



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Jacob  
Lawrence, 1968 October 26

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# Transcript

## Interview

**CG:** Carroll Greene

**JL:** Jacob Lawrence

**CG:** This is an interview with the painter Jacob Lawrence, October 26, 1968. Jacob Lawrence, where were you born?

**JL:** Atlantic City, New Jersey, September 7, 1917.

**CG:** Would you care to tell us a little bit about your childhood and the background, the early influences there?

**JL:** Yes. Well, you know when I tell people that I was born in Atlantic City I always have to follow that up with, "But I know nothing about it." Which is true. I know that my parents were part of this Negro migration which took place right after World War I, so many of the Negroes coming North to seek work. They were domestics. I think my parents met in Atlantic City. They were part of that movement from the South.

**CG:** Where were they from?

**JL:** My mother was from Virginia. My father was from South Carolina. And they met in Atlantic City. He was a cook and my mother was a domestic worker. I was born in Atlantic City. I knew nothing about Atlantic City. I remember my mother took me back like when I was about eight or nine or ten. And I spent a couple of summers on beaches. And up until a few years ago when my dealer who happened to live in Atlantic City invited us down I had no connection with Atlantic City at all between the ages of nine, say, and - well, a few years ago when I was about forty-eight or forty-nine. So my experience with Atlantic City was as almost nothing. And then remember my parents moved to Easton, Pennsylvania which was I think a coal mining town.

**CG:** The city of Easton? (E-a-s-t-o-n).

**JL:** I think that's the spelling.

**CG:** That's right.

**JL:** Easton, Pennsylvania. Something like a Pittsburgh, I guess.

**CG:** Yes, a smaller type.

**JL:** And I can remember that childhood because I had some experience of - I remember one very - well, not so good experience of falling down a terrace. You know there are very steep hills and things like that there. I don't think I was there too long. You know, when you think back and you're a child one summer, one year, and one experience you remember that for the rest of your life if the experience is deep enough for a child, a child's experience. I don't think I was there very long. I think my mother and father separated about that time. He was working on the railroad as a chef. By the way I had a sister and a brother - Well, not at that time, just a sister. And my mother took us to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We stayed there for a few years. And I remember settlement houses there and I think my mother had quite a hard time with us because she had no one to help her support us. And finally she came to New York. We were with the Department of Welfare and she was working here in New York. And that was it as my childhood. I can't remember any influences at that time which were outside of the normal childhood experiences, you know, school; you may remember a teacher who made a great impression on you or something of that sort, you see. And then she finally brought us to New York - that was, oh, about 1933 - where I've been ever since.

**CG:** You've been in New York City since 1933?

**JL:** Since about 1933 - or was it 1931? It may have been 1931. Because I think it was before - no - when was the Crash? The Crash was 1929.

**CG:** 1929.

**JL:** And it was shortly after that. And it must have been a couple of years after that. It must have been about 1931. And we came to New York and of course this was a completely new visual experience seeing the big apartments. When I say "big" I mean something six stories high because I wasn't used to apartment houses. In Philadelphia, you know, they had brownstones and things, you know, the type of architecture there. Like Baltimore and Washington and Boston, you know, all that kind of architecture, you see, in the houses. So you see this was completely new experience for me. And what I did miss coming here was the playing in open lots. In Philadelphia you had open lots where we used to play marbles and things like that and you didn't have to worry about vehicular traffic, that type of thing. And I did miss that. And I can remember to this day seeing kids playing marbles in the gutter which was, you know, something that I had never experienced before. Here they were confined just shooting marbles in the gutter and that type of thing. So this was an impact which left its impression. I still think about that, you know, when I have to talk about it, such as now. This move was quite an experience for me.

**CG:** Was there any church affiliation during those years?

**JL:** Yes, I went to the - my mother was a Baptist and being Baptist I went to the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

**CG:** Oh, the Abyssinian here in New York?

**JL:** Yes, that's right. Oh, you mean earlier in Philadelphia?

**CG:** Well -

**JL:** In Philadelphia I don't remember a church affiliation if you're speaking of that at that time. The earliest church affiliation I can remember, that is going to church regularly and being affiliated with being in the Sunday school and participating in plays and that type of thing was in New York here. I guess I was about twelve or thirteen years of age. And I went there. And of course I think Powell Senior was a very big name then. And I can remember some of his sermons. One of his famous ones was the dry bones sermon. And he was called on to preach that sermon not only in his own church but as guest minister in other churches. And I heard him do that several times and he was very dramatic with it. He was quite a big personality when I was a kid when I first came here.

**CG:** Yes. How long did you go to church there at Abyssinian? It's one of the oldest Negro churches.

**JL:** Yes. And I think that it's one of the largest not only Negro churches but I think it's one of the largest of the Protestant churches in America.

**CG:** Yes, in fact I think it is.

**JL:** Yes, I think it is.

**CG:** Very highly organized having been there myself.

**JL:** Yes, that's right. Now I can't remember offhand but I would say it was about a five-year period that I went regularly. I would say between the ages of twelve to seventeen probably. And then my interest and so on began to wane. And of course I was becoming very much involved in art at that time. Well, how this came about: my first exposure to art, which I didn't realize was even art at the time was at an after-school settlement house. It was the Utopia Children's Settlement house.

**CG:** In Harlem?

**JL:** Yes, in Harlem. I don't know if that's in existence now.

**CG:** You were living near the Abyssinian Baptist Church?

**JL:** Yes. We lived up in the - well, my entire living in New York between the ages of twelve

and, say, seventeen, eighteen was spent in the upper 130s and 140s around in that area.

**CG:** Were you near Striver's Row?

**JL:** Yes. Right off Seventh Avenue. That's right. We lived mostly between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. Striver's Row which was 139th or 138th Street, I don't know which now, I've forgotten - Striver's Row was 138th between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. So I was right in that area.

**CG:** What was your attitude toward Striver's Row?

**JL:** At that time I didn't have any attitude. You see, as I said, my interests were so involved in art but not in a scholarly manner. Because I didn't know what art was in that way. It was something I just liked to do. It was like I guess some kids ride bikes and some kids hike, some kids join the boy scouts. I never even thought of being a professional artist at that time. I didn't even know what it was about. It wasn't that I thought about it. But it was beyond my experience. I never saw an art gallery until I was about eighteen years of age. Which is very unusual for kids who have a background and know about this thing, have art in their homes and that type of thing. So my experience was almost like something I liked to do. I liked to color. And this was it. This was my exposure. And going to the settlement house I was exposed to arts and crafts; soap carving, leather work, woodwork and painting. It was an arts and crafts thing. And I went into painting. I did the painting with poster color and things of that sort. That was my first real exposure.

**CG:** Around what ages?

**JL:** Between the ages of about - well, this started - my mother was working and she sent us to this after-school place.

**CG:** You and your sister?

**JL:** Yes, that's right. And my brother at that time. My brother was born in Philadelphia later; he wasn't in Easton. And she sent us there because she was working all day. And I think for ten cents you'd have your lunch and during your school lunch period you'd go there and have a hot hunch and then after school you'd go there until about five or six - school let out at three so you'd be there a couple of hours after school. And during that period you participated in whatever the settlement had to offer, which was arts and crafts. So that would have been between about twelve, thirteen, fourteen, say. So it was a couple of years. And about this period. . . We all know this history. The country, of course was in an economic depression.

**CG:** What years?

**JL:** Well, the depression started about - the crash was 1929 and I think the masses of the people, the poor people began to feel it around 1931, 1932, or maybe around 1930, 1931. This is when Roosevelt came in. And then he implemented, started all these relief programs. And they set up these various centers throughout the country. And this is when I became involved in - I went to one of these centers. This was outside of the Utopia House. The Center was the first center in the Harlem area, or one of the first. It was held at the 135th Street library. We did painting in the evening there. I guess they didn't have the facilities - they hadn't set up all the places as yet. I think Augusta Savage's place was another one. This was one of one of the earliest ones and I think it was a College Art program.

**CG:** Did you know Augusta Savage in those days?

**JL:** Yes, I did. I first met Augusta Savage - I didn't know who she was and it didn't mean very much to me - they had a center across the street from where I lived. I think it was 144th Street. And that's where I first met Norman Lewis. He was there. This must have been in 1933 or 1934.

**CG:** Augusta and Norman being older than yourself.

**JL:** Yes. Norman was older. And Augusta would be much older if she were still living. She died a few years ago, of course. She had just come back from Paris around this period. I think she had received a Rosenwald Fellowship. And that's when I first met her but it didn't mean very much to me at that time, you see, because I was about fifteen. I didn't know who

she was, I didn't know of her importance in American art. Of course later I did know. She was very influential a few years later in making me a professional really in that she liked my work, she was a very nationalistic person.

**CG:** What do you mean she was nationalistic?

**JL:** She was very nationalistic in that she was of the period, she was of the same kind of thinking of a Claude McKay, people of that - Garvey.

**CG:** Oh, this is the first wave of black consciousness in America?

**JL:** Well, I don't know if it was the first wave but it was the first that I experienced. I don't think it was the first in looking back historically.

**CG:** Well, it was the first wave of black consciousness in a cultural kind of way?

**JL:** In a cultural way, yes. That's right. That I wouldn't even be sure of because I don't know for sure but it was my first experience with it in a person thinking, you know, being involved in art. At this time my contacts with people were artists, professional artists much older than myself, people like Augusta Savage.

**CG:** Who were they?

**JL:** People like August Savage were the professional people. She was the professional person in that area at the time, in the Harlem area. And I think countrywide she was known throughout the Negro communities and probably throughout the American communities when you spoke of the Negro artists. I think Augusta was one of the big names. And then there was Aaron Douglas of course. I think these two. And I think Hale Woodruff may have been a little younger than they but he was also known. Hale Woodruff, Augusta Savage, Richmond Barthe, Archibald Motley, Claude McKay the writer and poet; these were the people. . . I hope I'm not rambling. You see, the people of the early - of the renaissance - I didn't know them unless they were still living and still living in the Harlem area.

**CG:** Well, you were a bit young for that.

**JL:** I was young so I didn't know it but some of these people were a part - had come out of that although they were -

**CG:** After all, the renaissance began in the twenties and you were only born in 1917. So that you were a bit young for them. But what about some of the influences on your work?

**JL:** Oh, I see. You mean stylistic influences and that type of thing?

**CG:** Yes. In this very early time were there any teachers or any influences.

**JL:** Well, the people I came in contact with were people like Charles Alston like Henry Bannarn, the sculptor. I think these were the earliest influences. And I don't know if you would call it influences as much as contact with people doing art. Now if you speak in terms of stylistic influence I don't think this was true because they had an entirely different training than I did. They had a very formal art training. Bannarn went to the Academy. Alston had a very formal art training. He went to receive a degree at I think it was CCNY. So stylistically I don't think they had any influence of that sort. I can't remember anyone I knew at the time who had stylistic influence. I don't think this is the most important thing. I think the other influence, the contact was just as important.

**CG:** How did the contact manifest itself? Did you have conversations with these people?

**JL:** Well, I went to their schools. You see all of these people were finally workers on these various projects which were implemented at the time.

**CG:** Such as WPA?

**JL:** Well, before WPA even there was a College Arts program. And then you had the FPA. I don't know the exact sequence. And then the WPA. But they were on the very first ones and since they are older than I (I thought at the time much older), but of course they weren't that much older, they were college people, they were people in college or just coming out of college and so they received these positions as teachers in the art centers. And of course

people were encouraged to come in off the streets and work, and I was one of these. Or if you were interested you went to these centers. And many of these people encouraged me. Since I did not have a formal art training my work almost grew out of the way an unsophisticated person would work in a flat kind of pattern, color, but not academically. And they did encourage this. And I think it was a period of this kind of encouragement in art - the country was very social minded - and I think the big influences were in art. The Mexican painters -

**CG:** Such as - ?

**JL:** Painters like Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros. Also the Polish artist Kathe Kollwitz. People of this sort and the type of content that they were doing was very important to the people at the time. They were working in a social realist philosophy; this was their philosophy.

**CG:** This took on with you, didn't it, Jacob Lawrence?

**JL:** Yes. I always have to explain this. I wouldn't say that it took on because it wasn't a consciousness on my part. But that's all there was at the time. This was the way that all artists in every area were thinking. The writers, the artists, the people in the theatre.

**CG:** It was the Zeitgeist as the Germans say.

**JL:** That's right. So it wasn't a selection -

**CG:** You were caught up in it.

**JL:** That's right. It wasn't a selection on my part. It was just that this was the trend, this was it. Just like now or a few years back a younger painter would be involved maybe in the abstract expressionist type of thing, you see. Although I think this was a much greater and much wider type of thing.

**CG:** Why? Could you elaborate on that?

**JL:** Well, I think it had to do with the economic condition of the country, of the world - not of the country - but of the world; this was a worldwide thing.

**CG:** It was an art which had a social relevance?

**JL:** That's right. And therefore any youngster involved in that period in art this was all he would get. Because his teachers were oriented in this way. Their thinking was this. So he had no other experience, you know, unless it was a person who was in college. He may have had it. But even in your colleges your college teachers, everything was oriented in this - taught in this kind of philosophy, this kind of thinking. So as for myself who did not have college experience that's why I always have to qualify this as to your question as to why this became important to me. It really didn't become important because I didn't select it. Because this was all I knew. This was a natural way for me. This was my exposure. The people I knew were involved in this kind of philosophy, you see. So the selection was not on my part really.

**CG:** Yes. As we say, you were caught up in the spirit of the times.

**JL:** That's right.

**CG:** What about your education, Jacob Lawrence?

**JL:** Well, I didn't finish high school. I spent a few years in the High School of Commerce. About this time I was becoming more and more involved in painting. I gave it more and more time and I finally dropped out of school.

**CG:** How much time did you spend at the High School of Commerce?

**JL:** I think a couple of years; no more than that.

**CG:** Two years of high school?

**JL:** Yes. And I was fortunate enough at the time. . . You see I was also being encouraged to continue my painting. Evidently people saw that I liked painting. They encouraged me.

**CG:** Who encouraged you?

**JL:** Oh, all the people who I've mentioned: Augusta Savage; many of the people.

**CG:** Alston?

**JL:** Alston. Bannarn. I worked in their studios. You see by this time they had gotten these studios and the government was paying the rent on these workshops. So I'd go there and work. I wasn't making money out of art. And this is what I meant when I mentioned a few moments ago the importance that of a person like Augusta Savage played in my life. Because she thought that I should be on the Project at this time. I remember she took me down to try to get me on the Project. And I was a little too young. I think I was about nineteen going on twenty. So I didn't make it that time. But the next year she took me down again. This was something she didn't forget; she took me down to the Project and I was finally accepted on the Project. This was the end of the Project really. I think I went on in about 1939 and the Project sort of phased out about 1940 - or maybe I went on in 1938. I spend eighteen months on the Project -about a year and a half.

**CG:** This was the Federal Art Project?

**JL:** Federal Arts Project, yes. I was in the easel division. So she was greatly responsible. . . That's what I meant when I said really my first professional experience as an artist came through Augusta Savage. And of course when I went onto the Project I had the good fortune to meet many more people, not just the Negro people but other artists as well.

**CG:** One of the very positive aspects of the Federal Art Project is that it brought artists of various ethnic backgrounds together.

**JL:** Definitely. And not only that. It not only brought them together in a social manner but it was responsible for those who may not have developed as professionally as others to receive the experience of those who were more professional, you see. So it was like a very informal schooling. YOU were able to ask questions of people who had more experience than yourself about technical things in painting. They had lectures. They put out books on painting, technical pamphlets and things. I still have some of these. They're very interesting to go back to and read and look at and so on. Romy Bearden was also one of the people around at that time.

**CG:** You and Romy are around the same age, aren't you?

**JL:** I think Romy may be a few years older, or three or four. I'm fifty-one. What is Romy? - about fifty-three? fifty-four?

**CG:** Probably, yes.

**JL:** He's about that, yes. And he was around then. And then we finally had a studio. I remember this because we had a studio on 125th Street, not together, but in the same building; Romy Bearden, myself; I remember the Writer Bill Attaway was there at one time; Claude McKay had a place there. It was a loft building.

**CG:** Yes. 125th near where?

**JL:** They've just torn that down, by the way. I think they're going to put up -

**CG:** Did Norman Lewis have a studio there?

**JL:** Yes, in the next block. He'd been there up until about a few months ago. He'd been there about thirty-five years.

**CG:** Yes. I've visited him there.

**JL:** He was between Seventh and Lenox Avenues. And we were between Lenox and Fifth Avenues. But up until a few months ago Norman was there. He\_\_\_ been there about thirty some years easily. Well, we had a studio there \_\_\_\_\_. And Romy had a studio up on one of the other floors. And, you know, we worked around there. It was a wonderful period.

**CG:** Did you have - was there a sense of community there?

**JL:** Yes, there was. We visited and talked to each other and so on.

**CG:** These were all black artists?

**JL:** Yes. Artists and writers. And I guess we were there about two years. Some people would move in and out. By the way, I think the Negro Digest - I don't know if you remember that - was started there. George Norford and Philip Morrison, who just died recently.

**CG:** Who?

**JL:** Alan Morrison. Did you never hear of him? This was the period I was working on my Negro Migration series. I worked on it in the 125th Street studio.

**CG:** When did you begin the Migration series?

**JL:** The Migration series was begun about 1940 and I completed it about 1941. I received a Rosenwald Fellowship - no, let's see, now, how did that work? - yes, I was on a Rosenwald Fellowship and this was my Project to do this. I put this down as my project. I thought it was a very exciting thing. You see, prior to this time I had also been exposed to Negro history and I had done a few series on Negro history dealing with the Negro historical theme.

**CG:** In the United States?

**JL:** No, not only in the United States, but I did one on Haiti, on Toussaint l'Ouverture.

**CG:** Oh, yes.

**JL:** All the rest were on the Negro in the United States. I did Harriet Tubman at that time. I did Booker T. Washington. And then of course the Negro Migration. And that's what I was working on when we had our studio on 125th Street.

**CG:** It is rather interesting, Jacob Lawrence, because these themes that you were working on really came to prominence during the Negro renaissance in the 1920's.

**JL:** Yes. thirties and so on. The depression really sort of brought it to a halt.

**JL:** That's right.

**CG:** Here you were picking up on a theme you mentioned the fact that your parents had come up from two different parts of the South after World War I. That was one wave of Negro migrants to the big cities. And then here you were in the 1940's. And this is really what brought you into public attention, isn't it? Fortune Magazine, I'm looking at your copy, the copy of Fortune magazine which I picked up here.

**JL:** That's right. And about this time, too, the Negro art community - I \_\_\_\_ the American art community was beginning to give some attention to the Negro artist. Prior to this time I don't think there was one - well, I can't be sure of this - but surely there were very few Negroes who were in galleries. I can't remember one. Maybe Richmond Barthe. Oh, there was Horace Pippin. Horace Pippin was in a gallery. I think he was the first Negro in this time. Now there may have been some before in earlier history like Henry O. Tanner and people like that.

**CG:** Yes, Tanner was in a gallery.

**JL:** But I mean later from about the twenties, surely during the thirties, the only Negro I can remember was Pippin, which was one of the big names of that period. I think he was in Philadelphia at the Carlen Gallery.

**CG:** Philadelphia. That's right.

**JL:** In the Carlen Gallery. I was fortunate in that I was one of the people selected. Or maybe I should give you a little more detail on this. You probably know it but I'll repeat it again. I had just gotten married in 1941.

**CG:** Who did you marry?

**JL:** Gwen Lawrence, a painter. Her name was Gwen Knight then.



**CG:** Gendolyn Knight.

**JL:** She went to Howard University. Art was her major. She didn't finish at Howard but she studied there for a year or so.

**CG:** Where is she from?

**JL:** She was born in Barbados, British West Indies.

**CG:** It's the West Indies today.

**JL:** That's right. Yes, it is just the West Indies today. Her parents brought her here, not directly to New York but to St. Louis. She lived in St. Louis up until the time she was thirteen. And then she came to New York with her parents. We met in one of these centers I spoke of earlier. She left Howard. She went to Augusta Savage's workshop.

**CG:** Augusta did a beautiful head - tell us about that.

**JL:** Oh, that head. Yes, I think that's one of the best things. In fact I'd like to have that done in a more permanent medium because it's in plaster now. And I always have the fear that something is going to happen to it. So eventually I want to have that. . . And I think of all of Augusta's work this is surely one of the most resolved pieces plastically. I really like it. It's a beautiful piece.

**CG:** You know you married Gwen Knight - what year was that?

**JL:** 1941. And -

**CG:** And she's your present wife?

**JL:** That's right. And she's painting and she's been a big help to me in my work as a critic whom I respect. It's been a good relationship. Surely artistically it's been excellent. And she's a person who I respect. She criticizes my work. You know, there are things an artist will do that he's unaware of and which may not be quite right. And you have a person around whom you respect who sort of pulls you up sometimes and points this out to you. And you either accept it; it doesn't mean that you just accept it but you think about it, you see. It makes you begin to think. And sometimes it may lead you into other areas or sometimes it may just stay right there. But you begin to think. And it's a stimulating thing. And it's a good thing to have someone like this. I tell all artists this, all young people that it doesn't mean that you have to agree with the person but it makes for a stimulating thing and it's provocative when you have a person like this whom you respect. And this is one of the areas where Gwen has been most. . . And I appreciate to a great degree this type of thing that she has performed. So this is how we met through one of these centers.

**CG:** Which center?

**JL:** Well, I was at what they call the Harlem Art - well, it wasn't called that at that time. It was just one of the centers in Harlem. Gwen was with another center, Augusta Savage's center. I was with the Bannarn group. And we were both in Harlem and sort of got together. We were all on WPA. She was on the mural project and I was on the easel project. So we all got to know each other. And that eventually led to marriage. So, as I said before, I was working with the Negro history theme. It became very important to me. There was a lot of talk about it at that time, the Negro. You know the period we're living in now is not new. People have been talking about this for centuries I guess. And as far as I can remember I think the new thing, or the thing that I can remember most outside of a historical reference was Marcus Garvey which was a little before my time but not far enough back for me not to remember some of the people who were greatly influenced by this; people like Claude McKay, people like this. You asked me a few moments ago why would I say Augusta Savage was a nationalist, a Negro nationalist, a black nationalist. And this is the way these people thought. And then being a woman, too, she didn't have it easy in the art world. It was sort of difficult for her. Negroes didn't have it easy generally and of course a Negro it was even more this was another barrier.

**CG:** You mean artists didn't have it easy?

**JL:** The artists. Artists generally. And then a Negro woman artist it was even more a greater

barrier to overcome. I had a thought there a few moments ago and I've sort of lost it. It was all pertaining to this. But I'll go on. It'll probably come back.

**CG:** Yes. Well, I'm very interested in your Migration of the Negro series that you did in the 1940's. This had grown out of your interest of course in Negro history and also in the social realist.

**JL:** That's right. That's right. See the two things work together.

**CG:** Yes. Could you tell us a little bit about that.

**JL:** Well, as I've mentioned before, the orientation at that time, everyone was oriented in this direction. Everyone was thinking socially.

**CG:** Right.

**JL:** So it was natural for me to think in these terms.

**CG:** And your parents after all had been a part of the early migration after World War I.

**JL:** That's right.

**CG:** Tell us a little bit about your Migration of the Negro series. What were you trying to do there?

**JL:** Well to me it was, as I said, many of the things you do early you don't realize sometimes you add other dimensions to them later. I wanted show I guess it would be what you would call, if this was a European experience, a peasant class in America. It was a great epic drama taking place in America. The Negro has been one of the great I guess focal points of this drama which we as Americans have experienced. We've experienced through the Negro as Americans have experienced. We've experienced through the Negro experience. So you select things being interested in that and being interested in man and his desire to always better himself. The Negro you cannot pick a better symbol in America to point this up than the Negro experience. So that the Migration I think was an epic which took place and points up this experience definitely. And it was a great dramatic movement, a great drama to it. And of course you have all sorts of social implications there. Everything. The school situation which we talk about to day, the poverty, the people who were successful - and I just don't want to dwell on all the negative aspects - people moving and people getting a better education. Out of this we have the children of today who are making a contribution in various areas. It was their parents who took part in this migration, came up and worked and so on. These are all things I was trying to say in this, you know, as I look back in retrospect.

**CG:** Well, in retrospect, too, Jacob Lawrence, in your series you have 26 of these tempera on board representations in the Migration of the Negro series.

**JL:** Yes, they're on board. Well, there are sixty altogether. There are 26 reproduced in Fortune magazine, you see; that's what it is. There are sixty panels.

**CG:** Where are they?

**JL:** Fortunately they have been kept together. The Museum of Modern Art owns half.

**CG:** Given by Mrs. David Levy.

**JL:** That's right. And the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington has the other half.

**CG:** So that there are 30 in each place?

**JL:** Thirty (30) in each place. That's correct.

**CG:** And you may be able to get those circulated nationally soon. Now you were rather hard on the urban Negro who had already come to the North and who was fairly well off in that series, as I remember.

**JL:** Am I? I don't know. I haven't seen them in a long time. If I was, it wasn't a conscious thing. It was just that maybe this is what I felt. And I didn't mean to -

**CG:** Well, there's one where the man is dressed in a top hat -

**JL:** And the ladies in furs.

**CG:** The ladies in furs.

**JL:** Do you remember the caption of that?

**CG:** And they looked like death itself.

**JL:** Yes. Well of course my experience maybe I felt - fortunately we don't have that today, we had the schism of the Southern Negro and the Northern Negro at one time. I can remember that very easily that the Northern Negro who was probably just a generation up from the South or was of the first generation sort of looked down on the peasant which was the Southern Negro. And maybe this is what came through in that. I don't know. But you did at that time have this definite schism between the North -

**CG:** The urban versus -

**JL:** It's that, the urban versus the rural, you see. And you had this type of thing. And maybe this is what this particular painting which you mentioned may be my attitude toward this sort of schism; this sort of schism which did exist, you see.

**CG:** Could you tell us a little bit about some of the people who helped you during this time perhaps?

**JL:** Oh, yes. I know now I'm getting back to that thought I lost. I was about to say that the white art community was beginning to see that this was a source, the Negro artist was a source which had never been tapped nationally.

**CG:** This was during the 1940?

**JL:** Yes, during the 1940's, the beginning of the 1940's. A group of. . . I don't know if you've ever seen the books of Edith Halpert in the early periods but it must be a wonderful thing; it would make a wonderful historical reference not only to the entire art period of America but to the Negro. By the way, I think this was her idea. She had the idea that they would sort of explore and see what the Negro artist was doing. And a group of dealers got together - I think Edith Halpert was the leader of this group - and each gallery decided to give an all-Negro art show at a particular time. And they did. They arranged it and they gave it. Out of this show they would select one Negro artist whom they would have permanently, you see. Now they gave this show. And that's where my marriage came in that's why I mentioned that. I went off on a track there; that's why I mentioned that. Gwen and I had just gotten married. I was on a Rosenwald Fellowship and we went to New Orleans. So I wasn't able to attend this exhibition. Well, the date of the exhibition happened to be December 7, 1941. And if you can recall this date it's the date of Pearl Harbor. I heard about all this later. Now a gallery to me up to this time meant nothing. I didn't know the significance of it. Now I realize how many young artists do anything to get into a gallery. But it didn't mean anything to me then. I was just painting away. I was on my Fellowships I didn't know what I would do after the Fellowships were finished. I had no idea. But they gave this show. And of course all the dealers -

**CG:** Where was the show?

**JL:** Well, at various galleries. Her show was at her gallery.

**CG:** The Downtown Gallery?

**JL:** Now wait a minute - was it just at the Downtown? -maybe you're right. Each dealer was supposed to take an artist out of this show. I think Edith was the one who gave the show. Each gallery did not give a show. She gave it and then all of those dealers who were interested - the idea was to select one artist out of the show who would become a part of their regular roster. That was it. Well, we were away. And even if I had been here the show wouldn't have - I didn't realize the significance of belonging to a gallery. Well, Edith Halpert - and of course on account of Pearl Harbor they all became very timid and apprehensive about what was going to happen. And Edith Halpert I think was the only one, or one of the very few - maybe there were one or two - who finally did select an artist out of this group. The others

were sort of retrenching because they didn't know what was going to happen. They didn't want to expand. Although this was the original idea. And she selected me. Now she had a Negro artist whom she was handling before.

**CG:** Who was he?

**JL:** Pippin. She was handling him through Carlen. She was the New York dealer for Pippin. I think Carlen was his main dealer in Philadelphia. I think that was it. And she handled him here. But of the younger people, which I was one, she took me. And my Migration series was exhibited there. And that's how Fortune happened to do it and so on. And this is how all this came about. So I always owe Edith Halpert really - I think she is one of the great American dealers really. She was one of the first people to really become involved in the young American artist. You see prior to that time the dealers were involved mostly in Europeans, or if you were an American who had gone to Europe and then come back; it was one of those things. She was a real pioneer and she took many young people. Jack Levine was one, Dave Fredenthal was one; he's dead now; in fact he committed suicide a few years back. I think she took him when he was about eighteen years old. Jack Levine was a few years older. Mitchell Siporin who is at Brandeis now; he's been at Brandeis for a number of years, head of the art department. These were the younger people.

**CG:** Were there any others that you remember?

**JL:** There was Dave Fredenthal, Jack Levine, Mitchell Siporin.

**CG:** These are the ones that you -

**JL:** These were not Negro artists.

**CG:** No, I know.

**JL:** These are general artists. I'm just telling the type of woman that she was.

**CG:** I know Edith Halpert.

**JL:** Yes. Well, this was my good fortune.

**CG:** Well, she was instrumental in getting you the Fortune -

**JL:** Oh, yes.

**CG:** She has some very nice stories that she tells about you.

**JL:** Oh, very much so. I mean that person - Edith Halpert, was greatly responsible for me and my early success and I would think my latest success, because if it hadn't been for the early success I probably wouldn't have had the kind of later success I've had. Because, as I said, I knew nothing at the time, about dealers, galleries; nothing. And she wrote me a letter in New Orleans and said she would like to handle my work on a permanent basis. She would like for me to become a member of her gallery. This had no significance to me at the time. I started sending work back. And then I began to meet artists of reputation, artists I didn't know like Ben Shahn - these were all members of her gallery - Ben Shahn, Julian Levi, people like that. Well the war, of course, intervened. Between this period 1941 and when I got to know the artists in the gallery 1945 I went into the service, I was in the United States Coast Guard for a couple of years; I think it was just about 25 months. I was still with the gallery at this time but I didn't know any of the people because I wasn't around. Then after this, you know, I came back when the war was over and we all left the service. Then I began to know the artists in the gallery. So this is the story of that period. I was with Edith Halpert up until about 1953 - twelve years from 1941 to 1953. I think that's a twelve-year period. Yes.

**CG:** What happened?

**JL:** Well, she decided that she wanted to do something else. She didn't want to promote at the time. In the meantime she had taken on Charles Alan (A-l-a-n). He had come out of the service and he was interested in art. She had taken him on as her assistant the idea being that he would learn about the field and so on. And I think the idea was that eventually he would take over the gallery. And of course Edith Halpert loved the arts so, she loved the artists she was so much involved with I think when this time came that she couldn't do this. So what happened is that he was anxious to set up his own gallery. And of course she wasn't

too anxious I don't think to relinquish her gallery to anyone. So finally they came to an arrangement where they would sort of split. He took all the artists who were with Edith after 1930 and she kept the artists who were with her prior to 1930. Which meant he took the younger people and she kept the older artists. And that's how it was handled. It was a very amiable arrangement. And this is why our association ceased at this time; this is what it was. So I went with Charles Alan in 1953 and stayed with him up until about six years ago. And now I'm with Terry Dintenfass. This is the story of that whole -

**CG:** Tell us a bit about your art training, instruction.

**JL:** Sure. Well, I touched on a little of this earlier.

**CG:** You mentioned your associations with individuals.

**JL:** Yes. Now the Harlem Art Workshop that was where I was first exposed to artists of big names, not meeting them but through books and things like that because we had books around. I first became acquainted with the Mexicans, with, as I said, the Polish artist Kathe Kollwitz, and people of that sort; and historically with people like Breughel and people like that. I was able to look at these books and see how they worked, what they were doing. And I guess it was a sort of training, too. And then in 1937 or 1938 I received a scholarship to the American Artists School, which is non-existent now. It was down on Fourteenth Street between Seventh and Sixth Avenues. I went there for about a year, worked there. This was all part of my training, really formal training and learning; this was it. Other than that -

**CG:** Are there any teachers that stand out in your mind particularly?

**JL:** All of them stood out. I studied with Anton Refregier, Sol Wilson (he's still around; in fact he lives very near here).

**CG:** Very near your residence?

**JL:** Yes. He's on 113th Street here I think. He's not too well now. YOU know, he's not a young man naturally. And, oh, yes, this is not a person who had any direct influence on me in a direct way. But I can remember it had a certain kind of influence; just how I don't know. He was a sculptor even. And I remember that a great deal of talk - you probably know him, Edmondson, a Negro sculptor.

**CG:** Oh, yes.

**JL:** He was given a big show. I think in content it meant a lot to me. I never met him. He may even be dead now - is he still living?

**CG:** No, he's dead.

**JL:** I thought he would be.

**CG:** He was born in 1887.

**JL:** And he had this big show at the Museum of Modern Art. I was just a kid at the time. I was about seventeen I guess. But I remember this had a great influence on me. And also African sculpture. I don't know how this was translated into my painting, if it was at all. But I remember it had a great impact.

**CG:** Edmondson was a self-taught stonecutter.

**JL:** That's right. Yes. He did tombstones and things. Quite a few of them.

**CG:** That's right. And then, of course, you had Pippin.

**JL:** Oh, well, Pippin is one of the great. . . Well, Pippin I didn't know as a major show of his even at that time. So I only learned about Pippin painter. I don't think he's gotten the sort of acclaim that he would get or eventually will get. I surely think he's one of the top American painters of any period. I really think so. I see some of his works now. I don't know if he's had a major show. . . He hasn't had a major show has he? I don't think so.

**CG:** Not a one-man.

**JL:** Not one man. I know that Selden Rodman did a book on him.

**CG:** He was a part of the exhibition at the Corcoran last year, Three Pennsylvania Artists.

**JL:** That's right, yes. He's with shows like that. But a major focus I don't think he's ever had. I can't remember having seen it. But I really think he's - but he came later. That is, his recognition to me came later.

**CG:** He was before, I think.

**JL:** Yes, that's right.

**CG:** And here he was an older man.

**JL:** Yes.

**CG:** A veteran of World War I.

**JL:** Yes, that's right. In fact he was wounded in the war.

**CG:** Yes.

**JL:** I understand he had to support his hand when he painted and that type of thing.

**CG:** That's right. Who are your heroes in the art world? Do you have any?

**JL:** No - not individual heroes. I can't think of. I may have had schools of painting which I liked. I liked the Mexican School of painting.

**CG:** What did you like about it?

**JL:** I think the pure color, or what seemed to me at that time to be the pure bold color, the big forms. If you were to ask me then I wouldn't be able to tell you. I'll tell you in this way. But I think that was the appeal. Also the content; dealing with people, you know, the big forms and that type of thing.

**CG:** I have a feeling, Jacob Lawrence that you are very much taken by - that you have an epic sense. It perhaps derives out of your sense of history, a sense of epic proportion. You mentioned Breughel, for example earlier. And you've mentioned Orozco, and Rivera and the kind of things which they were doing, the social realists and so on. And thinking back say, on your Migration of the Negro series I was beginning to wonder if you were looking up yourself perhaps as an artist who was kind of in a sense a chronicler of the black experience in America. I just wondered if you feel this?

**JL:** Yes, this is possible. I've been asked this before in various ways. I don't know. I would say yes. But not consciously on my part. Consciously I think that - and this only comes later - because I've been forced to think about this from questions such as the question you just asked - as why, why have I gravitated toward - or why have I developed this kind of philosophy, or if I am epic, why. And I would rather think that I'm very much interested in the humanistic. Of course, this wouldn't necessarily mean epic either. I don't know why it takes on an epic, you know, kind of thing.

**CG:** Oh, maybe it doesn't. I didn't mean to suggest that. I simply suggested that perhaps you were interested in this almost larger than life type of thing.

**JL:** I don't know.

**CG:** Maybe you're not.

**JL:** Yes - well, I've always expressed myself in this way. But I don't know, again it wasn't a conscious selection on my part. Now how this developed, I don't know. It may have developed because of a lack of formal training at one time. So there fore you work in big forms which can give you (it doesn't always have to do this) but can give your pieces an epic dimension.

**CG:** When does your formal training stop?

**JL:** When does it stop? At the American Artists School in about 1940.

**CG:** And since that time you have been working as a professional artist and also as a teacher?

**JL:** Yes. Since about 1940 I've been a professional artist. That is, thinking of professional in the sense of making a living out of your art and as a teacher, yes. By the way, I do want to say here. . .you asked me who are some of the major influences - I forgot because again I have a tendency to think in terms of content - and this is a man who I think very few people, unless they actually knew it, would associate me with him - and that is Josef Albers.

**CG:** Albers!

**JL:** Yes. Because years ago - this is another person I think who had a great influence on me, just like Edith Halpert had a great influence on me in a professional sense, in a commercial professional sense - he had a great influence on me in a plastic aesthetic sense. Years ago he invited me down to Black Mountain College for the summer as a guest instructor. Black Mountain College in Black Mountain, North Carolina. It's about fifteen miles from Asheville, which is the biggest city. And here I had the experience of coming in contact with I think one of the great teachers of our time. I heard his lectures and that type of thing. As I said before, this may seem strange because if you look at our works there's no connection there; that is, he's handling purely abstract shapes, not even forms, but shapes, and not involved in content as I would be involved in it, you see. So it seems so far removed. But yet I would say that much of my teaching is based on the teaching of the Bauhaus and Josef Albers. Of course Josef Albers was a part of the Bauhaus. And much of the teaching I do, my approach to teaching is based on this philosophy.

**CG:** Would you care to elaborate on your interpretation of this philosophy, how you yourself have adapted it to your own approach to teaching?

**JL:** The Bauhaus? Yes. Well, when I teach or doing my teaching I try to get the student to appreciate form and shape, line, color, texture and space regardless of what the content may be. The content can be abstract or it can be figurative; figurative or non-figurative. But I try to get the student to appreciate this because I think when the student does appreciate this then he can almost (this was the Bauhaus theory by the way, the Bauhaus philosophy).

**CG:** Yes.

**JL:** I try to point out to them there's less chance of your becoming just illustrative when you become involved with the plastic elements of painting. So in short this is how I try to adapt it to teaching. You don't see a head as a head, but you see it as a form and as a shape. And you can work as realistically as you care to. But if you just see these things for what they are the chances are you will become more illustrative and you will never develop from this, you know; move out from this. The other way you become much more plastic much more aesthetic in what you're doing. This is the way I adapt it to my teaching.

**CG:** So much of your painting, Jacob Lawrence, since the Migration of the Negro series has centered around Negro, or as is popular today, black subject matter as far as content is concerned. Would you care to comment on that?

**JL:** Yes. I think this is natural thing. My early beginnings, as most Negroes in the United States, has been the Negro experience. This is all I knew at one time was the Negro experience. My whole background, Negro family, Negro community, everything was Negro. So I think it was natural that I would use this symbol for my expression, you see. And of course this is a development. I did do - I think this is very important to what we're saying here - several years ago I started an American history series which did not pertain strictly to the Negro theme. But I think even my reason for doing it had something with the Negro consciousness because I wanted to show in doing it how the Negro had participated and to what degree the Negro had participated in American history. And that was my reason for doing this. But if you go through the paintings there are very few Negroes in them. There are Negroes with Washington crossing the Delaware purposely so because I wanted to show how he was so much a natural part of the American experience. So that the one time I did move out from this even that was based on my own Negro experience, both historically and my own personal knowledge, my own personal experience.

**CG:** This experience as a Negro in the United States do you feel that it has made you

different from other American artists or do you think it has added another dimension? How do you view this?

**JL:** I think it's added a different dimension. I think that's true in my case - naturally I can't speak for all Negro artists - and I would even venture to say for most Negro artists. But I couldn't make an absolute statement but I would definitely say that I think any experience that evolves because of your ethnic background, and especially pertaining to the Negro it's been such a special kind of experience, I think it definitely has added a different kind of dimension than, say, another artist would have. And since we as a people have not been integrated (we may never be) I don't know because of the physical difference, you know, I don't know if we ever will be. That doesn't mean that it'll always be a negative thing but it cannot help but influence their thinking, that is, my thinking and then my work and my whole being. I wouldn't say that it added a deeper dimension but I will say definitely another kind of dimension than some other artists who may not have had this experience, the same kind of experience I've had of being Negro. Because I am Negro I think this expression would be different.

**CG:** Jacob Lawrence, could you tell us a little bit about the materials that you use to work with.

**JL:** Yes. I don't work in oil, for instance. And many people who've asked me this say "why?" And the question at times seems to indicate that I may not like it. This is not the case. You know, I told you about my early days when I was a child working at the Center. Well, my first experience with material was with poster color and brown wrapping paper or any kind of paper. And I sort of developed using the water \_\_\_\_\_ because of this and not being experimental in that way, experimenting with various media, always being involved in the content of what I was doing, I more or less stuck with this - not poster color, but always the water medium, like egg tempera, gouache, casein. And this is how that came about. It isn't because I don't like the other media.

**CG:** You're more comfortable with the aqueous?

**JL:** Yes. Well, now I would be after working so many years in it. I guess I am comfortable with it and not wishing to experiment with media, or not having the inclination that maybe some artists would have. Some artists become very conscious of media and they want to experiment with it. They want to experiment with various types of media. I've never been that kind of person.

**CG:** I was one evening in the company of Mrs. Lawrence, your wife, and someone posed to her the questions: why are Jacob Lawrence's painting so expensive? And she went on to say that the medium that you use takes you a long time to produce a work.

**JL:** Yes. Well, that has something to do with it. Here again I want to say about the expense of a painting. I don't think it has anything to do with the value of that painting aesthetically. I think they are two different things. I think one is a commercial thing. I don't think you can really put a monetary value on a painting. It has nothing to do with the painting's worth aesthetically. That's another thing I think it has to do with - well, your statement would indicate this, the time involved in producing it, the man's reputation, all of these things have more to do with the actual cost of a painting or what a painting may be worth in a material sense than the actual painting as a good painting or a painting that's resolved aesthetically. I think they are two different things altogether. Well, we know this by the way paintings fluctuate in terms of their monetary value. We know this. It depends on so many other things, so many other -

**CG:** Indices.

**JL:** That's right. And I often tell students this. I day don't get mixed up in this. You should be paid for your work but don't feel that because you get a hundred dollars for a drawing and somebody else may get five that this necessarily means that yours is better. You can't judge it that way. There are many other factors involved in this. Now it could be of course that over a period of years that a painter who has - although we know historically this may not be true - the painter who has developed an appreciation and an audience for his work sometimes this is based on aesthetic judgment from the outside and this has something to do with the monetary value of his work. So more than likely over a period of years a painter who does get a hundred dollars may be better as a painter, may be, but this doesn't



necessarily follow.

**CG:** It's not an absolute.

**JL:** No, it's not an absolute by no means.

**CG:** Who are your patrons, Jacob Lawrence?

**JL:** Well, the people who mostly buy - I guess the people who were interested in a certain kind of art during the thirties, during the forties, many of them are people who are interested in social commentary kind of painting, I would think this is true. These constitute the people who make up my patrons.

**CG:** But you do something with your social commentary because your special use, or your distinctive use of color even though the content very often might be very profound and in a sense perhaps morbid in one sense, but somehow the color always seems to humanize it to a bearable degree.

**JL:** I don't know why this is so. I guess my color is relatively pure color dealing with. . . I don't deal in tones much; I'm not a tonal painter.

**CG:** That's what I'm getting at.

**JL:** Yes. If this means humanization I don't know.

**CG:** I meant in the sense of warmth.

**JL:** Yes, I know what you mean.

**CG:** I've never seen anything by you that I'd call exactly cold except a part of the Migration of the Negro series where you have used perhaps blues and very dark colors here to indicate poverty and really the very austerity of the situation.

**JL:** I guess this is another - I guess there are reasons for this. Maybe it has to do with my - I don't know if it has to do with my environment as a child. This is a very complex thing. It's a thing that would be difficult to answer. See again I never learned color in an academic way. I never learned it in a formal way. So this may have something to do with that, of expressing myself in a very limited palette, you see, of a few colors and using pure color. You see, now knowing in my earlier experience, my early experience may have had much to do with my choice of palette. I think my palette is quite limited in color, my range is quite limited. But I would like things the way I manipulate even within this limited range which makes one color dominant in one painting, and another color pattern dominant in another; but it's really the same color.

**CG:** Yes.

**JL:** And I would imagine it has something to do with my not having a certain kind of formal training when I was very young.

**CG:** Do you feel that there have been any direct African influences on your work?

**JL:** No. This is interesting. I've been asked this before, too. I don't feel it. Of course I would like to because I would like to have some of the African influence in my work because it's been such a great influence on world art. But I think it would be presumptuous of me to try to find it or to say so, you know, because it's been a great movement.

**CG:** These \_\_\_\_\_ not conscious?

**JL:** No. If it happened it was not a conscious thing. But, as I said, I think I'd be presumptuous to say this. But, you know, the African, especially what I know, the West African has greatly influenced all of our art very consciously in the past 60 or 70 years since the advent of Cubism.

**CG:** You spent some time in Africa, didn't you?

**JL:** Yes, eight months in Africa. And that was a wonderful experience.

**CG:** Where were you?

**JL:** West Africa, specifically Nigeria.

**CG:** Nigeria?

**JL:** Mainly Nigeria. Well, all Nigeria is where I spent my time. And that was quite an experience.

**CG:** What year?

**JL:** 1964.

**CG:** Did you go by grant? Or \_\_\_\_\_

**JL:** No. We went on our own.

**CG:** You and Gwen?

**JL:** Yes, Gwen and myself. We went on our own. We hadn't been any place. Well, that is a story, too. Why Africa? And then why Nigeria? If you know - I'm sure you do - of Amsac, the American Society of African Culture, and of course their function was to sort of foster an exchange between the Africans and people of African descent throughout the world in the arts. And then over there they had the African Writers Club of Nigeria. I was invited to have a show there. This was about a year and a half before we went over, my wife and I. I was invited to have a show and then they invited me. I went for ten days. And this was my first experience with Africa. I made some acquaintances there. I got to know many of the artists. And then when I came back Gwen and I were talking and we said we haven't been anywhere, let's take a trip, it's time to take a trip, let's go to Africa. And that's how this trip came about. That's how we happened to select Africa to go to because I had made these contacts about a year and a half previous to this trip, to this eight-month trip. And it was a wonderful experience.

**CG:** What did you do there?

**JL:** I just painted. All of my content dealt with the market places. I did a series of 8 paintings just dealing with various market places, market scenes. And this was it. We both painted. And this was it. This is what I did mostly. I did run a workshop for - it wasn't a place where we painted, it was mostly discussion. Amsac set up a workshop an evening - what do you call it? - discussion - what do you call that?

**CG:** Seminar?

**JL:** Seminar.

**CG:** Was this in Lagos - the Amsac -

**JL:** It was in Lagos at the Amsac Center.

**CG:** Calvin Rawlinson -

**JL:** Rawlinson was there, yes. That's right. And Baker came later. Rawlinson was there and he implemented and set up this workshop for the Nigerians. And I sort of chaired it - I wouldn't say that I ran it because it wasn't the kind of thing where I was teaching. But we discussed ideas back and forth about art. I gave a couple of lectures there. BUT it was a very wonderful experience we had.

**CG:** Do you feel that this has had any impact on your work, your having been in Africa?

**JL:** No, I can't see it if it did. As I said, I've been asked this before. Now maybe - sometimes these things are so subtle it takes an outside observer to note it but I can't see it my self.

**CG:** Of course, African art itself is in transition, isn't it?

**JL:** That's right.

**CG:** Westernized, isn't it?

**JL:** Yes, that's right. Well, if you speak of it in that sense I would say that definitely, no. Because any influence I may have had, all my influences from Western art are conscious influences so I wouldn't go there and be influenced by those who may be going through a transition of the Western idiom. I was thinking in terms of mainly the traditional art forms.

**CG:** That was what prompted my question originally.

**JL:** Yes. And that I can't see. I think it would be much too subtle. I think about it; and then, too, here you're dealing with two different art forms, one two-dimensional and the other three-dimensional sculpture. Now if I were a sculptor maybe I could say yes or no more definitely. But being a painter it would be more difficult to see any influence from the three-dimensional. But it may be there, I really don't know.

**CG:** Ben \_\_\_\_ paints, too.

**JL:** Yes, he paints. But he's quite Western in his paintings, you know. He's quite Westernized in his paintings. In his sculpture he's surely not a traditionalist. He's a Westernized artist. He's very Western in his forms, you know, and things of that sort. That's what I meant when I said at first it wouldn't be a person like Juan Van Loo or the type of work he's doing that would influence me because I've been exposed to this all my life, you see. I know it. So that kind of influence wouldn't be then. But it would be the traditional African sculpture.

**CG:** Some of which you have hanging in your home.

**JL:** Yes, that's right. We have a few pieces there. Which I'm very happy to have of course.

**CG:** Yes. Jacob Lawrence, it has been noted in recent years that seemingly a number of Madison Avenue techniques have been applied to the art world; that is, that certain particular kind of art it in vogue and out of vogue very, very quickly and even sometimes more quickly quicker than women's fashions change. As an American artist I mean would you care to comment on this phenomenon.

**JL:** Yes. Of course your question here is a very broad one I think which takes quite a bit of thinking. So I'll just talk and more or less see what comes out in my own thinking on this. Yes, this question has oftentimes come up in various ways. And I would like to separate the creative artists from the - when you say "Madison Avenue" of course the assumption is, or I interpret it to mean a certain kind of promotion, sort of commercialism and we must not feel that this is bad in itself. First of all I'd like to get that straight. I'd like to get the thing straight here: that we live in a world - and I imagine this has always existed - of trade, of commercialism, of - well, just this as opposed to the creative world which deals in another way - is creative in another sense. And I think this is what we must realize when we talk about this. Now as this pertains to the artists, it's been my experience that with - he has to separate these two things. He cannot let his creative activities or his creative involvement become involved or let this other thing which we call Madison Avenue influence in any way his creative involvement, you see. And I feel that the only way the artist can do this, or the only artists I've seen accomplish this are it comes with a maturity, a sense of maturity. He must get this straight because once he begins to mix these things up he ceases to become either - he cannot take advantage of either one. He cannot take advantage of his own creative talents whatever they may be, neither can he fully take advantage of what Madison Avenue has to offer. I'll put it that way. And it's been my experience he can become a pretty dissatisfied and in some instances a pretty bitter individual because he's neither one nor the other. I think both of these areas are very valid areas and the artist must realize this very valid. Now I'm thinking about this whole thing. I didn't have this problem - and I don't think this is unique with myself - when I was younger; and I don't think I have it now. I don't know if this has come about because I've been fortunate enough to have achieved a certain degree of success in both areas, in both a certain degree of recognition in my work and also having been paid for my work, for this performance, you see. So I never had this conflict of having to make certain concessions to either satisfy one or the other area. You note how I always try to put this in a framework that does not presuppose that we're talking about that one is less than the other. Because usually when one speaks of Madison Avenue it is spoken of in a sense of - well, this is not as good as, you see.

**CG:** I was concerned with Madison Avenue techniques rather and Madison Avenue per se.

**JL:** Yes, the techniques. All right. Well, I'll put it this way. Could you give me an example of techniques - you say techniques here, you mean - ?

**CG:** I simply meant you touched on it intrinsically in what you have said. And that is that fads and fashions come and go and the Madison Avenue group is very much attuned to psychology and to the uses of applied psychology. And this has been in more recent years at least, some observers have said these techniques have been applied to the art realm. And that is that today we have one vogue in art, in individual arts, and then tomorrow we have another. And this is largely a promotional game. And they come and they go. And this is what I was concerned about as to whether or not -how you felt about this. You don't seem to be as an artist yourself susceptible to that kind of game. You seem you follow your own lights.

**JL:** Well, I don't think you can speak on this - I think this is where my groping in answering your question why it exists, this groping, because I don't think you can generalize on this. When you say the art world or the artists I think you have to break this down into the individual artist, you see. Now if you're speaking of me how I - and I think that's the question.

**CG:** It is. It's Jacob Lawrence we're interviewing.

**JL:** Yes. This has never bothered me. I'm aware of it. I'm aware of these things, of the techniques of Madison Avenue. And again your question presupposes a sort of a negative factor here (I don't mean you personally) what is generally spoken of as Madison Avenue and this promotion or this technique in a negative sense, you see. As I say, I'm not speaking of you personally, but generally this is the idea that I - this is the way I interpret when my colleagues or my friends speak of this Madison Avenue technique they speak of it in a negative sense as it relates to the artist or as the artist may relate to it. And, as I said before, I have never been - well, your question is how do I react to this? I'm trying to keep this because I know this will give this more - it'll be more valid if I answer it personally. And I really don't know how to answer it. I'm still groping. I'm still thinking. Because, you know, when techniques - what does this mean (I know what the word means, I'm not using it in that sense) are these techniques good or bad, or does the artist let these various techniques, or do I let these various techniques influence me? No, I would hope not.

**CG:** Well, let's just ask you another question, Jacob Lawrence, at this point. Recently, or not so long ago there was a vogue of Pop art.

**JL:** Yes.

**CG:** Now I've never seen any of your things which could fall into that particular category. Pop art is not new, it is a revival of art forms which have been used in the past. But as far as our contemporary scene goes it is new, it's a renaissance, it represents that. Why didn't you engage in Pop art?

**JL:** Well, I would say that I have a philosophy that hasn't led me into this area as yet. I'm interested in everything which goes on around me. Now if your question implies that the Madison Avenue technique has been greatly responsible for this interest (and that I feel is what your question implies).

**CG:** Well, Pop art is only one of many -

**JL:** Yes, I know what you mean. You mean the various isms and various fads and things like that.

**CG:** That's right.

**JL:** And I feel as an artist that if your question implies that this is an influence, how has this technique influenced me, I would rather say it hasn't.

**CG:** It hasn't. But why?

**JL:** I guess it's an assuredness. I have an assuredness of myself. I never protect myself against it. If I find something valid in this I surely don't turn my back on it. If I feel there's a valid thing in this ism which I think will - if I can take it and it will do something to my work or add another dimension to it I will surely do so. But I'm not going to do that because this has become a fad or has become a projection of Madison Avenue. You see, I wouldn't do it for that reason. If I did this I would become involved in the commercial aspects of what's hot today, what's the thing, what's "in" today, you see, and my value to myself as an artist would be much less. I think of myself primarily as an artist and I guess I'm egotistical enough

to think that Madison avenue would adapt its techniques to what I'm doing, to my discoveries, to my involvements rather than the other way around, you see. Now speaking both here as an individual artist and as an artist generally, you know, as we use the term the artist, I'm presumptuous enough and I'm egotistical enough to feel that. Now, as you said before, I think that naturally I cannot - every artist must work this out for himself, if he has to work it out. I've never had to work it out, you see, because it's never been a problem. It's never been a problem like that. We can't help but know that this thing exists, this thing is with us.

**CG:** What thing?

**JL:** The Madison Avenue technique, you see. We call it that. It's with us. And I still go back, I think one of the important things here is that we must not assume that this is a negative thing. Because it's a part of our lives and this is it. But I've never had this problem. Speaking as an individual I've never had to cope with this, you see.

**CG:** Yes. Well, this is a phenomenon which many artists - comment on because they're not going along with the current (quote) "thing" (unquote). Therefore their works are sometimes considered old hat -

**JL:** By whom?

**CG:** - not quite in the mainstream.

**JL:** Yes, but by whom?

**CG:** This has been a criticism which has come from a part of the art establishment in regard to some of the black artists particularly. This is what I was trying to get at. And I was trying to ask whether or not you felt that this was a problem and whether you felt there was a different sense of values perhaps, a sense of reality between black artists and white artists and so on. Now we have this in the area of music and the quality of soul which is this rather almost an ethereal sort of mystical kind of thing to pin down that black people claim to have. And I was just asking you about the coming and going fads and fashions on Madison Avenue as applied to an artist who happens to be an American and who also happens to be a black American. This is what I was trying to get at.

**JL:** Yes, I know. I think my answer would still be the same to this. I can only answer this individually. If you ask me to answer it other than in an individual sense I would say surely I've seen some very talented artists and I think any artist could answer this. I think your question you would have to answer it in two areas, the artists generally. I think the white artist up to a point has this problem. Now the Negro artist, or the artist who happens to be negro, however you may want to put it, may have this plus an additional problem. But we don't know. I mean how can we say that this - would it affect us more because we happen to be Negro, or less, or just what? I don't know. This is a vacuum which I think saps the energies of you creatively, saps the energies of the creative artist.

**CG:** Well, some of the other artists have very, very, very strong views about it. But -

**JL:** I know they do. Well, when I put out these questions they're rhetorical. I'm not asking you. It's a way of thinking. Because I know that you've thought about it and you are thinking about it. So my talk - is rhetorical.

**CG:** No, I'm only concerned about what your particular attitude is about this \_\_\_\_\_. I think you have answered the question. Let's ask you a little bit about some of the jobs which you've had. You're presently of course working as a painter. And you also are teaching - where?

**JL:** I'm teaching in three places now. Pratt Institute, the New School, and the Art Students League. Well, I enjoy it. I may be doing a little too much teaching. Sometimes I feel that. Teaching has been a very good thing for me in that I think that it's led me into areas of exploration, areas of thinking which I may not have gone into it had I not had the experience of teaching. I think, again, I may have remained in a narrower area. But when you teach, it stimulates, you're forced to crystallize your own thinking, you're forced to communicate - or I'll put it another way: you're forced to formalize your own theories so that you may communicate them to the students, you see. Which I think in turn you go back to your studio and you think about this again; it doesn't end there. It doesn't end in the classroom or in the

workshop. So for me it's been a very rewarding experience; or it is; because I'm very much involved in this; it is a very rewarding experience. And I hope and I think it has definitely given a broader dimension to my work, you see. Now as to jobs, that's one area. The other things are commissions which I've received, which I think I have carried out in a satisfactory manner both to myself and to my client. And this again has been a challenge. I don't think that my experience in the art field has been much different from that of the artist generally. I think that's what we're getting to. Again, this may be an individual and very fortunate experience for me. I could not sit here and say that my being Negro has not hindered my development. But I can sit here and say I don't know to what extent it has hindered - has kept me from developing, you see. I don't know this. Because this is what I meant when I say it's a point here that is so abstract, it's so elusive that I just do not know. I know generally. Generally the negro artist who is as successful in his way as the white artist does not get the same material -

**CG:** Compensation?

**JL:** That's right. As the white artist. But then again I look around and I say - well, some white artists do not get this. But this has something to do with our whole social condition. This does not only apply to the artist. We can pick up any book on sociology and the Negro experience and we can apply this to the Negro artist, too. I don't think it because - as I talk now things are coming to me, I think one of the areas where this is very evident is in a man like Pippin whom we spoke of a while back. Now they have claimed (when I say "they" I mean the critic, the art establishment) they have put Pippin in the category of what - they call him a primitive. Now regardless of how we interpret this primitive can usually mean two things. We usually mean the early pre-Renaissance people, or we usually mean an untrained person in a formal sense. I think that's the general broad. . . Now we'll take the latter. So when they say here's a primitive painter, a very good primitive painter, you see, this is what the art establishment says here, then they're speaking of it in the latter sense of a person who has not been trained in the formal sense. Well, they apply the same definition to Grandma Moses. But yet Pippin never achieved the material success of a Grandma Moses, you see. He never did achieve it. And I think aesthetically, plastically and otherwise he's a much greater painter. Now so this has to do with our whole American social condition here, you see. But, on the other hand, had Pippin - I don't know, I never met Pippin, I was never fortunate enough to meet him, I wish I had met him - so I don't know if he knew this or if he realized it. But in any event I'm sure that if he did it would not have stopped him from painting. See this is what I'm talking about here. You see, he can think of it intellectually, he can think about these things, and he can say well I would like to live, you know, I would like to have the money, I would like to have the material success of a Grandma Moses or someone else; and even if I didn't live like they lived I would like to say well this is of my own choice. But maybe he never had the choice to even say that I would like to do this or do that, you see. Now I don't know what this does to the psyche of the artist and I think this is an individual thing, you see. Maybe this is why I'm groping here. And this is strictly that. Now maybe to me I have - if it was a problem (and I don't know if it ever was) maybe I have solved it in a subconscious manner which I do not know you see. Maybe I've done that. You see, maybe I've ignored all this other thing around me. Maybe it's been a protective kind of thing, and I said what the hell I can't do anything about it. Not consciously I've never said this. But then again I've never had to say it. I've never had to say it consciously. But I have realized I know of colleagues who've gotten things that I haven't gotten, you see, and I know that they've been invited places and gotten big fees from serving as artists in residence in other places, schools, colleges, universities, you know. But I cannot see myself wearing this chip on my sleeve because I don't think it's because I'm an artist but I think it's because my whole American experience, our whole American experience as a Negro, you see, I guess it's because I'm an artist maybe I come in contact with more people than a carpenter would come in contact working in a Negro - you know, if you happen to be a Negro. So maybe my experience is much broader in that sense, my social experience.

**CG:** Well, to put it another way, Jacob Lawrence, would you rather spend more time painting than teaching?

**JL:** I would. I want to eventually. I sort of was \_\_\_\_ into teaching in the past - up until the past three years I didn't do as much teaching as I am now. And it sort of snuck up on me, you see. But to answer your question I'm going to start leveling off and dropping a few here and there. Because I don't want to spend more time teaching than painting. I never want to find myself in that situation.

**CG:** Are you doing that now?

**JL:** Well, I'm doing quite a bit of it now. I'm teaching 21 hours a week, which is quite a bit of teaching, you see, and I think it's just a little too much.

**CG:** Twenty-one hours a week?

**JL:** Twenty-one hours a week. And I think it's a little too much teaching. I know it is.

**CG:** How many hours do you paint?

**JL:** Well, that varies. You can't put that down to hours like that because I may come in, I may do a little something.

**CG:** Well, I realize that but -

**JL:** I'd rather put it this way: how many paintings do I produce. I think that would be a better way of putting it rather than hours. And so far it has not affected my painting and I think that again is because I've just finished a few things, projects. But I don't know what will happen if I continue this, say, a couple of years hence. I don't know if this would show up. So it's really too soon to tell if it has affected my painting. As far as my production is concerned it has not affected it as yet. So I'd rather put it that way rather than in hours.

**CG:** Yes. You keep a rigorous kind of studio sort of -not schedule as it were but you realize that this is - ?

**JL:** Yes. That's right. But I think in a couple of years it could show up. Then I could be more definite in my answer to your question. [Interruption for phone.] Well, to go back to what we have touched on or spoken about, I think the question that remains uppermost in my mind - not because I can answer it but because it is, as I said before a very difficult question to answer, and that is the Negro artist his dilemma in our society as a practicing artist. I've had the experience of speaking to many artists all my life, Negro artists like myself, and white artists and I'm just trying to think of how they may differ as artists, not just as people, they naturally differ as people. And there is a common denominator here that the Negro artist talks about when we get together, we discuss. We may disagree with each other. We discuss our acceptance or non-acceptance in the community as artists. And I'm still thinking about this question. I'm thinking about some sort of positive answer here as to how this relates to me, you know, how it has related to me. I'm very conscious of this in one respect but I'm also conscious of the fact of not letting it but trying not to let it influence my work as a practicing artist, you see. But at the same time protecting myself and getting the most out of what society offers too. If I am a success I want to have everything else everyone else wants as a successful practicing artist. Now how I am to get this or am I to dwell on it am I to talk about it; do I waste my energies by going out and telling the establishment, look, here I am, he gets this, I don't get this. How much of this am I going to do.

**CG:** "He" being the white artist?

**JL:** Yes. The establishment, yes. Not the white artists but -

**CG:** But the establishment that metes out to the -

**JL:** That's right. Metes out to the artist, you see. How much of this am I going to. . .Will I waste my energies doing this? I have to do it to some extent. Whenever the opportunity arises I have to speak out. I have to say something about it. But I cannot make this my focus. I cannot make focus this part of my activities, make this greater than my involvement in painting. I cannot do this. Because if I keep doing this well then it's sort of a vicious cycle. I would no longer be a painter. I'd become something else. I'd become an agitator. Which is good, too. You have to be some of this. So this is the question. I think this is it.

**CG:** You might become a politician.

**JL:** Yes. That's right. We know that this exists. Your question is a very valid one. We know it exists. We know that the Negro artist does have a problem, you see. He has a problem far beyond that of the white artist, speaking generally. We know this. So we must say we know this, we accept this fact. But then the question comes as to what extent are we going to do anything about this? How much are we going to, as you say, politick or whatever you may

call it, or agitate to better this condition. Artists have always done it to a lesser or greater degree. I think this is the question more than the techniques of Madison Avenue and how they may affect me as a Negro painter, or that type of thing. Now I think I'm clearing this up. I think your question would come, you see: how much have I accepted; and if I accept some of it, if I accept this as being a valid thing and a valid part of our society, which I believe it is, I think it is. I think that Madison Avenue is a valid part of our society, you see. Well then, if I accept this then I want to participate in everything and I want to have everything which this society has for me.

**CG:** I suppose one of the questions is: Do you feel that the black artists in America has any values to affirm that are different from the predominant values which are expressed through Madison Avenue? This is something which is individually answered of course. But this I think is what we're trying to get at here: Do you feel there is any common sharing of values as Americans? We talked about, for example, why is there soul music. Is there an equivalent of soul in art, in the plastic arts?

**JL:** No, I don't think so. A very general answer to your question I don't feel it is. I don't think so. I've thought about this. We've all thought about it. And I can't see it. I really can't.

**CG:** How do you regard the phenomenon that's occurring across the country of students, particularly black students, from Vermont to California, and Chicago, and Mississippi asking for black art and black studies and black this and black the other. What are they asking for? How do you regard this?

**JL:** I think they're asking for social recognition and intellectual recognition, and an identity. But I don't think this identity is always expressed. I can't see where it's always expressed through the plastic arts. Except in a very superficial sense, in a very superficial way that you look at a painting and the content may be that of Negro content. I think in some areas - now you've mentioned several things here. If you speak in terms of history I think this may have more. . . And of course if you speak in terms of history then the art falls into this. But not as a separate thing of form. You see, when you say this I think in terms of form, not in terms of content as much. And I don't know if these students - you put up a painting or you put up a piece of sculpture. I don't know what it would mean in terms of ego except that a black artist did it; you know, if you mean in that sense. But as for the thing itself I don't see where -

**CG:** That's one of the definitions that has - one of the critics has defined it as the fact that it's any art which a black artist has done. That's black art.

**JL:** Yes, I know. And I can't accept that. I mean sure - I think we've gone beyond the point where we know that we can do things. I mean we have the same mental capacity. I think that's been proven. I mean how long are we going to prove this. I do think this: I think that where this question would have more validity is in the critic. I think this is the important - not the performer or the doer so much as in the critic. I would rather put more emphasis on the critic going out and talking and being analytical to what these people, or what we are doing, you see. I think this is more important than putting up paintings and putting up shows of saying well, this was all done by artists who happen to be Negro or happen to be black or whatever you may say. And I think this is also important to the development of the artist.

**CG:** What critics are you talking about?

**JL:** I'm talking about the art critics. I think it's important for us to develop people in this area.

**CG:** This is the point that's been made is that there have not been establishment critics who sufficiently understand the black life style to be able to interpret. And students from Bennington and Sarah Lawrence and from every other place I can think of around the country are asking for a show of black art and black this and black the other. This is what I'm very much concerned about because I'm at sort of the forefront of this.

**JL:** Well, what would this do? That's what I'm asking. Does this accomplish as much as we would hope it would accomplish?

**CG:** Well, I'm not - I'm interviewing you. I just want to know how you felt about this phenomenon.

**JL:** Well, I think it's good to have the . . . I'm confused on it. I really am. I don't know if it's more important to have just shows and exhibitions and have the black artists included in just



exhibitions, you see. What I would prefer to have, and I think it may be more important, and maybe I'm not making myself clear, I would like to see a black critic on a major newspaper like many of the other critics. I'd like to see a Herbert Read or a John Canaday or people like that where he would have the same sort of respect, intellectual respect would be given him as would be given these other people. I think that would be more valid. Because it's been proven that there have been very fine painters and sculptors who happen to be Negroes. I don't see where that's a question here.

**CG:** It is a question because of the fact that the educational establishment in this country has not done it. Why are the students \_\_\_\_\_ Bennington asking for it; why are the students at the University of Illinois asking for it; why are the students at Harvard asking for it; why are the students at the University of California asking for it? Etcetera, etcetera. So when you say it has been proven, it's been proven to whom? You see, this is where we are. This is where every country is. You see, you live in New York and you are part of a community which is far ahead perhaps of the rest of the country. But even in this state Negro history is just being introduced. And the contributions of the Negro even at the lordly Smithsonian Institution are just now being recognized, you see. So that perhaps you are a little bit avant-garde in this regard. I agree with you but at the same time I'm talking about a condition of people who have not yet come up to that point. We have a situation here today of a school strike which is based on something that has to do with content, it has to do with community control.

**JL:** Yes. But this takes in more than just the practicing artists.

**CG:** Oh, yes. But it's all a part of the American social phenomenon and the artist is a part of the scene. And this whole rash of black art shows and black this and black courses of study and so on is a new development on the American scene. I guess my question actually is how do you regard this kind of thing? I think you regard it positively. But -

**JL:** Oh, sure. Definitely. But I think it may be at the expense of other areas of art, other areas of art involvement. That's what I'm saying. I think it's a wonderful thing, for instance, that we have. . . I feel just as good about a person like - what is his name? The person who's at the Jewish Museum - the fellow from Trinidad. You know him. I feel just as good about him -

**CG:** He just recently left.

**JL:** Oh, he did leave? I didn't know that.

**CG:** McShine.

**JL:** Yes, McShine. And I feel it was a shame that this fellow. . . It was a very sad thing that this fellow out West was slain a year or so ago, the art historian or critic out there - do you remember?

**CG:** Yes. I know who you mean.

**JL:** And we have people, we've always had them; we have Doctor Locke, we have Porter, we have people of this sort. But I feel that this is in the area of - I would hate to promote all these other things at the expense of this kind of involvement, you see, because I think this is where your power is. This is where it is. Hell you can give a show and it's forgotten when it comes down, you see. It's forgotten. This is what I meant when I said that I doubt if any but the most bigoted, the most prejudiced person could not believe that a Negro artist or some Negro artist could attain the same degree of proficiency in his art as anyone else. But this is where your power lies. This is where the analytical and critical approach to art, this is what I think it is, you see. And at the expense of this I would hate to see these other things go on at the expense of this involvement.

**CG:** What other things are you talking about?

**JL:** I mean the exhibitions and things of that sort, the shows. Because I don't think it's a lasting thing without the other. I think we need the two. So what do we do. Except for a few people who write about what the Negro artist is doing, a show goes on at City College, some very fine things are said about it, a wonderful catalogue was put out about it, and there's a write up in the New York Times about it. And it's forgotten.

**CG:** That's not exactly true but go ahead.

**JL:** But this needs a perpetuation. It needs a continuous involvement. You pick up something by - well, you go to a bookstore and you go to the art section where you see Herbert Read all over the place, all his books and writings and things like that. And this man has great authority, great respect, great intellectual respect. And we have people who can do this. And I would hate to see this at the expense of these kind of people. That's what I'm saying. I think we need both.

**CG:** I don't see that the two necessarily have to operate at the expense of the other. In fact it's like omitting the soup in order to have dessert.

**JL:** Yes. But most of the times when we put up the shows, when the shows go up except for a person like yourself, a person like a Porter, or a person like someone else, who writes about it; who does this? And we have to pick up our daily papers, our magazines and see what's been said about a show at City College. You see this is what I mean.

**CG:** But what about black people who have the capacity to. I mean that is, the economic capacity, ability to buy art? How do you see them in this picture?

**JL:** Well, I think they should support the arts. But at the same time. . . You see, this is another dilemma. This is a dilemma also. Naturally I would like to see them buy. I would like to see our people buy art. I would like to see them buy my art, buy the art of other Negro artists. I would like to see this done. But again I would like to see them buy it because it's a good work of art, because they thought it was a good work, and not because just to support Negro artists. If they're going to support the Negro artists I think they can support it in other ways. They can support it by putting up schools, by giving scholarships for people to study, and that type of thing. I can't say that people should just buy art, that people should just buy because you happen to be Negro. And I wouldn't ask that. I think that's too much to ask of Negro people. It's just too much. I would like to see them buy it. I would like to see them like my work enough to buy it instead of doing something else which many of them have the money to do. But I surely would not like to have them buy it out of some kind of condescending reason or say well this was done by a black artist so therefore I'll buy it. I wouldn't like to see that either. That's the way I feel about that.

**CG:** Mr. Lawrence, you had said earlier that you really didn't realize how important a gallery was at the time when you were taken on by Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. Could you tell us a little bit about that particular experience, your experience with the Downtown Gallery.

**JL:** Yes, surely. Well, like many Negro artists at the time, very few of us had had any experience with galleries. You know, we think of galleries as being a commercial outlet, which they were, which they are; and very few of us had this experience. I was twenty-three years of age. I had received the Rosenwald Fellowship at the time just prior -. In 1940 I received the Rosenwald Fellowship to do the Migration of the Negro series. Which I did. And , you know, when I think back to that time I guess we oftentimes say in life how certain things seemed to happen simultaneously and they result in a certain thing, result in a certain positive thing developing. Well, this is what happened. I had done a few series. I had done a series on Harriet Tubman. I had done a series on John Brown. And the latest series about 1940 I applied for a Rosenwald Fellowship to do the Migration series. Which I did do. I didn't know what would happen to it. I had no idea. I was fascinated by this subject. I was very involved in Negro history at the time. I did this series. I'm just trying to think. I think it was through. . .oh, yes, and at the same time - END OF SIDE 1 SIDE 2 - November 25, 1968\* \*(On page 74 Mr. Greene says "today is November 25, 1968." I am assuming they began Side 2 on that date.)

**CG:** Okay.

**JL:** Oh, yes. Now -

**CG:** The Downtown Gallery.

**JL:** Yes. At the same time I was doing this I learned much later that there was a group of galleries which were interested in making a survey of the Negro artists, what they were doing and so on, in planning to take them on, to take some of them on, to give a show. There were a number of them planning to give a show of the Negro artists, and out of this show they were to select one Negro artist which they would add to their roster to handle. Along about this time, too, as I prefaced this earlier, there were many things happening. We were on the verge of war. Europe was in the war. Pearl Harbor had not been attacked yet. In the

meantime they had planned this show. They had gotten all of these artists together, names, and so on. And I was one of these people selected by the Downtown Gallery to show. I think the Downtown Gallery was the gallery which was to show all of these artists and then the dealers were to come, they could see them and they would select an artist out of this group. I think the only artists at that time, if my memory served me right, who had a commercial outlet for his work, that had reached this kind of professionalism was Horace Pippin. The Carlen Gallery in Philadelphia was handling his work and I think his New York outlet was the Downtown Gallery. I knew nothing about this. I was very naive. I think I had received my second Rosenwald. This was 1941 and at that time Gwen and I got married and we went to New Orleans. So I didn't know all this was happening. I learned this much later. The show was given. The date of the opening of the show was December 7, 1941. And I was in New Orleans not only on my honeymoon but I had received a Rosenwald (I think it was my third, I said just now it was my second), my third Rosenwald. And that's when I did my John Brown series. I did it down there. In the meantime I didn't realize the importance of this show. I didn't realize the importance of the Downtown Gallery. I had no idea about the commercial art market whatsoever. Well, what happened was Edith Halpert was one of the top names in the American art field at that time as a dealer. She gave the show. And of course everybody was very jittery because of - no, that wasn't it, I'm sorry. I'm thinking while I'm talking here. The show opened December 7. Of course we all know this is I had been invited to someone's home in New Orleans to hear the symphony. And the symphony was interrupted to tell us that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Ordinarily I would have been excited. I should have been excited about the opening of the show in New York. But, as I said, I was quite naive at the time. And we all talked about it and so on. And, as people will do, as everybody was doing. So I didn't know what was going on in New York. Well, I found out later of course that this prior commitment that the dealers had to select an artist out of this show at the Downtown Gallery they all sort of just let that go by because, you know, they didn't know what was happening, everyone was jittery, everything was happening; so they went back on their commitment. And Edith Halpert was the only dealer who went through with this prior commitment to select an artist. And I keep saying this because I realize how fortunate I was at the time that I was the artist selected to be added to her roster.

**CG:** The Downtown Gallery.

**JL:** The Downtown Gallery.

**CG:** Who were some of the other people she had on her roster?

**JL:** Oh, some of the others were people like Ben Shahn, Kuniyoshi, Charles Sheeler, Niles Spencer. And among the younger people there were Jack Levine and David Fredenthal. And so she had some of the top names, many of the top names in American art; Ben Shahn. I don't think I mentioned Ben Shahn.

**CG:** You did mention him.

**JL:** Many of the top names in American art at the time. And of course again these names didn't mean too much to me at this time although I had heard of them from reading periodicals and so on. But, as I mentioned a few moments ago, I was fortunate enough to have been the artist she selected to become part of her gallery. Well, she sent me this letter and she said she'd like me to join the gallery and when I arrived back in New York she'd like me to sign a contract. Gwen and I read it. We were still very naive, you know, we didn't know anything about this. Oh, she told me to send her some paintings, "send me anything that I was doing down there." Again I didn't know this. In the meantime Edith Halpert had contacted Fortune MAGAZINE because she thought that Fortune would be very interested in seeing these things. The things which I showed at the Downtown Gallery was the Migration series. So she contacted Fortune magazine. As a result of this contact they reproduced 26 of a series of 60 panels which I did on the Negro migration. So this is what was happening. And this came out while I was down there. And I guess this is what you would call my first really big exposure. And I don't think I've had anything bigger than that. Maybe I've done something to equal that. Although I don't know about that. I think this was my really biggest exposure to the art world since I've been working.

**CG:** How were you received by the critics?

**JL:** Very well. I was received very well by the critics. Well, just that. And again I say it, it didn't mean very much to me at the time. You know I didn't know about the art world. I had

been confined to the Harlem community, not had been - I was all my life confined to the Harlem community. This is where I lived. This is where I grew up. This is where I got the material of my painting, the content of my painting and so on. So I just never thought of this. I just hadn't realized at the time what it really was, what it really meant to me. And I look back now and I said, I ought not to say that had anyone come along and said well we want to handle your work I would have gone with them because I had no judgment. It was just fortunate that I got one of the big names Edith Halpert at the time in the art world. That's what I mean by these things coming together which seem to influence our life a great deal. We don't know it's happening at the time. So we think of what happened at that time. They were interested in the Negro artists, they suddenly became interested \_\_\_\_ Pearl Harbor. I had done the Negro Migration series. See all of these things coming together. I think the American art world was becoming very conscious of the young American artists, not Negro artists necessarily, but of the young American artists. So as a result of this it created another focus of the Negro artist. You see, because he was one of the young American artists, too. So all of these factors coming together was a very happy event for me entirely. Going back to it now I look at it and I almost say well suppose these things hadn't come together what would have happened. I think I would have continued painting. I also want to say this because I think it's very important. There were people before this, Negro people who were very important in making in bringing to the established art community at the time these Negro artists who became a part of the show at the Downtown Gallery. And I must give credit to a man like Alain Locke - Dr. Locke, who I think was very, very important in bringing us to the stage where we could be recognized by the art establishment. I don't want to leave this out because I think it's a very important thing. And if it hadn't been for people like this - and I won't mention Porter because I don't think Porter was as active at that time. He was a younger man.

**CG:** He was an artist himself.

**JL:** Yes. He was working himself so although later on he did quite a bit of writing which he's still doing now but I think Alain Locke was really the person at that time. And of course along with the Harmon Foundation who gave awards in all the arts, poetry, music, writing, and the plastic arts. And this was encouragement. So all of these people were responsible in making it possible by encouraging us to paint up to the point or up to the time when the art establishment was ready to take notice of what was going on. So this is how I became a member of the Downtown Gallery. When I arrived back in New York I went to see Edith Halpert, as she had requested in her letter. I didn't even know it was a part of the gallery. I asked for a contract. And she said, well you really don't have to sign a contract. Give your work to me and I will handle it for you and I will receive a commission out of sales. This is the way it works. So I said okay. This is how this developed. Of course, another very important aspect of this relationship was meeting many of the top names at the time, meeting people like Ben Shahn, meeting people like Niles Spencer. These were the older people. And of course I met the younger artists like myself - like Jack Levine, people like David Fredenthal. And this is how it all started, how I became more a part of the art world.

**CG:** You were very fortunate, of course, in your gallery. Could you tell us a little bit about your Migration of the Negro series, tell us a little bit about what it was and how you happened to be inspired to do this particular series.

**JL:** Yes. Well, as I mentioned before, I was very involved with Negro history at the time. I think my first involvement came about from hearing someone at the Harlem YMCA tell the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian liberator who is often referred to as the George Washington of Haiti. And from that I did the Booker T. Washington and I did the Harriet Tubman series. Now all of these dealt with historical, the Negro in a historical sense. At the same time I was doing contemporary single pieces, things dealing with the contemporary scene, my life in Harlem, Harlem scenes and so on. And I guess it was inevitable that I would arrive at doing something closer to the contemporary. And just how I happened to get the idea to do the Migration I don't know. Except that my parents maybe were part of this. I was a product of it as a child. I was born in Atlantic City I think my mother and father met there and, you know, they married there.

**CG:** A generation before.

**JL:** That's right, a generation before. My mother was a domestic worker. My father was a cook on the railroad later on but he was cooking in one of the establishments in Atlantic City. And they were a part of this migration, the migration from the South. I guess I somehow

began to tie this up with the Negroes in the North and this great influx carbon. And since I was involved in doing a series of panels telling the story in this series, this is how it came about to do this series of the tribulations, what made the Negroes move, and so on. This is how this came about.

**CG:** Did you do research in order to do this?

**JL:** Yes, I did quite a bit of research. Again I was fortunate in that in that we had the Schomburg Library which had become one of my favorite places to go.

**CG:** What is the Schomburg?

**JL:** The Schomburg Library is one of the most extensive libraries dealing with Negro - not necessarily just American Negro - but Negro history in the world. It was established by Arthur Schomburg who was a Puerto Rican of African descent. He had these books and he established this library. This became a favorite place of mine to go and work and do research. And this is where I think I read many of the books like books of Du Bois, books of - well, he was one of my favorites - and many books like this. And this is how this story developed. To me it was a very dramatic thing of people moving, this great trek, you know. This is the historical thing I think which fascinates us all. And we often hear of people all over the world that make these treks. And it's a very dramatic thing. This may have fascinated me greatly. And this is how the Negro Migration theme came into being. In the meantime, as I said before, I didn't know what would \_\_\_\_\_ happen to this. I had no idea what the response would be. They were finally sold - they were exhibited -

**CG:** Where?

**JL:** The first exhibition of course was at the Downtown Gallery. The next exhibition was at the Museum of Modern Art in 1944 - I was in the Coast Guard then -. And I think they were exhibited along with some paintings of the Coast Guard period that I was doing. And Fortune in the meantime had reproduced 26 of the 60 panels in full color. And they were finally sold to the . . . I think somebody bought them and I think they made a donation.

**CG:** Mrs. David Levy.

**JL:** That's right - to the Museum of Modern Art and to the Phillips Memorial Gallery.

**CG:** Phillips in Washington, yes.

**JL:** Yes.

**CG:** And they each have 0 of these panels, so that the agreement was, as I understand it, that when either of the galleries decides to put on a full Migration show that the other gallery will lend the other half. One gallery has the even numbers.

**JL:** The even numbers, yes. I can't remember which one now.

**CG:** I can look at the catalogue of the show.

**JL:** Well, that's how this came about. Since then I have continued this involvement. I like to think that I've expanded my interest to include not just the Negro theme but man generally and maybe if this speaks through the Negro I think this is valid also. I don't like to think of myself as just confined to this. I'll put it this way, although my themes may deal with the Negro but I would like to think of it as dealing with all people, the struggle of man to always better his condition and to move forward, you see, in a social manner however you may interpret this. I like to think that I have grown and developed to where I can see it in this way.

**CG:** In other words, you're concerned about, you feel, as has been said of you, you have achieved a kind of universality in what you've done artistically. And you use the materials at hand, you use that which you know best.

**JL:** I would like to think so. I would like to think I've been successful in that. Well, I just keep working in that manner. This is what I know. If I can speak, and if my paintings have to make a statement dealing with all mankind I think it has to be done from the Negro point of view. This is what I know. I don't think the Negro situation is different. It may differ in a small cultural sense but I think all people aspire, all people strive toward a better human

condition, a better mental condition generally. And if I can express that through the Negro image I would like to think that I'm making some contribution in this area.

**CG:** Well then, from your Migration of the Negro series which really catapulted you to national attention, and you were then of course in the Coast Guard, but your interest has been one that was grounded in history, particularly the history of the Negro not only in the United States but you were also interested in Toussaint L'Ouverture and you mentioned Haiti. Can you tell us about some of the other series that you've done. Because Jacob Lawrence, you are known as one of the contemporary artists who has been very successful at narrative painting. And so you have done other narratives, haven't you?

**JL:** Yes. Well, I think I've mentioned before that prior to the migration series, the Frederick Douglass and Toussaint L'Ouverture were first. And when I went into the service, the United States Coast Guard - I was in the service 25 months - I came out and then I did a series on the war, a war series, my experiences in the war. And this was purchased and given to the Whitney Museum. That's in their collection now.

**CG:** Is this the Coast Guard series?

**JL:** No, it's not dealing with the Coast Guard. It's dealing with the war generally, World War II generally. The things I did in the Coast Guard are in the Coast Guard archives. They deal with the activities of the Coast Guard. I received a PR rating, which was public relations, which enabled me to paint. I was with a very sympathetic. . . Oh, this is interesting I think you ought to know this. My first assignment with the Coast Guard was what they call boot training. It's a camp that really gets you ready to serve. You sort of do physical exercises, you take all your shots and things like that, you march, and it prepares you I guess for service. Well, this camp was in St. Augustine, Florida. It was also an officer's training camp. I was sent there and served there. The commandant, I guess you call it, of this camp was Captain Rosenthal. I think he was a career man in the Coast Guard, a very sensitive man. I've always remember him. He was an art photographer; you know, he did photography in the sense that he was very concerned about the art of photography. And he was very interested in art. And he encouraged me to paint. He gave me the opportunity to paint and so on. Then I was shipped from there. My first ship was aboard the U.S.S. Sea Cloud which belonged to Ambassador Davies. Many of these people who owned yachts gave them or loaned them to the government during the war for a dollar a year. This was a weather patrol ship. You know, Ambassador Davies was Ambassador to Russia before the war. There I had the good fortune to serve with Captain Carleton Skinner. This is when they were trying out this idea of the integrated crews aboard ship. And probably in the Army, too - I don't know the details of that - but I know this was the first experiment, as they called it. They always experimented with these things. And this ship was made up of a crew of integrated. . . It was what they called an integrated ship, that is white and black seamen. And of course the captain had to be sympathetic to this idea. And they selected Captain Skinner to command the ship. I went into the service as a steward mate. You see, up to that time there was a tradition that Negroes going into the navy - the Coast Guard \_\_\_\_ under the Navy during wartime - they all became steward mates and chefs. So this was my rating. That is, most of us became this. And during World War II they began to break this. I served on this ship. I've forgotten now for how long. And Captain Skinner saw that I got a PR rating which was public relations. Which meant you did either photography, or you did painting, various things of that sort. And I received a PR rating which enabled me to paint. The things I did went to the United States Archives. So I was very fortunate all through that war period. This was a weather control ship. Then after that I was assigned to a ship, a troop transport with the same Captain Rosenthal who was stationed in New Orleans' who headed the camp there, was the commander of this ship, the troop transport. So he asked for me. And I went aboard his ship. And that's when I got around the world and saw a couple of ports which I would never have seen otherwise in England, Egypt, Pakistan (which was all Indian then). This was my service. Out of this experience I did the war series which was purchased by Gordon Birkett and he presented it to the Whitney Museum where it is now. Oh, by the way, I received a Guggenheim Fellowship in this. When I got out of the service I applied for a Guggenheim to do the war series; and I received a Guggenheim. This is how I did that. This was in 1946. And then I think a year later I was invited. . . Oh, you're just speaking of the series, of course. I think after that I did the. . . I'm just trying to think of what came after. I'm just trying to give you highlights. I was invited to Black Mountain College Josef Albers invited me down there. You know, he was one of the students of the Bauhaus School. And he invited there as a summer instructor. This was about 1947. This was a great experience for me, hearing him lecture, hearing him talk. Although I was teaching I attended many of his

lectures. He was a very fascinating man. Although he didn't have a command of English at this time but he's such a fascinating speaker and lecturer that anyone attending his lectures - although nine-tenths of his words may have been in German - his demonstrations were so precise and so fascinating that you could understand what he was talking about. So this was quite an experience for me. I spent a summer down there.

**CG:** Was that the beginning of your teaching?

**JL:** Yes, it was. Really, there were two teachings - I think I had taught in camp. I was a counselor about a year before that. Which I guess you could say was part teaching. But, you know, how camp is. You give kids material. But you're not really teaching in that sense. My real first teaching experience was Black Mountain College.

**CG:** In - ?

**JL:** Black Mountain, North Carolina. That's I think about fifteen miles from Asheville. This college is not existent now. But at the time it was one of the most progressive, one of the foremost colleges in teaching art, music. This is what they taught there. This was quite an experience for me.

**CG:** You mentioned your interest in history. I was drawing you out a little bit on this series. We don't have to limit ourselves only to the series. But you did a series on Harriet Tubman. And I wonder if you'd tell us a little bit about that because just recently you have a book.

**JL:** Yes. Well, the first Harriet Tubman. . . I would like to see that. I think I'm going to have the opportunity now because I think this university has quite a few of these paintings. The Harmon Foundation acquired these paintings some years ago and recently they gave part of their collection to Fisk University. And part of this collection consisted of the Harriet Tubman paintings. And I'll be going down there in a few days so I'm very anxious to see them. The reason I mention this is because there's about a twenty-five-year span since I did the first Harriet Tubman. And now that I have children's book out I'd like to see the difference in the handling and so on. This was a tremendous woman and I just enjoyed doing this. I enjoyed doing the series both times. I've even forgotten how many panels are in the first series. They were done in case in tempera on small panels about twelve by eighteen I think. So I'm very anxious to see that. It was a wonderful thing to do this. Most of the characters in my series have such a great appeal, appeal of struggle, of people involved in a struggle. And if you're involved in history and in Negro history I think it's inevitable that you would be fascinated by the life of Harriet Tubman. This is how I happened to do that. Now the second time - the book to which you've just referred, I was approached by a publisher, a new publisher who said he was interested in doing children's books and he wanted to know if I would be interested in doing one.

**CG:** And he named the subject?

**JL:** No, he did not. He left the subject up to me. We had a few talks. We met for lunch and talked over the theme and so on. And immediately I thought of me doing a Negro subject because he knew that I had been involved in this, that I was interested in this. Although he did not say that this must be my theme - he left that up to me - but I think he knew that this would be it. So then we talked over the theme. I suggested Harriet Tubman. Well, of course, he knew nothing about Harriet Tubman. And I gave him a sort of synopsis, an outline of this woman. He said it sounded very good to him, and to go on with it. So I started my research because although I knew the general outline, the general story, this was a period of twenty-five years since I had done the first Harriet Tubman, so naturally I had to go back. And even if I had known what I knew twenty-five years ago about Harriet Tubman it would have been different. Because I like to feel that I have grown, my attitude would have been different, my choice of material out of the life of Harriet Tubman would have been entirely different. So I researched the material, took many notes. As most of us who do research do, we know that nine-tenths of what we take is never used but we have to take all of it in order to get that one-tenth. So this was the process. And out of this developed a children's book on Harriet Tubman which is just out, has just been published. And I think if I can see the two series side by side I think I would say that this is the better of the two. I think it's more subtle; I guess it would be because I'm older, you know, and I have developed a degree of selectivity which I did not have then. I think it's just a more subtle thing. And I think technically it's a better series. I think so. It should be. After working for twenty-five years you should be better technically than you were twenty-five years before. So I'm very anxious to see it. As I said

before, I'll have that opportunity in a few days to see and compare this version with the earlier version.

**CG:** I might add that today is November 25, 1968 since Mr. Lawrence did make mention of today or the next few days. Now you have done other series. One, which \_\_\_\_\_ Saarienen mentions in her introduction to the book that was done, almost a definitive study really on you. And she makes mention of the Industrial Revolution and also of the American War of Independence. Can you tell us a little about those two series.

**JL:** Yes. Well now, this is really one series. The Industrial Revolution was part of the American series.

**CG:** I see.

**JL:** It was a series which was to be continued which I've never gotten around to continue as a series. My reason for doing this, I think I mentioned earlier was that I like to think that I have expanded, that I have grown, and I like to feel that the Negro struggle was unique. And, of course all struggle from my point of view. You see, early maybe I didn't think this. Maybe I thought the Negro struggle was unique. And, of course all struggles are unique in that when and where they take place they have a uniqueness. But generally I think it's all one. I don't think it's as unique as that when you look at it in a very \_\_\_\_\_ sense. Now I thought of the American history thing. In fact I call it The Struggle. And one of the motivating factors for my doing this again was the negro. I think this is happening more and more now. But up until that time, as late as a few years ago in the 1950's the Negro had not been included in the general stream of American history. We're doing that more and more now. There are books coming out. People are more aware of it. And there's a more conscious effort to put the Negro back where he belongs in American history. I mean up till now he's been taken out, just excluded, or put aside. We don't know the story, how historians have glossed over the Negro's part as one of the builders of America, how he tilled the fields, and picked cotton, and helped to build the cities. Now I don't want to be sentimental and say well the Negro did all this, the Negro did nine-tenths of this. This wouldn't be true either. I mean there were many other groups coming from Europe who contributed. However these other groups always get mentioned. The Polish, the Italians, the English, they're all mentioned as to their contributions. When I was a child this is all I heard of. All we hear of the American Negro is that he picked cotton. And they don't even call it a contribution. That wasn't even it. So one of my main reasons I thought it would be a good thing if I did plus the fact I think American history is a fascinating subject. But I wanted to do a series showing the American Revolution. Again this had to do with struggle, the struggle of man and showing as part of the struggle a person who took part in the struggle of man and showing as part of the struggle a person who took part in the struggle was the American Negro. You see, this is not a Negro - as the other themes were - this was not a Negro series. It isn't just Negroes. It dealt with Washington crossing the Delaware, Negroes who were with Washington when he crossed the Delaware. Not as slaves. These people were people who had signed up to take part in the American Revolution. I mean you had people like that. That's what's fascinating about the Schomburg Library. We not only know that Negroes participated in the American Revolution but we know the names of these people. We can go there and find the actual names of people who enlisted in the American Revolution. You also have people who served as the officer's servants. Well, they had to go. That was a different thing. But I'm talking about people who went voluntarily, signed up like anyone else and served in this thing. So you have that. They were with Jackson at New Orleans, the Negro was. And of course we all know about the beginning of the Revolution. All through the 1800's the Industrial Revolution was all a part of this thing. You know, we oftentimes mention women. We hear about Molly Pitcher. We hear about Betsy Ross. We hear about this woman. We hear about the other woman. And that was the reason, too, why - to get back to Harriet Tubman - the Negro woman has never been included in American History. Has never been. Well, naturally, because we don't even include Negro men. So I think a person like Harriet Tubman is a - well, just a fascinating person. I can't say more than that. But this was the motivating factor for my doing the American history theme and for my still being interested in that. By the way, there's one other series that you haven't mentioned. And that was a series which was completely outside any of the others. That was the hospital series I did which dealt with when I became ill - I was in the hospital for about a year - and on coming out I did the things on my stay in the hospital. I did that. But this was outside the general area of the others.

**CG:** Where is that series now?



**JL:** That's been dispersed. It hasn't been kept intact. It's been dispersed. Various people own it. I think I have some paintings in that series that I like very much. Well, in a way this is very close to the others because it still says struggle, too, doesn't it when you think of it?

**CG:** I think it does.

**JL:** Yes. You, know, in speaking to you about it I realize how - I said it was far removed - but it's a different kind of struggle. It's a struggle of man and his mind. But it's still a struggle also.

**CG:** Yes. Well, you have this particular success with - we talked about these narratives because you are notable for your success in dealing with the narrative and one of the few painters in modern times who has been eminently successful I think in dealing with this particular medium. Could you talk a little bit perhaps about the medium which you use. You said earlier I think that you confined yourself pretty much to the aqueous media and you had mentioned that you had worked in this as a youngster when you went to Utopia House and so on. Now you've expanded somewhat though since that time, haven't you?

**JL:** Yes. This is very interesting, too, because I think it brings to us the importance of contact, the important contact with other artists. I worked not worked, this is the wrong term), I went to a center, Utopia Children's House where there was available arts and crafts where you went to these various activities. The kids were encouraged to go into soap carving, woodwork, painting, you know, just general arts and crafts. I went into painting. I was about eleven or twelve, not more than thirteen at the most. I went to the painting area. And the material given us was what we call poster paint, that is paint that comes in jars; you can buy it at the five and ten. And it's a water paint, an aqueous medium. And this was my first involvement with paint. It was my first material. And I more or less have stuck with and developed working in the water media. Now I think the reason for this, most painters their first experience is as children - they're not painters then - many of us are not even thinking about painting as a profession - but our first material is poster color. In schools and, everything this is what it is. So I worked with this (I keep using the word work), it wasn't work at that time; it was strictly fun. It was recreation. And of course I was encouraged to continue my interest. There was a young fellow at the Utopia Children's House who was going to Columbia University at the time. I didn't realize it then but he was just ten years older than myself.

**CG:** Who is this?

**JL:** I'll tell you. But he was a man.

**CG:** Yes, of course.

**JL:** When you're a kid of thirteen a person of twenty-three is a man, you see. This man Charles Alston had a job there. He was going to Columbia University. I think he was working on his M.A. And he had this job, probably a part-time job at Utopia Children's House. And he encouraged me - we were in the midst of the depression. So he encouraged me to continue on working, to continue doing this. And he exposed me to many things and so on. Now at this time - I don't mean to deviate but we have to if we're going to tell this story and put it in some sort of logical context. That's why I said the country was in the worst kind of a depression. Roosevelt had just been elected and he had started all of these relief measures. And one of the relief measures was to sort of employ the artists, to keep the artists employed and so on. And these centers were established throughout the country. They had different initials. The first was College Arts. Then the WPA. Then the Federal Art Project. But I don't think this matters how they came. But this was all part of getting the entire country sort of on its feet again. So they employed among the skilled workers, among the many workers which were employed to take part in these projects were the artists. Well, naturally I was too young so I was no part of that. But I had the benefit of going to one of the centers which was established for this purpose to give people work. And these were the people who taught us.

**CG:** Where was the center?

**JL:** First it was located at the YMCA, the old "Y" which was on 135th Street. It was right across from the new "Y" now. But at that time it was just the old "Y" on the uptown side of the street. No, I'm sorry, it was the Library, the 135th Street Library. I'm sorry. All these buildings are all going so we get mixed up sometime. That's where the center was first

established, the art center. And then the center was moved to a building of its own on 141st Street right off Eighth Avenue. And I went there and worked every night or every day after school I worked along and so on. Now I mentioned earlier that this is where the. . . You asked me about the aqueous medium and how I became involved in it and how it developed. Along about this time there was also a young man working and going to school and going to the League and he was getting a formal education. He was not much younger than I, about four years. And he saw that I was interested in the water medium and he said, "Why don't you try \_\_\_\_\_ and casein and things of that sort?" Which I knew nothing about. This fellow happened to be Romare Bearden. This was about 1937, more than thirty years ago. He had more of a formal training than I had. He was studying with George Grosz at the time at the Art Students League. He was probably one of the few Negroes at that time going to the League. So I mention this to say the importance of contact with artists or people in the arts is part of your education, part of your development. You may not even realize it at the time how important this is. I think it's significant that all of this happened in Harlem. When I say 'Harlem' I mean in the broad sense; I don't mean just the New York Harlem; but I imagine this was happening to many people and many Negroes throughout the country in their own Harlems. You see, so many positive things came out of these communities. I know to me it has been a very positive experience. So much so that I still feel very much a part of the Negro community. I've never left it. I've never left the Negro community in spirit. And I can well understand what Langston Hughes said before he died - I don't know - I think he said this over and over that he would never live outside the Negro community. Because this was his life. This was his sustenance. This sustained his motivation and spirit and so on. You know, I think I mentioned this before. Maybe some people need it. Maybe others do not. I always feel I need it. I don't think that I have to live physically in the Negro community. But the very work I do is so much a part of me that I feel that I could never leave it really.

**CG:** So you don't physically live in the --?

**JL:** I don't physically live in the Harlem community now or in a so-called Negro community now. But I still feel - and I think this is evident by the work I'm doing - very close to it. Not close, but a part of it. I don't seem very close but a part of the Negro experience and the Negro community and so on. But I mention this to say my contact, my first contact - and I think I mentioned also (I want to repeat this) how I first met Augusta Savage, the well-known Negro sculptor (I guess for a woman you say sculptress, I don't know).

**CG:** Take your choice.

**JL:** We don't use that today. So this was a very important thing for me to have this kind of experience. And the older I get the more I recognize how important this was in my development, my growth, and just that. So what made me get off on this track was coming into contact with people like Romare Bearden, people like Mike Bannarn. People don't know him now because he never achieved any kind of outside success but although he was successful to us the younger people; here was a man who had gone to an art academy which very few Negroes had the experience of at that time. I was able to work in his studio. He was on the Project.

**CG:** The Federal Arts Project.

**JL:** The Federal Arts Project. He was a carver. He painted, too, but I think his main talent was in carving. He died a few years ago. But he may never be known by the younger people, but all of us know him. I don't think his reputation will ever be anything beyond the time and place and work of the few of us who knew him.

**CG:** His full name was Henry Bannarn.

**JL:** Henry Bannarn, yes. To us he was very important and he will continue to be important to a person like myself. He wasn't a teacher in the formal sense. But this was a contact again.

**CG:** Jacob Lawrence, you grew up at a time when social content in art was very much in vogue. You mentioned before that \_\_\_\_\_ at the time of the great depression of the thirties, the rise of Fascism in Europe, the war in Europe, and you were among that group of artists, generation of artists who used their art as a means of expressing their concern about the world in which they lived and so on. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the artists at that period who influenced you, and how the influenced you if you can pin it down.

**JL:** Yes. I think I was influenced by many of the artists influenced most of us at that period, my age group. I think the big school then in the social consciousness school of painting was the Mexican School: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros (who is still living and still very active). This is the big three of Mexico. Of course Siqueiros was the youngest of the big three. And the others have died of course, both Rivera and Orozco. Also we were exposed to people like Kathe Kollwitz, the Polish artist; many of the Chinese artists who were doing big woodblocks; they were doing peasants and that type of thing. It all was their choice of content, of people; and I guess this made it social. And this permeated all of the arts of that period with the aid of the writing, literature and everything. It was a period when a man did his Native Son. I'm trying to think of some other - not Hemingway - who did the Okies?

**CG:** Steinbeck.

**JL:** John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. And in the dance, this was the material of the dance. So I'm really a product of this period. Some artists have done other things since then, especially those of my age who started out like this. Some of them became very important abstract expressionists like Gorky before he died. But not frequently. I think Franz Kline - they were very much involved with this. I don't know about some of the others. But I do know these two. And then many of the artists were involved in this kind of content in their work. This was the period for dealing with a very humanistic - we thought about man. We thought about - well, you know, this may sound \_\_\_\_\_ because I guess although you're doing non-figurative things you're still involved with man, you see. I don't want to sound like that. But I guess it was a figurative involvement; I'll put it that way. And I'm a product of that period. Everything was of that period. This was it. I mentioned Romare Bearden and how he studied with George Grosz. We all knew who George Grosz was. He was the great German expressionist and satirist of postwar Germany. This is what he dealt with, this kind of satire. He was a big name in that period Fran\_\_ Mazariel, a Belgian artist, a woodcut artist. As I said, Kathe Kollwitz. The Mexicans. Some of the Chinese whom I don't know by name. They were the sort of artists who we never got to know their names although we got to know their works. So this is what influenced many of us. And I guess it didn't take much to influence me because I was working in this kind of genre and in any event I took my scenes from the Harlem community the Harlem community wasn't an upper class community anything you would do would be involved with the social statements, you see, - you couldn't help being - without even thinking about it, you see. So this is how that came about.

**CG:** It has always been mentioned and I notice as one person said, that you have an addiction to pattern, to color, design in your work. Would you care to comment on that a little bit.

**JL:** Yes. My first paintings - again I won't say "paintings" - my first involvement with paint - I liked design. I used to do things like rugs by seeing the pattern - this was when I was about twelve or thirteen - like very symmetrical design.

**CG:** What kind of rugs were these?

**JL:** Well, I guess they were copies of Persian rugs.

**CG:** Oriental type?

**JL:** Oriental, I know they weren't the real thing. They were in the Harlem community so they couldn't have been the real. These things weren't very expensive. But they were copies of them. And I used to make these very symmetrical designs in very bright primary and secondary colors. This was the beginning of it. I guess I just liked design. I just liked it. And then I did masks. I used to study the masks of the great mask-maker \_\_\_\_\_ and I used to make papier-mache masks. And again they were very symmetrical. I made them for no reason other than to make a mask. I wasn't involved in making them for a play or anything like that but I just liked to make them, you see.

**CG:** Although you did make stage sets.

**JL:** Stage sets were around this period. And the stage sets dealt with areas of the Harlem community again. \_\_\_\_\_ like taking \_\_\_\_\_ boxes and painting the "El" in. They were three-dimensional. Some things were painted. Some things were actually built-in. I used to take a \_\_\_\_\_ box and do this. And again dealing with just primary and secondary colors and moving them around and just having fun with them. I didn't have any

reason to do them. There was another reason than just the act of doing them. You know, usually when you say you make masks you're doing them for a play or display or to sell or something like that. The same with stage sets; if you do them you hope that they will be used for models for a stage setting or some \_\_\_\_\_ of drama group or something of that sort. But I just did them. And this was my first expression, my first type of expression. First came the very symmetrical designed, like designing rags and thins like that. When the masks. I don't know, it all probably happened in a couple of years. And there was no formal training in this. But just doing them. And this was another thing about the Harlem community which we had in these art centers, we had books which we are exposed to. Somebody knew that I liked masks or stage sets; they told me what books to look at. And that's why I got to know a person like \_\_\_\_\_ and what he was doing with masks and stage sets and things like that. We had all this exposure. And again not in formal sense because I never wrote any papers on these people, you know. It wasn't like going to college where you'd take a very formalized course in something and would write a paper on it, you see.

**CG:** Did you have any exposure to African art during this time?

**JL:** Yes. My first exposure to African art, and I think this was true of most people of that period - well, I won't say most people, but surely people who had not had -

**CG:** What period are we talking about?

**JL:** We're talking about around 1937, 1938. There was given a very extensive show of African sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. And it wasn't the Museum of Modern Art we know today. But it was on 53rd Street, it consisted of two brownstone houses. This was before the new building was built. And they gave this show, which was a big thing at that time, a tremendous thing, because so many people had not seen all of these things. I remember that we had a person in Harlem then, a historian by the name of Professor Seyfert. He was a real nationalist and he was very much involved. Everything was African. And he tried to play up the African thing. He tried to give us the importance of how - or make us see the importance of the African heritage. And he took a group down to the Museum and he gave a talk on the various pieces that we would see that were displayed in the cases. And I did a couple of pieces on this. I think Norman Lewis still had these years ago. And they were pieces - oh, about four or five inches, something like that. He may have one of them. They were the nearest thing I've ever come to sculpture. And I did them after the African sculptures which I'd seen. Of course now later, much later, a few years ago (this is again twenty-five or thirty years later) I had the opportunity of actually going to Africa. But this is almost a separate period from the other. I collected a few things. But at that time Africa was so remote in my life, you know, that I just thought I'd never see it. I never had a desire to see it, not that I didn't want to see it, but it just never occurred to me that I'd ever get to see it. I just never thought of it in that way.

**CG:** What was your impression when you got there?

**JL:** Well, I think I was pretty open. So much had been talked about Africa, I had met so many Africans (this was a few years ago 1961)

**CG:** Which countries?

**JL:** Nigeria. Just Nigeria. I think I mentioned this that I was given a show there and then they invited me over.

**CG:** Was this Amsac, the American Society of African Culture?

**JL:** Amsac. Amsac is the American Society of African Culture. And Ambari the artists and writers of Nigeria. They sort of worked together. It was like a cultural exchange thing. Now the artists and writers in Nigeria \_\_\_\_\_ invited me to have a show. And then they invited me over for ten days. And I went. I met the artists. You asked what was my impression. I don't think I was open to anything one way or the other. Because I've since learned that for a new experience you try as much as possible to remain very open. When you say 'what was my impression' I really -

**CG:** I just wanted you to comment really.

**JL:** Yes. Well, my impression was how much like the American Negroes these people were. Or we look like them. Of course this may seem like a naive statement, but this is not true

throughout Africa. Especially on the West Coast people are much darker or blacker. But on the West Coast - if you walk along the Harlem streets or any Negro community you see exactly the same kind of coloring, the same features and so on.

**CG:** You mean the variations?

**JL:** Not to that degree, no. But what we consider a typical American Negro, which would be like a brown I guess, maybe a dark brown, you know, in that range, but not black, you see this mainly along the West Coast of Africa which would take in Ghana, Nigeria, places like that. But I think East Africa, which I never had the opportunity of seeing, or in the interior, Middle Africa, I'm pretty sure the people are much blacker in complexion. This made an impression on me. There wasn't this difference, physical difference.

**CG:** Well, there's been a lot of speculation. Do you feel - maybe I asked you this before - that there's any particular African influence in your work. I mean why were you selected by the American Society of African Culture? I don't mean that pointedly but is there any feeling that your work is akin to the work of Africans?

**JL:** I don't see how it could be if this invitation or this interest comes from the West Coast. Because the West Coast Africans are mainly noted for their sculpture, not for their painting. And I was never involved in sculpture. Other than for content or the way the content was handled maybe this is the interest in a flat way. Maybe this is it. I don't know. What I'm trying to say is I don't know if there was a plastic reason or an aesthetic reason, you see, in that I was just one of the painters who had been painting.

**CG:** Since you were a leading American artist by consent.

**JL:** Yes, this could be, yes. I don't know why other than I dealt with Negro content and there was an interest in this. And, of course, all artists the world over regardless of we all have some sort of kinship I think. You could be a Swede - the reason I say Swede is because it's so far removed from the Negro experience geographically, physically, and everything else. The moment you have artists there is some sort of rapport there. But I imagine the African artists and many of the Afro-American artists have an interest. I mean there's a subconscious interest all the way - it can be subconscious or it can be very conscious because we have some sort of interest because we know this was our background, you know, but we may not express it the same way. So I imagine this was one of the reasons. Curiosity, maybe that's a better word to use. Curiosity, because these were the people from which we came.

**CG:** Did you feel the Africans had any particular kind of identification with your work?

**JL:** I think this ranged in the extreme. I think some did; some did not. I think you have schools - well, not think; I know this. Having been to Africa, having been to Nigeria you have a school of thinking in Africa and among the African artists who work in a very traditional way. Now they may not feel any kinship. But then you have another group, you have really three groups: you have the \_\_\_\_\_ group which tries to use the native idiom but are adopting modern techniques, at least being aware of modern techniques like lithography, printmaking, graphics, all sorts of graphics. Then you have the other group - now these people, the ones I just mentioned, the Umbari group which were responsible for my visit, would be the most interested. The first group I don't think would be - the traditionalists. Nor do I think the group I am just about to mention, which would be for lack of a better word I use the word sophisticated, but that's only for communication purposes. I don't imply that the others are not sophisticated. And by 'sophisticated' in this sense mean those artists who have traveled in Europe, studied in Europe, or their students have studied in Europe. They work very much like the Europeans. If you saw a show of their work there would be no - except for the content you wouldn't know it was African, you see. I don't think they would have a particular interest. But it would be the middle group because their inspiration is drawn from more or less the same kind of inspiration that mine comes from, dealing in folk manners, the genre of the people, you know. Things like that and so on. So to answer your question I think the middle group would more likely have this kind of interest, you see.

**CG:** You were mentioning about this so-called sophisticated group in terms of their exposure and so on. Since World War II there has developed a kind of universal school as it were, not a school, but it's very difficult to discern nationality in art from one country to the other because there is this international kind of approach to art. I wonder if you'd care to comment on that. You mentioned these Africans who paint, they paint and they create and you

wouldn't know they were Africans particularly, they're divorced from their tradition, they are a part of this cosmopolitan approach to art.

**JL:** Yes. Well, I think this is happening all over the world. I think you have two groups here. You have a group of practitioners which we call sort of they developed the international scene. They are part of the whole international thing. They don't involve themselves in the local genre of their communities. And they're more involved with what's going on, say, in a philosophical sense in the Italians, the English, the French, the Germans, the Americans. And I think if you had a show of all these people I don't think you could tell the difference between one and the other, you see. The same way in the Sudan. Now, on the other hand, you do have people who are dealing with the local genre, people like myself, and these people also exist in various countries and somehow we don't have the same kind of rapport, you see. I think we would have it if we met. But since the scene now there's more talk, there's more discussion about the new forms in art to take the place of that. It's not about the local genre like what happened in the thirties when we were involved with the Mexicans or the Polish artist Kathe Kollwitz and what she was saying; or the Mexicans and what they were saying. A genre came out of that kind of thing. The internationalists are more involved with a more - well, just that. I can't find a better term than international symbol, non-figurative; or even if it's figurative it's done in a way that becomes sort of an international language. [Interruption for phone call.]

**CG:** Jacob Lawrence, now that we're near the end of our interview with you I wondered if you might have some thoughts which you would like to elaborate on, or some additional things which you would like to say to in a sense summarize what we have been doing.

**JL:** Yes. I'll try. Well, I feel that since this - I feel that what would be appropriate would be to discuss the - to summarize the Negro artist what he has become in the years since I first became aware of art generally and my place as a Negro artist in our society. I think generally we have developed. I think we are developing, I think we have become a part of the scene, of the creative art scene. I don't mean just the American scene. But I mean the international scene, too. There used to be a time when any of us involved in art would know every other artist working. Now we don't know this. There are many younger people coming along. We are widely dispersed throughout the Negro community in philosophy, technique, in just about everything. And I think this is a very good thing. I think that this goes along with our social our development generally. I mean the Negro artist has benefited by a more professional status. Not that he was not always professional because many of us were. Many of the older artists were very professional in their attitude. But we were not accepted as professionals. But I think now we are accepted more as professionals working in the field of art. I think this is a very good thing which I am very happy to see. Well, I don't know what else I can add to that. And I think this will become even more so. If it can become more so I think it will. We find Negro artists now teaching in universities. This is good, too. I don't mean to say that because we're not teaching there it means that we have progressed. I don't mean to imply that. But what I do mean to say is that we have been accepted more and respected more and looked at as artists with a contribution to make.

**CG:** Do you think that a young person today who happens to be a Negro in the United States and who is inclined towards art, should have a positive attitude in terms of his possibilities as an artist?

**JL:** Oh, definitely. I definitely think so. This overlaps, too. I think that generally artists should have this attitude and I think definitely that the Negro artist should not feel because he happens to be Negro or because the person who aspires to an art career should not have a positive attitude toward this. I definitely think so. I mean art has always been a difficult thing in our time whether the artist be Negro or otherwise and I think it's part of our maturing, it's part of our growth that we can step into something or aspire to an area which is not always rosy, it's not always an ideal situation; but we can aspire to it like anyone else can. The same aspirations and so on. I don't think that that's exactly true now but I think it's surely more so than it was fifty years ago.

**CG:** Thank you very much. END OF INTERVIEW