



Jacob Lawrence

lectures at the library. He became very interested in Toussaint L'Ouverture. In the 1700s, France occupied Haiti and kept the people enslaved. Toussaint L'Ouverture helped the Haitian people gain their freedom. By 1804, Haiti was the first nation in the Western Hemisphere to end slavery.

After learning everything he could about L'Ouverture, Jacob

decided to do paintings about his life. But which part of the Haitian leader's life should he paint? Jacob couldn't decide. He started with one small painting, then did another, and another. Soon there were forty-one paintings telling the story of L'Ouverture's life.

Some of Jacob's teachers—artists who would become famous themselves—recognized his talent and encouraged him. So did others in Harlem. In 1938, at the age of twenty-one, Jacob had the first showing of his paintings at the local YMCA.

Painting Hope

By Linda Trice

Thirteen-year-old Jacob Lawrence stood shyly in a doorway in the Harlem section of New York City. It was 1930, and his family had just moved to Harlem from Philadelphia.

Jacob looked out at the crowds of people. Harlem was so big, so noisy. Jacob wasn't sure he would like his new home in the heart of a city with buildings so tall you couldn't even see the sky.

Years later, Jacob remembered his first experience there. "What did I see when I arrived in Harlem in 1930? I remember seeing the movement, the life, the people, the excitement."

Painter of History

When his mother signed him up for an after-school program, Jacob took to art right away. He loved drawing shapes and coloring them with yellows and reds and blues.

Jacob painted what he saw in his neighborhood—children playing, signs on buildings, and crowds and crowds of people. He used basic shapes and colors. But what shapes! The positions of the bodies showed emotions. The colors were vivid and alive.

Jacob also liked to go to history



Moving Day, painted by Jacob Lawrence in 1937, shows both the joy and struggle of life.

The next year, officials at the Baltimore Museum of Art invited some of the most famous artists of the day to participate in an exhibition. They invited Jacob's teachers, and they invited Jacob, too.

Every artist was allowed to send one or two paintings to the show. But Jacob's best work was the Toussaint series. Which two should he choose? Jacob realized the paintings didn't make sense standing alone. They told a story, from Toussaint's birth through Haiti's independence.

Officials at the museum agreed with Jacob. They set aside a room just for the Toussaint series, all forty-one paintings! When the show opened, people were captivated by Jacob's work. At twenty-one years old, Jacob Lawrence was a success.

Painter of Books

After years of doing paintings of history, Jacob was asked to create a children's book. *Harriet and the Promised Land*, based on his paintings about the life of Harriet Tubman, was published in 1968.



Harriet and the Promised Land, No. 13, helps tell the story of the Underground Railroad.

Jacob Lawrence brought the joys and struggles of African Americans to life through art.

Tubman had escaped from slavery. She led thousands of men, women, and children to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

Other books followed, including *The Great Migration*. This book tells the story of the thousands of African Americans who left their homes in the South around the time of World War I, hoping for a better life in the North, Midwest, and West.

The paintings that launched Jacob's career also found their way into a children's book. Nearly

sixty years after Jacob painted the Toussaint series, author Walter Dean Myers was asked to create the text for a children's book using the paintings. In 1996, *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom* was released.

Jacob Lawrence became one of America's most important modern artists. He was one of five American painters invited by President Jimmy Carter to his inauguration in 1976. Later that year, one of Jacob's paintings was made into a

poster for the Olympic Games. The Pope selected one of his works for the Vatican Museum, and in 2000, his painting *The Library* was used for a poster by the U.S. Census Bureau.

In 1995, an interviewer asked Jacob what he would like the audience to experience when looking at his work.

"I'd like them to experience the beauty of life, the struggle," Jacob said, "how people can overcome certain things that could be very frustrating or very demeaning."

Jacob Lawrence died in his home in Seattle on June 9, 2000. He was eighty-two years old.