INTRODUCTION

> The art historian will have to check what he thinks is the intrinsic meaning of the work, or group of works, to which he devotes his attention, against what he thinks is the intrinsic meaning of as many other documents of civilization historically related to that work or group of works, as he can master: of documents bearing witness to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation.
>
> ERWIN PANOFSKY, "Iconography and Iconology" (1939)

> And if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced.
>
> STEPHEN GREENBLATT, "Culture" (1990)

This is a story about Jacob Lawrence and his art.

It is also a story about Harlem—a community that gave him encouragement and from which he drew his strength as a man and as an artist. In interviews Lawrence always acknowledged the importance of this community to him. At a public forum in October 1991 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, when asked to name the "references" that inspired his art, Lawrence replied: "The community let me develop. . . . Of course, there were books around . . . and West African sculpture. . . . I painted the only way I knew how to paint. . . . I tried to put the images down the way I related to the community. . . . I was being taught . . . to see."[1]

He recalled the Harlem community as being polyphonic, made up of many and often competing voices—the Garveyites, communists, socialists, and church people.[2] Lawrence reminisced about listening to his teachers in after-school black history clubs and to street-corner orators, who told stories with "such a spirit and such a belief" that he "responded with [his] paintings." In the spirit of Jacob Lawrence and guided by the words of the art historian Erwin Panofsky (see the epigraph above), I plan to interpret Lawrence's art against the intrinsic meanings of "documents bearing witness to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation."[3] The complex interaction of events, of the visual and oral culture of Harlem, of people important to his artistic life making their entrances and exits—together these constitute the thick context out of which Lawrence created his art.

THE 1930S MOMENT

Following the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression, many millions of men and women in the United States lost their jobs, walked the streets, rode the rails, or hitchhiked across the country to find decent employment (or any employment) to support their families. They pooled their resources and petitioned govern-

ment agencies to open up jobs and provide relief. They picketed, protested, and marched.[4]

For artists living in New York, never before or after has there been a decade like the 1930s. Each of these artists can tell a story of hardships, struggles, and camaraderie. Many could not sell their artworks; many gave up art altogether. But by the mid-1930s New Deal public relief programs for artists had been put in place by both local and federal governments, assisted by private agencies, churches, and philanthropic organizations. Once employed, art workers—artists, arts administrators, and teachers—felt a sense of purpose. They were creating the conditions for an "art of the people." Freed of market concerns—of the need to adjust their work to appeal to the whims of wealthy patrons—and paid regularly by local and federal agencies, the artists could paint, sculpt, photograph, and make prints for a new audience consisting of their neighbors and the people in their communities. A host of librarians, administrators of nongovernmental organizations, art center directors, workshop teachers, and civic leaders helped develop an appreciation of the arts at the community level by staging exhibitions in the neighborhoods.

A case in point is Audrey McMahon, who, as executive secretary of the College Art Association in the early 1930s, initiated programs to give artists jobs and later headed the New York office of the Federal Art Project in the late 1930s. She was one of many who advocated public art but also affordable art that people could buy for their own homes. "To hold art a luxury is pernicious to the public and to all but a few very successful artists," she wrote in 1933. She felt it entirely appropriate that fine arts artists receive wages no higher than other artisans: "If, in the new economic era, the great collector who replaced the state and the church of ancient times as a patron of art is vanishing and if he in turn is to be replaced by the people, art must be brought within their ken financially as well as emotionally and intellectually."[5] McMahon and others were committed to the proposition that the arts in America should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Especially affected by the hard times, African American artists living in Harlem welcomed the relief programs that offered employment in the arts. While still laying claim to the legacy of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and inspired by its writers, poets, and musicians, the visual artists in Harlem came into their own during the 1930s. As Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson characterized the two decades: "What strongly differentiated this period [the 1930s] from the Harlem Renaissance was that the employment of a large number of African American artists gave them self-respect, the feeling that they were worthy of their pay and not dependent on patrons who felt sorry for them. These African American artists believed that art was a means through which they could win new respect for their people."[6] Artists were in tune with their community as never before. Their art captured the expressive culture at the heart of that community's modernity, and they began to achieve national recognition. Lawrence had the good fortune to come of age during the 1930s as an artist in Harlem.

THE LEFTIST POLITICS OF THE 1930S

The 1930s was also the decade when many artists and writers embraced the ideas of the Left. Some became independent Marxists, others called themselves socialists and communists, and many more held progressive ideas about the benefits of an egalitarian nonracist society, the necessity of justice, and the urgency for collective action. Marxism and communism seemed to them to offer persuasive analyses of the causes of the Depression and the failures of capitalism. Communist Party members were especially respected by many on the Left for their persuasive analyses and their organizational savvy and commitment to activism. They were in the forefront of organizing demonstrations, planning strategies for work relief solutions, and developing critical responses among the base of people with whom they were working.[7] These activists of the Left helped create a movement—one that embraced writers, artists, actors, and musicians across a spectrum of progressive political philosophies.

Marxist writers on art also encouraged artists to produce an art of social content. The art historian Meyer Schapiro, in his address to the American Artists' Congress in February 1936, observed: "Artists who are concerned

with the world around them, its action and conflict, who ask the same questions that are asked by the impoverished masses and oppressed minorities—these artists cannot permanently devote themselves to a painting committed to the aesthetic moments of life, to spectacles designed for passive, detached individuals, or to an art of the studio."[8] Writing sometimes under the pseudonym John Kwait, Schapiro encouraged an explicitly critical art in his writings for *New Masses*.[9] Louis Lozowick, writing for *Art Front,* the journal of the Artists' Union, specifically urged artists to embrace themes of "class struggle" for their art—to create a revolutionary art focused on the realities of life under capitalism. To Lozowick, "revolutionary art implies open-eyed observation, integrated experience, intense participation and an ordered view of life."[10] When Aaron Douglas, president of the Harlem Artists Guild, spoke at the American Artists' Congress, he praised revolutionary art "for pointing a way and striking a vital blow at discrimination and segregation."[11] Such political art, to African Americans, was on the right side in their fight against racism, and many joined the movement for a socially progressive art.[12]

It was exactly such an engaged art that Lawrence exemplified. The artist Charles Alston, his first mentor, wrote several paragraphs on Lawrence for a brochure accompanying an exhibition the twenty-year-old youth had at the YMCA in Harlem in February 1938: "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."[13] Lawrence fulfilled this promise. Like Lozowick, Lawrence believed that through his paintings he could help advance the movement for change.[14]

Revolutionary and progressive ideas, however, would not have taken hold and been the basis of a movement without personal and collective experiences of the Depression.[15]

EXPERIENCE AS ART

During the 1930s personal experiences provided a valued source of subjects for art. Langston Hughes predicted in 1926 that he would see "within the next decade . . . the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world."[16] With the encouragement of writers such as Hughes and Alain Locke and art teachers such as Alston, Henry Bannarn, and Augusta Savage, young Harlem artists fought for a place at the common table, confronted the racism that had hobbled the advancement of African Americans in the past, and created expressive works that incorporated the faces and "typical" experiences of their community. In this way the artists were very much a part of the "American scene" artistic trend of the 1920s, except that they focused on the urban life of their own community, often with a politically charged edge.[17]

In this progressive, populist decade, the audience for art was as important as the creators of the art. Most art world people then understood art as a dynamic human activity in which everyone should participate. They valued paintings that communicated an artist's personal experiences with the sights and sounds of his or her own life, everyday encounters as well as more disturbing incidents of brutality. Influential art world people, such as Holger Cahill, appointed national director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935, were inspired by the philosopher and Columbia Teachers College professor John Dewey and his book *Art as Experience* (1934).[18] Dewey was not a communist, but he believed, like the communists, that art should be a communal process that involved both the making of art and the appreciation of it by a democratic citizenry. Like Audrey McMahon, mentioned above, both Dewey and Cahill rejected the idea that art should serve only the wealthy. Artists would and should pay attention to the formal elements of picture making—the arrangement of color, line, and mass—but they believed that the communication of an experience was primary, whether as narrative or as expression of inner emotion.

Black communities of artists, however, recognized that because of race their experiences would differ substantially from those of artists in the white community. As Ralph Ellison noted in 1946: "Obviously the experiences of Negroes—slavery, the grueling and continuing fight for full citizenship since Emancipation, the stigma of color, the enforced alienation which constantly knifes into our

natural identification with our country—have not been that of white Americans. And though as passionate believers in democracy Negroes identify themselves with the broader American ideals, their sense of reality springs, in part, from an American experience which most white men not only have not had, but one with which they are reluctant to identify themselves even when presented in forms of the imagination."[19] Experience, to Ellison and others, was contingent on one's social and racial situation.[20]

The Howard University philosopher Alain Locke and others encouraged young Lawrence to paint his experiences: to represent not only what was unique to his community and to himself as a black urban artist but also what he shared with others—white men and women—outside his community. Locke would not waver from encouraging artists to express the fullness of their experiences. In 1950 he admonished, "Give us Negro life and experiences in all the arts but with a third dimension of universalized common-denominator humanity."[21] For Locke, one could reach the universal through the specific and the local, and one reached the essential American experience through African American experience. Locke mentored Jacob Lawrence, who absorbed these principles and made them his own.

LAWRENCE'S ENTRANCE ONTO THE ART SCENE

Lawrence came to maturity as an artist in the right place at the right moment. The first works he created were Harlem genre scenes, using a limited palette and simple shapes and focusing his subjects on the comings and goings of ordinary people. Lawrence had great powers of concentration and an uncanny sense of design that made his compositions come alive with linear rhythms, patterns, and color; and his teacher Alston had the wisdom not to tamper with that inborn talent. But as he developed as an artist, Lawrence went beyond design and the observation of his environment. He also thought deeply about what he was seeing and read widely. In 1943 the artist James Porter noted, "His art is founded on reality. It includes the vivid moments of actual experience as well as those vicariously gleaned through reading."[22] Lawrence also listened to the stories his neighbors told and incorporated their experiences into his art. For his history series, *Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, The Migration of the Negro,* and *Struggle . . . From the History of the American People,* he did research at the New York Public Library on 135th Street.

His pictures were thus re-presentations—"typical" scenes—constructed from his experiences, those of others, what he read in books and newspapers, and his library research. Lawrence's need to create the structures for communicating experience impelled him to stay on the stylistic course he had early developed.[23] His work quickly gained acceptance. In fact, Lawrence's style and subject matter appealed to a range of contemporary art advocates at midcentury. The expressive flat collage cubist style he forged attracted artists and critics who saw his work as modernist and concerned with form, color, and pattern, even if they puzzled over his insistence on subject matter.[24]

The very simplicity of his expressive cubism attracted not only the modernists but also those art world people who valued as "authentically American" the objects and paintings made by untutored and naive folk artists. Those who prized folk art saw Lawrence as a "primitive"; they presumed he painted intuitively, without making the complex compositional decisions that in fact he did make.[25] Traditionalists advocating an art of racial themes found the figural and expressive elements of Lawrence's work most appealing. Artists on the Left especially admired Lawrence's emphasis on working-class lives, on ordinary people struggling to better their circumstances.

When pinned down, Lawrence would call himself an expressionist. In an interview of 1985, he explained that *expressionism* means "express [ing] yourself in a certain manner, not necessarily working from the object or from the scene, but expressing your feelings as to that object or scene."[26] Lawrence's "feelings" were inevitably complex and often fraught with contradictions. The result was an art sometimes lucid, sometimes puzzling in its details, and always fascinating.

Lawrence's personal qualities of friendliness and politeness endeared him to his elders. His background of poverty and single-minded focus on his art encouraged

people in the art world to reach out to help him achieve recognition. Among those who did so were his artist teachers Augusta Savage, Charles Alston, and Henry Bannarn; his artist friends Gwendolyn Knight, Ronald Joseph, Bob Blackburn, and Romare Bearden; the writers and critics Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Carl Van Vechten, Arna Bontemps, and Richard Wright; the community arts administrators Gwendolyn Bennett, in New York, and Peter Pollack, in Chicago; the museum curators and directors Alfred H. Barr Jr., Charles Rogers, and Lincoln Kirstein (a sometime curator); the Harmon Foundation director Mary Beattie Brady; leftist artists such as Harry Gottlieb, Philip Evergood, and Sol Wilson; the museum film curator and historian Jay Leyda; and the art dealers Edith Halpert and, later, Charles Alan, Terry Dintenfass, Francine Seders, and Bridget Moore. These notables all believed in the originality and authenticity of Lawrence's art. All, moreover, held influential positions in the world of arts and culture from which they could promote his work and advance his career.

Encountering the full range of his art, we can begin to understand that Lawrence was painting Harlem modern by representing the shapes and forms of modern urban life and by translating them into symbols of struggles, hopes, and victories of the human spirit. And Harlem, as we will come to understand, was not just a site located north of 110th Street in Manhattan but a state of mind that nurtured and expanded creativity.

■

My project is not only to construct a history of Lawrence's cultural surround but also to probe that history through close readings of Lawrence's art and thereby suggest deeper understandings of both. Literary theorists have proved excellent guides to art historians wanting to refine and add nuance to their interpretations. Insights that such theorists make about literature often apply with equal relevance to the visual arts. For example, "close readings," as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has said of his own literary approach, "if utilized subtly enough, help readers to understand even more fully how remarkably complex an act of literary language can be."[27] As Stephen Greenblatt notes in the epigraph above, close readings and the heightened understanding of a culture have a reciprocal relationship; one enhances the other.[28] When acknowledging the insights of these scholars, we need to substitute "visual language" for "literary language." However, the extended captions that Lawrence provided for many of his paintings, particularly his history series, give us a unique opportunity to counterpoise the visual with the literary—to probe the potential of conjoining image and text or to test their productive dissonance.

I prefer the literary critical phrase *close reading*. Unlike the traditional terms invoked by art historians—*stylistic analysis* and *iconographic analysis*—*close reading* implies teasing out meanings more relevant to the historical moment and with deeper resonances to our actual experiences than the mere formal description of lines, forms, colors, and motifs.[29] Like Gates, I want to show the complexity of Lawrence's visual language and its effects on us, the viewers.

And so our charge is twofold, as befits the doubleness of "art history": to interpret Lawrence's art and to situate it in a coherent context of history and experience. Close readings of Lawrence's art and the reconstruction of the thick context of his cultural surround can move us closer to what it must have been like for one gifted, black urban artist to experience social, civic, and political life in the mid–twentieth century in the United States.[30]

FROM THE 1930S TO THE 1960S: THICK CONTEXT

Throughout this book I have attempted to offer a complexly layered, thick context that includes the artists, writers, and educators concerned with issues of race, art, modernity, and the "double-consciousness," as W. E. B. Du Bois explains, of being both an American and an African American.[31] Chapters 1 and 2 of Part I describe the Harlem environment of the 1930s— the people and institutions that nurtured Lawrence and other young artists and their impact on Lawrence's development as an emerging artist and a visual spokesperson for his community.

Part II develops interpretations of the themes and iconographies of Lawrence's art from the Great Depression of the 1930s through World War II in the 1940s and the cold war of the 1950s to the civil rights movement of the

1950s and 1960s. During these years Lawrence continued to work in an expressive collage style, but his art became more nuanced as his experiences of life and art deepened. The simple scenes of Harlem gave way to the more sophisticated imagery of his series, including *Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman,* and *The Migration of the Negro,* discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. His travels in the South during the 1940s, discussed in Chapter 5, expanded his awareness of Jim Crow segregation and its brutalities, and his response to racism and lynchings became both more subtle and more explicit. Chapter 6 focuses on how his return to Harlem after his southern sojourns increased his appreciation of home, street life, and the cultural geography of community.

Chapter 7 begins in 1949, when Lawrence, by then thirty-one and being heralded as the foremost African American artist, experienced a mental breakdown. He voluntarily entered the psychiatric ward of Hillside Hospital in Queens, New York, where his extended stay lasted just over a year. He emerged with a greater understanding of the intersection of self, sociology, and symbolic thinking, which he translated into complex pictorial iconographies focused on the motif of masking. Chapter 8 looks at Lawrence's return, during the civil rights movement, to the issues of segregation, protest, and justice; his moral compass helped to guide his artistic responses.

In the Epilogue I examine the end of Lawrence's career, briefly discussing his move to Seattle and his relationship to his wife and partner of many years, Gwendolyn Knight, and assessing his stature in twentieth-century art history.

Lawrence was a deeply moral artist—concerned with the fight for racial and social justice and with maintaining a positive image of the humanity of people who constantly struggle for those ideals. He was never self-righteous or sentimental. He was sensitive to his surroundings and aware of possibilities, a visual artist whose art paralleled the writings of other African American artists who pursued the literary arts, especially Langston Hughes. He spoke to the black community and painted Harlem modern; he spoke to the nation and painted America modern.