

## A CLOSER LOOK

# Jacob Lawrence



## Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917-2000)

*The 1920's... The Migrants Cast their Ballots*, 1974, from the portfolio, "Spirit of Independence, Kent Bicentennial."

Screenprint

SBMA, Gift of Lorillard Company, 1976.7.7

## About the Artist

The son of southern migrants, Jacob Lawrence moved to Harlem with his mother and sister in 1930. There he developed his love of art by participating in community art workshops. Throughout his long career as an artist, Lawrence created art based on the African American experience, capturing the struggle for equality and civil rights.

## Themes

- Elections + Voting
- American Government
- African-American Experience
- Liberation

## Overview

*"Among the many advantages the migrants found in the north was the freedom to vote. In my print, migrants are represented exercising that freedom."*

– Jacob Lawrence

This screenprint shows African American citizens exercising their right to vote in an election from the 1920s, mostly likely in Harlem, New York. Representing a community, the print shows a range of voters—old and young, some dressed casually and others formally. The print was commissioned as part of the Kent Bicentennial Portfolio, Spirit of Independence, in which 12 American artists were asked to contribute a work of art that celebrated the 200th birthday of the United States. Each artist was asked to respond to the question, "What does independence mean to you?"

Lawrence chose to commemorate the advancement of civil rights—a theme that had been a focal point in his artwork for many years. In fact, the print is a continuation of the artist's famous *Migration Series* from 1941. In 60 paintings, he depicted the migration of African Americans from southern states to the north from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Known for a visual style characterized by flat shapes, tilted perspective, and layering of colors, Lawrence here combines shades of black, brown, and grey with the colors of the American flag—red, white, and blue.

## Research: Voting in America

Research the history of voting in the United States. When did Black males gain the right to vote? When did women receive the right to vote? What struggles did citizens face to attain voting rights? What current challenges are still in place that undermine the right to vote?

Research the Voting Rights Act of 1965. How did this law enact equality?

Research the history of voting methods in the United States. What type of voting machine is being used in this print? How did it work? How do citizens vote today?

## Read: Barack Obama on Voting

In his 2020 eulogy for the late John Lewis—a Congressman and legendary leader of the civil rights movement of the 1960s—President Barack Obama urged Americans to value and exercise their right to vote, calling cynicism “the central strategy of voter suppression.”

What does Obama mean in this statement?  
Why is cynicism a deterrent to voting?

Obama added that people must vote to secure lasting change. He said: *“We are also going to have to remember what John said: If you don't do everything you can to change things, then they will remain the same. You only pass this way once—you have to give it all you have.”*

Do you agree with this statement? Write about something in your own life that you are willing to go “all in” to change. This can be personal, or something that you observe in your school, community, or the world.



## Activity: Independence

*“To me, migration means movement. There was conflict and struggle. But out of the struggle came a kind of power and even beauty. ‘And the migrants kept coming’ is a refrain of triumph over adversity.” - Jacob Lawrence*

Before making this print, Lawrence was asked to reflect on the meaning of independence. Reflect on the same question he was asked: What does independence mean to you today?

Write or draw your response.

## Watch:

In this ten-minute interview from 1995, listen to Jacob Lawrence discuss his life and work: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/jacob-lawrence/>

