

Artist Profile – Norman Lewis

b. 1909 New York City; d. 1979 New York City

Lewis knew he wanted to become an artist at just ten years old after watching a woman painting on the street in Harlem, New York. In high school, Lewis studied commercial design and freehand drawing, and later participated in events at the Harlem Community Art Center where he eventually became a teacher. Lewis never attended college to study art, considering himself a self-taught artist, he frequented art museums and read art literature to further his knowledge in the area which lead to an interest in European artists.

Lewis created paintings, drawings, and small figural sculptures although he was most well-known for his paintings. Lewis didn't always work in the same style, he was interested in experimentation, both with styles and with mediums. Often his work was politically charged, speaking to current racial issues of the time, he was active with these issues in the community, known to write "letters to the editor" in response to an article about race.

Lewis was inspired by politics as well as music, race, literature, philosophy, African culture, and even snapshots he had taken of forms in nature as well as photographs of people. Lewis's experimentation with his work lead to him creating pieces where he combined different types of paint, painted on different types of canvas like burlap, and even used layered paper or fiberboards as his canvas.

Lewis's early works were figurative, took inspiration from cubism, and were dramatic with a subtle color palette. Other characteristics of his early works is the fact that no two people share the same skin color, this reflected the diversity of Lewis's community, and the theme of the Depression. In the 1940's his work shifted to become more abstract with underlying themes of war and symbolic imagery. The 1940s and 50s were when Lewis started creating more drawings done with ink and paper. In the 1950s he focused more on landscapes, specifically, the moon, often done vertically to resemble Chinese scroll paintings and with a blurred effect.

The 1960s marked a time when the subject of race and civil rights were prominent in Lewis's works, a well-known set of paintings that use red text and reference the Ku Klux Klan. Near the end of his life, in the 1970s, Lewis continued to work on large, powerful works on paper and canvas that spoke to the civil rights movement and other issues of the time. Other common themes during this time were the processional/carnival motif and calligraphic figures, and Lewis also reached the height of his minimalist abstractions with his landscape-like paintings.

Examples of Lewis's works include *Hep Cats* (1), *Night Walk (aka Night Walk I)* (2), *Redneck Birth* (3), and *Title Unknown (March on Washington)* (4).



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