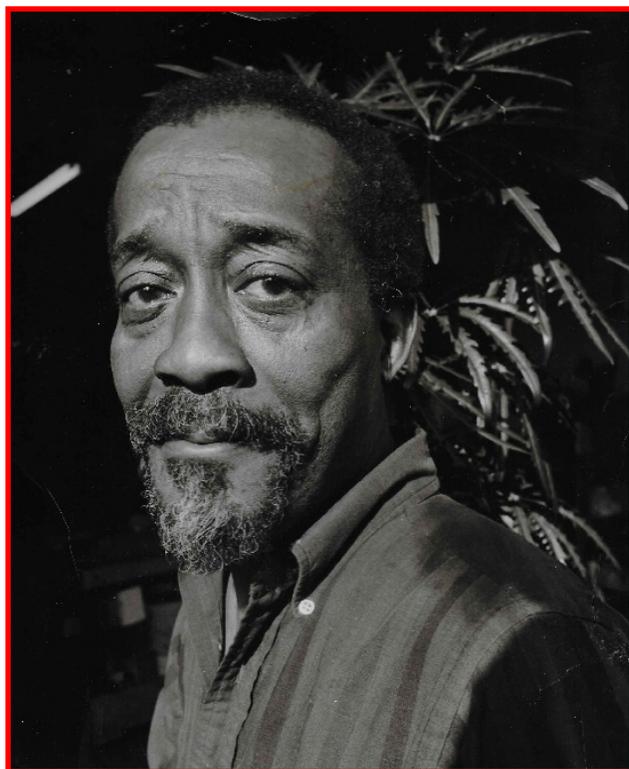


NORMAN LEWIS (1909-1979)

“For many years, I, too, struggled single-mindedly to express social conflict through my painting. However, gradually I came to realize that certain things are true: The development of one’s aesthetic abilities suffers from such emphasis; the content of truly creative work must be inherently aesthetic or the work becomes merely another form of illustration; therefore, the goal of the artist must be aesthetic development, and in a universal sense, to make in his own way some contribution to culture.”¹

A native of New York City, **Norman Wilfred Lewis** was born to St. Kitts immigrants Diana and Wilfred Lewis. The Lewis family lived in Harlem, where the population was a mixture of Jewish, Irish, Italian-Catholic, and African American communities. As a youth, Lewis held various jobs throughout his schooling but knew he wanted to be an artist from the age of ten. In 1929, Lewis found work as a seaman on a freighter and spent several years traveling throughout South America and the Caribbean, meeting local people and witnessing firsthand the poverty of Bolivia, Uruguay, Jamaica, and elsewhere. Upon his return to the United States, Lewis settled back in New York City.

In the early 1930s, Lewis met Augusta Savage, who ran an arts school in Harlem and was involved with lobbying the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to hire more black artists. From 1933 to 1935, he took classes at the Savage School of Arts and Crafts and attended Columbia University Teachers College. Lewis’s deep commitment to social and economic equality led him to join the Artists Union, which was organized to protect the rights of artists and workers. He is a regular at 306, a cultural center in Harlem that attracted musicians, writers and young artists, and a co-founder of the Harlem Artists Guild (HAG) in 1935. The Guild lobbied for and won federal funding for the Harlem Community Arts Center. In 1936, he began working for the WPA’s Federal Arts Project, teaching classes at the newly formed center and at the George Washington Carver School. Lewis’s art at the time was grounded in social realism and focused on the lives and struggles of black Americans, but in the 1940s, he began to explore abstraction. While he remained active in the struggle for civil rights throughout his life, Lewis was skeptical about the power of art to effect

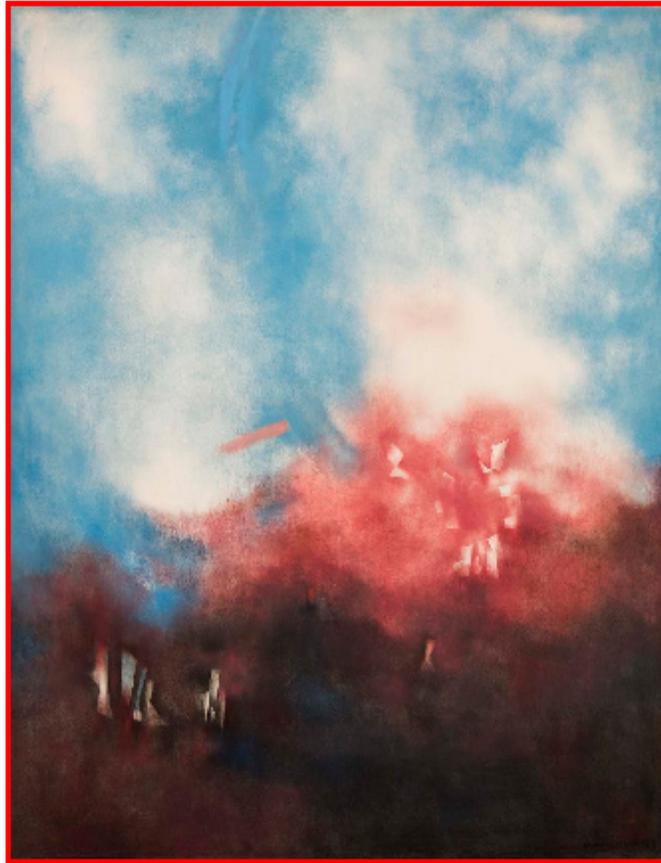


Photograph © Gary Schoichet. Courtesy of the Estate of Norman W. Lewis

change, explaining in a 1968 interview, “one of the things in my own self education, was the discouraging fact that painting pictures of protest didn’t bring about any change.”²

In 1945, Alain Locke included Lewis’s work in the exhibition *The Negro Artist Comes of Age: A National Survey of Contemporary American Artists*, and the following year, Lewis joined the growing number of New York abstract artists represented by the Marian Willard Gallery. From his first solo show at Willard in 1949 to the mid-1950s, Lewis’s reputation steadily grew, and he developed his own individual style consisting of calligraphic, fluid forms suggesting groups of figures engaged in kinetic activity. Traveling in the same circles as prominent abstractionists, Lewis befriended Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, Charles Seliger, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning. In 1950, he was the only black artist to participate in the famous closed-door sessions defining abstract expressionism held at Studio 35, organized by de Kooning and Kline and moderated by Museum of Modern Art Director, Alfred J. Barr. A year later, MoMA included his work in the exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. Despite a decade of artistic achievement and consistently favorable reviews, Lewis never received the kind of recognition and financial success his white colleagues enjoyed, and it was only in the late twentieth century that his work began to occupy a central place in histories of American art. Lewis himself was aware of this disparity and of the related expectation in the art world at the time that African American artists document “the black experience.”

Throughout his career, Lewis pursued his unique artistic vision while also remaining committed to his political beliefs



Norman Lewis (1909-1979), *Blue Red*, 1963, oil on canvas, 64" x 49 1/2", signed

and dedicated to the people of Harlem. He was a founding member of the Spiral Group, and from 1965 to 1971, he taught for HARYOU-ACT, Inc. (Harlem Youth in Action), an antipoverty program designed to encourage young men and women to stay in school. In 1969, Lewis joined Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, Clifford Joseph, Roy DeCarava, Alice Neel, and others in picketing the infamous *Harlem on My Mind* show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That same year, he, Bearden, and Ernest Crichlow co-founded Cinque Gallery, dedicated to fostering the careers of emerging artists of color. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (1972), a Mark Rothko Foundation Individual Artists Grant (1972), and a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1975), Lewis had his first retrospective exhibition in 1976 at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York.

Since his death in New York City in 1979, Lewis has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. His work is part of the permanent collection of numerous museums, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo, NY); The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MA); Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY);

National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC); The Newark Museum (NJ); Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York, NY); Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC); and Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, NY).

Currently on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts (PAFA) is *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, the first comprehensive museum overview on the artist. Curated by Ruth Fine, the exhibition will travel to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art (Ft. Worth, TX) and the Chicago Cultural Center (IL). The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated monograph with an artist chronology, 95 color plates and new scholarship by Ruth Fine, David Acton, Andrianna Campbell, David C. Driskell, Jacqueline Francis, Helen M. Shannon and Jeffrey C. Stewart.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC is the exclusive representative of the Estate of Norman W. Lewis.

¹ Norman Lewis in his 1949 application for a Guggenheim Fellowship printed in Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction, Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989, 63.

² Oral history interview with Norman Lewis, 1968 July 14, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm> (accessed February 2009).



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