

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

The Migration Series

Jacob Lawrence and the Painted History of a People in Motion

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VII • Harlem, New York

Who He Is

Jacob Lawrence was born September 7, 1917, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and raised largely in Harlem after his family moved north as part of the Great Migration. He came of age inside the Harlem Community Art Center and under the mentorship of sculptor Augusta Savage and artist Charles Alston, absorbing the Works Progress Administration's arts programs as a training ground during the Depression. By his early twenties he had already developed the flat, angular, boldly colored style — he called it "dynamic cubism" — that would define his six-decade career.

The Migration Series

In 1941, at twenty-three, Lawrence completed *The Migration of the Negro* (later retitled *The Migration Series*): sixty small tempera panels, each paired with a spare narrative caption, tracing the mass movement of Black Americans out of the rural South and into Northern cities between roughly 1915 and 1930. The series was an immediate sensation — *Fortune* magazine reproduced twenty-six panels in 1941, and the full set was split and jointly acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection, an arrangement that made Lawrence, still in his twenties, one of the first Black artists collected by a major American museum at that scale.

"And the migrants kept coming." — Refrain repeated across panel captions, *The Migration Series*, 1941

Lawrence returned repeatedly across his career to serial, narrative treatments of Black history and labor — including series on Toussaint Louverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown — building a body of work that functions, panel by panel, as a visual historiography of Black struggle and self-determination rather than single isolated images.

Seattle and a Teaching Life

Lawrence served in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II, one of the first Black servicemen assigned to an integrated ship's crew, and continued painting throughout his service. After decades in New York, he and his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight, moved to Seattle in 1971, where he taught at the University of Washington until his retirement in 1986. He died there on June 9, 2000, at eighty-two.

NC Local Lens

The one documented North Carolina connection found for Jacob Lawrence in this research pass is a 1946 teaching stint at Black Mountain College, the experimental arts school in Buncombe County — invited that summer by Josef Albers alongside artists including Willem de Kooning. Black Mountain College sits in the western mountains of the state, roughly two hundred fifty miles from Fayetteville, and no source consulted places Lawrence in Cumberland County or Fayetteville itself. This entry documents the genuine Buncombe County tie without extending it into a Fayetteville connection that the record does not support.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Black Mountain College visit: confirmed as a 1946 summer session teaching appointment; the exact duration and Lawrence's specific coursework there were not independently verified beyond general institutional histories in this pass.

No Cumberland County connection: do not extend the Black Mountain College (Buncombe County, western NC) tie into a Fayetteville claim.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Jacob Lawrence," The Phillips Collection, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/jacob-lawrence>.
2. "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North," Museum of Modern Art, exhibition record, 2015, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1498>.
3. Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
4. "Black Mountain College and Its Legacy," Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/>.
5. "Jacob Lawrence," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jacob-lawrence-2735>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.