

PRESS RELEASE

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Press Contact

Rachel Eggers

Associate Director of Public Relations

rachele@seattleartmuseum.org

206.654.3151

SEATTLE ART MUSEUM PRESENTS JACOB LAWRENCE: THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE

Only West Coast stop for landmark exhibition reuniting the modern artist's narrative series on early American history



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1300 First Avenue
Seattle, WA 98101
206.625.8900
seattleartmuseum.org

SEATTLE, WA - The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) presents *Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle* (March 5–May 23, 2021), reuniting the artist's revolutionary 30-panel series *Struggle: From the History of the American People* (1954–56) for the first time since 1958. This is the only West Coast stop of the exhibition's five-city national tour. Created during the civil rights era by one of the greatest narrative artists of the 20th century, the series depicts pivotal moments in early American history with an emphasis on the experiences of Black people, Native Americans, and women. New work created for the exhibition by Derrick Adams, Bethany Collins, and Hank Willis Thomas reinforce the timeliness of *Struggle* by engaging themes such as democracy, justice, truth, and the politics of inclusion.

Reunited for the first time in more than 60 years, the *Struggle* series brings American history to life through energetic, expressive paintings that explore the boundary between figuration and abstraction. For this reunion, 26 of the *Struggle* paintings are accounted for, including one, Panel 16, which was discovered only recently while the exhibition was on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Four panels still remain unlocated; of these, the known works are presented alongside reproductions of the missing paintings, as well as those too fragile to travel.

Lawrence's visual style conveys the physical, emotional, and ideological struggles inherent to the country's founding. He saw American history as a complex shared experience and his paintings sought to create a broader, more encompassing narrative that celebrated prominent historical figures alongside those unsung and underrepresented. *The American Struggle* presents Lawrence's paintings in dialogue with new work by contemporary artists Derrick Adams, Bethany Collins, and Hank Willis Thomas; their work, also informed by deep engagement with historical research, powerfully asserts that America's struggles continue in earnest today.

Born in 1917, Lawrence broke through the color line of New York's segregated art world when, at the age of 23, he created the *Migration Series*, a historical narrative of the Great Migration that was instantly recognized as a masterpiece and became the first work by a Black artist to be acquired by the Museum of



Modern Art. The series was exhibited at SAM from January 21 through April 23, 2017; the museum welcomed over 10,000 visitors during its three-day free opening weekend alone.

“Lawrence’s *Migration Series* opened at SAM the day after the 2017 presidential inauguration, and its message of determination in the historic fight for racial justice proved especially relevant for our audiences at the time,” says Theresa Papanikolas, Ann M. Barwick Curator of American Art. “Today, we present *Struggle* at another watershed moment, as the fight for justice gains urgency. Exploring and revealing history’s resonance in the present is one of Lawrence’s great strengths as an artist. In centering not just the history’s heroes but a variety of participants in the narratives that make up our nation’s story, he reminds us that the struggle for freedom belongs to all of us.”

INSPIRATION AND PROCESS



Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was one of the most prominent and celebrated Black artists of the 20th century. His artistic training was fostered by the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance and inspired by the stories he heard from elders about the abolitionist movement, Black heroes, and familial struggles. Because of the lack of Black history taught in American schools, Lawrence chose in his early work to depict iconic figures like abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. With a style that was expressive and symbolic in form, Lawrence combined realism and abstraction to create pared down

compositions brimming with vitality and graphic strength. Lawrence went on to create compelling, often metaphorical stories of the Black experience and the history of the United States.

A REVOLUTIONARY STORY

By mid-century, Lawrence had perfected his narrative invention of using modestly scaled panels to tell a sweeping epic. In 1949, the national political climate was fraught, freedoms were under threat, and the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. In this context, Lawrence began his research for *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, a narrative that sought to visualize a more complete—and more complex—version of American history. His goal was to “depict the struggles of a people to create a nation and their attempt to build a democracy.” Lawrence spent countless hours at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Black Research and Culture) in Harlem, poring over historical texts that included first-person accounts, letters, and coded messages from individuals on all sides of the American Revolution. For more than five years, he read and researched, and then, in May 1954, just as the Supreme Court ruled to desegregate American schools, he began to paint.

Lawrence’s often lengthy captions that accompany the panels in the *Struggle* series feature excerpts from famous speeches as well as reports, letters, and petitions from anonymous soldiers and enslaved people. Panel 8 depicts the image of clashing soldiers in the Battle of Bennington in 1777, accompanied by the caption “...again the rebels rushed furiously on our men” which is from an account written by a Hessian mercenary (German soldiers who served as auxiliaries to the British Army). The viewer is left to consider the fate of the Hessians, as well as the fate of other mercenaries, such as Black soldiers who fought in the war. Ironically, after the war, the Hessian soldiers would be granted citizenship long before the descendants of Black people who fought and died in the American Revolution.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

The struggle for democracy is as relevant today as it was during Lawrence's life. Artists Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976), Bethany Collins (b. 1983), and Derrick Adams (b. 1970) add their contemporary perspectives to the exhibition through the presentation of recent work.

Hank Willis Thomas excerpts images from the vast visual archive of history and reproduces them in new ways. By combining historical research with technological processes, he pushes the boundaries of photography. Visitors can take flash photography of *Turbulence* (2018) and *My Father Died for this Country Too / I Am an American Also* (2017) on their cell phone cameras to illuminate images that are "hidden" beneath the surface, such as a protester resisting arrest in Alabama and a demonstration at a "whites-only" beach in Florida. For *Rich Black Specimen #460* (2017), Thomas used archival "runaway slave" advertisements to create a dynamic, larger-than-life three-dimensional version that injects personhood into the otherwise cruelly anonymous form.

Between the 18th and 20th centuries, American songwriters rewrote the lyrics to the melody of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (also called "America") in support of varying American causes, including revolution, temperance, suffrage, abolition, Native sovereignty, and slavery. Bethany Collins's *America: A Hymnal* (2017) is a laser cut special edition artist book that unifies 100 versions of the song to show how words and meanings change over time. As the laser cut pages of this book are turned, the work is gradually destroyed. An a cappella recording of the hymns being sung accompanies this installation.

Derrick Adams' video, *Saints March* (2017), pays homage to past and present cultural influencers of New Orleans, capturing the footwork of local dancers who use Decatur Street as their stage. As Lawrence did in the *Struggle* series, Adams plays with vantage points, zooming in and out to create portals that energize and transport us to see the past, present, and future anew through the motions of others. For his mixed media installation, *Jacob's Ladder* (2020), Adams imagines Lawrence's studio as a quiet self-reflection space by using materials from Lawrence's personal archive, such as the artist's photographs and armchair. Referencing the biblical story, a ladder ascends directly from the chair to Adams' original portrait of the elder artist. To Adams, this artistic homage represents, "the continuous progression of Lawrence's life journey and the most magnificent manner in which he expressed his ideas and vision."

THE 31st PANEL

SAM's presentation of *The American Struggle* will include a gallery dedicated to art by today's youth imagining the "31st panel" of Lawrence's series. 12 works will be on view, all by artists between the ages of 13-21 who were invited by SAM to submit artwork considering the themes of the series and depicting the contemporary and ongoing American struggle. Submissions were reviewed by SAM's Teen Arts Group, an intensive program for high school-aged youth who are interested in leadership and want to make SAM fun and engaging for teens.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

For major exhibitions, SAM convenes a group of advisors from the community to participate in planning. *The American Struggle* advisory committee is:

- Cleo Barnett, Executive Director at Amplifier
- Rebecca Cesspooch, Northern Ute/Assiniboine/Nakota visual artist and educator
- Lauren Holloway, Educator at Franklin High School
- Dovey Martinez, Visual artist, SAM Emerging Arts Leader program alum
- Delbert Richardson, Founder of The Unspoken Truths American History Traveling Museum
- Lucia Santos, Contributor to *American Struggle: Teens Respond to Jacob Lawrence*, SAM Teen Arts Group (TAG) member
- Carletta Wilson, Literary and visual artist
- Inye Wokoma, Visual artist, Co-Founder of Wa Na Wari

TICKETING INFORMATION

Museum Hours

- Closed Monday–Thursday
- Friday–Sunday 10 am–5 pm (beginning March 5)
- First Thursdays 10 am–5 pm (beginning April 1)

Daily Prices

- \$29.99 Adult
- \$27.99 Senior (65+), Military (with ID)
- \$19.99 Student (with ID), Teen (15–18)
- FREE for children (14 and under)
- FREE for SAM Members

Special Prices

- First Thursdays: Free to all, including special exhibitions
- First Fridays: Free general admission and \$7.99 for special exhibitions for seniors (65+)

The museum is open at a limited capacity, with timed tickets available for purchase online and in advance.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Use #AmericanStruggle to engage and connect with the exhibition.

EXHIBITION PUBLICATIONS

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle is edited by curators Elizabeth Hutton Turner and Austen Barron Bailly and published by the University of Washington Press. This 192-page hardcover catalogue marks the historic reunion of the series by restoring Lawrence’s lost narrative and examining his use of the American historical archive and place as source material. It features 30 distinct voices for the 30 panels in the series, as well as the work and words of contemporary artists Derrick Adams, Bethany Collins, and Hank Willis Thomas.

American Struggle: Teens Respond to Jacob Lawrence presents the creative written expressions of more than 40 teen writers in response to Lawrence’s epic series. Edited by Chul R. Kim and published by Six Foot Press and the Peabody Essex Museum, the 168-page paperback young adult book features facts on the *Struggle* series from the exhibition curators and vivid photographs of all the known works.

Both publications are available for purchase from [SAM Shop](#).

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle is organized by the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. It is co-curated by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, Professor of Modern Art at the University of Virginia, and Austen Barron Bailly, formerly Peabody Essex Museum (PEM)’s Curator of American Art, with support from Lydia Gordon, PEM’s Associate Curator of Exhibitions & Research. This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Image credits: . . . *is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?* —Patrick Henry, 1775, Panel 1, 1955, Jacob Lawrence, from *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, 1954–56, Collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross, © 2019 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, . . . *for freedom we want and will have, for we have served this cruel land long enuff . . .* —a Georgia slave, 1810, Panel 27, 1956, Jacob Lawrence, from *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, 1954–56, Private collection, © 2019 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Artist Jacob Lawrence with panels 26 and 27 from *Struggle: From the History of the American People* (1954–56), 1958, photograph by Robert W. Kelley. © Robert W. Kelley/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.

ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and rededicated as the Asian Art Museum in 1994, and it reopened on February 8, 2020, following an extensive renovation and expansion. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2017.

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