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"Jazz Musicians" from Norman Lewis featured at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

One of the most rewarding aspects of art is the sense of discovery. It can range from the shock of seeing familiar images in a new light or uncovering an artist who is unfamiliar or less well-known.
In “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis” on display at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, one discovers an artist who, despite being involved in many of the most artistic, political and social movements of his day, has been sadly and unjustly overlooked. This exhibition, the first comprehensive museum overview of his work, seeks to give Lewis his rightful place in art history.

Lewis (1909-1979), was an African American painter born in New York City to Caribbean immigrant parents. While he attended several New York art educational institutions in the 1930s, Lewis considered himself primarily self-taught.

In the exhibition, “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis,” his life’s work is divided into six thematic groups that are arranged in a loosely chronological order.

“In the City” tracks his work from the 1930s and 1940s that consist of figurative compositions that reflect Social Realism. Social Realism sought to portray conditions of the Great Depression and agitate for change. Lewis took for his inspiration scenes of his native Harlem, from the burgeoning jazz music culture to the deprivation and racism experienced by his friends and neighbors.

At the same time Lewis became influenced by the Modernist Movements such as Cubism, Futurism and especially Abstraction. As time progressed, these influences became more prominent in his work, yet the figurative aspects are never completely abandoned. Instead he strikes a balance between representation and abstraction that remained for the rest of his career.

The exhibit continues with groupings titled “Visual Sound,” “Rhythm of Nature” and “Ritual,” which explore his creative heights during the late 1940s to the early 1960s. His muses included not only jazz but also classical music, birds and plants, as well as the rituals of communities such as processions and parades. Lewis’ ability to create scenes of expressive shapes and color while retaining recognizable elements leaves one able to relate to both the abstract and figurative in his paintings.
While Lewis never defined his art by his race, as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s grew to prominence, he felt he could use his art to create awareness. It was during this time that Lewis founded Spiral, a group of artists and writers who sought to engage in issues of racial inequality.

The paintings he created during this time used a more limited palette. Black, white and red became his primary colors. Themes were drawn from the tumultuous times—the KKK, Civil Rights marches and civil unrest. “American Totem,” an oil paint on canvas, is a black-and-white, shadowy representation of an ominous stack of KKK hoods. These pieces are a far cry from the colorful abstracts and delicate lines of his earlier work.

The final years of Lewis’s life are reflected in “Summation” in a grouping of large canvases that he created in the 1970s. Moving to a bigger studio space in New York City enabled him to paint the largest works of his career. Culling from all of his lifelong influences, themes range from the pastoral in “Afternoon” to fiery emotion in “Confrontation.”

This retrospective of the art of Lewis is an interesting look at an artist whose journey was influenced by the world around him—the real and the abstract, beauty and ugliness, celebration and defeat. Moving through “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis,” is a trip through some of the most important artistic movements in the 20th century, by an artist who may not be well-known but is nonetheless an ideal example of the role of the artist in society.

“Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis” is on display until April 3, 2016, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The museum is located at 128 N. Broad St., Philadelphia. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, and closed Mondays and legal holidays. Admission is $15 for adults, $12 for seniors, $8 for youth, and free for children 12 and younger. There is free admission every Sunday for the duration of “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis.”

For more information visit www.pafa.org.

Joseph George holds a degree in history and art history from Dickinson College. He and his wife, Barrie Ann have spent much of their 25 years together traveling and visiting art galleries locally and throughout the world. Their tastes range from fine art to street art.