection, 1963-181-40 © 2014 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation; Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gift of John Mark Lutz, 1965-86-6198; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gift of Lorillard, 1976-38-8 © 2014 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This painting is featured in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's exhibition, *Modern Times: American Art 1910-1950* (April 18–September 3, 2018). The show explores how artists responded to the great social, artistic, and technological changes of their time.

Modern Times: American Art 1910-1950 has been made possible by The Pew Charitable Trusts, The M. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, The Amerenberg Foundation Fund for Major Exhibitions, The Kathleen C. and John J.F. Sherrerd Fund for Exhibitions, Lyn M. Ross, Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Exhibition Fund, The Laura and William C. Buck Endowment for Exhibitions, Leslie Miller and Richard Worley, and two anonymous donors.

Exhibition-related education programming was generously supported by the Center for American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

(Credits as of March 15, 2018)

0418-11385