



Panel No. 1 1941 *During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans.* tempera on masonite, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Jacob Lawrence MIGRATION SERIES

an exhibition organized and circulated by
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

The Museum of Modern Art
January 12–April 11, 1995

For Immediate Release

An exhibition of *The Migration Series* (1940-41) by American artist Jacob Lawrence (b. 1917), on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 12 to April 11, 1995, brings together the entire, sixty-panel work for the first time in more than twenty years. Owned jointly by The Museum of Modern Art and The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., this epic series dramatically depicts the post-World War I migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the industrial North. **JACOB LAWRENCE: THE MIGRATION SERIES** is unique in its examination of the artist's vivid images and inventive narrative technique, in the context of both the 1940s and the present.

This exhibition and its national tour are organized by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., and sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc. Additional major funding has been provided by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Jacob Lawrence's work during the last five decades has powerfully expressed the African-American experience. As a modern-day *griot*, or storyteller, his words and images convey metaphors of injustice, strife, change, hope, and beauty. Created on the eve of World War II, as American

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industry once again sought black labor, *The Migration Series* is also a cautionary tale, citing disappointments of the recent past and inspiring new hope for the future.

"The Museum is privileged and proud to have in its collection half of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*," states Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art. "At a time when the exploration of racial identity and a commitment to social analysis are often trumpeted as innovative forces in the work of younger artists, this important body of work points up Mr. Lawrence's pioneering role and reminds us that such engaged creativity has deep roots in earlier twentieth-century art."

"Our sponsorship of this exhibition flows from our desire to celebrate Lawrence's unique artistic achievement and his contribution to our American heritage," remarked George L. Knox III, Vice President, Corporate Public Affairs, Philip Morris Companies Inc. "While every age will find its own truth in Lawrence's work, it has special resonance today, as a new generation of Americans strives to create a better life for themselves and their families."

JACOB LAWRENCE: THE MIGRATION SERIES is comprised of sixty tempera paintings on eighteen-by-twelve-inch composite board. Each work is accompanied by a descriptive caption, revised by the artist for this exhibition. In addition, the exhibition features interpretive materials, including installation photographs from Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery exhibition where the series was first shown in New York in 1941, as well as a new, twelve-minute video featuring an interview with the artist.

Derived from Synthetic Cubism, *The Migration Series* is marked by a distinctive style; abstracted, expressive figures with masklike faces act out causes and consequences in stagelike spaces. A consistent palette of blue-green, orange, yellow, and gray-brown ensure the visual integrity of the whole. The first half of the series illustrates the economic hardships and social injustices of the South; the second half describes the life the migrants found when they reached the North.

The Migration Series begins and ends with images of the train station (panels 1, 60); the action simulating a train journey unfolds in progression from painting to painting with clear stopping points and pauses along the way. Sequences of adversity and despair alternate with images of hope and anticipation: for example, reading letters from relatives who had already moved North (panel 33) and baggage piled high on a train platform as people of all ages await passage to a new life (panels 32, 39).

After portraying the initial exhilaration of arrival, Lawrence shows the crowded, squalid conditions of northern labor camps (panel 46) and urban slums (panels 47, 48). He confronts the migrants' disillusionment with a distinctive blend of realism and abstraction. Flames burst from faceless brown tenements, telling the effects of overcrowding and race riots (panel 51). One moment the ground rises up on a diagonal, echoing the reach of a white man wielding a club (panel 50); then it widens like a stage where prone and struggling figures, black and white, cast violent silhouettes (panel 52).

Lawrence concludes the narrative by focusing on the newly formed African-American communities of the North. He contrasts images of established, well-to-do residents dressed in top hat and furs (panel 53) with newcomers worshipping in a storefront church (panel 54). These are not portraits in the traditional sense, but metaphors for a community with

strengths, foibles, and possibilities provided by education, the vote, and perseverance. The series ends as it began, "And the migrants kept coming."

A child of the Depression, Jacob Lawrence was schooled primarily in Harlem. In 1932 he began taking classes at the 135th Street Branch Library which housed the Schomburg Collection of Negro History, Literature, and Prints. Lawrence studied with Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn in 1934 at workshops sponsored by the government through the Work Projects Administration (WPA). In 1936 he won a scholarship to the American Artists School, New York, where he studied for two years with such artists as Harry Gottlieb, Louis Lozowick, and Anton Refregier.

Lawrence's first narrative cycle, completed in 1938, chronicled the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the liberator of Haiti. In 1939 he completed a thirty-two-panel narrative on Frederick Douglass, and in 1940, a thirty-one-panel narrative on Harriet Tubman. Ironically, Lawrence had never visited the South when he painted *The Migration Series*; instead, he drew inspiration from research and his own experiences among southern migrants in the North.

Twenty-six panels of the *The Migration of the Negro* (Lawrence's original title) were published in the November 1941 issue of *Fortune* magazine, and all sixty panels were exhibited the same year at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. The series was divided by even and odd numbers in 1942 by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Founding Director of The Museum of Modern Art, and Duncan Phillips, founder of The Phillips Collection; the even panels were purchased by Mrs. David M. Levy for The Museum of Modern Art. It was shown around the country in a circulating exhibition from 1942 to 1944, and at The Museum of Modern Art in 1944 and again in 1971.

JACOB LAWRENCE: THE MIGRATION SERIES has been organized and circulated by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., where it opened in September 1993 before traveling to Milwaukee, Portland, Birmingham, and St. Louis. It has been coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by Laura Rosenstock, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. Project Director for the exhibition is Elizabeth Hutton Turner, Associate Curator, The Phillips Collection. A consulting panel of cultural and art historians include Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W.E.B. du Bois Professor of the Humanities and Chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department, Harvard University; Richard J. Powell, Associate Professor of Art History, Duke University; Spencer R. Crew, Social/Cultural Historian, Smithsonian Institution; Lonnie G. Bunch III, Assistant Director for Curatorial Affairs, National Museum of American History; Deborah Willis, Curator, African American Museum, Smithsonian Institution; Diane Tepfer, Assistant Curator, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress; and Patricia Hills, Professor of Art History, Boston University.

After its New York showing, **JACOB LAWRENCE: THE MIGRATION SERIES** travels to the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (April 25 - June 25, 1995), The Denver Art Museum (July 15 - September 10, 1995), and the Chicago Historical Society (September 22 - November 26, 1995).

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Berlinart: 1961-1987 (1987); *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1978); and *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (1978). Philip Morris Companies Inc. has five principal operating companies: Kraft General Foods, Inc.; Miller Brewing Company; Philip Morris U.S.A.; Philip Morris International Inc.; and Philip Morris Capital Corporation.

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PUBLICATIONS

Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series, edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner. 174 pages with 116 illustrations, 60 in color. Published by The Rappahannock Press, Washington, D.C., in association with The Phillips Collection. Paperbound, \$25.00; available in The MoMA Book Store.

The Great Migration: An American Story, Paintings by Jacob Lawrence. An illustrated book for young people. 48 pages with 60 color illustrations. Copublished by The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; and HarperCollins Publishers, New York. Clothbound, \$22.00; available in The MoMA Book Store.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact Alexandra Partow, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 212/708-9756.

For Philip Morris Companies Inc., contact Pamela Johnson or Kris Moran, Serino Coyne, Inc., 212/626-2700.