**An Appreciation of Painter Jacob Lawrence’s**

**“The Builders - The Family (1974)”**

**by Harvey N. Myers**

**Introduction**

Jacob Lawrence was an American painter, and one of the most widely acclaimed African-American artist of the 20th century. He is best known for his Migration Series which consisted of 60 panels painted on cardboard. It depicts the [Great Migration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Migration_(African_American)) of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. His works are in the permanent collections of numerous museums about the country. In 2007, at a Christie’s auction, the White House purchased “The Builders (1947)” for $2.5 million and this painting hangs in the Green room there. The Kalamazoo Institute of Art has 26 of Lawrence’s works in its permanent collection.

I attended with our Community Advocates for Parents and Students of young grade-school students from Interfaith Homes a Jacob Lawrence Exhibit at the KIA in April 2008. It was at this show that I promised myself that I would learn more about this African American artist. This docent final class assignment prompted me to follow up on my promise. When I visited the KIA’s library to work on my assignment, I was amazed to discover how many books were written about the works of Jacob Lawrence. There are ten books and one video about the life and works of Lawrence in the KIA library. There are many others that refer to his works including Marilyn Stokstad, Art History.

**Brief Summary of his life**

Jacob Lawrence was born in New Jersey in 1917; however, he was raised in New York City's Harlem. In 1937, Lawrence won a scholarship to the American Artists School in New York. When he graduated in 1939, he received funding from the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project. He was known for producing narrative collections like the Migration Series and War Series. He brought the African-American experience to life using blacks and browns juxtaposed with vivid colors. At the outbreak of World War II, Lawrence was drafted into the United States Coast Guard where he was assigned to be the Coast Guard artist aboard a troop ship, documenting the experience of World War II. When his tour of duty ended, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and painted his War Series. He produced 48 paintings during this time, all of which have been lost.

In 1971, Lawrence accepted a tenured position as a professor of art at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he taught until he retired in 1986. In addition to teaching, he spent much of the rest of his life painting commissions, producing limited-edition prints to help fund nonprofits such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Children’s Defense Fund and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. He also painted murals for the Harold Washington Center in Chicago, the University of Washington and Howard University, as well as a 72-foot mural for New York City’s Times Square subway station. Lawrence painted until a few weeks before he died, on June 9, 2000.

I chose to discuss “The Builders (The Family),” a screen print by Jacob Lawrence that was done in 1974. I would prepare my discussion for a group of high school students. To start the discussion, I would ask the following open-ended questions. What do you think is happening in this work of art? What is the first thing that you notice? What color or colors do you notice at first glance? What movement or action do you see going on in this work? What tools can you identify?

I would continue to ask questions to bring forth points that this work of art depicts a scene in an urban area in which there are two groups – a family of four and a work team of three builders. There is much movement in the scene. The family is strolling along “hand-in-hand” in the foreground as they pass the builders who are busy at work in the background. One worker is climbing the ladder, while another is drilling a hole, and the third is about to saw. The work could be entitled “The Family” since the family in the foreground appears to overshadow the builders in the background.

The family appears to be dressed in fine clothing in route to or from a special occasion. I would guess that this is a Sunday morning or afternoon which would imply that the family is in route to or from church. However, if it is a Sunday, it seems to conflict with builders working at a construction site since most construction work ceases on Sundays.

Part of Lawrence’s style throughout his life was to integrate black and white characters in his groups of workers. When you look closely at this work, you see that the work group is integrated. This is significant in that this work was done in the early 70’s, a few years after the height of the Civil Rights movement. Also, in each of his many works on builders and carpenters, he used a number of different builders’ tools. He was introduced early to cabinet making; however, he never became a cabinet maker, carpenter or builder, yet he became a major collector of carpenters’ tools.

In this work, Lawrence has limited himself to just eight colors. He uses blacks and browns contrasted with vivid colors of red, yellow, and blue. As I viewed the print, I noticed that there is no blending or shading of colors. To me, this is unique.

His style is often referred to as Cubism. The reduction of natural forms to their geometrical equivalents is readily apparent in this painting. Note that the father’s hat is reduced to a circle with squares, the dresses are reduced to triangles, and the limbs of the people are distorted.

In conclusion, this work is simple yet made interesting by its use of movement, colors, and distortions.

**References:**

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