

ART & DESIGN

Review: ‘One-Way Ticket’ at MoMA Reunites Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Paintings

By HOLLAND COTTER APRIL 2, 2015

On Easter 1939, Marian Anderson stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and sang: “The gospel train is coming; I hear it just at hand; I hear the car wheels rumbling, and rolling through the land. Get on board.” By then, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans had already heard the call, leaving the rural South for the industrial North in search of jobs, homes and respect.

The same year she sang, the young artist Jacob Lawrence, son of relocated Southerners, began research for a sequence of paintings that would record the wave of boardings, rumblings and arrivals. Those paintings and journey itself are the subjects of “One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North” at the Museum of Modern Art, a show as stimulating to the mind and the ear as it is to the eye.

Officially, the show is meant to celebrate the centennial of the migration, which started during World War I. Just as significantly, though, it brings all 60 of Mr. Lawrence’s small paintings together at MoMA for the first time in two decades. Even before he completed the project in 1941, the artist had been hailed as a prodigy by the Harlem cultural establishment. The “Migration Series” made him a crossover star. When it was exhibited at the Downtown Gallery on East 51st Street, he became the first African-American to be represented by a New York gallery. Collectors and curators paid attention. Fortune magazine, one of the country’s leading weeklies, reproduced 26 panels from the series. Everyone wanted a piece of it.

Mr. Lawrence, however, told his dealer, Edith Halpert, that he didn’t want the work sold piecemeal. He had conceived it as a unit and insisted it be kept that way. Before the show opened, he moved to New Orleans to get firsthand experience of Southern life. So he wasn’t around when Ms. Halpert negotiated the sale of the series in two big pieces, with all the even-numbered panels going to MoMA and the odd-numbered ones to the Phillips Collection in Washington. When he learned of the deal he wasn’t thrilled, but he was philosophical, reasoning that at least the pictures would be well cared for and could potentially be reunited, which is what’s happening at MoMA.

Originally titled “The Migration of the Negro,” the series is now so familiar and beloved that it’s easy to miss how brilliant it is, as tightly thought through as any fresco program by Giotto, and probably more consistently executed, being the product of just one hand. By the time he came to it, Mr. Lawrence had been in Harlem for about a decade, having moved there from Pennsylvania with his mother. She enrolled him in neighborhood art classes and he found ardent mentors in two artist-teachers, Charles Alston and Augusta Savage. They urged him to be ambitious, and he was, turning out three narrative cycles on black heroes from the past — Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman — before starting his grand essay on the African-American present.

Mr. Lawrence had the temperament and habits of a scholar. A good part of the time and energy spent on the “Migration Series” went into preparatory reading and note-taking. He did most of this at the 135th Street Public Library, which is now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and which collaborated with MoMA and the Phillips Collection on the show. Always on a slender budget, he used inexpensive materials: pencil, ink and tempera paint on hardboard. Thanks to an artist’s grant, he was able to rent a Harlem studio just large enough to let him view all 60 paintings simultaneously.

With the help of another artist, Gwendolyn Knight, who he would soon marry, he prepared the panels with gesso and transferred onto them previously finished drawings. He then filled in the drawings with straight-from-the-jar paint, applying one color one at a time, patchwork-style, to all the panels, beginning with black and saving the lightest colors for last. On separate pieces of paper he wrote captions for each image, a format he’d picked from magazines.

The result is a visual narrative as logically imagined and rhythmically paced as a film storyboard. At MoMA the entire series wraps round the walls of one gallery, and even from a distance, standing in the middle of the room, you can pick up the formal links and syncopations. Dark, dense compositions alternate with open, light ones. Geometric dominance — vertical, horizontal, diagonal — shifts from panel to panel. Single rich colors — rust-pink, mustard, sherbet-green — recur, threading through the whole like the sound of bright instruments in an orchestra.

The expressive variations Mr. Lawrence extracts from a few basic visual props — staircases, windows, walls, beds, massed figures — is astonishing. So is the really epic drama he distills from stripped-down, nearly abstract images. A silhouetted brown body raising a hammer high above a single immense rail spike says a lot of what there is to say about backbreaking labor. A cell-like room with a shade pulled down sums up what some migrants left behind. A yellow train bell clanging in the blue night hits a note of exultation and alarm that many northbound travelers, in the process of changing their lives forever, must have felt.

Sound — music — plays a big role in the show. So do literature and photography. The organizers, Leah Dickerman, a curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, and Jodi Roberts, a curatorial assistant, rightly place the Lawrence series center stage. But they surround it with

evidence of the culture that inspired it. In Harlem, Mr. Lawrence was a deep reader living among deep writers, like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. He knew them, talked with them, listened. In a very smart move, MoMA has extended this tradition of disciplinary exchange by asking 10 contemporary African-American poets, under the direction of the writer Elizabeth Alexander, to respond to the “Migration Series” with new work. The results are in the catalog and on tape in the gallery. Terrific.

Mr. Lawrence himself was responding to writers, but also, in a big way, to photography by artists who had been documenting the Great Migration long before he took up the subject. Ms. Dickerman has assembled a stirring archive of images by some of the great names in the field. Shots of sharecropper shacks in the South and ghettos in New York and Chicago support an underlying message of Mr. Lawrence’s series: Coming north was no guarantee that life would be anything other than differently grim. Yet there’s joy, too, in his painting of black voters standing in line and waiting their turn at the polls, and in a photo by the brothers Morgan and Marvin Smith of crowds spilling out of a Harlem church on an Easter morning.

For sheer transport, though, there’s nothing like music. The show has a lot. And there’s nothing discreet about it; it’s in the air. Bessie Smith sings about partying hard. Ida Cox sings about hard times. Mahalia Jackson sings about heavenly time without end. On film, Billie Holiday performs “Strange Fruit,” an anguished, weirdly sensual song about lynching. A Lawrence painting of lynching is very different, stark: a noose hung from a knife-blade of a branch against a blank sky.

Ms. Holiday sang her song for the first time in 1939, the year Mr. Lawrence began his migration research, and the year Ms. Anderson, who was performing outdoors in Washington because she had been denied the use of an indoor hall, urged her listeners to journey in a new direction. By the time the Great Migration is considered to have ended in the 1970s, an estimated six million African-Americans had done so.

Globally speaking, that move continues. In the Americas, there’s still a northward surge, now mostly from the Caribbean and Mexico. And you see constant movement in new art. The current reinstallation of MoMA’s contemporary galleries, the best one at the museum in years, includes artists from China, India, South America and the Middle East, as well as Europe and the United States. The work is far from utopian, but then the “Migration Series” isn’t exactly utopian either. It’s questioning, doubting, and ends on an ambiguous note, with travelers jammed on a railroad platform, baggage piled, waiting. The final caption reads: “And the migrants keep coming.” Maybe it’s utopian that they still do.

“One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North” runs through Sept. 7 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; 212-708-9400; moma.org.

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