

At MoMA, Jacob Lawrence Is No Outsider

Blake Gopnik, Monday, June 1, 2015



THE DAILY PIC: Here's one image from the 60 in the stunning Migration series, begun in 1940 by Jacob Lawrence and now (as rarely) on view in its entirety at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The series is powerfully bold and just slightly crude. But what struck me most in the exhibition was the fact that pictures Lawrence painted in the few years before his Migration (see below) are actually more polished, and Parisian, than the Migration panels themselves. That means that any outsiderism that we see in Migration is the product of calculation; we can't condescendingly imagine that Lawrence's brilliantly unpolished style – successful and potent as we may find it – was the product of an artist who didn't have the polish of a fancy upbringing in art. As Thomas Crow has laid out in his new book *The Long March of Pop*, the work of untrained artists was, for a while at least, a crucial source of inspiration for the most cutting-edge American art. What Lawrence seems to have figured out is

that this position in society let him lay special claim to that modernist strategy, and use it more powerfully, more convincingly than most of his more privileged peers. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA /Art Resource, NY)

Blind Beggars (1938), from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York © 2010 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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