

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **JACOB LAWRENCE: THE MIGRATION SERIES OPENS AT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM JANUARY 21**

Epic narrative series brought together for exclusive West Coast viewing thanks to major loan from The Museum of Modern of Art and The Phillips Collection



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SEATTLE, WA – In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of artist Jacob Lawrence's birth, the Seattle Art Museum presents *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (January 21–April 23, 2017). Thanks to a major loan from The Museum of Modern of Art in New York (MoMA) and The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, all 60 panels of Lawrence's masterwork *The Migration Series*—depicting the exodus of African Americans from the rural south between World War I and World War II—will be shown together for the first time in more than two decades on the West Coast.

### ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

In 1941, Jacob Lawrence, then just 23 years old and living in Harlem, completed a series of 60 paintings about the Great Migration, the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in the decades between World War I and World War II. This was his community's story, told in images and words in poignant detail. Lawrence's epic work stands as a landmark in the history of modern art that remains relevant today.

Lawrence exhibited the series at the famous Downtown Gallery in Manhattan in 1941. Two institutions expressed interest in the series, and it was divided between them: the Phillips acquired the odd-numbered panels, and MoMA acquired the even-numbered panels.

The Phillips Collection is exhibiting the complete series this fall (October 8, 2016–January 8, 2017), and MoMA did so last year (April 3–September 7, 2015), bringing new attention to this important work more than 75 years since its creation. The two museums agreed to lend the combined series to the Seattle Art Museum so that it could be seen in Lawrence's other home city. Jacob Lawrence and his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, moved to Seattle in 1971 when Jacob accepted a position at the University of Washington, where he taught until he retired in 1986.

Lawrence conceived of *The Migration Series* as a single work of art, painting on all 60 panels at the same time to achieve unity of form and color. The complete



work appears like a large mural painting, an art form that Lawrence admired and that gained new attention in the late 1930s and 1940s, thanks to government sponsorship and the role that public art was given in bringing the US out of the Great Depression.

Fittingly, SAM will install the series like a mural on the walls of its Gwendolyn Knight & Jacob Lawrence Gallery, which was created to honor their enduring gifts to the city. The Lawrences were generous supporters of the museum and the arts throughout the region—an immense legacy that continues to this day.

“We are deeply honored to present this extraordinary series in its entirety,” says Kimerly Rorschach, SAM’s Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO. “We’re grateful to MoMA and the Phillips for making this possible.” Adds Patricia Junker, SAM’s Ann M. Barwick Curator of American Art, “*The Migration Series* is a revelatory monument of early modern American art. Now is an extraordinary moment to return to it—the themes of social justice it explores are timeless.”

“It is fitting and timely that Jacob Lawrence, great American Painter, be celebrated by those of us who knew and loved him,” says Barbara Earl Thomas, artist and Vice President of the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation. “But even more exciting is to know that generations of young people will have their first glimpse of his work, as they step into an epic story of American history, told in a cinematic sweep by a master painter full of passionate humanity.”

#### JACOB LAWRENCE - BIOGRAPHY

Jacob Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1917. His parents migrated from the American South to the North during World War I.

He was one of the first African American artists to be represented by a major commercial gallery and the first to receive sustained mainstream recognition in the United States. He exhibited regularly in New York throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, when many other African American artists were denied professional consideration.

Lawrence is perhaps most widely known for *The Migration of the Negro*, later renamed *The Migration Series*, an epic narrative series of 60 paintings that he completed in 1941 at the age of 23. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Lawrence committed himself to commissions, especially limited edition prints and murals.

Today, he has been the subject of many major retrospective exhibitions and his work is represented in hundreds of museum collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Phillips Collection.

A devoted teacher most of his life, Lawrence accepted a tenured position at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1971 and retired as a professor emeritus in 1986.

Lawrence was actively painting until several weeks before his death on June 9, 2000.

#### EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

Exhibition of the entire *Migration Series* is made possible by generous loans of collected works from The Museum of Modern Art and The Phillips Collection.

#### PROGRAMMING & EVENTS

SAM will present programs and events related to the exhibition with details to be announced at a later date. Many will be in partnership with other local organizations as part of a city-wide celebration of Lawrence’s centennial.

As part of these celebrations, Meany Center for the Performing Arts will present, in partnership with The Phillips Collection, the Seattle debut of *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence*, performed by Step Afrika! (February 16–18, 2017). The evening-length work integrates projections of the painter’s 60-panel masterpiece with rhythmic footsteps, body percussion, and spoken word to create a multi-media dance performance chronicling the early 20th-century exodus of African Americans from the rural south. A pop-up edition of the performance will also take place at the Seattle Art Museum on February 18. For more information, please visit [MeanyCenter.org](http://MeanyCenter.org).

**Image credits:** *The Migration Series, Panel no. 3: From every southern town migrants left by the hundreds to travel north, between 1940 and 1941, Jacob Lawrence, American, 1917–2000, casein tempera on hardboard 12 x 18 in., Acquired 1942, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. © 2016 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. The Migration Series, Panel no. 12: The railroad stations were at times so over-packed with people leaving that special guards had to be called in to keep order, between 1940 and 1941, Jacob Lawrence, American, 1917–2000, casein tempera on hardboard 12 x 18 in., Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2016 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

#### **ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM**

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Robert Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and reopened as the Asian Art Museum. SAM’s desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM’s collection of more than 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures and time periods.