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Harlem Rhythms

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts hosts the first comprehensive retrospective of Norman Lewis’ work since his death

November 13–April 6, 2016
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In Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, curator Ruth Fine set out to tell a vivid story of who Lewis was and what he was trying to achieve with his art, from his early representational work to periods later in which he dove headfirst into abstract expressionism.

“He had an incredible curiosity about art, about life, about nature. Much of his work has roots in nature and the city,” says Fine. “It’s a complicated body of work that requires you to grasp its complexity to fully understand and appreciate. It’s a rewarding journey with this important artist, one I have admired for many years.”

Fine, who recently retired after a four-decade-long career at the National Gallery of Art, says Lewis is thought to have painted about 2,500 images throughout his career, which creates a daunting challenge when curating a show about his work. New York’s Michael Rosenfeld Gallery represents the estate, and between the gallery and Fine, they pulled together 90 important Lewis works from the early 1930s through to his death in the late 1970s.

The show is titled Procession to highlight a prominent thread that runs through much of the Harlem artist’s works: processions as forms of ritual, be they celebratory or more sinister, from parades to Ku Klux Klan marches. Lewis, who was black, was one of several prominent artists to address issues involving race, civil rights, poverty and other social issues during major periods of artistic discovery in Harlem and elsewhere.

“As an African-American, Lewis had
evolved early on with all the early Harlem artists. He saw everything, and he painted what he saw. He was interested in the world around him and believed that we are all shaped by our environments,” Fine says. “But he didn’t just paint social issues. He painted people reading, people in interior environments. He did have strong civil rights connotations in his works, but he also had very romantic ideas about people.”

Works in the show include a number of compositions based on jazz music and musicians, including the oil piece Cantata, with its frenzied arrangements of blue and white over a field of black, and Jazz Musicians, which depicts lined figures clutching instruments in a tightly composed cluster of lines. Works that examine race include the pieces Redneck Birth and American Totem, which has allusions to the KKK and its hooded costume of hate.

The show will be organized into six motifs: In the City, Visual Sound, Rhythm of Nature, Ritual, Civil Rights, and Summation. The six motifs will reward viewers with pieces that explore Lewis’ processions of color (Aurora Borealis), representational scenes, as seen in Meeting Place (aka Shopping), abstractions of geometric shapes (Composition I), intense works of expressionism (Birds), and pieces that showcase his dramatic and chaotic use of lines (Roller Coaster).

“Lewis is important because he did not see the world in just one way. He saw it in multiple ways,” Fine says. “And his work really forces you to look at the world in that way with him.”

Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis opens November 13 and continues through April 6, 2016, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.