

Jacob Lawrence

Four works from The Migration Series. 1940-41

Illustrated on page 273

Jacob Lawrence, *The Great Migration*, 1992, n.p.

This is the story of an exodus of African-Americans who left their homes and farms in the South around the time of World War I and traveled to northern industrial cities in search of better lives. It was a momentous journey. Their movement resulted in one of the biggest population shifts in the history of the United States, and the migration is still going on for many people today.

The great migration is a part of my life. I grew up knowing about people on the move from the time I could understand what words meant. There was always talk in my house of other families arriving from the South. My family was part of the first big wave of migration, which occurred between the years 1916 and 1919. . . .

I arrived in New York City's Harlem community in 1930, when I was thirteen years of age. . . . After school I went to an arts-and-crafts program at the Utopia Children's House, which my mother enrolled me in to keep me busy while she was at work. I decided then that I wanted to be an artist. . . .

Eventually, teachers, friends, even actors on the street corners helped me to understand how my own experiences fit into a much larger story—the history of African-Americans in this country. It seemed almost inevitable that I would tell this story in my art. I spent many hours at the Schomburg Library in Harlem reading books about the great migration, and I took notes. Soon my research gave me the images I needed to tell the story of the great migration. Many of the images were new for me—along with my street scenes, I would now need to paint rural landscapes, images of violence,

and interiors, like the inside of a schoolroom.

I started the Migration series in 1940, when I was twenty-two years old, and finished it one year later. I can still remember all the panels spread out in my studio on tables made from boards and sawhorses. My wife, Gwen, helped me to prepare the surfaces. I painted the panels all at once, color by color, so they share the same palette. I had made some preparatory sketches that provided me with general outlines, but I worked out the details of the pictures as I painted them. There are sixty panels in the series, and since I wanted them to tell a story, I gave each one a number and painted it directly onto its frame.

To me, migration means movement. While I was painting, I thought about trains and people walking to the stations. I thought about field hands leaving their farms to become factory workers, and about the families that sometimes got left behind. The choices made were hard ones, so I wanted to show what made the people get on those northbound trains. I also wanted to show just what it cost to ride them. Uprooting yourself from one way of life to make your way in another involves conflict and struggle. But out of the struggle comes a kind of power, and even beauty. I tried to convey this in the rhythm of the pictures, and in the repetition of certain images.