

ARTS & THEATER

Crocker's Jacob Lawrence show celebrates black history and the dignity of labor

BY VICTORIA DALKEY



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“Forward Together,” 1997. Jacob Lawrence. **MARC NEWTON**

If ever a show deserved a rave review, it's the Crocker Art Museum's "History, Labor, Life: The Prints of Jacob Lawrence," the centerpiece of the museum's celebration of Black History Month.

Lawrence (1917-2000) was born in Atlantic City, N.J., where his family had moved as part of the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to find a better life in the North. After his parents separated early on, he and his siblings lived in settlement houses and foster homes in Philadelphia until they rejoined their mother in New York City during the latter days of the Harlem Renaissance.

The streets of Harlem, with jazz clubs, poetry readings and art exhibits, provided the teenage Lawrence with an informal arts education, while he received formal training through after-school workshops, where

he studied with the noted artist Charles Alston.

His early work, “The Migration Series,” brought him national recognition when it debuted at Downtown Gallery in New York City in 1941. Lawrence, who was 24 at the time, became the first artist of color to be represented by a major New York gallery and his reputation as an established artist and influential teacher at colleges and universities was secured.

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Lawrence began exploring printmaking, a medium that suited his bold narrative style well, in the 1960s. The more than 90 vibrant prints at the Crocker deal with African American experiences and history. They range from observations of daily life, work and struggles for equality to vivid visual narratives of heroes, such as Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Overture, abolitionist John Brown, and Harriet Tubman who helped hundreds of slaves escape north to freedom.

The bold abstraction, subtle color, and simplified figures in these works tell their stories clearly and brilliantly. “The Legend of John Brown Series” is stark and forbidding, the heroic protagonist’s fanaticism and failure presented with the kind of ambiguity you find in great poetry. L’Overture’s story, moving from his birth into slavery to his death in a French prison, is elegant, dashing, and full of surprising color.

“The Coachman,” a scene with a pair of dark blue and gray green horses, is a strong color statement and a profile portrait of General L’Overture in a tricorn hat with a plume is as radical as one of Kara Walker’s cutout silhouette works. “Forward Together,” an image of Tubman from his illustration for the children’s book, “Harriet and the Promised Land,” portrays the Underground Railroad “conductor” pointing to a bright star, beckoning children to follow its light to freedom.

It’s a rich scene, rife with fascinating details woven into an intricate tapestry. Other powerful works depict the revolt of captives on the slave ship Amistad in 1839, the aftermath of the bombing of the Japanese city of Hiroshima, and the dignity and value of work.

Lawrence’s great respect for laborers and their tools is evident in many scenes of builders, carpenters, stained glass makers and, most humbly, a single self-portrait in the studio. In the latter, he pictures himself in his attic studio in Seattle, where he was professor of painting at the University of Washington.

In his left hand, he holds a carpenter’s divider, a symbol of craftsmanship and rational knowledge and in his right hand, paint brushes symbolizing fine arts and creativity. As Crocker curator Christie Hajela,

pointed out, some have seen this arrangement as an illustration of the left brain/right brain functions, though it suggests to me Lawrence's role as the architect of a world of his making.

"Life," the final section of the show, deals with the struggles and triumphs of African Americans. The images range from a poster he was commissioned to create to celebrate the 1972 Summer Olympics Games in Munich, the first since the 1936 Berlin games when Jesse Owens won four gold medals despite open hostility from Nazis, to "Confrontation at the Bridge," inspired by the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., when peaceful protestors met with brutal attacks from local law enforcement at the Edmund Pettis Bridge.

Themes of struggle and hope run throughout the exhibition culminating in one of the last images in the show, "Brotherhood for Peace," which depicts a group of men of different races embracing, an expression of Lawrence's hopes for reconciliation and healing.

On Sunday, Feb. 17, the Crocker will host a free-to-all-ages Black History Month celebration from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. with performances, art activities, films, a Black Is Beautiful artisan's market, mini talks (including one by former Bee editorial writer Ginger Rutland), and more.

IF YOU GO

History, Labor, Life: The Prints of Jacob Lawrence

Where: Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St.

When: Through April 7. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday.

Cost: \$12-\$6, free for museum members and children 5 and younger. Every third Sunday of the month is "Pay What you Wish Sunday."

Info: (916) 808-7000. www.crockerart.org

This story was updated at 11:04 a.m. on Feb. 15 to clarify the day for free admission.

