The Great Migration Series
by Jacob Lawrence
The Great Migration
An American Story paintings by Jacob Lawrence

This is the story of the exodus of African Americans who left their farms and homes in the South. Their movement resulted in one of the biggest population shifts in American history.

The Great Migration is very much a part of Jacob Lawrence’s life. My family was a part of the first Migration 1916 and 1919. I spent many hours researching the great migration and this research gave me the images in my head that I needed to tell this story.

“And the migrants kept coming” is a refrain of triumph over adversity. My family and others left the South on a Quest for Freedom, justice and dignity.

Lawrence painted the 60 pictures not one at a time but production-line style, working on them all simultaneously. In a given studio session he would apply a single color to several paintings in progress. In the next session he would apply another color in the same way. Chromatic recurrence was one way he bound the series together.

The use of repeated motifs was another. Linear uprights — bare trees, prison bars, raised arms, flames — alternate with the flat planes of open skies or high walls to create a rhythm of escapes and enclosures punctuated by exclamations. Figures, often in silhouette, move, then wait, then move again. Descriptive captions under each image enhance a sense of unity. The series begins with these words: "During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes." It ends, "And the migrants kept coming."
Around the time Jacob Lawrence was born, many African Americans from the South left their homes and travelled to the North in search of a better life.
"There was a shortage of workers in Northern factories because many had left their jobs to fight in the First World War."
"The factory owners had to find new workers
…to replace those who were marching off to war."
Northern Industries offered southern blacks jobs as workers and lent them money to be repaid later, for their railroad tickets.
The Northbound Train was packed with recruits
Nature had ravaged the South. Floods ruined farms.
"Another great ravager of the crops was the boil weevil." (1940-41)
The war had doubled the cost of the food, making life even harder for the poor.
Railroad stations were crowded with immigrants that guards were called in to keep order.
The flood of migrants northward left crops back home to dry and spoil.
For African-Americans the South was barren in many ways.
There was no justice for them in courts and their lives were in danger.
Although slavery had long been abolished...
White landowners treated the black tenant farmers harshly and unfairly.
And so the migration grew....
Segregation divided the South.
The Black newspapers told of better housing and jobs in the North.
Families would arrive early at the railroad stations to make sure they could get on the Northbound trains.
Early arrival was not easy, because African-Americans found on the streets could be arrested for no reason.
And the Migrants kept coming.
In the South there was little opportunity for education and children labored in the fields.
These were more reasons for people to move north, leaving some communities deserted.
There was much excitement and discussion about the Great Migration.
Agents from the Northern factories flocked into the Southern counties
And into the towns looking for laborers.
Families often gathered to discuss whether to go North or to stay in the South.
The promise of better housing in the North could not be ignored.
The railroad stations were crowded with migrants.
Letters from relatives in the North and articles in the black press portrayed a better life outside the south.
Many migrants arrived in Chicago.
In Chicago and other cities they labored in the steel mills...
And on the railroads
And the migrants kept coming.
... and coming
Southern landowners stripped cheap labor, tried to stop the migration by jailing the labor agents and the migrants.
Sometimes the agents disguised themselves to avoid arrest, but the migrants were often taken from the railroad stations and jailed until the trains departed.
Black and White Southern leaders met to discuss ways to improve conditions to stop the flow of workers north.
Although life in the north was better, it was not ideal.
Many migrants moved to Pittsburgh which was a great industrial center.
Although they were promised better housing in the North, some families were forced to live in overcrowded and unhealthy quarters.
The migrants soon learned that segregation was not confined to the South.
Many northern workers were angry because they had to compete with the migrants for housing and jobs.
There were riots....
Longtime African-Americans residents living in the north did not welcome the newcomers from the south and often treated them with disdain.
The migrants had to rely on each other. The storefront church was a welcoming place and the center of their lives in joy and sorrow.
Black professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, soon followed their patients and clients north.
Female workers were the last to leave.
Life in the North brought many challenges, but migrants’ lives had changed for the better.
The children were free to go to school and their parents were free to vote.
And the migrants kept coming....
Migration by Walter Dean Myers

In the waiting room "Colored",
Hands, calloused and black as the rich
Georgia/Carolina?Alabama birth they leave behind,
Clasp and unclasp silently,
Some hold bibles older than freedom,
Others hold food that will not last the long journey.
There is no need to speak, to explain
How so many nights of love and terror
So many back cracking, heart breaking days
So many humbled dreams
Can fit into the small rope-tied case that sits
On the ancient hardwood floor between them

A stirring at the ticket counter
Stiffens backs, tightens stomachs
Hard-eyed men with guns in their belts
Stare "daggers" into the room, "Colored"
In the distance the whoo! whoo! of the train breaks
The Stillness of a forever moment
The men with guns look, shake their heads and leave
Life goes on

The tickets to Chicago/Detroit/New York are heavy
As heavy as the memory of a church built
With sweat and faith and knotted pine
On the edge of the old burying ground
But there are the children, and there is the hope
Of a people with yet one more river to cross.
ABOUT THE ARTIST
Jacob Lawrence was born in 1917 and grew up in New York City during the depression. He studied art at the Harlem Workshop and the American Artist school. He is best known for his sequences of Narrative Paintings of which the Migration is one.

ABOUT THE ART
The Migration of the Negro, a narrative series of 60 individual panels was painted between 1940-41. Tempera on Gesso on board, each panel is 18x12. Lawrence filled the Migration Series with images of “the human drama” - hope, disappointment, determinations, despair, struggle and perseverance. Although Lawrence certainly saw The Migration Series as an artistic statement about the African American experience, he also wanted the series to convey the universality of moving, migrating, and immigrating. Indeed, The Migration Series can be seen in terms of even broader shared experiences: taking risks and facing the unknown in search of a better life.

See WS Subject and Atyle & technique

ABOUT THE POET
Walter Dean Myers is the author of dozens of books for young adults.
Questions to ask:
1. Are these paintings Primary or Secondary Sources? How do you know? What stands out that makes them either Primary or Secondary?
2. Is the poem a Primary or Secondary Source? How do you know? What are the clues?
3. Define Narrative Painting.
4. What themes do you see though the poem?
5. Can each painting stand alone as a Narrative painting? Why or Why not.
6. Does Jacob Lawrence’s style lend itself to the portrayal of the Great Migration? Explain.
7. Have students explain how *The Migration Series* was personal for Jacob Lawrence. How do Lawrence’s paintings evoke an emotional response?
8. Lawrence illustrated important social events. How is art similar to journalism?
9. Have students discuss how artists can influence public opinion. What effect did Lawrence have on Caucasian Americans’ perceptions of African Americans? On other African Americans?
10. How is artwork an effective way to influence people socially, politically, and globally in today’s world?
11. Does Lawrence feel positively or negatively about this social change? How do they convey this?