

Norman Lewis at the Pennsylvania Academy

Although he lived his entire life in New York City, Norman Lewis is finally receiving his measure of fame, posthumously and in Philadelphia, where the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has mounted a retrospective of his career (it will travel to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art and the Chicago Cultural Center later this year).

Lewis is noteworthy both as a first-rate abstract painter and as an African-American artist at a time when very few of them won fame in the visual arts, and fewer still did so within the context of the New York school of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. He came of age during the famed Harlem Renaissance, which was distinguished

not only for its literary and musical achievements but also for a lively art scene that rarely came in direct contact with what was taking place in the mainstream, and overwhelmingly white, galleries seventy blocks to the south.

Lewis studied under the sculptor Augusta Savage and worked for a time in her Harlem Community Art Center. Most of his early work, like that of most of the American-born artists who would later join the New York school, was figurative in that slightly schematic fashion favored by the WPA, with which he was asso-

ciated. His early paintings also revealed an element of Mexican muralism that was equally typical of that time and place. Lewis was a founding member of Spiral, a group that included such artists as Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, and Charles Alston, and was intended to address the subject of race in the visual arts.

But all of that is by way of prologue to his abstract work, which forms the bulk



of the Philadelphia show and is the overwhelming cause of his newfound fame. Most of Lewis's best-known paintings were done in the 1940s and 1950s, and they have a distinct and charming postwar feel to them. They recall that initial phase of the New York school before it was taken over by the maximalist, not to say messianic, canvases of Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman, whose paintings were unfurled across an entire wall and bade fair to take over an entire room. Lewis's paintings, by contrast, extend only a few feet in any direction and sit elegantly on a wall. In them the artist demonstrates an instinctive feel for the rules of the game: he can be gestural or calligraphic by turns; he can fill an entire painting with all-over patterning; he can boldly exploit voids as he collects his squiggles and jabs within the center of a canvas, giving over the rest to dazzling expanses of burgundy and gold.

He is, in short, a master of his medium and is finally receiving the attention that he has long deserved.

—James Gardner

Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis • Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia • to April 3 • pafa.org



The Wanderer (Johnny) by Norman Lewis (1909–1979), 1933. Oil on canvas, 36 by 30 inches. Except as noted, the works illustrated belong to the estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York © Estate of Norman W. Lewis.

Musicians (also known as *Street Musicians*) by Lewis, 1945. Oil on canvas, 25 ¾ by 19 ¾ inches. Private collection.

Untitled by Lewis, 1978. Oil and pastel on paper, 29 ½ by 41 ½ inches.

