

These ‘missing’ Jacob Lawrence paintings are finally in a museum — and they’re masterpieces

By **Sebastian Smee**

Jan. 24, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. EST

SALEM, MASS. — The ironies attendant upon the American Revolution — in so many ways a magnificent event in human history — still scald. As the colonies fought for freedom, high on the fumes of philosophy, the "Sons of Liberty" galvanized support by describing their debt to Britain as slavery. ("We won't be their Negroes," said Samuel Adams). Their actual slaves, meanwhile, were fleeing to the British side, which offered liberty in exchange for joining the fight against their masters.

"How is it," asked British author Samuel Johnson, who loathed slavery, "that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

It was a situation for which the word "irony" is actually too soft. When a country is built on a world-altering interpretation of liberty but corrupted from the outset by its dependence on slavery, the ironies don't just "abound." They cannot be checked off, like so many rhetorical points. They are ambient, inescapable and acrid, like the smell of burned hair.

America was founded by people who breathed that air. There were winners and losers, and their story is one of convulsive struggle. It is that struggle that Jacob Lawrence made the subject of 30 small paintings depicting key moments in early American history.

"Struggle: From the History of the American People" had never, until now, been shown in a museum. It was dispersed soon after its first showing at a New York gallery in 1956. Its reappearance, 63 years later, at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem is an occasion to celebrate. The show opens ahead of a two-year national tour that will take it to New York, Birmingham, Seattle and Washington at the Phillips Collection.

"Struggle" is a national treasure. It is a work of sustained brilliance by one of America's finest artists working at the height of his powers. Even though Lawrence originally planned 60 panels, and even though, of the 30 he painted, five have gone missing, the art testifies to a level of ambition that still astounds.

Consider the circumstances. Lawrence (1917-2000) was a black artist and veteran living through the civil rights era. Even as he was recovering from crippling depression, he had the audacity to take on, as a subject of self-consciously modernist art, the founding and life-struggle of the American nation. The exhibition, which was organized by Elizabeth Hutton Turner and Austen Barron Bailly, makes one thing clear: The series should never have been dispersed. It is a key pictorial document in American history and, more important, collectively, a great work of art.

When Lawrence began “Struggle,” he was the most widely recognized and critically acclaimed black artist in America. He had painted episodes in the life of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and John Brown. At 23, he painted a 60-panel series addressing the Great Migration, which was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (where half the panels ended up; the other half are at the Phillips Collection). From that time on, Lawrence was famous.

But his interest in history was by no means confined to the black experience.

Lawrence had served in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II. In the years afterward, despite completing a vaunted series about the war, he succumbed to depression. In 1949, just as New York’s avant-garde art scene was exploding, he checked himself into Hillside Hospital in Queens. He stayed there almost a year.

A painting from the time, “Depression,” shows enfeebled, isolated men with heads hung low, slumped shoulders and hesitant, directionless steps. Men struggling, like him.

Lawrence emerged from his struggles by reading and plotting. He immersed himself in the poetry of Walt Whitman and popular American histories. During long sessions at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), he planned his most ambitious project yet.

Lawrence told the poet and critic Selden Rodman that he was “looking for any episode that suggests a symbol of struggle.” And as he studied the nation’s founding, he concluded that “the part the Negro has played in all these events has been greatly overlooked. I intend to bring it out.”

He was ahead of his time. The fact that the American Revolution hinged to a large degree on the question of slavery was not commonly accepted. But it did. As Jill Lepore wrote in “These Truths: A History of the United States”: “There were not one but two American revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century: the struggle for independence from Britain, and the struggle to end slavery. Only one was won.”

Lawrence didn’t start painting “Struggle” until 1954, the year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to desegregate American schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The subjects he painted take viewers from the Boston Massacre of 1770 to the aftermath of the War of 1812.

The works are all 12-by-16 inches, small enough to be portable, like icons, or carried to classrooms as teaching aids, which Lawrence intended. But as pictures, they are in no way didactic. Lawrence relished complexity, contradiction and irony. He favored the particular over the general, the obstinate incommensurability of actual human experience over the oily blandness of ideology. He was an artist.

The panels were painted in egg tempera on hardboard. Lawrence adapted his own distinctive style — clear, legible forms in shallow, cubist space — to a subtly refreshed language expressing pressure, conflict and tumult. The cubist

faceting of both figures and ground gives each panel a density of surface and a propulsive, lilting energy, like swing jazz but with spiked edges.

Lawrence favored piled-up, pyramidal forms. Each shape establishes a rapport with its rhyming environment; everything feels bitterly connected. Lawrence knew, too, how to use color and cropped vectors (fists, swords, guns) to dramatize every square inch. His knack for conveying compositional struggle ingeniously reflects his theme — a nation’s birth pangs.

Each panel is captioned. The words are excerpted from lyrics, slogans, speeches and the U.S. Constitution itself. Each addresses hard truths. Lawrence understood what was at stake, and he understood that the struggle was violent. Almost every panel has blood spilling or trickling from human forms or streaking the surface.

The first shows brown-skinned figures in creased cloaks. They raise their fists in response to a speech by Patrick Henry. The caption — “. . . is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?” — is taken from Henry’s address to the Second Virginia Convention in Richmond. The unspoken answer — “Yes. But wait, where is our peace, and why has the sweetness gone sour?” — is suggested by the tense, compacted figures and the streaks of blood on the wall.

Henry, a bold orator with pinioning eyes, had argued at the First Continental Congress that each colony should be assigned a number of votes proportionate to the number of its white inhabitants. When war broke out, Henry’s own slave, named Ralph, escaped after learning of Lord Dunmore’s offer to free slaves who fought with the British.

Subsequent panels address the Boston Tea Party, the ride of Paul Revere, the Declaration of Independence and Washington crossing the Delaware. But Lawrence had a sly eye, and there are many less obvious subjects, too.

It’s easy to imagine students wearied by textbooks thrilling to Lawrence’s “Struggle.” History in general — and American history in particular — can be wordy. So many speeches! Lawrence’s panels present a fresh way in. “Mere” images they may be, but they’re haunted by experience and, as carriers of meaning, darkly efficient. When you look at them, you may think you’re learning something. But you’re involving yourself in something even better. You’re experiencing great art.

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle Through April 26 at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. pem.org. The exhibition will come to the Phillips Collection in Washington from June 26 to Sept. 1, 2021, after stops at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama and the Seattle Art Museum.
