

The Indefatigable Curiosity of Norman Lewis

by [Anne Blood](#) on [March 28, 2016](#)



Installation view of 'Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis' at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (photo courtesy the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts)

PHILADELPHIA — While teaching at Jefferson School of the Social Sciences in New York around 1949, [Norman Lewis](#) began to draft an artist's treatise in which he laid out his teaching theories, and, more intriguingly, his ideas about the role an artist should play in society. He urges his students to learn from the past — to read, to look — but to create works that speak to the present condition; one must not slavishly copy old styles or try to appeal to the prevailing taste of the time, but seek out a unique voice that pushes the limits of human expression. Above all, he insists, artists must be curious and not content.



Norman Lewis, "Girl with Yellow Hat" (aka "Woman with Yellow Hat and Yellow Hat") (1936), oil on burlap, 36 1/2 x 26 in (courtesy of Leslie Lewis and Christina Lewis Halpern from the Reginald F. Lewis Family Collection; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

It is a rather simple (perhaps trite) command, but while walking through the artist's [current retrospective, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*](#), on view in the Fisher Brooks Gallery at the [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#), this statement about curiosity struck me as an apt description of Lewis's personality and how it manifests itself in his ever-changing oeuvre. Although his claim of being a self-taught artist is somewhat shaky, Lewis had a keen thirst for knowledge. His library and archive of newspaper and magazine clippings, selections of which are neatly displayed in vitrines throughout the galleries, reveal the breadth of his interests, which included poetry, politics, philosophy, and art topics ranging from Chinese calligraphy to the drawings of [William Steig](#). He worked on a wide variety of surfaces, from burlap to Masonite, and the heavy annotations on inventory lists from paint companies along with letters to distributors about his interest in new pigments and chemicals offer insight into his engagement with materials on the most minute level.

Organized with the assistance of the artist's family and curated by Ruth Fine, the exhibition includes more than 90 paintings and works on paper from the early 1930s through to the late '70s. In many ways, the show is a reintroduction to Lewis. Although he was active in both the Harlem and Downtown art scenes as a founding member of the [Harlem Community Art Center](#) and an influential contributor to the nascent Abstract Expressionist movement (he notably participated in the invitation-only [Artists' Sessions at Studio 35](#)), Lewis remains less well-known today than many of his contemporaries. The title of the exhibition highlights what Fine describes as a prominent thread that runs through much of Lewis's work, that of the procession, both for its celebratory links to

parades and *carnevale* and the terrifying marches of the Ku Klux Klan. While this is certainly a recurring motif, it does feel a bit forced to give it so much prominence (the subject first appears in his work around 1947), especially when the show in many ways highlights the wider stretch of Lewis's output. But this is really a minor criticism to what is a thoroughly engrossing retrospective.



Norman Lewis, "Title unknown (Potato Eaters)" (1945), oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in (Collection of Raymond J. McGuire, New York; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)



Norman Lewis, "Composition I" (1945), oil on canvas, 40 x 24 in (The Thompson Collection, Indianapolis, Indiana; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

The show begins with Lewis's early figurative work, which primarily depicts his local community during the Great Depression. Vagrants and the dispossessed are common subjects, but his style fluctuates as he absorbs new influences: volumetric forms and simplified geometry define the elegant figure in "Girl with Yellow Hat" (1936), while the tension between representation and abstraction is played out in "The Dispossessed (Family)" (1940), in which the checkered pattern on a woman's blouse floats above her chest like an architectural form and the bodies of the two figures huddled together seem to melt into one monumental form. Lewis takes greater aesthetic risks as the '40s progress, which is particularly notable in two markedly different works from 1945: "Title Unknown (Potato Eaters)" and "Composition I." In the first painting, the overlapping rectangles in the background flatten the pictorial space and focus our attention closely on the five figures sharing a meager meal of potatoes. The quickly applied strokes of green and putty gray on two of the figures' faces accentuate the sense of debilitating hunger that dominates the lives of these weary individuals, yet the bright red spots and flowers that decorate the blouses speak to an indestructible pride. With "Composition I," Lewis fully embraces linear abstraction, but the neatly organized planes of color seem to suggest architectural space, as if Manhattan's skyscrapers and long avenues continue to hold sway over his imagination.

Turning into the section of the exhibition called "Visual Sound," one encounters an overwhelming sense of confidence. Lewis's technical mastery is proclaimed in the large, untitled canvas from 1953 (recently acquired by the Newark Museum). Here, Lewis pulls his fully loaded brush with exquisite control; he knows how to vary the weight of the paint on the surface so as to allow the pigment to move from thick, dominant black lines to whisper thin watery passages. Tall, narrow forms march across the tan canvas in a steady beat that pulsates against the rhythmic cacophony of the

intertwining, sinuous lines punctuated by sections of red and gold.



Norman Lewis, title unknown (1953), oil and metallic paint on canvas, 41 1/2 x 71 in (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

Lewis's early years working in a realist style and his transition into abstraction are a well-known tale, but his aesthetic development does not follow a neat linear trajectory and he never arrived at a single, signature style. Even as he added new subjects and formal ideas, he returned to earlier concerns throughout his life. His desire to engage directly with politics fluctuated through his career, but he continually extolled the potential of paint to explore the meaning of life. At a time when black artists were under pressure to convey social injustices through literal depictions, Lewis chose to embrace abstraction, but not as a retreat.

In the '60s, he returned to a more overt engagement with contemporary social issues, in a manner different from but reminiscent of his work of the '30s and early '40s. Composed from a limited palette of black, white, and red, canvases such as "American Totem" (1960), "Alabama" (1960), "Redneck Birth" (1961), and "Title Unknown (Alabama)" (1967) prove most emphatically how abstraction could be used to create powerful and inspirational images that spoke directly to the contemporary struggle for civil rights. Lewis consistently attested to his belief that visual art was a unique language and that the role of the artist was to engage with the contemporary moment in a way that was accessible to his or her audience. He rebelled against the prevailing discourse about the dichotomy between developing radical experiments in aesthetic form and engaging with socio-political issues in art. He wanted painting to reconfigure our perception of the world.



Norman Lewis, "Redneck Birth" (1961), oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 72 in. (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Joseph E. Temple Fund; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)



Norman Lewis, "Alabama" (1960), oil on canvas, 48 x 72 1/4 in (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)



Installation view of 'Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis' at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (photo courtesy the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts)



Norman Lewis, "The Dispossessed (Family)" (1940), oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in (The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis continues at the **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts** (118-128 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through April 3.

Norman Lewis Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Philadelphia