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# Newark Museum Acquires Norman Lewis Painting Featured in Recently Opened PAFA Retrospective

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 21, 2015 • 12:23 pm

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EIGHT DAYS BEFORE “[Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis](#)” opened at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA), one of the large-scale canvases featured in the exhibition was acquired by the Newark Museum. The

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painting is one of the more striking on view in the **Norman Lewis** retrospective, a 1953 abstract on untreated canvas, the title is unknown (shown above).

"This rare painting ...features Lewis's calligraphic brushwork in a series of sweeping vertical forms. It's remarkable both for its scale and for its bold abstract composition. Untitled, 1953 reflects the confidence and virtuoso painting of an important figure in the New York School at the height of his career," said Tricia Laughlin Bloom, curator of American Art at the Newark Museum, in a [press release](#).

The New Jersey museum made the announcement on Nov. 20 and said that its board of trustees voted on Nov. 5 to buy the painting. It was acquired from the collection of the artist's estate through Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York. The gallery represents the Norman Lewis estate.

Born in Harlem, Lewis (1909-1979) was a lifelong New Yorker. The exhibition [catalog](#) notes that the painter "was the sole African-American artist of his generation who became committed to issues of abstraction at the start of his career and continued to explore them over its entire trajectory." An important figure among African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Lewis made significant contributions to abstract expressionism that have only begun to be broadly acknowledged and seriously examined in recent years. "Procession" is Lewis's first major museum retrospective.

*“Norman Lewis was the sole African-American artist of his generation who became committed to issues of abstraction at the start of his career and continued to explore them over its entire trajectory.”*

Lewis was known to revisit works years later. The painting that is being brought into the Newark Museum's collection reconsiders "Too Much Aspiration," a 1947 watercolor (shown below).

The message Lewis appeared to be conveying in the earlier work is discussed in "Beyond Category: Before Afrofuturism There Was Norman Lewis," a [catalog](#) essay by Jeffrey C. Stewart, chair of the Black Studies department at UC Santa Barbara.

"Lewis famously stated that he moved away from social protest art ...because he never found that a painting changed attitudes, whereas a picket line could. The organizing principle for Lewis throughout his late 1940s explorations was his experimentation with form, color and the expressive line; he tried to see through such arrangements, how forms and shapes could be made to speak to one another and create satisfying tensions." Stewart writes.

*“[Norman Lewis] tried to see through such arrangements, how forms and shapes could be made to speak to one another and create satisfying tensions.” — Jeffrey C. Stewart, exhibition catalog*

"When one looks at Lewis's abstract painting of this era ...especially 'Too Much Aspiration,' there is a feeling of 'rootlessness' as if ...Lewis is signifying that there is really no place in America for a Negro with 'too much aspiration.'"

After the PAFA exhibition closes in April 2016, the 1953 painting will travel with the exhibition to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Ft. Worth, Texas (June 4-August 21, 2016) and the Chicago Cultural Center (Sept. 17, 2016-Jan. 8, 2017). When the exhibition concludes in 2017 the Lewis painting will be installed in the Newark Museum's American Art gallery. **CT**

*TOP IMAGE: NORMAN LEWIS, "Title unknown," 1953 (oil and metallic paint on canvas), | Estate of Norman W. Lewis (now Newark Museum), © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, N.Y.*



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A comprehensive, beautifully illustrated catalog has been published to accompany the retrospective. "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" features contributions by exhibition curator Ruth Fine and essays by several other scholars. The nearly 300-page volume also includes reproductions of Lewis notes.



NORMAN LEWIS, "Too Much Aspiration," 1947 (opaque watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper). | L. Ann and Jonathan P. Binstock © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, N.Y.

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