

# African-American abstract expressionist celebrated

Fred B. Adelson, For the Courier-Post 5:33 p.m. EST January 14, 2016



(Photo: L. Ann and Jonathan P. Binstock © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Art historians love to resurrect under-appreciated artists, especially when the shroud of racial bias is lifted.

Over the past few years, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has assumed an important role in mounting exciting shows that offer a more inclusive look at American modernism.

“Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis” is a truly revelatory exhibition devoted to an African-American artist who was involved with the emergent Abstract Expressionist scene and has been called a “founding father of the New York School.”

Yet Norman Lewis (1909-1979) has become one of the most invisible of the post-World War II American painters, even though he had exhibited with such celebrated contemporaries as Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Helen Frankenthaler.

Significantly, in 1950, as the only black participant, he joined many of these seminal figures in the now-historic round table discussions about abstraction and other contemporary artistic issues that took place at Studio 35 in lower Manhattan.

Even around 1955 at the height of Lewis's career, a San Francisco collector asked: “Why in hell aren't you famous?”

Given his extensive exhibition record of seven solo and 132 group shows, positive reviews by leading New York art critics and numerous prestigious awards, it is hard to fathom why Lewis has been so surprisingly overlooked. He remains an unfamiliar name to most museumgoers.



Norman Lewis' untitled work, known as 'Jazz Club,' was created in 1945 in oils and sand on canvas. (Photo: Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Along with “Procession,” which is sensitively installed in the Hamilton Building at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, “Stone and Metal: Lithographs and Etchings by Norman Lewis” next door at the historic landmark building is an intimate yet engaging look at his printmaking from the 1930s to the mid-1970s.

Both shows were organized by Ruth Fine, who recently retired as curator of special projects in modern art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington after spending more than 20 years as curator of prints and drawings there. On view through April 3, the celebratory exhibits provide a chronological look at Lewis' paintings, drawings and prints, as well as a small sample of early sculptures over a career that lasted more than four decades. Together they comprise the “first comprehensive museum retrospective” since his death over 36 years ago.

Lewis' creative achievement is evidenced by nearly 100 paintings and drawings in “Procession.” Concurrently, “Stone and Metal” displays selected

examples of more than two-thirds of his print production. The shows reveal the full extent of Lewis as both painter and print-maker with significant loans from numerous public and private collections as well as key examples from the artist's estate, now based in Newark. (Though Camille and Bill Cosby have a notable collection of African-American art and own an early Lewis oil portrait, it wasn't loaned to the exhibit; there are, however, works from the collection of Ed Bradley, the late CBS News "60 Minutes" journalist).

A smaller version of "Procession" will travel to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, and finally end its run at the Chicago Cultural Center next January.



**Norman Lewis' "Hep Cats" is a 1943 oil on canvas work.** (Photo: Khephra Burns and Susan L. Taylor © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

During a recent visit to the Academy, Fine scanned a gallery with his mature abstract paintings and admitted: "I have never done a show with such serious color on the walls. He is a fabulous painter." Indeed, Lewis was admired as "a great colorist" by his contemporaries. Lewis, who came of age during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, deserves this national reexamination to reclaim his place in the canon of the New York School.

Referring to his own work as "visual poetry," Lewis achieved "an activity of discovery — emotional, intellectual, and technical — not only for the artist but for those who view his work."

"Procession" is arranged in six sections: in the city; visual sound; rhythm of nature; ritual; civil rights; and summation.

Even though Lewis produced about 2,000 paintings and around 400 works on paper, Fine concedes, "We don't know him."

The guest curator maintains that his drawings are "as important as the paintings on canvas," revealing a key interrelationship reinforced by the artist's deliberate respect for a border, whether it is the edge of a sheet of

paper or fabric on which he is painting.



**'Migrating Birds,' 1953 is an oil on canvas work by Norman Lewis.** (Photo: Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

At the entrance to "Procession," the viewer is greeted by a charmingly whimsical painted sculptural self-portrait wearing striped shirt, wool herringbone pants and straw boater hat. This figure from the 1940s brings together the artist's representational skills as well as a variety of multicultural influences that impacted his formative years.

After his early figurative and illustrative images, like "The Wanderer (Johnny)," that address the economic struggles of the urban poor during the Depression, he strove to move away from social realism to become an artist in the broadest sense of its meaning.

Lewis had said, "The content of truly creative work must be inherently aesthetic or the work becomes merely another form of illustration." His art became increasingly more abstract starting in the mid-1940s with a multi-media painting whose title isn't known but is possibly "Jazz Club," revealing an assimilation of Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneer of nonobjective imagery.

Though Lewis doesn't seem to have had formal art school training, he did make weekly visits to the Museum of Modern Art and was very familiar with its unrivaled collection of European contemporary art that served as a vital instructional resource for his development. In such key mature works as "Jazz Musicians," "Migrating Birds" or "Exodus," Lewis' calligraphy of drawn lines seems like pictographs to suggest figural references. At the same time, his paint surfaces of varied textures and patterns that include a combing effect enhance the visual experience.

For Lewis, subtleties are evident in the details.

Interestingly, "Migrating Birds" dates from 1953 and was seen two years later at the Carnegie International, a prestigious contemporary art exhibit in Pittsburgh. By ballot, visitors chose the canvas as the most popular work on view, and Lewis was given an award of \$200 for his Asian-looking curvilinear design of white-abstracted birds. Though the artist enjoyed the outdoors as an avid fisherman, it is possible that the subject of birds and their migratory flight may metaphorically suggest the movement of African-Americans from the South to the North, which considerably increased New York's black population after the Depression.



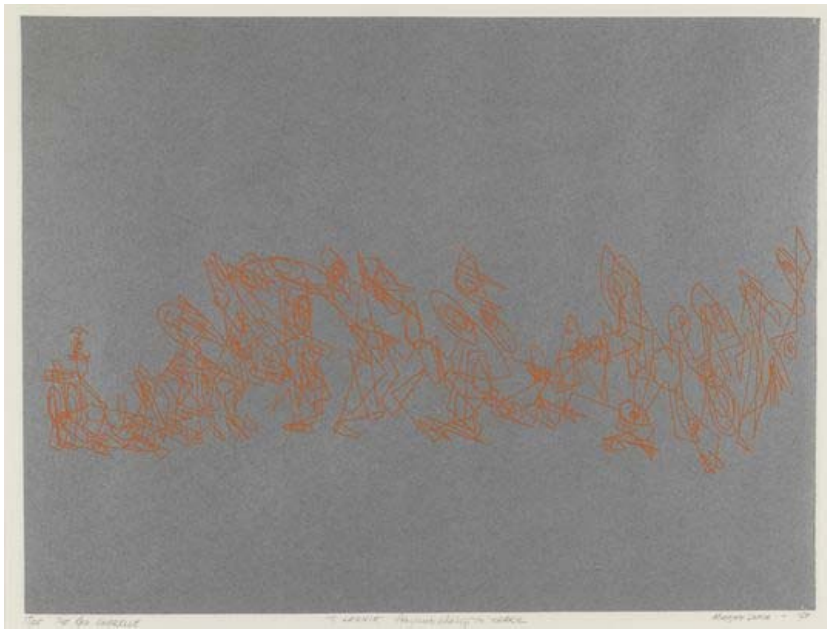
**This untitled Norman Lewis work, called 'Barker and Crowd aka Torch' was created circa 1960. It is an oil on canvas work. (Photo: Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)**

Between 1969 and 1972, Lewis completed 10 large canvases (72 by 89 inches); Fine proudly pointed out that eight of them are on view in this show.

She characterized these works as the "absolute height of his powers." The luminously colored canvases, like "Afternoon," "Confrontation," or "Part Vision," are exhilaratingly beautiful and reveal paint applications that vary from thinly applied to quite thick. Lewis said, "I feel color can evoke a great deal of visual excitement." There is an exuberance of spirit that may come out of the landmark civil rights legislation resulting from the Lyndon B. Johnson administration.

When asked why Lewis has been so forgotten, Fine recites a list of probable factors, beginning with race. Then she goes on to mention that his gentle marks contrast with the bravura gestural strokes that typically characterize Abstract Expressionism. Finally, she acknowledges that he has no single signature image.

Also, in 1964, Lewis left the Willard Gallery that had been presenting his work since 1946; the relationship had carried him through the key years of Abstract Expressionism when nonrepresentational art was a hard sell in America. His career undoubtedly suffered without a strong New York gallery affiliation.



**'The Red Umbrella' is a 1972 etching in orange intaglio with gray relief on off-white wove paper** (Photo: The Studio Museum in Harlem © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Finally, in 1977, Lewis confidently wrote Leo Castelli, the celebrated international art dealer, asking for assistance and inviting him to visit his studio: "I have talent. ... Come to see and judge for yourself. ... I need a gallery and could be an asset to your gallery!" This letter and other archival materials are on display in several vitrines placed throughout the exhibition, giving the show added personality.

During a career of more than 40 years, Lewis turned from his initial realist images of urban subjects to a deeper avant-garde sensibility that dispensed with an overt narrative. He understood art could stand on its own, saying, "I don't believe there is any such thing as black art."

"There are artists who are black making art," he added.

As an innovative painter and printmaker who grasped the universal aesthetic of formal abstractionism, Lewis declared with honest conviction: "I wanted to be above criticism ... so my work didn't have to be discussed in terms of the fact that I'm black."

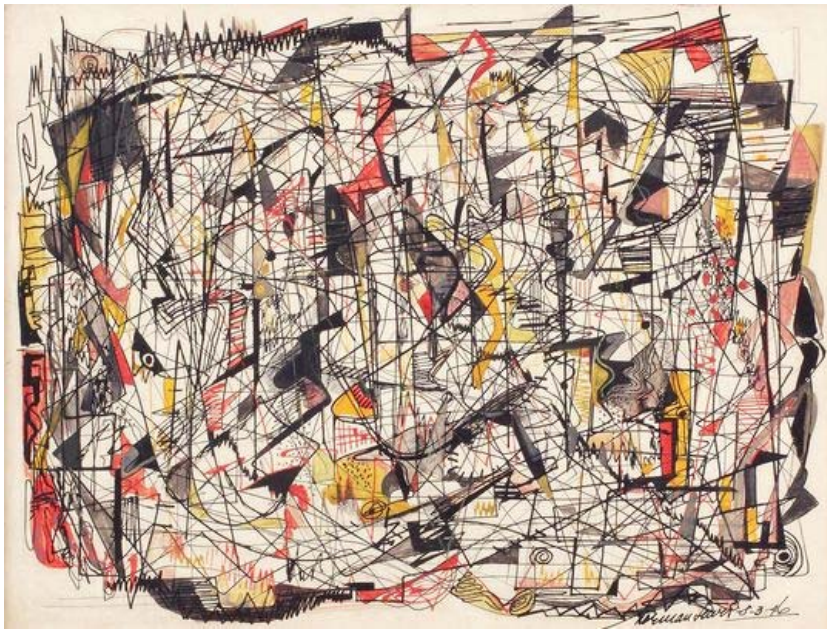
Nonetheless, just three years before his death, Lewis lamented: "None of the prejudice against black artists has abated. We still haven't learned to see art as we listen to music. "

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**Norman Lewis, 'Roller Coaster,' is a 1946 Opaque watercolor, ink, and crayon on board creation.** (Photo: Private Collection; Courtesy of Bill Hodges Gallery © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

### If you go

"Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis/Stone and Metal: Lithographs and Etchings by Norman Lewis,' Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 118-128 North Broad S., Philadelphia. Call (215) 972-7600. Hours: Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.; Wednesday, 10 a.m - 9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Closed Mondays and legal holiday Adults: \$15 | Seniors (60+): \$12; Students (with ID): \$12 | Youth (13-18): \$8 ; children 12 & under: free; military personnel (not groups): free

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