

Jacob Lawrence

The Glory of Expression

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Jacob Lawrence: The Glory of Expression is a documentary about the life and work of one of America's greatest painters. He was the first African-American to be represented by a New York gallery. His work mirrors the growing recognition and appreciation of the role of African Americans in the history of the United States. In his epic series paintings, he depicts the struggles of his people in the stories of Frederick Douglass, Harriett Tubman and The Great Migration. His personal story also chronicles his development as an artist from the end of the Harlem Renaissance, to the Works Progress Administration, the Harlem Art Center and his numerous fellowships. His life is a lesson on the importance of motivation and determination for success. In the film students will see Lawrence painting, observe his unique style and hear about what inspired and influenced him.

TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and his accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

BIOGRAPHY

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the eldest child of Jacob and Rosa Lee Lawrence. His father worked as a railroad cook and in 1919 moved his family to Easton, PA where he sought work as a coal-miner. Lawrence's parents separated when he was 7 and in 1924, his mother moved her children first to Philadelphia and then to Harlem when Jacob was 12 years old. He enrolled in Public School 89 and at the Utopia Children's Center, a settlement house that provided an after-school program in arts and crafts for Harlem children. The center was operated at that time by another well-known African American painter, Charles Alston, who recognized Lawrence's talents.

Lawrence had to drop out of high school to help support his family. Lawrence's mother lost her job during the Depression and had to go on welfare. He enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps, and was sent to upstate New York to plant trees, drain swamps and build dams. When he returned to Harlem, he became associated with the Harlem Community Art Center directed by African American sculptor Augusta Savage. During this time he was encouraged to visit the Schomburg Library in Harlem to read everything he could about African and African-American culture and also to visit the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of African art in 1935.

Augusta Savage helped him get assigned to the Work Progress Administration as a painter. His first subject was Toussaint L'Ouverture, the black revolutionary and founder of the Republic of Haiti. Lawrence felt that a single painting would not depict L'Ouverture's numerous achievements and decided to produce a series. This led to his most well-known works, series paintings on The Life of Frederick Douglass (40 panels) 1938; The Life of Harriett Tubman , (31 panels) 1939; The Migration of the Negro , (60 panels) 1940--41 and several others. The Migration Series made him the first African American artist to be represented by a major gallery and he was only 24 years old!

He received numerous scholarships and Rosenwald grants for several years which enabled him to continue his work. During the late 1940s Lawrence was the most celebrated African American painter in America. However, he was somewhat overwhelmed by his own success and became so depressed he voluntarily entered a hospital for treatment. This became the subject of his Hospital Series.

He received numerous awards and taught at several well-known universities, most recently at the University of Washington in Seattle.

His wife Gwendolyn Knight, a fellow artist, was his mentor and a major factor in Lawrence 's career.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for Jacob Lawrence's self-portrait. How is it like a child's drawing?
- Watch for how he creates works of art, from the original idea to planning the overall composition.
- Watch for how scenes of New York and city life inspired a lifelong theme.
- Watch for how Lawrence works in large blocks of color and the materials he uses.
- Watch for how his mother's interest in design motivated him.
- Watch for how historical events influenced his life and work.
- Watch for how Jacob Lawrence says the community was a role model for him.
- Watch for how he learned to be an artist.
- Watch for works by other artists, e.g. Goya, Grosz and Orozco and how they compare to Jacob Lawrence.
- Watch for examples of exaggeration in Lawrence's work.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Jacob Lawrence and his and her work.*

- ? What does Jacob Lawrence say about the creative process?
- ? What does Lawrence think about the way American history has been written?
- ? What is a theme of Jacob Lawrence's work?
- ? What is the WPA? How did it help Jacob Lawrence and other artists?
- ? Why is Jacob Lawrence considered a famous artist?
- ? How did fellowships help Jacob Lawrence?
- ? What is Expressionism? Why did Jacob Lawrence think it described his work?
- ? Where did Jacob Lawrence get his ideas for making art?
- ? What kind of slavery does Jacob Lawrence say we have today? Do you agree? What other kinds of slavery are there in the world?
- ? What can you learn from Jacob Lawrence?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Jacob Lawrence's work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. Experiment with color and texture like Jacob Lawrence. Use tempera and paint some stripes of paint on the paper. Paint over some of the stripes with a darker color. What happens? Paint over some stripes very lightly. What happens? Vary the brush strokes and colors to create different kinds of textures.
2. Geometric patterns are a characteristic of Lawrence's work. What do they add to his paintings? Would they look the same without them?

Try creating three different patterns using colored markers. Draw a figure and use patterns in his/her clothing for an interesting effect.

3. Think about Lawrence' s series of paintings he calls *the Builders*. Make a series about other people who work, e.g. your family cooking, cleaning, caring for children, mowing the lawn; storekeepers; police, firefighters, repair crews. Work by yourself or with a group of classmates making pencil sketches first and then working in markers and tempera paint.

4. Do a study of hands or feet. Ask classmates for permission to draw their hands using charcoal or pencil. Draw the hands or feet from different angles and doing different things. Choose one to exaggerate for effect.

5. What important historical event or heroic figures fascinate you? Find out as much as you can about your topic and think about how to translate it into a series of artworks. Create your own historical series, mural, book or multi media work based on this subject.

6. Could a Works Progress Administration be beneficial to people today? Why or why not? Write a story about the WPA, reviewing its accomplishments, and create a persuasive argument about the relevance of the WPA today.

7. Visit an art gallery or museum in your community. Find one object or display that interests you the most, and draw a quick sketch of it to share with members of the class. If a museum or gallery is not available, visit one of the many museum sites on the Internet.

8. One of the Jacob Lawrence's favorite subjects was the street scene. Review the ones you saw on the video. Create your own street scene. Will it be a real street or one you imagine? Think about people, cars, stores, houses and other objects that you will include. What time of day will it be? What is happening? Write a third person description of your street scene.

9. Harriett Tubman was recognized as a great heroine by Jacob Lawrence when he made her the subject of a series. Write a letter to Harriett Tubman telling her what has happened concerning slavery and human rights since she died.

10. Compare the work of George Grosz and Jacob Lawrence. How are they alike? How are they different? Discuss the influences on each artist, their countries, what was happening at the time as well as their Expressionist style.

VIDEO SERIES

Jacob Lawrence: The Glory of Expression, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about *Jacob Lawrence: The Glory of Expression* and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Productions, tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

This video study guide is by Nancy Roucher, an arts education consultant, who specializes in interdisciplinary curriculum. She lives in Sarasota, Florida, and can be reached at nancyhr@home.com or at 941-349-3439.