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# Black Art History: Jacob Lawrence’s Narrative Series About Black Perseverance and American Rebellion Inspired a Cache of Children’s Books

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Feb 28, 2019 · 11:58 pm

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*"The Last Journey," No. 17 from the series Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land (1967) by Jacob Lawrence*

OVER THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER, **Jacob Lawrence** (1917-2000) documented the African American experience and life in Harlem. He also tackled key moments in American history through multi-panel series. A sweeping look at the history of the United States, his series Struggle...From the History of the American People (1954-56), acknowledged all of the nation’s people. His earlier War Series (1946-47) captured his firsthand experience serving in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II.

Lawrence is best known for several series that focus on black perseverance and American resistance. These narratives about historic figures Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North, were produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s, before his military service.

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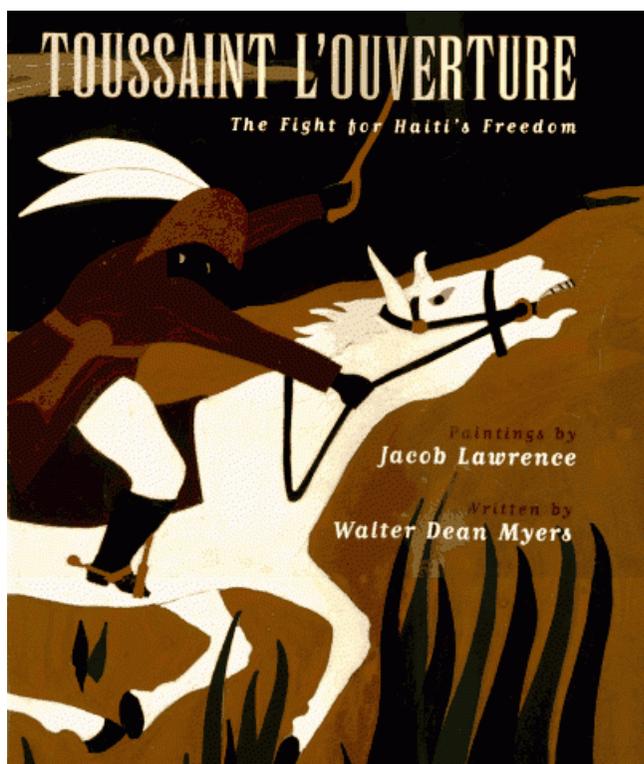
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“American history has always been one of my favorite subjects.”  
— Jacob Lawrence

The Harlem-born artist collaborated on children’s books about four of these series. “Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land” was first published in 1968. The other volumes debuted much later, between 1993 and 1996. In his introduction to the book “[Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land](#),” Lawrence shared his fascination with history and how black women have influenced his life and work.

“American history has always been one of my favorite subjects. Given the opportunity to select a subject from American history, I chose to do a number of paintings in tribute to Harriet Tubman, a most remarkable woman, and in so doing also to pay tribute and honor to my late mother, Rosalee, and to my wife, Gwen,” he wrote in the 1993 edition of the book.

“These three women have contributed much to making it possible for me to develop, to live, to grow, and to fully appreciate the challenges and the beauty of life in general; and to express through the elements of color, line, shape, and value, the wisdom of an almighty God.”



“[Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom](#),” by Walter Dean Myers, with illustrations by Jacob Lawrence (Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 40 pages). | Published Oct. 1, 1996

## Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom

The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture (1936-38) was the first multi-panel project produced by Lawrence. The artist was only 21-years-old at the time. The series of 41 tempura painting documents the life, leadership, and legacy of Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803), the Haitian revolutionary. The original paintings are in the collection of The Amistad Research Center, at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Published in 1996, “[Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom](#)” is a collaboration between Lawrence and celebrated children’s book author Walter Dean Myers (1937-2014). In the introduction to the book, Lawrence recalls the compelling stories he heard from Harlem street orators about black history figures such as L'Ouverture.

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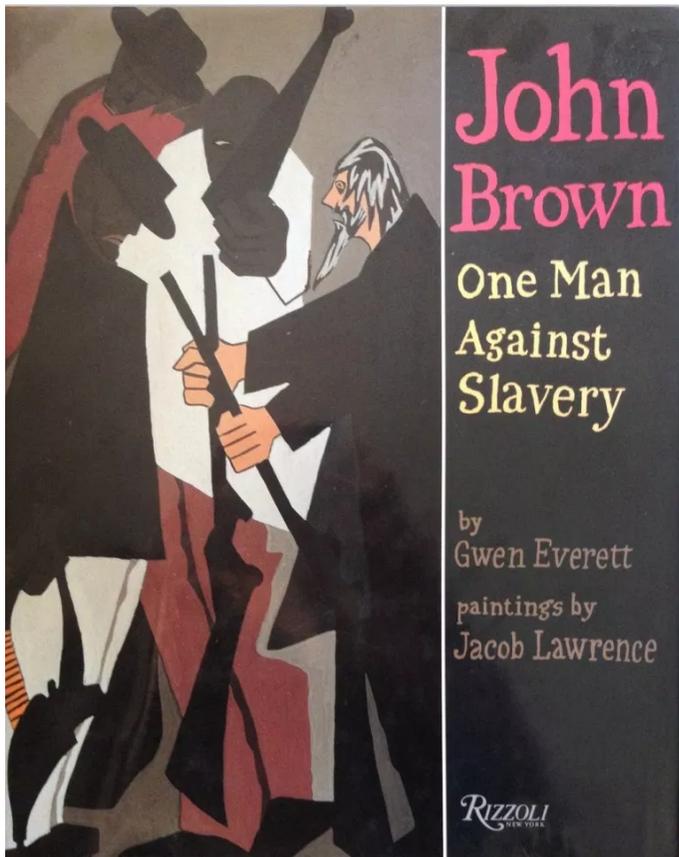
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LATEST NEWS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ART: LAUREN HALSEY, KAPWANI KIWANGA, CHRISTINA QUARLES WIN ARTIST AWARDS & MORE

"These were heroes to whom I could relate. I was inspired and motivated to tell these stories in paint—in a serious form. My first subject was Toussaint L'Ouverture, a very brave and brilliant leader who defeated those who would enslave him, and in so doing deny him and others equality, justice, and fraternity," Lawrence wrote. "In winning the battle for Haiti's freedom, Toussaint L'Ouverture joined the ranks of those who have fought and contributed much to our continuous struggle for liberty."



*"John Brown: One Man Against Slavery," by Gwen Everett, with illustrations by Jacob Lawrence (Rizzoli, 32 pages). | Published April 15, 1993*

## John Brown: One Man Against Slavery

In 1859, abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859) raided Harpers Ferry in Virginia, an attempt to take over the U.S. arsenal and lead an armed slave revolt. Lawrence documented Brown's actions in his "The Legend of John Brown" series. Executed in 1941 in 22 parts, the original gouache on white wove paper works are in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

Paintings from Lawrence's Brown series illustrate "John Brown: One Man Against Slavery," by Gwen Everett. When the 1993 book was published, Everett was the collections research coordinator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art (now called the American Art Museum). Today, she is the associate dean of the Division of Fine Arts at Howard University. Everett wrote the book from the perspective of Brown's daughter Annie. She opens the volume with the following passage:

"We listened carefully to Father's reasons for wanting to end slavery. None of us questioned his sincerity, for we knew he believed God created everyone equal, regardless of skin color. He taught us as his father taught him: To own another person as property—like furniture or cattle—is a sin. When Father was twelve years old, he witnessed the cruel treatment of black men, women, and children held in bondage and he vowed, then and there, that one day he would put an end to the inhumanity."



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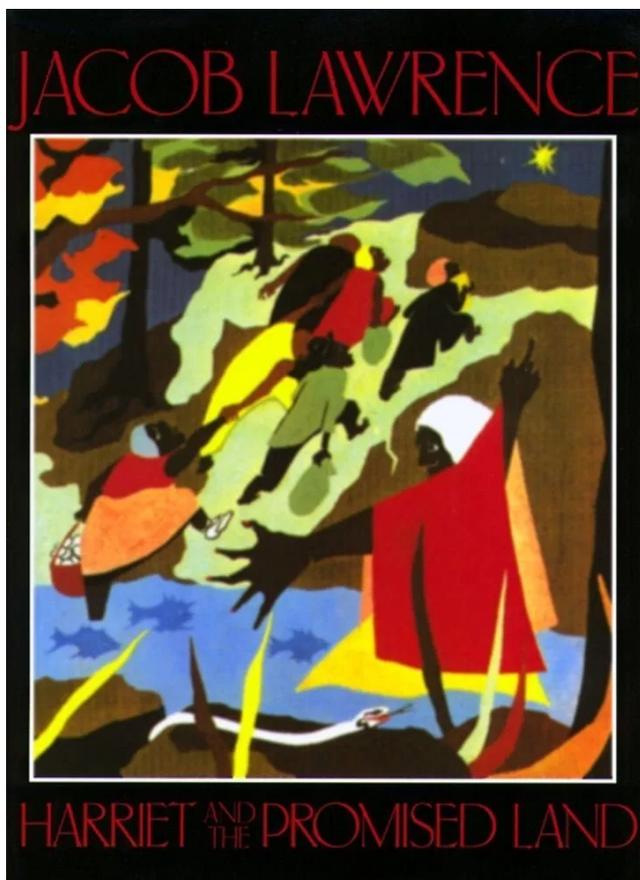


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The book includes two afterwords, one by Dennis E. Frye, chief historian of Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. The other by Ellen Sharp, graphic arts curator at DIA. Sharp cites the exposure to black history that accompanied Lawrence's early art training.

"In 1930, when Lawrence was thirteen and living in New York, his mother enrolled him in after-school art class at Utopia House. At the same time, he attended meetings of a Negro history club at the Harlem YMCA," Sharp wrote. "Lawrence has stated, 'It was in a Negro history club and our nearly all black school that I first heard the stories of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and John Brown along with many others...and these stories were told in a very dramatic way.'"



*"Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land," text and illustrations by Jacob Lawrence (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 40 pages). | Reissue Edition, Published Oct. 1, 1993*

## Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land

The collection of the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Va., includes The Life of Harriet Tubman series by Lawrence. Composed of 31 casein tempera on hardboard panels, the series was produced in 1941.

First published a half century ago (1968) with a yellow dust jacket, the children's book "Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land" was re-released with a black one in 1993. Both the illustrations and the text in the book are by Lawrence, who dedicated the volume "To the courageous women of America."

In the introduction to the 1993 edition, the artist recounts when he first heard about Harriet Tubman's pioneering legacy. "I recall learning of Harriet Tubman from my mother and from the many schoolteachers and librarians within New York's Harlem community with whom I had the opportunity of coming in contact when I was a very young boy of about five or six years of age," Lawrence wrote. "I will always remember the drama and exploits of Harriet."

The image at the top of this page, "The Last Journey, No. 17" (1967), appears on the last spread in the book, accompanied by the following lines in verse: "The chariot was sent/By the Lord's Own Hand,/And Harriet/Rode the

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BACKSTORY: ART COLLECTOR KENNETH MONTAGUE ON ACQUIRING 'BLOOD (DONALD FORMEY),' THE 1975 PAINTING BY BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS

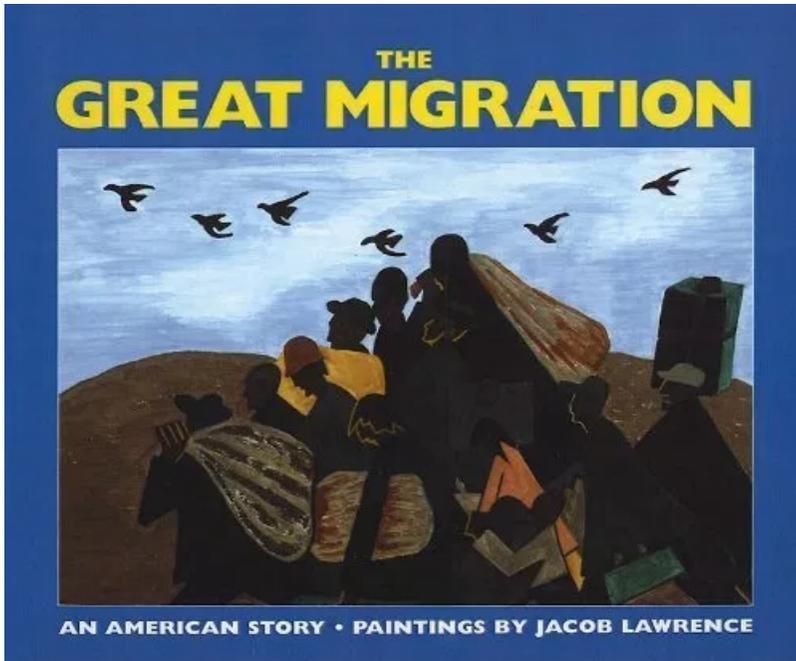


BETYE SAAR, 92, IS TAKING STEPS TO SECURE HER LEGACY WHILE FORGING AHEAD WITH NEW ARTWORK AND EXHIBITIONS



CULTURE TYPE PICKS: 18 BEST BLACK ART BOOKS OF 2018

chariot/To the Promised Land! The final page reads: "Harriet, Harriet,/Born to be free,/Led her people/To liberty!"



*"The Great Migration: An American Story," text and illustrations by Jacob Lawrence (HarperCollins Children's Books). | Published 1993*

**The Great Migration: An American Story**

Lawrence conducted research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem around fall 1940 to gather information for his storied 60-panel Migration Series (1940-41). The November 1941 edition of Fortune magazine featured 26 panels from the Migration Series in an eight-page portfolio. The entire series was presented at Edith Halpern's Downtown Gallery the same month.

Shortly after, the works were acquired by two museums. The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., owns the odd-numbered panels in the Migration Series and the even-numbered panels are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The Migration Series is the best known of Lawrence's narrative projects and has been the subject of a number of exhibitions and several publications. The children's book, **"The Great Migration: An American Story"** (1993) features his paintings. The text is comprised of the captions that accompany the multi-panel series. An antiphonal poem by Walter Dean Myers is also included in the book.

In the introduction to the volume, the artist connects his family's story to the history of black migration. "The great migration is a part of my life," Lawrence wrote. "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. My mother was born in Virginia, and my father was born in South Carolina. Somehow they met on their way north, and I was born in Atlantic City in 1917."

He added: "We settled for a while in Philadelphia. Many other families settled there, too, but many traveled even further, to Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis. I arrived in New York City's Harlem community in 1930, when I was thirteen years of age."

The final caption in the Migration series concludes the book. It's a message of hope and perseverance that continues to resonate: "And the migrants kept coming. Theirs is the story of African-American strength and courage. I share it now as my parents told it to me, because their struggles and triumphs ring true today. People all over the world are still on the move, trying to build better lives for themselves and for their families." **CT**



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**BLACK ART HISTORY: JACOB LAWRENCE'S NARRATIVE SERIES ABOUT BLACK PERSEVERANCE AND AMERICAN REBELLION INSPIRED A CACHE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS**



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**BLACK ART HISTORY: 10 CHILDREN'S BOOKS ILLUMINATE THE LIVES OF IMPORTANT AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS**

TOP IMAGE: JACOB LAWRENCE, "The Last Journey," No. 17 from the series Harriet and the Promised Land, 1967 (gouache, tempera, and graphite on paper, 15 5/8 x 26 3/4 inches / 39.69 x 67.95 cm). | © The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Gift of Dr. Herbert J. Kayden and Family in memory of Dr. Gabrielle H. Reem, Collection of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University

**BOOKSHELF**

Published in 2015, "Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series," accompanied exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and The Phillips Collection. In recent years, children's books exploring the lives of African American artists, such as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Clementine Hunter, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, have been published. [Read more about them](#) on Culture Type.

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