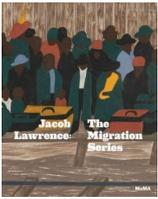


Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series



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Although migration is obviously a hot topic in the news these days, this beautiful MoMA art book is about an earlier internal movement that began during World War 1 when many blacks left the south for the industrial north of our country to find work and better living conditions. In the end, over six decades, more than six million African Americans left the South for northern cities and towns.

When he was only twenty-one years old, Jacob Lawrence completed a series of striking tempera paintings. Lawrence himself knew many of these migrants, having moved to Harlem with his parents when he was a young teenager from Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Before beginning this project of sixty paintings, Lawrence did months of research exploring diaries, photographs, news articles, and photographs of the people that made this brave trek into the unknown. Each panel is beautifully reproduced on a single page. Across from it, are notes by Jodi Roberts giving historical perspective and a grounding in what the painting represents. For instance, the first painting is of an unnamed train station full of jostling people. Three giant signs stand in the background, directing people to queue to board trains for Chicago, New York, and St. Louis.

Panel 3 showcases a triangular group of migrants walking north with suitcases and pillow cases over their shoulders; some hauling boxes in their arms. Above them a line of geese flying parallel their journey.

While studying the pictures, you learn all sorts of interesting facts, such as, Northern industries often gave the migrating African-American free train fare so they could take over jobs left by soldiers leaving for overseas. The fare would later be subtracted from their salaries.

One panel shows a striated look at a brown, black and green field symbolizing the life most of these African-Americans were leaving behind, a life of brutal farm work in the fields. However, when the soldiers returned after the war, the blacks were relegated to the most dangerous jobs and those paying the least.

But at least their housing was better. Lawrence painted Harlem apartment buildings set in geometric rows that struck him as enormous when he first arrived from the south. With colorful windows, Lawrence painted them in a flat plane so the painting looks almost abstract.

One of the most important panels is Panel 59. It depicts a green voting booth with a black curtain, and African Americans waiting in line. In the North the migrants finally had the freedom to vote.

Closing the book is "The Migration Series: Poetry Suite" that is introduced by Elizabeth Alexander, in which ten poets were commissioned to write new poems in response to Lawrence's paintings. This section features work by Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, Natasha Trethewey and other well-known American poets. It's interesting to see how some very talented poets translated these paintings into words.

For a visual, historical, and literary experience hard to beat, check out this compelling new art book. If this book piques your interest in the subject, try Isabel Wilkerson's fascinating history of the topic:

[The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration.](#)

Posted by Dory L. on December 16, 2015

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