



The Cabinet Maker, 1994. Gouache on paper, 29 ¾ x 22 inches

Jacob Lawrence: *Builders*

September 5 – 28, 2024

Opening Reception
September 5, 6 - 7:30 pm

DC Moore Gallery is pleased to present *Jacob Lawrence: Builders*, an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and prints spanning from 1974-2000. Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) is an iconic presence in 20th century art. He uniquely harnessed the power of the figurative, the narrative, and the abstract to address major social and philosophical themes. His engagement with African American subject matter was groundbreaking. During the last three decades of his life, Lawrence consistently pursued the subject of *Builders*, an unparalleled commitment within his work. A continuation of his dedication to themes from daily life, the *Builders* are a manifestation of his belief in human agency and the dignity of work. The *Builders* symbolize a variety of ideas about life and work, particularly in Black communities. Altogether, the *Builders* paintings are philosophical reflections on the human condition, addressing the role and responsibility of all people to the improvement of society.

In 1998, Lawrence created a series of twelve paintings on the *Builders* theme, first shown at DC Moore Gallery in the fall of that year. Four of these paintings are included in this exhibition. Lawrence followed the working method he devised for his narrative series depicting episodes of Black history: he would determine the overall concept, draw each composition in pencil, and then apply each color of paint simultaneously to all of the works. The paintings are full of visual play, with a strong use of primary colors, precariously tipped perspectives, precisely cut-out forms in shapes of equal density, and large, blocky objects played off against smaller, intricate ones.

Throughout the paintings, Lawrence uses arrangements of tools to create dynamic compositions, often exaggerating their size or depicting them hanging off a table's edge as if weightless. He

kept a collection of vintage hand tools in his studio, such as wood planers and other carpentry tools, a selection of which are included in this exhibition. “Many hand tools haven’t changed for centuries,” Lawrence said, “They have such balance and are so functional. The human body is like a tool. Any living thing has this kind of structure.” He often portrays the builders’ hands as overly large features, emphasizing the physical effort, power, and skill that he linked to creativity and progress. Through the connection of the hand and the tool, he celebrated the work of carpenters, and he saw a relationship between their labor and that of artists. Both necessitate the coordination of the mental and the manual, the mind and the hands.

This correlation between the body and the tool was also expressed in Lawrence’s figure drawings. In the 1970s, his interest in the *Builders* theme initiated an exploration of figure drawings. Studying the scientific drawings of Vesalius, a sixteenth-century doctor, Lawrence created drawings of the human form as a structural, rather than expressive entity. In these drawings, figures stand in minimal environments with carpenter’s tools and wooden boards, the lines and angles of the tools echoing the lines of the human forms.



Builders – Builder with Pear, 1998. Gouache on paper,
24 x 18 inches

Running through the works is an exploration of Lawrence’s identity. Lawrence saw himself as one among many using their talent to work towards improving society. The 1994 print *Artist in Studio* makes evident Lawrence’s self-identification with the builder, depicting an artist working on an image of a man holding tools. The artist’s brushes are over-sized, emphasizing their use as tools. On the windowsill, we see a hammer and saw and a bowl of fruit, objects which frequently recur in Lawrence’s *Builders* compositions. The image of fruit in a bowl to Lawrence was a symbol of attaining what one needs and enjoys in life.

The works in the exhibition speak to the artist’s continued growth and broadening of imagery, as well as his unflagging commitment to tell the stories of working people’s lives. Like his earlier historical series, the *Builders* are socially motivated, offering deeply personal perspectives upon hope, agency, collaboration, and progress.

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) is represented in important museum collections throughout the country. Recent major solo exhibitions of his work include *Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle* (The Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts, 2020; traveled to the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama, The Seattle Art Museum, Washington; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.); *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club* (Chrysler Museum of Art, Virginia, 2022; travelled to the New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana and Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio); and *One Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2020.

DC Moore Gallery specializes in contemporary and twentieth-century art. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10am-6pm. For more information, photographs, or to arrange a viewing please call 212-247-2111 or email Caroline Magavern at cmagavern@dcmooregallery.com.