When Jacob Lawrence was young, the colors and patterns of his mother’s small, inexpensive Persian rugs so intrigued him that he would copy them. First he drew all the geometric designs, then he filled them in color-by-color—all of the reds, then all the blues, and so on. He also loved to cut the tops off cardboard boxes, then paint inside neighborhood street scenes—funeral parlors, barbershops, tenements with broken windows. Today, Jacob Lawrence is considered one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, with these early artistic interests continuing throughout his sixty-year career.

We see both patterning and neighborhood scenes in this early genre painting, done when Lawrence was only twenty. [See slide 7] Featuring the Harlem Clinic that Lawrence himself used, Free Clinic demonstrates the young artist’s skill at creating wonderfully economical yet evocative shapes that let us diagnose, with just a few clues, these patients and their various states of pain. We see injured heads, upset stomachs, sick infants, and bad feet. Above the patients’ heads, images of lungs, intestines, and laboratory equipment reinforce the clinic’s function and its clients’ ailments. The people seem to wait so patiently, and we wait with them as Lawrence’s plunging diagonals lead our eyes back and forth along the weaving line of long-suffering individuals. Using gouache, Lawrence narrows his palette, which became one of his stylistic signatures—“It forces you to be more inventive,” he once explained. He then arranges this limited number of bright, flat colors into bold patterns to further strengthen his composition.

Lawrence was part of this community, and Free Clinic is just one of the artist’s many genre scenes that document Harlem during the Great Depression. “My pictures express my life,” he once said; “I paint the things I have experienced.” Lawrence’s mother, who was part of the Great Migration North, brought her children to Harlem around 1930, when Lawrence was thirteen. Although the Depression dulled the glitter of the Harlem Renaissance, also called the New Negro Movement, the vital community continued to nurture its artists, aided in the mid-1930s by the government-sponsored programs of WPA/FAP. [See map page 23]

Lawrence studied at a number of federally-funded community cultural centers and art workshops, including the Harlem Art Workshop. His talent was recognized immediately, although Lawrence thought otherwise. “No matter how hard I try,” he once declared, “I just can’t draw like the rest of the fellows up at Mike’s (studio workshop).” Since many of the artists’ studios doubled as gathering spots, Lawrence came into contact with some of the period’s luminaries, including Aaron Douglas (see pages 26-29), the poet Langston Hughes*, and scholars Alain Locke* and W.E.B. DuBois*. In 1938, the WPA/FAP hired Lawrence in its Easel Project, which not only paid for materials and paintings, but exposed him, on equal footing, to other professionals. “It was a real turning point for me,” he stated. “It was my education.”

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary
Lawrence, however, was well on his way. In 1938, at the age of twenty, he had his first one-man exhibition in Harlem, displaying his early genre scenes of Harlem. The following year, he had two shows, one of them featuring an epic narrative series documenting the life of Touissant l'Ouverture* (c. 1744-1803), the Haitian revolutionary responsible for the establishment of Haiti as the first independent black republic in the Western Hemisphere. This recognition of Lawrence's talent happily coincided with the museum and gallery world beginning, as black art historian/curator Edmund Barry Gaither stated, "its earliest retreats from the freeze-out against black artists." Thus the Baltimore Museum stressed the importance of the Touissant series by installing it in a separate room. This first major museum exhibition of black artists's work, held in 1939, was co-sponsored by the Harmon Foundation. Lawrence's series was also shown in Chicago's landmark American Negro Exposition, held at the Tanner Gallery in 1940.

Throughout the rest of his career, Lawrence would intersperse small genre scenes like Free Clinic with these epic series, which consist of small panels that fit together in a cinematographic fashion to form a powerful narrative whole. Continuing the pattern-making he did as a child, Lawrence worked on all of the panels at once, filling them in color-by-color, doing the darker colors first, which imparted a consistency of hue throughout the entire series.

Soon Lawrence became known as the great narrative painter of black nineteenth-century history. Since, as Lawrence once claimed, "they never taught Negro history in public school," he wanted to set the record straight. "The Negro has always participated in American history. There were Negroes with George Washington crossing the Delaware. I don't see how a history of the U.S. can be written honestly without including the Negro." In the tradition of such socially committed artists as the Spaniard Francisco Goya (1746-1828) or Lawrence's contemporaries, the Mexican muralists, the artist declared: "If at times my productions do not express the conventionally beautiful, there is always an effort to express the universal beauty of man's continuous struggle to lift his social position and to add dimension to his spiritual being."

Lawrence chronicled the story of the valiant abolitionist Frederick Douglass in his next series of 1939-40. [See figure 5, also see pages 12-16] Consisting of thirty-two panels, the work combines narrative text and imagery to retell the compelling story of Douglass who escaped from slavery in Maryland to become the foremost African American abolitionist spokesman during and following the Civil War era. Lawrence divides his series into three sections: "The Slave," "The Fugitive," and "The Free Man." In this panel from "The Fugitive" section, an angry mob of pro-slavery supporter attack Douglass and his fellow abolitionists at a rally in Indiana. They knocked Douglass unconscious and also broke his left hand, which was left permanently weakened.
Lawrence depicts this dramatic incident using a spare, forceful composition consisting of angular and diagonal thrusts. “When the subjects are strong, I believe simplicity is the best way of treating them,” he once said. His perspective is steep, and depth is indicated by smaller, receding forms. His expressive technique features bold and dark colors. In striking contrast, the white-attired Douglass forms the panel’s anguished centerpiece, his arms and legs extended in a manner suggestive of Christ.

Just as Lawrence captures the essence of the episode through his simplified angular imagery, so too does he concisely and accurately narrate the scene. Text and images complement one another, with a vividness reminiscent of black oral tradition. Culled from thorough research, Lawrence’s caption reads: “The Garrisonians in the year 1843 planned a series of conventions in order to spread and create greater antislavery sentiment in New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. In one of these conventions, Douglass and two of his fellow workers were mobbed at Pendleton, Indiana.”

As shown here, Lawrence combines a modernist sensibility—simple composition, large flattened forms, and minimal detail—with the narrative tradition of Social Realism to achieve his uniquely expressive style. “I gravitate to geometric forms,” he once said. “My work is abstract in the sense of
being designed and composed.” But, he added, “The human subject, the human figure, is the most important thing for me. I want to communicate.”

And communicate Lawrence did. Between 1940 and 1943 alone, when he was drafted into the Coast Guard during World War II (1939-1945), Lawrence completed series about ex-slave Harriet Tubman, abolitionist John Brown, and his home of Harlem. With the success of his sweeping *Migration of the Negro* series, 1940-1941, Lawrence joined that vanguard of African American artists to be represented by a New York gallery, Edith Halpert’s prestigious Downtown Gallery. Meanwhile, awards such as the *Julius Rosenwald Fund* fellowship (his first of three) enabled Lawrence to travel for research and study through the rural South where he experienced for the first time the blatant discrimination still prevalent in the region. Of his work during this period, a critic remarked: “[In Lawrence’s work] there is a laconic handling of explosive subject matter, direct as a broadside.”

After World War II, as awards and fellowships continued, including a noted John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Lawrence broadened his approach.
His Struggle: From the History of the American People series, 1955-1956, documented blacks' involvement in American history from the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) through the first covered wagons heading West, around 1817. He responded to the turmoil of the civil rights era during the 1960s by producing perhaps his most overtly political art.

Lawrence's most recent art ranges from people laboring together harmoniously in works entitled Builders, begun around 1969, to his 1982 Hiroshima series that exposes the devastation wrought by the atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945. One of Lawrence's latest works is Events in the Life of Harold Washington, 1991, a ceramic tile mosaic featuring the accomplishments of the late Chicago mayor (1922-1987) that greets visitors in the lobby of Chicago's Harold Washington Library Center. [See figure 6]

In 1974, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, honored Lawrence with a major travelling retrospective, and in 1983, he was elected to the prestigious Academy of Arts and Letters. For much of his career, Lawrence has also contributed to the art world through his teaching. Currently, he is Professor Emeritus of Art at the University of Washington, Seattle. And for his entire career, despite pressure and trends to the contrary, Jacob Lawrence has not wavered in his commitment to, in his words, "my national, racial, and class group." As a critic once said, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s: "Jacob Lawrence is one of the very few ... American artists courageous enough to paint subject in a day-when it is distinctly unfashionable; and much more than that, to make his subject a testament, an expression of his belief in man's continuing strength and will to achieve and preserve freedom."
Slide Seven: Jacob Lawrence

1. Lawrence uses diagonals in *Free Clinic* to create a sense of depth and movement. Have students compare this compositional device with diagonals in works by Hale Woodruff, Walter Ellison, and Archibald J. Motley, Jr. in this manual. Have students compose pictures with perspective created through the use of diagonals.

2. “My pictures express my life,” said Jacob Lawrence. “I paint the things I have experienced.” Have students create scenes of the people, places, and incidents that they experience in their community.

3. Lawrence has created epic narrative series of historic figures such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Have students research a figure from American history and determine 8 to 10 scenes from his/her life to depict. In keeping with Lawrence’s methods, have students fill in their drawings color by color and write narratives to accompany their pictures. (Suggestion: Depict the life of Fredrick Douglass, as outlined on pages 12–16).

4. A critic once said that Lawrence’s subjects are “an expression of his belief in man’s continuing strength.” How is their painting, with its subject of illness and poverty, about strength? Have students discuss.