

Jacob Armstead Lawrence

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.