



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence**

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The fellowship project aims to complete research for and commence writing of a book focused on key themes in the art of African American painter Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) that developed out of and gave pictorial image to modernist Harlem. There the modernism and modernity of the jazz age combined with cultural practices rooted in the Great Migration of two million African Americans who moved north and west during the two World Wars. With the publication of the Lawrence catalogue raisonné in 2001, we can now understand the full range of his oeuvre and can probe into the deep content of his art. This study will explore issues informing his Harlem community from the 1930s through the 1960s that had a lasting effect on Lawrence’s art. They include: African American storytelling and folk traditions; the rhetorical strategies of African American preachers; the “usable past” of ancestral African arts and vernacular Southern crafts, such as quilts; modernism and modernity as shaped by writers and artists of the New Negro movement in the 1920s; debates about the social responsibility of art within and apart from the government relief projects of the 1930s; and the development of a “blues” aesthetic. These issues will be incorporated into five chapters, each with a different approach: cultural, formal, geographical, iconographical, and sociopolitical. The chapters are: “Cultural Life in Harlem in the Late 1930s: The Context for the Development of Lawrence’s Expressive Cubism”; “The Harriet Tubman and Migration Series: Narrative Strategies, Pictorial Structure, and African American Storytelling”; “A Harlem Artist Confronts Southern Traditions and Southern Realities During the 1940s”; “The Mask Motif in the Work of Lawrence and His Contemporaries in the 1950s”; and “Lawrence and the Civil Rights Movement in the Late 1950s and 1960s.”