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# Knives Out

Sanford Schwartz

‘Struggle: From the History of the American People’ charts the strife of early US history in a fierce Cubist/Expressionist style.

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**Reviewed:**

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle
an exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, January 18–August 9, 2020; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, August 29–November 1, 2020; the Birmingham Museum of Art, November 20, 2020–February 7, 2021; the Seattle Art Museum, March 5–May 23, 2021; and the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., June 26–September 19, 2021
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner and Austen Barron Bailly
Peabody Essex Museum/ University of Washington Press, 188 pp., $45.00



Jacob Lawrence: *Massacre in Boston*, 12 x 16 inches, 1954–1955; panel 2 from *Struggle: From the History of the American People*

As we were waiting on line at the Metropolitan Museum to get into the exhibition “Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle,” I told my friend that one reason why Lawrence, though long an esteemed name in American art, has a rather modest presence in our museums may derive from his not having made oil paintings. In a long career that stretched from the late 1930s, when he was barely in his twenties, through the late 1990s—he died in 2000, at eighty-two—he primarily used gouache (which is sometimes referred to as poster paint) or tempera.

These water-based paints can be used on paper or on prepared boards—Lawrence used both, but he more often painted on paper—and while works in tempera can get by without being glazed, museums increasingly want them protected by glass. Works on paper are always glazed and they are often matted, too, and the combination of glass and mat can give Lawrence's pictures a slightly removed, retiring quality, despite the fact that his characteristic subject was the hum and bustle of urban existence, and his pictures are often full of bright, unshaded yellows, greens, reds, blues, purples, and oranges.

Even Lawrence's best-known work, the 1941 *Migration Series*, is, due to its very structure, more heard about than seen. Originally titled *The Migration of the Negro*, the monumental piece details the experiences, moods, and sites that made up the mass twentieth-century exodus of African-Americans from the rural South to cities in the North. Lawrence's genius was not only to see that the vast story could be the subject of a single artwork but to tell it in a series of separate, self-contained, highly varied small panels. Any viewer taking in its sixty pictures on the walls of a museum—pictures that might show masses of people at a train station, a girl reading in bed, or a corner of an empty wood cabin with the blind drawn—is automatically put on a journey of her or his own to begin with. It did not hurt the fame of the work, which was instantaneous, that its creator was a largely unknown twenty-four-year-old who had dropped out of high school and had little formal art training.

Seeing the work in full, however, takes a certain amount of waiting and luck. Half of it is owned by the Phillips Collection and half belongs to the Museum of Modern Art, which together organized the last, and warmly received, full exhibition in 2015.* Yet when the many panels, which were done in tempera, can be reassembled (in itself demanding a significant amount of wall space), a small but potent element in their

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Sanford Schwartz's new book, *On Edward Hicks*, will be published early next year. (November 2020)

1. As it happens, the Modern is currently exhibiting its half, and ten of the panels owned by the Phillips are part of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art entitled "Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945." ↩