



HARLEM'S ARTISTIC COMMUNITY IN THE 1930S

Not to know the Negro on the group and historical level is to rob him of his rightful share in the American heritage.

J. SAUNDERS REDDING, *On Being Negro in America* (1951)

EARLY STUDENT YEARS

Sometime during 1930 Rosalee Lawrence brought her children, Jacob and his younger siblings William and Geraldine, from their foster homes in Philadelphia to live with her at 142 West 143rd Street in New York's Harlem. Jacob was either twelve years old or thirteen, the age he turned on September 7, 1930.¹

Harlem, an area north of Central Park, had originally been populated by German Americans, who built elegant brownstone townhouses but then left when African Americans began to expand into the area in the early twentieth century.² By the early 1930s many of the brownstones had been converted into one- or two-room kitchenettes to accommodate the burgeoning population. The city block Lawrence lived on—142nd Street to 143rd Street, bordered by Lenox and Seventh Avenues—was described in a *New York Herald Tribune* article in 1934 as

tenanted exclusively by Negroes. On its four sides the area presents a front of gray and red brick fire escapes broken

only by dingy areaway entrances to the littered backyard about which the rectangle of tenements had been built. . . . Half of all the tenants are on relief and pass their days and nights lolling in the dreary entrances of the 40 apartments which house them or sitting in the ten by fifteen foot rooms which many of them share with a luckless friend or two. Unless they are fortunate their single windows face on narrow courts or into a neighbor's kitchen and the smell of cooking and the jangle of a dozen radios is always in the air.³

Harlem, much larger and more densely crowded than Philadelphia, opened the eyes of the impressionable young Lawrence (Map 1).

Five years before Lawrence arrived, in 1925, the writer and educator James Weldon Johnson had spelled out Harlem's special qualities from an insider's point of view, in sharp contrast to the *New York Herald Tribune* reporter's account:

Harlem is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising,

◀ **FIG 1** Jacob Lawrence at work on a Frederick Douglass series panel, c. 1939. Photo: Kenneth F. Space, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.



CENTRAL HARLEM, ca. 1930s–1940s.

East/west blocks increase by 100 numbers per block.
Walking north or south along the avenues takes about 20 minutes to cover 20 blocks.
Mount Morris Park is now Marcus Garvey Park.

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| 1 Lawrence’s temporary home in 1940, 292 W 147th | 11 Old Harlem YMCA, 181 W 135th |
| 2 Augusta Savage’s first studio, 163 W 143rd | 12 New Harlem YMCA (built in 1930s), 180 W 135th |
| 3 Lawrence’s first Harlem address, 1930, 142 W 143rd | 13 Utopia House, 170 W 130th |
| 4 Lawrences’ home, 1942–43, 72 Hamilton Terr. | 14 Langston Hughes’s home, 20 E 127th |
| 5 “306” Alston/Bannarn Studio, 306 W 141st | 15 Braddock Hotel, site of 1943 Harlem Riot, 272 W 126th |
| 6 Abyssinian Baptist Church, 136–42 W 138th | 16 Lawrence’s studio in 1940, 33 W 125th |
| 7 Ethiopian School of Research (Charles Seifert), 313 W 137th | 17 Apollo Theater, 253 W 125th |
| 8 Harlem Artists Guild, 321 W 136th | 18 New York Amsterdam News (office in 1930s), 2293 7th Ave. |
| 9 August Savage’s second studio, 239 W 135th | 19 Harlem Community Art Center, 290 Lenox |
| 10 NY Public Library, Harlem branch, 103 W 135th | 20 First Harlem Music and Art Center (1937), 1 W 123rd |

the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world. . . . Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city. It is not a ‘quarter’ of dilapidated tenements, but is made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth. A stranger who rides up magnificent Seventh Avenue on a bus or in an automobile must be struck with surprise at the transformation which takes place after he crosses One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street. Beginning there, the population suddenly darkens and he rides through twenty-five solid blocks where the passers-by, the shoppers, those sitting in restaurants, coming out of theaters, standing in doorways and looking out of windows are practically all Negroes.⁴

Like Johnson, young Lawrence was attracted to the magic of Harlem’s beauty and vitality, with neighbors and strangers moving past each other through the spaces of stoops, sidewalks, and streets. Lawrence would later say, in a remark familiar to his interviewers: “It was a very cohesive community. You knew people. You didn’t know their names, but you’d pass people on the street and see the face[s] over and over again. It was that kind of a community. It was a very vital, exciting community. At least it was for me, and from what I hear from many other people my age[.] [Y]ou knew the police, you knew the firemen, you knew the teachers, the people on the street. You knew the peddlers. That’s what it was for me” (Figs. 2 and 3).

Rosalee Lawrence, sometime after her children arrived in Harlem, enrolled them in arts and crafts classes at the after-school program of Utopia Children’s House, located at 170 West 130th Street, in Central Harlem. Founded in 1927 by Daisy C. Reed, its first director, and other social progressives in Harlem, Utopia Children’s House provided activities and free lunches for the children of working mothers.⁶ Jacob took lessons from the Harlem artist Charles Alston, a recent graduate of Columbia College, walking each day the brief distance to Utopia House from PS 89, at Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard) and 135th Street, where he was in the fifth grade.⁷

Lawrence was fortunate to meet Alston (Fig. 4). At Columbia Alston had been briefly enrolled in a pre-architecture course but switched to the liberal arts curriculum and graduated in 1929.⁸ He spent at least a year teaching at Utopia House in the arts and crafts program originally set up by James Wells, also a Columbia graduate (class of 1925).⁹ Alston returned to Columbia after a year or two to complete a master’s degree at Teachers College.¹⁰

In interviews during the 1960s Alston recalled the circumstances of his first encounter with Lawrence and his determination to let his pupil’s innate talent develop. To Harlan Phillips, he remarked:

I took a job as a director of a boys’ club in a slum area in Harlem. It was a very small operation. . . . You had kids of ages—five to 16, 17—which made it very hard to develop a program. . . . Among the kids that I had was . . . Jacob Lawrence. This kid was not the usual mischievous, hell-raising kid. . . . Jake . . . had this very curious vision that just fascinated me. If I gave him crayons or whatever materials were available, there was always a very personal, strange kind of expression. I don’t think at that time he had ever seen African masks or anything like that, but he used to do these fantastic masks . . . in brilliant colors. I kept him supplied with things and sensed even that early . . . that this was a kid to leave alone. Don’t let him start painting like you, don’t start cramming him with classical ideas about art.¹¹

To another interviewer, Albert Murray, Alston added, “He didn’t work like the other kids. He knew pretty definitely what he wanted to do and it didn’t relate to the typical kind of thing that children of that age do. I’m glad I had the sense at that time to realize that this kid had a very unusual, unique kind of talent, and a way of seeing things. I wouldn’t even let him watch me paint. And I tried my best just to protect this very unique quality in Jake.”¹²

At Utopia House, Lawrence was introduced to soap carving, metalwork, woodwork, and painting. Painting particularly appealed to Lawrence; to Elton Fax he recalled his early attempts at making art unencumbered by rules and academic protocols: “My first paintings consisted of geometric designs, done from my imagination, with poster paints on paper. I was playing with forms and color with no other thing in mind. Then I began painting masks out of my imagination. It was only later that I began

—Bad break
Please advise
BH/ICS



FIG 2 View of 125th Street, looking west from Seventh Avenue, 1943. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

FIG 3 Sid Grossman, *Children Playing on Sidewalk*, 1939. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

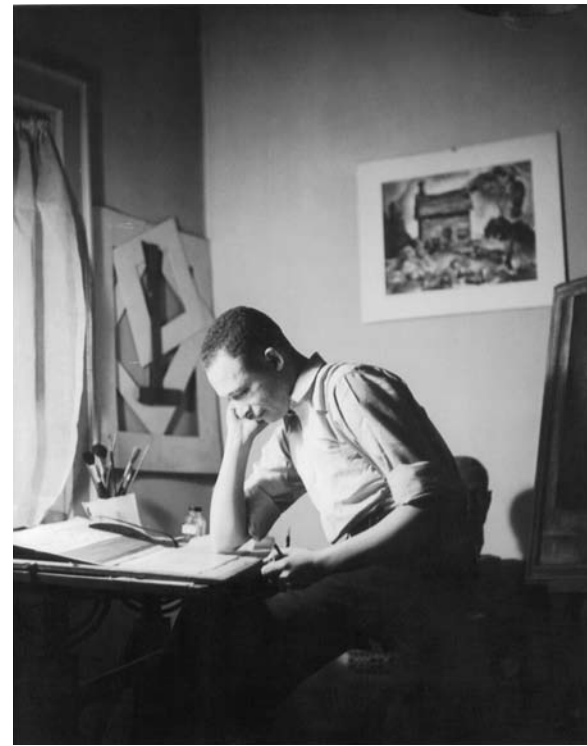


FIG 4 Charles Alston in his studio, 1930s. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.

working out of my own experience. I built street scenes out of corrugated boxes—taking them to familiar spots in the street and painting houses and scenes on them, recreating as best I could a three-dimensional image of those spots. And then I began to gradually work freely on paper and with poster color.”¹³ To another interviewer, Lawrence elaborated: “There was a lot of theatre equipment at Utopia. I got absorbed in working on stage sets and in making masks. Pictures of Persian rugs and Moorish tiles fascinated me and I started to cover sheets of paper with crayoned webs of small, complicated, geometric repeat-patterns. I was fascinated by patterns from the outset.”¹⁴ Even though Alston claimed not to have taught Lawrence academic methods, and Lawrence himself recalled his own complete freedom to create at Utopia House, Alston’s own Teachers College training would serve the younger artist well.

As the art historian Elizabeth Hutton Turner has pointed out, Alston no doubt conveyed to Lawrence many of the precepts of the influential artist and educator Alfred Wesley Dow, who had chaired the Fine Arts Program at Columbia’s Teachers College from 1904 until his death in 1922.¹⁵ Dow’s book *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for Use of Students and Teachers* (1899; revised, 1913 and 1938) served as a guide for a generation of artists, particularly those trained at Columbia.¹⁶ Inspired by his own study of Japanese art, Dow taught students first to learn and experiment with the “three structural elements” of art: *line* (and its relationship to space), then *notan* (“darks and lights in harmonic relations”), and finally *color*. Dow described *notan* as the patterning of lights and darks in harmonies and contrasts, not as light and shadow or chiaroscuro. The *notan* was to effect a harmonious pattern, not to simulate an illusion of three-dimensional depth. Dow’s method differed from traditional academic art teaching that stressed representation, especially life drawing, as the basis for art. Whereas students in traditional art academies were first taught to draw as realistically as they could from still life objects, plaster casts of antique statuary fragments, or the live model, for Dow, “mere accuracy has no art-value whatever. Some of the most pathetic things in the world are the pictures or statues whose only virtue is accuracy. The bare truth may be a deadly commonplace.”¹⁷ Dow instead urged exercises for students, such as copying the lines, light-dark patterns, and colors in textiles and rugs, as a way to develop an artistic sensibility (Fig. 5).¹⁸

Pattern became an important element in Lawrence’s compositions, as the artist explained in a 1968 interview: “I look around this room . . . and I see pattern. I don’t see you. I see you as a form as it relates to your environment. I see that there’s a plane, you see, I’m very conscious of these planes, patterns.”¹⁹ Lawrence’s procedure as an artist followed the Dow method: he first drew on the support (whether paper or a gessoed panel), then painted in the dark colors (which as a contrast to the white support would help construct the light-dark pattern), and finally filled in the lighter colors to achieve a harmony.

Besides the basic elements of line, light-dark pattern, and color, Dow wanted students to “look for character . . . and to value power in expression above success in

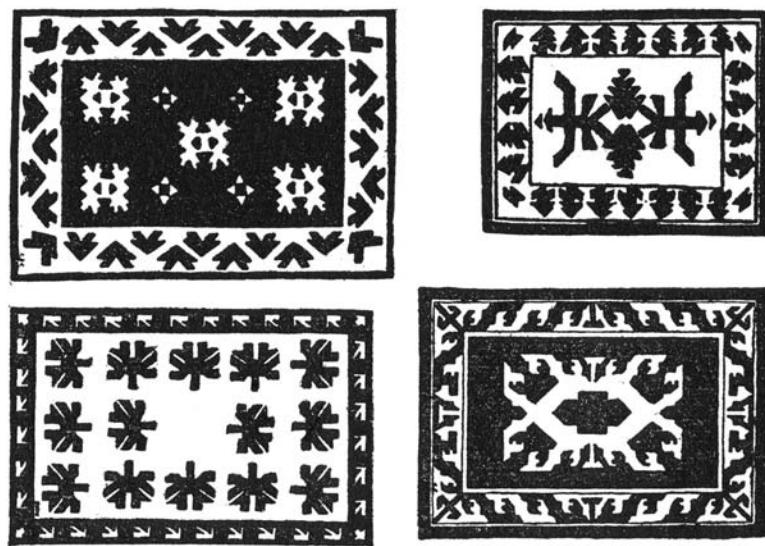


FIG 5 Page from Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, 1938.

drawing.”²⁰ For Alston, and in fact for any teacher setting up lessons in a children’s after-school program, such exercises were far simpler and no doubt produced quicker and more satisfying results than traditional perceptual studio drawing exercises. And since Alston recognized Lawrence’s uncanny sense of design, he would naturally steer the youth toward developing his compositional skills.

This nonacademic method of conceiving pictures first as design structures would stay with Lawrence throughout his career. Early on he developed his signature style of working with descriptive lines, patterns of light and dark, and a limited palette of flat, unmodulated colors for composing his pictures, for example, *Halloween Sand Bags*, 1937 (see Fig. 22). When interviewers later asked him about his distinctive style, he would often say: “I didn’t think about it. It was all I could do. I couldn’t do anything else. I didn’t know of any other way to paint. So it wasn’t an intellectual process. . . . I was encouraged by various people. They didn’t try to change my style.”²¹ We know of only one instance when he expressed doubts about his unique style—when he confided to the artist and poet Gwendolyn Bennett that he might be disadvantaged by not having mastered the classical techniques of academic drawing. In an article of 1947 Bennett recalled Lawrence’s words: “I’m worried about the fact that no matter how I try I just can’t draw like the rest of the

fellows at Mike’s [Henry Bannarn’s 306 studio].” She assured her readers, “I have always prided myself that I urged Jacob Lawrence not to worry about whether his work was like that of others around him.”²² Lawrence’s style merged Dow’s art-for-composition’s-sake methods with his own commitment to the representation of content—to portraying the social life of Harlem and to understanding “art as experience,” as John Dewey advocated.

Turner was the first to make the connection to another Columbia Teachers College influence that filtered through Alston to Lawrence: the social pragmatism of John Dewey.²³ Dewey and his followers believed that both the process of making art and the appreciation of art enriched the lives of individuals and, by extension, the community. In 1939 Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), delivered a tribute to Dewey at the philosopher’s eightieth birthday celebration. He emphasized the high regard in which educational leaders held Dewey:

John Dewey and his pupils and followers have been of the greatest importance in developing American resources in the arts, especially through their influence on the school systems of this country. They have emphasized the importance and pervasiveness of the aesthetic experience, the place of the arts as part of the significant life of an organized community,

and the necessary unity of the arts with the activities, the objects, and the scenes of everyday life. They have insisted that the teaching of the arts should not be relegated to the frills and the extras, but that it is central in any system of education. They have shown that art education, like art itself, involves activity, that art appreciation can best be taught through doing.²⁴

Dewey’s lectures and writings, particularly his book *Art as Experience* (1934), helped shape the discourse about art as an activity, a social responsibility, and a community endeavor. Indeed, Dewey’s goal in his book was “to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”²⁵ He and his followers rejected the separation of the high arts from the popular arts; the goal was to stimulate creativity in everyone.

The Dow and Dewey influences coalesced in Alston’s encouragement of Lawrence to see the artistic qualities of line, light-dark pattern, and color in his everyday experience at home and in the streets of Harlem. Lawrence later recalled to Samella Lewis:

My mother decorated her house with colors, we were surrounded by them. This was common for people in our economic and social level. I can’t say that it was common throughout the Harlem community—there were families in Harlem that were very affluent. I didn’t know those people. I only knew people on our economic and social level, poor people. And like other poor people in Harlem we used a lot of color to decorate our houses. We had a lot of decorations, including paper flowers and things like that. This was a part of my cultural experience, so it is reflected in my paintings.²⁶

The art historian Leslie King-Hammond, drawing on the observations of the anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston about “the urge to adorn” among working-class black families, summarizes the aesthetic prevailing in the Harlem community: “This penchant for decoration, springing from the poorer segments of the black population, was one facet of the quest for an aesthetic ideal in the black community in the 1930s.”²⁷

We can imagine that that nascent aesthetic experience for Lawrence also included taking in the forms, colors,

sounds, and smells of Harlem itself as he hurried from school to the after-school program at Utopia House to home, and, on Sundays, to the Abyssinian Baptist Church at West 138th Street, where he and his family listened to the inspiring sermons of Adam Clayton Powell Sr.²⁸

He confessed to the artist Elton Fax that in Harlem he seldom played with other children:

I’d been used to more space such as we had in Philadelphia. When I played marbles there, we played in large open lots. Here the tenement kids had learned to play in the cramped quarters of the gutters and I wasn’t used to that. New York City games took on the character of the environment. Stick ball played in the narrow side streets, with parked cars and manhole covers for bases, was strange and foreign to me. So I withdrew from much of that kind of activity. I was thirteen, and children entering adolescence find it more difficult to adjust than when they are younger.²⁹

Instead, he stepped back to become an observer of the Harlem environment. He saw and heard the street-corner orators (see Figs. 122 and 123), who stood atop soap boxes and ladders and harangued their audiences about communism, socialism, black nationalism, and religion. He watched kids playing in the streets, mothers and fathers hurrying to work, mourners walking to funeral homes (see Fig. 24), icemen delivering great blocks of ice to sweltering tenement residents, evictions of families for nonpayment of rent, blind men tapping their way along sidewalks (see Fig. 25), prostitutes leaning against lamp posts (see Fig. 121). All these would eventually become the subjects of his art, but at the time he focused on acquiring greater facility in designing compositions of line, pattern, and color; painting masks; and creating the three-dimensional stage tableaux from cardboard shoe boxes at Utopia House.

When he stopped going to Utopia House after a couple of years, he spent the after-school hours helping to support his family by delivering newspapers and working in a laundry and a print shop.³⁰ He nevertheless kept at his art, as he later told the radio personality Randy Goodman: “I was at Utopia House for about two years. Then I went out and started to work on my own. I got to know other young artists in Harlem . . . we sort of helped each other.”³¹

In 1933 Lawrence returned to study with Charles Alston. “I was trying my hand at everything . . . even designing masks. One day I ran into Alston, and he told me he was giving a course at the library. He asked me to stop by. I went around with a lot of my things. . . . He got very excited. He said it was original stuff. He advised me to look around . . . take the material at hand . . . and develop it.”³² Lawrence would now take classes on a more advanced and institutionally organized level than at Utopia House—thanks, in part, to the art workshop programs set up in Harlem as partnerships, variously, of the College Art Association (CAA), committees of civic-minded citizens, private foundations, universities, city libraries, municipal and state agencies, and, eventually, the federal government.³³

**EMPLOYING ARTISTS
IN THE DEPRESSION**

When the Depression deepened in the early 1930s, unemployment increased sharply, especially in Harlem.³⁴ As conditions worsened, Harlem civic leaders and organizations came to the aid of the homeless and the hungry. There are many examples of the creative partnerships among the nongovernment organizations. For example, in November 1930 New York City’s Emergency Work Bureau joined with United Neighborhood Houses to set up a workshop at the Urban League headquarters to make clothing for the families of the unemployed. The Abyssinian Baptist Church announced that married men who applied at the church on Mondays would be given jobs for three days a week at the rate of five dollars a day and that the church planned to convert its community house to an overnight shelter. Mayor La Guardia’s Committee on Relief brought packages of food to a public school near the West 135th Street police station for distribution. The Harlem branch of the Salvation Army fed a thousand people a day from its soup kitchen. By December the Abyssinian Baptist Church had also set up a soup kitchen. Private individuals pitched in when they could. One grocer gave away vegetables to a needy family each week; a local resident, Sister Minnie, pushed an old baby carriage filled with blankets that she distributed to families down on their luck.³⁵

Once basic needs were cared for, the next issue was jobs. Harlem civic leaders pressed the city government to end policies of segregation and open up jobs for African Americans; one result was that 110 subway jobs became available when the Eighth Avenue subway began construction.³⁶ Another concern emerged: If there were no jobs, what would fill the idle hours of the unemployed? Free classes and workshops, which had traditionally been offered by settlement houses, seemed a good solution, and these were set up in local churches with the help of organizations like the Urban League. For those concerned about artists, such as the staff of the CAA, art workshops seemed a very good solution indeed. Not only would such a plan give teaching jobs to indigent artists, but it could also instill in adults of all ages an appreciation for the arts. Many in favor of art workshops argued, like John Dewey, that one learns about art “by doing” and that making art enriches not only the lives of the participating individuals but the community as a whole.

**ORGANIZATIONS ADVOCATING
FOR THE ARTS**

The CAA, the professional association dedicated to promoting opportunities for both artists and art historians since its founding in 1912, was fortunate to have on staff at that time the dynamic and tireless Audrey McMahon, who was executive secretary, with Frances Pollak, a CAA volunteer, as her assistant. McMahon reasoned that exhibiting artists’ work might generate needed income for them from sales. McMahon and Pollak secured grants from the Carnegie Corporation to fund traveling exhibitions in the United States and Canada and to award scholarships, but the Carnegie Corporation pressed the CAA to take an even more active role.³⁷ The Carnegie Corporation agreed to supply the CAA with teaching equipment; but as grateful as McMahon and Pollak were, they realized they had only limited funds to pay artists’ salaries.

By this time, artists were increasingly visiting the CAA offices to bring artworks for the exhibition program, and McMahon heard their stories of hardship. She became convinced that more needed to be done.³⁸ In 1932, ac-

cording to McMahon, the CAA “petitioned the Emergency Work Bureau of the Gibson Committee to create a department to put the unemployed artist to work.”³⁹ Harry Knight became the supervisor for the overall CAA art program and acted as liaison between the CAA and other organizations. Pollak took charge of the teaching program, which was carried out in neighborhood houses, and McMahon oversaw the hiring of artists to paint or restore murals.⁴⁰ Mildred Constantine, McMahon’s young secretary in the CAA offices, worked in the exhibition program.⁴¹ All four worked out of the CAA offices.⁴²

After President Roosevelt took office in March 1933, several agencies of the federal government were established to aid the arts, with a consequent shifting of both funds and personnel between private and state and federal agencies. This wreaks havoc with a historian’s desire to present a tidy chronology, but it also explains the federal records of Charles Alston’s employment. Previously receiving a salary through CAA for his teaching duties at the Harlem Art Workshop held at the 135th Street Library, he became a “librarian” on the Civil Works Administration federal payroll on January 19, 1934, but on April 1, 1934 was transferred, still as a “librarian,” to the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA).⁴³ Nevertheless, to Alston’s friends and to Jacob Lawrence, it was the CAA, as the dispensing agency, that deserved credit for Alston’s employment at the library.⁴⁴ When the Federal Art Project was set up as an agency within the Works Progress Administration in August 1935, with Holger Cahill as director and McMahon in charge of the New York office, all the artists—whether teachers, supervisors, muralists, or poster designers—were transferred to the WPA payroll. By that time federal funds were adequate to cope with the salaries of all the unemployed artists, although funds to cover artists’ materials and workshop spaces still had to be obtained elsewhere.

Another organization working closely with the CAA was the Harmon Foundation, which had mounted exhibitions of art by African American artists during the late 1920s and early 1930s. During the mid-1930s, as the art historian Mary Ann Calo has shown, the Harmon’s director, Mary Beattie Brady, took an interest in the development of the workshops, often conferring behind the scenes with Alain Locke or Frederick Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation on

proposed initiatives and potential teachers to run them.⁴⁵ She hired Harlem photographer James L. Allen to take photographs to document the workshops’ activities for publicity purposes and helped organize exhibitions where Harlem artists’ work could be shown.⁴⁶ In 1934 Brady arranged for the CAA to co-sponsor a traveling Harmon exhibition, one that subsequently antagonized many Harlem artists because of Brady’s patronizing attitudes.⁴⁷

THE ART WORKSHOPS OF HARLEM

In the four years or so before the grand opening of the Harlem Community Art Center in December 1937, when workshop activities and exhibition programs were consolidated, there were four major operations where Harlem’s older teenaged students seriously interested in art, such as Lawrence, could attend workshops taught by trained artists: (1) the studios of Augusta Savage, first at 163 West 143rd Street and later at 239 West 135th; (2) the YMCA at 180 West 135th Street between Lenox and 7th Avenues; (3) the Harlem Art Workshop, at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, which held classes under the auspices of the Harlem Adult Education Committee at both the library and later 270 West 136th Street;⁴⁸ and (4) Alston and Bannarn’s studio/workshop, launched in early 1934 at 306 West 141st Street.⁴⁹ Almost every artist in Harlem was connected with one or another of these studio workshops, and several organizations and philanthropic foundations participated, not only the CAA, the Carnegie Corporation, the Harmon Foundation, and the Gibson Committee working out of Mayor La Guardia’s office, but also the Urban League, the Progressive Education Association, and several state and federal agencies.⁵⁰

One of the first African American artists to open a studio to students in Harlem was the dynamic sculptor Augusta Savage (Fig. 6).⁵¹ Ever since her return from study in Europe in 1931 she had been teaching small classes in her basement studio at 163 West 143rd Street.⁵² In December 1933, the Carnegie Corporation gave the Urban League \$1,500 to be regranted to Savage for “training and encouraging young artists.”⁵³ Since her salary was already being paid by the State Education Department, the funds were no

FIG 6 Augusta Savage in her studio, 1930s. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.



doubt used to purchase equipment and materials. Called the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, its official status was “the Harlem branch of the adult education project of the University of the State of New York.”⁵⁴ With this support and driven by burgeoning classes, Savage moved to larger quarters in a former garage at 239 West 135th Street, which she transformed into a studio space.

A forceful teacher, Savage continually championed her students, who included Gwendolyn Knight, Norman Lewis, William Artis, Ernest Crichlow, Elton C. Fax, Marvin Smith, and, for a time, Kenneth B. Clark, who later turned to social psychology.⁵⁵ She arranged for their work to be exhibited in the spring of 1934 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Lewis and Smith received prizes, and in the fall of 1934 at New York University.⁵⁶ Although Lawrence was not her student, he and his family lived just across from her first, basement studio.⁵⁷ On one of his frequent visits to her studio, he met Knight, who had posed for one of Savage’s sculpture busts (Fig. 7). Savage welcomed everyone, especially young Lawrence, for she recognized his extraordinary talent and enthusiastically promoted him at every opportunity.

Savage organized in Harlem a large exhibition of her students’ works, titled *Artists and Models*. Sponsored by the Urban League, it opened February 14, 1935, in the auditorium of the YWCA at 144 West 138th Street.⁵⁸ For opening night she dedicated a space to portraits of the arriving celebrities sketched on the spot by her students. These portraits were then considered part of the exhibition. One notable she took special pains to recruit as a portrait subject was Arthur Schomburg, the bibliophile, historian, and curator whose extensive collection of books on Africa and African American history and culture had been purchased for the West 135th Street New York Public Library. Behind Savage’s manipulations was her resolve to advance the race in the field of culture, a cause to which Schomburg was most sympathetic. She wrote him one month before the event: “The ‘Studio’ is planning to hold an exhibition . . . of the work of these students in an attempt to gain for them the recognition and assistance of those who are interested in the cultural advancement of the race. We will attempt to present Harlem to Harlem as seen through the eyes of the Artist.”⁵⁹ No doubt she wrote to other potential sitters as well; since the exhibition was

called *Artists and Models*, she would have wanted to have potential sitters/models there. In any event the exhibition and the sketches proved a success.

Savage was an expert in generating publicity and buzz for her causes. A reviewer from the *New York Herald Tribune* understood her goals when reviewing the February exhibition: “The artists have confined themselves to subjects connected with their own race and have not attempted to ape the schools of their white colleagues. There are pictures of dice players, women dancers doing the ‘Lindy Hop’ and a multitude of other Harlem scenes with which the artists obviously are intimately acquainted.”⁶⁰ To that reviewer, the artists had succeeded in capturing the local American scene.

Savage could count on the *New York Amsterdam News* to document her activities and to affirm her political goal, to give agency to Harlem’s own people in constructing the image of their community. The Harlem weekly devoted three half-columns to the show, praising it and reproducing some of the sketches:

At last, Harlem is going to have a chance to see itself as Harlem sees it. Anyway, as it is seen through the eyes of the threescore art students who for more than two years have been attending classes at the Augusta Savage Studio. . . .

The show, the first of its kind to be given in Harlem—or, as far as is known, in any part of the city—will indeed attempt to record the life of Harlem in every respect. It will run the pictorial gamut from success to failure, from Striver’s Row to Beale Street, from the cathedral to the gin mill, from Sugar Hill to the breadline.⁶¹

The article also named the “prominent Harlemites” sketched from life at the exhibition, but Arthur Schomburg, whom Savage had written, was not among them.

This was the kind of event that the seventeen-year-old Lawrence would have attended. Gwendolyn Knight was mentioned as one of the exhibiting students. Moreover, Alain Locke was named as one of the sponsors, along with many other notables.⁶² Older artists would have encouraged the youngsters to attend such major Harlem exhibitions as a necessary stimulant for young artists learning to make art.⁶³

The second site for Harlem art workshops was the 135th Street branch of the YMCA, where two categories



FIG 7 Augusta Savage, *Gwendolyn Knight*, 1934–35. Painted plaster, 18½ x 8½ x 9 in. (47 x 21.6 x 22.9 cm). Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence. Photo: Susan A. Cole.

of classes were held. The first was a Boys’ Work Program for twenty-five younger children, instructed by William E. Artis; the YMCA exhibited their arts and crafts during both March and May 1934. A second group—totaling ninety-five older students—had an especially enriched program. These were taught by Richard Lindsey under the auspices of the Y’s Activities Department in cooperation with the CAA. The author of a Harmon Foundation article on the Harlem workshops described the full curriculum: “Motion pictures on art and frequent trips to museums and galleries help to build a background of art knowledge and experience which is both instructive and stimulating.”⁶⁴ Exhibitions of this older group’s works were held at the YMCA in May 1934 and February 1935. Lindsey saw the classes as a balm for his students as they endured the stresses of the times: “I have been happily surprised to find that during the several years of the depression, a great number of people are turning to arts and crafts as an outlet for their mental strife. It is a pleasant experience to help people find themselves, and to find pleasure in creating things to make others happy.”⁶⁵ When the FAP was created in August 1935, as part of the



FIG 8 Display of masks at Harlem Art Workshop, 1933. Photo: James L. Allen. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



FIG 9 Jacob Lawrence (center) and other students at the Harlem Art Workshop, 1933. Photo: James L. Allen. Reproduced in “Art Study through the Workshop,” in *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of Their Achievements* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1935). U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.

WPA, the YMCA teachers’ salaries began coming from that agency.⁶⁶

The third location, which Lawrence attended, was the Harlem Art Workshop and Studio at 270 West 136th Street, established in July 1933 by Mary Beattie Brady of the Harmon Foundation and Ernestine Rose, director of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library.⁶⁷ Earlier, in 1932, the Carnegie Corporation had agreed to support an adult education project for the library that would focus on music, dramatics, and creative work.⁶⁸ However, the actual library branch at 135th Street never had adequate space for all the art classes and workshops.⁶⁹ With the sponsorship of the Harlem Adult Education Committee, the West 136th Street site, where formerly a nightclub had been, seemed to be a good solution.⁷⁰ The instructor, James Lesesne Wells, and his assistant, Palmer Hayden, offered classes in “drawing, painting, sculpture, mask making, block printing, and linoleum cut work.”⁷¹ An exhibition of the students’ work was shown at the library in September and October 1933.⁷² A reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* praised the artwork of two of the young artists in Law-

rence’s cohort: Georgette Seabrooke, who made charcoal drawings and lithographs, and Walter Christmas, who produced textile prints. The reviewer also praised the students’ painted papier-mâché masks (Fig. 8).⁷³

When Wells returned to his teaching post at Howard University in September, Charles Alston took his place at the Harlem Art Workshop, teaching both children’s and adult classes in the 1933–34 academic year. This was the year when Lawrence returned to studying with Alston. Alston introduced clay modeling, the use of pastels, and design and lettering.⁷⁴ It was probably at the spacious 270 West 136th Street location that the Harmon Foundation commissioned photographs of the workshop activities that included Lawrence with a textile instructor and also in the open workshop space (Figs. 9 and 10).⁷⁵

306 WEST 141ST STREET STUDIO

In early 1934 Alston proposed the fourth major site for a workshop. He persuaded his supervisors to allow him to move his classes to more accommodating quarters he



FIG 10 Jacob Lawrence (standing left) and other students with teacher at the Harlem Art Workshop, 1933. Photo: James L. Allen. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.

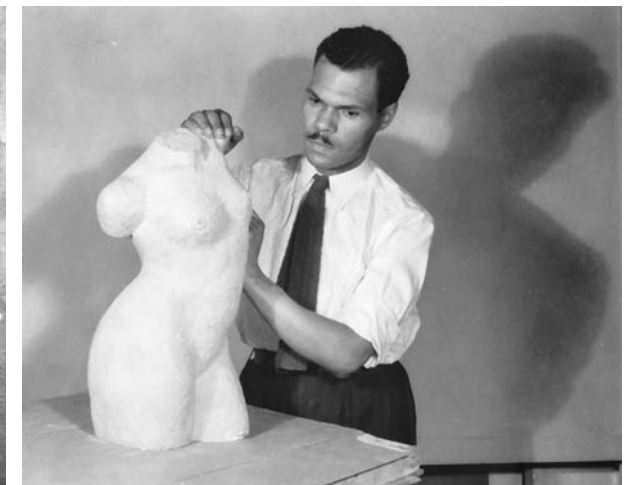


FIG 11 Henry W. Bannarn, ca. 1937. Courtesy of the Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, 1935–42, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

had found, in a former horse stable, at 306 West 141st Street. On April 1, 1934, he was transferred to the payroll of TERA; on April 25 he was promoted to “art teacher.”⁷⁶ Alston, called “Spinky” by his students and friends, moved in with his friend Henry W. Bannarn, nicknamed “Mike,” a sculptor who had been living at the YMCA (Fig. 11).⁷⁷ Alston and Bannarn took the top two floors as apartments, leaving the ground floor for a large workshop studio.⁷⁸ The Alston/Bannarn workshop, known as 306, became independent of the library’s Harlem Art Workshop, although the library still paid part of the rent as late as April 1936.⁷⁹

For the next two years, from about April 1934 to April 1936, the 306 workshop received government support as a teaching workshop, presided over by Alston and Bannarn, that included students such as Lawrence, Bob Blackburn, and Sara Murrell.⁸⁰ Because his mother had not been particularly sympathetic to his art interests, Lawrence rented a corner of Bannarn’s downstairs loft for two dollars a month to have a place to paint away from home (Fig. 12).⁸¹

Although shy and somewhat taciturn, Lawrence made friends with the artists and other students. He was some-

what in awe of the older artists Ronald Joseph, who was intellectual and liked to talk, and Gwendolyn Knight, who had studied at one of the best private high schools in Harlem, had gone to Howard University before the Depression made her attendance financially impossible, and was one of Augusta Savage’s students.⁸² Both Joseph and Knight would hire Lawrence to pose for them. The three of them would talk and visit museums. Younger artists who became his good friends were Bob Blackburn (Fig. 13) and Walter Christmas.⁸³

The Alston/Bannarn studio—306—became not just a teaching studio but an informal gathering place for artists and writers to discuss art and politics. Thirty years later Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson pointed to the cultural importance of 306 as “the main center in Harlem for creative black people in all the arts.”⁸⁴ This was no exaggeration, for Harlem, even though its population had reached 204,000 in 1934,⁸⁵ was a place where artists, civic leaders, and professional people moved in the same circles and socialized.⁸⁶

Lawrence and the younger artists benefited from being in such a stimulating milieu. He later recalled with pleasure this vital environment, so important for young artists



FIG 12 Jacob Lawrence in corner of studio at 306, 1930s. Photo: James L. Allen. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.

FIG 13 Bob Blackburn working on lithographic stone, 1930s. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Harmon Foundation Collection.



soaking up experiences and hearing the stories that older creative people told:

During the thirties there was much interest in Black history and the social and political issues of the day—this was especially true at 306. It became a gathering place for many in the arts from Harlem and other areas of New York. I received not only an experience in the plastic arts (at 306)—but came in contact with older Blacks from the theater, dance, literary, and music fields. At sixteen it was quite a learning experience—Katherine Dunham, Aaron Douglas, Leigh Whipper, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alain Locke, William Attaway, O. Richard Reid—hearing them discuss the topics of the day—as well as philosophy and creative processes pertaining to their own fields. Claude McKay was a frequent visitor to 306. He had more than a great interest in Africa, the philosophy of Garvey, U.N.I.A. [the United Negro Improvement Association], etc. Augusta Savage was also a strong Black nationalist and a champion of Black women.⁸⁷

In subsequent interviews, Lawrence would mention other arts people, such as Langston Hughes.⁸⁸ He clearly enjoyed being a fly on the wall: “They may not have talked to me because I was too young, but I would hear their conversations with each other. And not just blacks, but people from outside the black community—very interested artists. . . . There was this interchange. And, being a youngster, I guess subconsciously I was influenced by this. They would talk about their involvement in the arts and things like that.”⁸⁹ At the age of sixteen he was learning that art and its making are intellectual endeavors that have a social context.

Discussions at 306 might have focused on the controversial aspects of contemporary theater, the social responsibility of art, art as propaganda, and race as a component of culture, to name a few of the issues. Salient events of 1934 and 1935 no doubt elicited heated discussions: the Scottsboro Boys’ prosecution, the destruction by Nelson Rockefeller’s workmen of Diego Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* mural at Rockefeller Center, articles in the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, Nancy Cunard’s controversial book *Negro* (1934), and Aaron Douglas’s murals installed at the West 135th Street YMCA. Unemployment would have been a topic, as well as the lynchings that continued

to take place in the South and the need for federal anti-lynching laws.⁹⁰

We can speculate that Claude McKay might have talked about his article on the 1935 Harlem riots for the *Nation*. Norman Lewis might have brought back news of the meetings of the Artists’ Union, held downtown. Aaron Douglas and Ernest Crichlow would have relayed discussions about the upcoming American Artists’ Congress, held in February 1936. Plans for the Harlem Artists Guild, organized in early 1935, would also have been discussed. Other events of interest in 1935 would have included Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and the preparations of Joe Louis (the “Brown Bomber”) to challenge the German boxer Max Schnellling. Exhibitions held in 1935 outside Harlem that would have generated talk in the 306 group were the two antilynching art shows—one sponsored by the John Reed Club and held at the ACA galleries and the other sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and held at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries, which included the work of Alston, among others.

THE IMPACT OF AFRICAN ART

The big exhibition event in 1935, besides the two anti-lynching shows, that would have interested Harlem artists was the African art exhibition held that spring at the Museum of Modern Art, which brought Harlemites down to West 53rd Street. Lawrence recalls seeing the MoMA show with Charles Seifert, who led a group of artists and students there. Seifert, a self-taught historian with a deep knowledge of African history, owned a building at 313 West 137th Street, which he called the Ethiopian School of Research History. Here he made available to schoolteachers and students his extensive collection of African sculpture and artifacts, books, manuscripts, and maps.⁹¹ Like Arthur Schomburg, Alain Locke, and others, Seifert felt it imperative that African Americans learn about their African heritage. Lawrence later described Seifert as “a black nationalist who gave lectures in black history to any interested groups. . . . One of his projects (besides the collecting of books pertaining to black history) was to get black artists and young people such as myself who were

interested in art . . . to select as our content black history. . . . For me, and for a few others, [Seifert] was a most inspiring and exciting man, in that he helped to give us something that we needed at the time.”⁹² Excited by his visit to the African show with Seifert’s group, Lawrence went home and attempted to carve two sculptures out of wood.⁹³

Alain Locke (Fig. 14) initiated the discourse among African American intellectuals that pointed to African art as the foundational source for European modernism.⁹⁴ He emphasized the importance of the tribal arts of Africa in his 1924 essay “A Note on African Art” for *Opportunity* magazine and in his 1925 essay “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” for the anthology *The New Negro*.⁹⁵ Following the lead of Paul Guillaume in France and Marius de Zayas in the United States, Locke asserted that modern art had begun when French and German artists looked at and absorbed “the idioms of African art.”⁹⁶ To follow the lead of the first European modernists was sufficient reason for African Americans to pay attention to African art; and besides, looking to Africa would encourage “race pride,” a term Locke often used strategically to counter feelings of second-class citizenship among black people and to boost morale. As Locke stated in “Legacy”: “There is in the mere knowledge of the skill and unique mastery of the arts of the ancestors the valuable and stimulating realization that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance. Our timid and apologetic imitativeness and overburdening sense of cultural indebtedness have, let us hope, their natural end in such knowledge and realization.”⁹⁷ Like others who thought about modern art, Locke promoted creative originality.

Locke’s ideas skirt the concept of “the usable past”—a phrase Van Wyck Brooks first employed in early 1918. The idea took hold during the 1920s among white writers urging American artists to draw inspiration from the arts of colonial New England, Pennsylvania Shaker communities, or the Spanish and Native American traditions of the Southwest. Brooks used the concept to jump-start creativity at a time, World War I, when many writers and artists had become disillusioned with Western civilization and modernity: “Discover, invent a usable past. . . . The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable



FIG 14 Winold Reiss, *Alain LeRoy Locke*, ca. 1925. Pastel on artist board, 39 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (101.3 x 55 cm). The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Lawrence A. Fleischman and Howard Garfinkle with a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

ideals; . . . it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone . . . armed with a capacity for personal choices.”⁹⁸

Whereas Brooks’s idealism saw the past as a “storehouse for apt attitudes and adaptable ideals,” Locke’s thinking was tactical. He saw a way past the amateurish, tepid works young artists produced in imitation of art school academic naturalism: encourage them to focus on the art of the African past as “one of the great fountain sources of the arts of decoration and design.”⁹⁹ African art provided a model for young artists by teaching them to shun sentimentality and naive improvisation and to discipline themselves as artists: “What the Negro artist of to-day has most to gain from the arts of the forefathers

is perhaps not cultural inspiration or technical innovations, but the lesson of a classic background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery.”¹⁰⁰ Locke wanted the Americans not only to learn from the discipline of the Africans but also to be inspired by their art, as French artists in the circle of Picasso had been.

Locke has often been misread, especially by writers during the 1930s, including James Porter and Meyer Schapiro, and even present-day scholars continue to misread him, insisting that Locke wanted to persuade young African American artists to emulate—to copy—African art as part of a racialized project.¹⁰¹ This was far from the case, but such interpretations are understandable, given Locke’s maddening penchant, as the literary historian Gene Andrew Jarrett has observed, for planting “his philosophical feet on both sides simultaneously.”¹⁰²

Locke’s writings are impressive, however, not so much for their theories as for their tactics and strategies to achieve recognition and stature for African American artists. In his *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936) he elaborated on his views:

So we need this historical perspective [of African art] at the very outset to get at the true values of the Negro as artist. After achieving what is today recognized as great art and a tradition of great art in Africa, the Negro artist in America had to make another start from scratch, and has not yet completely recaptured his ancestral gifts or recovered his ancient skills. Of course he must do this in the medium and manner of his adopted civilization and the modern techniques of painting, sculpture and the craft arts. But when this development finally matures, it may be expected to reflect something of the original endowment, if not as a carry-over of instinct then at least as a formal revival of historical memory and the proud inspiration of the reconstructed past.¹⁰³

Locke makes clear that he does not really believe in essentialist “instincts” but instead encourages a “revival” of the usable past.

At the time Locke was also responding to the debate about whether aspects of African culture had been carried into the New World. In 1925, the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits contributed to Locke’s *The New Negro*

an essay, “The Negro’s Americanism,” which declared that there was “not a trace” of African culture in Harlem.¹⁰⁴ After considerable fieldwork, Herskovits changed his mind and wrote *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which argued for retentions from Africa. To Locke, however, the role of African art as a cultural inspiration seemed evident, and even strategically desirable, not because of a biological essence but because of its formal beauty. Locke’s admonition that African art be viewed as a useful model for African American artists became a justification for elevating Africa as a source of creativity.

Young Romare Bearden, for his part, expressed views similar to Locke’s when he wrote in the December 1934 issue of *Opportunity* magazine that “modern art has borrowed heavily from Negro sculpture. . . . Artists have been amazed at the fine surface qualities of the sculpture, the vitality of the work, and the unsurpassed ability of the artists to create such significant forms.” The quality that most appealed to contemporary artists, Bearden continued, was that “the African would distort his figures, if by so doing he could achieve a more expressive form. This is one of the cardinal principles of the modern artist.” Like Locke, Bearden also inveighed against “the timidity of the Negro artist of today.”¹⁰⁵

Gwendolyn Bennett was yet another writer of the 1930s who thought exhibitions of African art an urgent matter for the cultural development of Harlem artists.¹⁰⁶ Herself a poet, artist, and writer, she followed Locke’s lead in her review of the exhibition *Negro Art*, held at the 138th Street YWCA from March 17 to March 30, 1935, an exhibition of contemporary Harlem art as well as African art borrowed from the Schomburg Collection and private collections. Bennett first extended generous praise to the sixty-five established Harlem artists plus the students of the workshop teachers Charles Alston, Rex Gorgeleigh, Richard W. Lindsey, William Artis, Louise E. Jefferson, O. Richard Reid, Augusta Savage, and Grayson Walker.¹⁰⁷ She then observed the impact of the loans of African art and the context it had created for Harlem artists working in an expressionist style: “This primitive African art gives more pointed meaning to the naiveté of some of the contemporary artists who have branched away from the more academic forms of painting and

sculpture. The conscious and studied distortion in African sculpture makes similar distinction among the works of Harlem artists understandable. In short, African art, which is reputed to have influenced a great number of the European moderns, served as a worthy ancestry to the work of American Negro artists.”¹⁰⁸ Bennett, who in her letters to Alain Locke often solicited his advice, here echoed Locke’s own words, quoted above.

In this review, Bennett had another agenda—to promote the establishment of a permanent Harlem art center that the sponsors of the exhibition were advocating.¹⁰⁹ To underscore this need Bennett quoted from the exhibition’s brochure:

This exhibit is Harlem’s response to the question “Does New York need a city [art] center?” At the same time we hope that it will serve to create a greater interest on the part of the community in the endeavors of young men and women who seek to live up to the artistic traditions of their race. These traditions are among the noblest in history, coming down from the amazing sculpture of the primitive African in wood, stone, bronze and ivory to the magnificent paintings of Henry O. Tanner. Harlem, no less than other sections of the city, needs to cultivate a greater appreciation of art. If this exhibit to some degree accomplishes that end it will have served its purpose.¹¹⁰

Bennett then reported on the remarks made by Alain Locke at the opening preview of the *Negro Art* exhibition, when he had urged the community to nurture its youth in the arts: “He stated that a community art center in Harlem should be a place not only for the exhibition of works of art but a place in which artists might create.”¹¹¹ Although at this time classes were being held at the various workshops, and both the YMCA and YWCA had hosted exhibitions on an ad hoc basis, many felt that Harlem merited a single center embracing all such activities.

HARLEM ARTISTS GUILD

In 1935 Harlem might not yet have had an adequate community art center, but Harlem artists realized they needed to form their own organization. The Harmon Foundation’s exhibition in 1934 that the CAA had co-

sponsored had rankled many; they felt it necessary to mount their own shows, free from Mary Beattie Brady’s preconceptions about what constituted good art by African Americans. Bearden, in the same 1934 *Opportunity* article quoted above, spoke for many artists in criticizing the Harmon Foundation: “There are quite a few foundations that sponsor exhibitions of the work of Negro artists. However praise-worthy may have been the spirit of the founders the effect upon the Negro artist has been disastrous. Take for instance the Harmon Foundation. Its attitude from the beginning has been of a coddling and patronizing nature. It has encouraged the artist to exhibit long before he has mastered the technical equipment of his medium. By its choice of the type of work it favors, it has allowed the Negro artist to accept standards that are both artificial and corrupt.”¹¹² To artists like Bearden, the CAA’s exhibition program had been severely compromised by its association with the Harmon Foundation.

Although most Harlem artists employed by the government had joined the Artists’ Union downtown, many felt they needed another organization, based in their own neighborhood, that would more effectively represent their views and lobby for a large Harlem Art Community Center.¹¹³ Augusta Savage spearheaded the founding of the Harlem Artists Guild in early 1935, along with Gwendolyn Bennett, Aaron Douglas, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and a handful of others. Aaron Douglas became president, and Augusta Savage, vice president. By the summer of 1937 the guild had grown to about ninety members and had begun mounting exhibitions that included Jacob Lawrence.¹¹⁴

The preamble of the guild’s constitution stated: “We, the artists of Harlem, being aware of the need to act collectively in the solution of the cultural, economic, social and professional problems that confront us, do hereby constitute ourselves an organization that shall be known as the Harlem Artists Guild.” The goals were, first, to encourage young talent; second, to foster “understanding between artist and public thru education toward an appreciation of art” and through “cooperation with agencies and individuals interested in the improvement of conditions among artists”; and third, to raise “standards of living and achievement among artists.”¹¹⁵

One compelling issue in 1935 was the government’s apparent refusal to assign African American artists as supervisors of the FAP/WPA projects. Guild members also resented the requirement that artists “go to the Harmon Foundation to be certified” as professional artists.¹¹⁶ According to Bearden and Henderson, the guild put in place its own grievance committee and hence duplicated some of the activities that concerned the Artists’ Union, but this benefited both groups. Guild members could also be counted on to organize community protests and participate in picket lines.¹¹⁷ During the guild’s few years of existence it continued to advocate for African American artists.¹¹⁸

Alston, in particular, benefited from the political activism of the Harlem Artists Guild. As a result of the guild’s pressure he was promoted, in January 1936, to supervising artist on the WPA payroll, the first African American given that title, and put in charge of a team of young artists designing and painting murals for Harlem Hospital.¹¹⁹ At about the same time, in early 1936, the WPA withdrew funding from 306. Alston and Bannarn scrambled to raise funds to maintain their art center, and their landlord, impressed with the activity there, “let the rent slide.”¹²⁰

LAWRENCE’S ENLISTMENT IN THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

In early 1936, the eighteen-year-old Lawrence joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a public works program set up by the Roosevelt administration to put unemployed young men to work on conservation projects. When Roosevelt proposed the plan to Congress in March 1933, he predicted that the benefits to the young men would go beyond their earning a paycheck: “More important . . . than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work.”¹²¹ The program, administered by the army, provided over 2.5 million jobs from 1933 until July 1942, when it was curtailed because of the necessity for wartime military training.¹²² As of October 1935, 49,000 African Americans, 2,058 of them New Yorkers, were enrolled in CCC camps.¹²³ Lawrence most likely had high school classmates who were already in the program. Moreover, in early 1936 he was becoming indif-

ferent to high school and was not getting along with his mother, with whom he still lived.¹²⁴

Thus on April 13, 1936, he reported to Camp Dix, New Jersey, and was assigned to Company 246. After three days, his company was transferred to Breeze Hill Camp, at Wawayanda, near Middletown, New York. The camp, with 1,400 black enrollees, was involved in a flood control project.¹²⁵ In its February 8, 1936, issue the *New York Amsterdam News* had glowingly described the camp as a

modern mountain village of 84 buildings artistically grouped across the countryside. The buildings, including the five large ones used for educational, health, recreational and administrative purposes, were outfitted by the carpentry and cabinet-making classes of the youths.

An extensive educational program is being advanced at the camp. Academic, vocational and art classes are offered under the supervision of six educational advisors, six WPA instructors and nineteen Reserve Corps officers. Four Negro doctors protect the health of the enrollees.

The camp also had instructors in arts and crafts and in music. The article, which ended with the names of camp personnel, reads like a press release provided by camp officials.¹²⁶

The *Amsterdam News*, however, would scrutinize more carefully the situation at Breeze Hill Camp in subsequent issues because of a murder that had occurred there on February 1.¹²⁷ The alleged perpetrator, a Harlem youth, claimed it had been a gun accident, but investigating authorities linked the murder to a reputed loan shark ring. For its next issue, the newspaper sent out its own investigative reporters, who discovered not so much crime as racism. On February 22 the paper reported that “hundreds of Negro youths, many of them Harlemites, have deserted the Breeze Hill CCC camp . . . during the last few weeks.” The racism and physical conditions the youth had encountered there encouraged their flight: “According to reliable information . . . hundreds of youths have left the camp because of intolerable conditions allegedly imposed by white officials. Many of the deserting youths charge a ‘rule by intimidation,’ which includes exploitation at work, beating of enrollees by State Police, imposing of heavy fines for minor infractions and unpalatable food in the mess halls.” The long article details these

allegations and provides names. Working conditions were also a factor: “Thirty of the youths left in a body after they charged that they were ordered to work in water above their knees in 14 degrees below zero weather.” Another complaint was that African American WPA instructors were segregated and housed in a recreation hall with no running water or toilets. Another allegation foreshadowed the “battle royal” described in the first chapter of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “The youths also charge that the white officers exploit them by making them go to other camps to box against each other for the amusement of white fight fans.”¹²⁸ One can well imagine Harlem youths leading the desertions, since the *Amsterdam News* was delivering the paper to the camp.

The *Amsterdam News* reported in the following week’s issue, on February 29, that enrollees had staged a food strike to protest a banquet held exclusively for white officers and their friends. The paper also charged the Middletown townspeople with racism, reporting that African American youths were banned from the town skating rink, restricted to the balcony of the local movie theater, and prohibited from standing inside the train station (on freezing February nights) to wait for taxis to take them back to Breeze Hill Camp. Another charge was that the enrollees were prevented from reading copies of the *New York Amsterdam News*! The newspaper assured its readers that it had called for a federal investigation.¹²⁹

Lawrence and his mother no doubt knew of the Jim Crow conditions awaiting him at Breeze Hill Camp and Middletown. But he had already stopped attending Commerce High School in February 1936,¹³⁰ and the fate of the 306 classes was up in the air. This would be a new experience for him, and the CCC would send \$25 of his monthly paycheck back to his mother to help her meet expenses for the family.¹³¹ As in all of his interviews, Lawrence was loath to admit to any bad experiences he had encountered. He later told Aline Louchheim Saarinen, “It was a good experience, physically hard, but I’m glad I went through it. I learned the feel of lots of things—of a shovel, of how it feels to throw dirt up above your shoulders, for instance. Like any experience, it had things in it you never forget for painting.”¹³² Either at the camp or later, Lawrence made several drawings that show the somewhat humorous situations recruits would find them-



FIG 15 *Chow*, 1936. Graphite on paper, 16 x 20½ in. (40.6 x 52.1 cm). Spelman College Museum of Art, Atlanta; Gift of Catherine Waddell.

selves in, such as stints in the infirmary and grabbing for food in the mess hall (Fig. 15). He did not stay the usual six months but came home in less than four, on August 6, 1936.¹³³ Nevertheless, the experience marked his passage to adulthood.

RETURN TO HARLEM

By the time Lawrence returned from his CCC sojourn, Bannarn had taken over from Alston the duties of teaching the students—informally, one assumes, since government funding was no longer available to pay a teaching salary there. At that time Bannarn did not show up on government

payrolls, perhaps because he was getting sculpture commissions that helped pay the bills.¹³⁴ During 1936 Bannarn had two major commissions, one from Howard University to sculpt a bust of Frederick Douglass in black marble and another to provide a sculpture for a Harlem housing project.¹³⁵ Elton Fax recalled Bannarn’s impact on the younger artists: “Bannarn was magnetic. Young artists gravitated toward him like bees around a hive. Jake Lawrence, Roy De Carava, Bob Blackburn were among them. Billye Oliver who liked to draw and paint was a frequent visitor to the studio and she worked seriously while her husband, Sy, was on the road with the band of Jimmy Lunceford. Schoolteacher Dorothy Funn, writer William Attaway (*Let Me Breathe Thunder*), painter Aaron Douglas, and Claude McKay were also habitués of the studio at 306 W. 141st Street.”¹³⁶ Bob Blackburn recalled that “everyone loved” Bannarn, who was “the stronger influence as a person” and “a better artist” than Alston.¹³⁷

Bannarn’s insistence on studying the history of African Americans in the United States and his firm belief that artists should contribute their talents for the benefit of society as a whole would have touched a chord in Lawrence. In November 1937, Marvel Cooke, a reporter for the *New York Amsterdam News*, was stunned to find in Bannarn’s studio sculpted heads of the Arctic explorer Matthew Henson, the author and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and the actor Richard B. Harrison, famous for his portrayal of “de Lawd” in the popular play *The Green Pastures*. Bannarn commented to the reporter that he wanted to address the needs of African American children: “They know about George Washington . . . and not about Crispus Attucks—about Admiral Peary and not Matt Henson. That is not as it should be. I want to be a means of them knowing the Attuckses, the Hensons, the Pushkins and the Douglasses. I will not rest until they do. . . . I want to contribute in the field of art to the culture of the Negro in the same manner that the subjects I portray have contributed to Negro culture and the general culture of America.”¹³⁸

Bannarn also let the reporter know his view on “propaganda art.” He admired it but would not do it himself: “It is all right to know the realities, but we don’t always want to have them staring us boldly in the face. All art is propaganda, of course, but personally, I don’t like anything

which is obvious because I believe that subtleties are more powerful.”¹³⁹ By saying “All art is propaganda” Bannarn was no doubt referring to the famous dictum of W. E. B. Du Bois that “all art is propaganda and ever must be despite the wailing of the purists. . . . I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”¹⁴⁰

Lawrence certainly adopted Bannarn’s mission. When in 1937 Lawrence decided to paint the narrative of Toussaint L’Ouverture, he too showed determination to teach the history of African Americans, to give back to the community, and to create an art that showed his roots and had universal appeal.

THE HARLEM COMMUNITY ART CENTER

Meanwhile, during 1937 plans were unfolding for a permanent Harlem Community Art Center. Civic leaders and artists in Harlem had promoted the idea for years.¹⁴¹ After Holger Cahill took the job as head of the WPA/FAP in August 1935, he hired Audrey McMahon to continue the work she had done for the CAA, but now she would be director of the New York FAP office.¹⁴² As an advocate for artists in New York, McMahon knew that Harlemites wanted to establish a comprehensive cultural center that would offer free art and music classes; hold speaking events for writers, artists, and cultural figures; and mount exhibitions of the work of both students and professional artists. Such a center would offer more to African Americans than the art galleries that the Municipal Art Committee had set up in midtown Manhattan.¹⁴³

Mrs. E. P. Roberts, chair of the Harlem Art Committee, spoke up for the center. She wrote to Cahill praising the work of African Americans at a YWCA exhibition and ending with the plea, “I am writing you to ask you to make a direct Federal grant to finance this project.”¹⁴⁴ Cahill replied on December 13, 1935, that he was “very much interested in the idea” of a center in Harlem and that he wanted to help. He explained: “The Federal Art Project, however, by Executive Order of the President is not permitted to make grants to individuals or organizations. Our program is limited to employing artists from the relief rolls and a certain percentage of needy

unemployed artists who may not be on the relief rolls.” He suggested that she try to interest Mayor La Guardia and the Municipal Art Committee in the project.¹⁴⁵ There was an obvious need for community art centers across the country, but the movement did not get rolling until Cahill put Thomas Parker in charge of working out partnerships with community groups. In 1936–37, thirty-eight FAP community centers sprang up, with four of them established in New York City—midtown Manhattan, Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens.¹⁴⁶ The funding for such centers, as mentioned above, was shared by various agencies. The FAP paid the artists’ wages, expenses for activities such as exhibitions, and equipment. As was the case with other WPA/FAP workshops, payments by citizens’ groups or donations by local government would cover office and art supplies and rent.

By January 23, 1937, the *New York Amsterdam News* could report that plans were moving ahead: “School officials of the city are pressing plans for a cultural center in Harlem, which they hope will serve as the ‘spiritual focus’ of the community.” Joseph M. Sheehan, associate superintendent of schools, drafted a plan for Mayor La Guardia’s office to move such a center into the YWCA building at 124th Street and Lenox Avenue. Sheehan’s plan called for a budget of \$100,000 for equipment and staffing costs. Sheehan echoed the sentiments of other civic leaders championing a community art center: “There is much undeveloped talent—artistic, musical and literary—in Harlem. . . . All that is needed to make it flourish is a suitable center, properly equipped, where capable and sympathetic leadership will foster and develop the talents of the people, where opportunity is provided for musical, artistic and literary endeavor, where there may be a suitable library depicting racial ideas and progress so as to stimulate the population to high achievement.”¹⁴⁷ Progressives like Sheehan assumed that teaching the history of African American achievement was integral to advancing the cause of racial equality.

On March 10, 1937, the WPA music-art center that Sheehan envisioned was established at 1 West 123rd Street opposite Mt. Morris Park. Attending the gala opening were Mrs. Henry Breckenridge, chair of the Municipal Art Committee, and Ellen S. Woodward, an administrator for the WPA/FAP, which was paying the salaries of the

staff. Augusta Savage, as director, and Gwendolyn Bennett, as assistant director, set up classes for both children and adults in “painting, drawing, sculpture, metal work, pottery and ceramics, hook-rug making and weaving, printed textile design, dress design, wood and leather craft.” Music instruction was also offered (Fig. 16).¹⁴⁸ In May 1937 Bennett could report to the *New York Amsterdam News* that the center had registered 1,627 students, with over half of them in the painting and drawing classes.¹⁴⁹ The West 123rd Street space soon became cramped, so a new space was found to house the art activities, at 290 Lenox Avenue, where 7,500 square feet could comfortably accommodate concerts, dance performances, and art demonstrations and exhibitions as well as studios and workshops for “painting, sculpture, metal-work, pottery, commercial and graphic art and other crafts.”¹⁵⁰

During December the *New York Amsterdam News* reported weekly on the progress of the renovations of the Lenox Avenue site. After several delays, on December 20, 1937, the Harlem Community Art Center had its grand opening, with a special afternoon preview arranged for Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, the president’s wife (Fig. 17), also attended by Audrey McMahon and Holger Cahill. The speakers at the opening included A. Philip Randolph, chairman of the Harlem Citizens’ Sponsoring Committee and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Holger Cahill, director of FAP, based in Washington, D.C.; the author and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson; and Augusta Savage, the center’s director.¹⁵¹ Gwendolyn Bennett, the assistant director and then also president of the Harlem Artists Guild, also spoke. Charles C. Seifert, the specialist in African art, was still praising the speeches delivered at the opening when he wrote his book *The Negro’s or Ethiopian’s Contribution to Art*, published in 1938. Seifert interpreted the event as marking “the crossroads of the old and new philosophies in art” for African American artists.¹⁵²

The community finally had a center to answer its needs. Besides Savage and Bennett, the staff consisted of three office workers, twenty teachers, of whom ten were African American, and artists’ models.¹⁵³ Savage, however, was about to embark on a leave of absence from the center to work on a sculpture commissioned for



FIG 16 Savage with her staff of the Harlem Community Art Center, 1930s. Front row: Zell Ingram, Pemberton West, Augusta Savage, Robert Pios, Sarah West, Gwendolyn Bennett. Back row: Elton Fax, Rex Gorleigh, Fred Perry, William Artis, Francisco Lord, Louise Jefferson, and Norman Lewis. Gwendolyn Bennett Photograph Collection, 1930s. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

FIG 17 Gwendolyn Bennett, two instructors, Augusta Savage, and Eleanor Roosevelt, and at the opening of the Harlem Community Art Center, December 1937. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Bennett, as energetic as Savage and experienced as a writer, took charge first as acting director and later as director of the center.

In the late 1930s Bennett wrote up a report on the center’s progress in which she bragged about its accomplishments in its first sixteen months of operation. From November 1937 through March 1939, 2,467 children and adults were enrolled in art classes, and close to twenty-four thousand children and adults had participated in activities, lectures, and demonstrations, with many thousands more attending exhibitions and lectures. The center’s impact on its own staff had been especially gratifying to her: “A new understanding of the value and meaning of art teaching in the cultural scheme of things has been engraved on the consciousness of every person

associated with the Center.” Her politics and optimism come through in her conclusion that the center expresses “a new and better world!” Bennett, like Savage, was a tireless supporter of the arts and culture in Harlem—putting her work for the center above her own creative work.¹⁵⁴

Bennett also encouraged young Lawrence by including his paintings in one of the first exhibitions of the Harlem Community Art Center, held in February 1938.¹⁵⁵ The supportive community that developed around the center, as well as other people and institutions, constituted a movement that would nourish Lawrence in the late 1930s and 1940s. In the next chapter we will turn to specific individuals who helped him reach a professionalism in these years that would guarantee his lifetime reputation.



2

PATRONS AND THE MAKING OF A PROFESSIONAL ARTIST

He is particularly sensitive to the life about him; the joy, the suffering, the weakness, the strength of the people he sees every day. . . . Still a very young painter, Lawrence symbolizes more than any one I know, the vitality, the seriousness and promise of a new and socially conscious generation of Negro artists.

CHARLES ALSTON, brochure for Jacob Lawrence exhibition (1938)

What impresses me about Lawrence is his ability to combine social interest and interpretation . . . with a straight art approach. . . . His work has a stirring social and racial appeal.

ALAIN LOCKE, recommendation to the Julius Rosenwald Fund (1940)

I feel very strongly that Mr. Lawrence has what it takes to succeed. He has developed no attitude, is utterly interested in his work, has a definite objective toward which he is struggling, and he always is willing to give credit where he feels it is due.

MARY BEATTIE BRADY, letter to Charles Alston (1941)

I want you to look at the work of Jacob Lawrence, a Negro painter about 23 years old—who has the most powerful and original painting talent I've encountered anywhere in the country.

JAY LEYDA, letter to Richard Wright (1941)

A precocious young artist with a knack for design and a curiosity about the life around him, Lawrence was fortunate to have mentors such as Charles Alston, Henry Bannarn, and Augusta Savage. He was also welcomed by others as a participant in the vital art movement taking place in Harlem. At this time civic groups, journalists, church ministers, the city of New York, and the federal government, along with artists and educators, realized how much both the individual and the community stood to gain from the teaching, exhibition, and appreciation of art and its history. The early to mid-1930s had been years of struggle

and excitement for young Lawrence, and he absorbed the experiences and thrived in the artistic milieu that Harlem offered. During the late 1930s his conceptual powers matured, he mastered his techniques, and he began to exhibit his art professionally.

■ In August 1936, when Lawrence returned to Harlem from the CCC camp in Middletown, New York, he moved back into his routine of painting in his corner space at Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn's studio at 306 West 141st

◀ **FIG 18** *Moving Day (Dispossessed)*, 1937. Tempera on paper, 30 x 24³/₄ in. (76.2 x 62.9 cm). Private collection. Image courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.