

Chapter 5



Train Station, 1936
Walter Ellison
(American, 1900–1977)
Oil on canvas
Charles M. Kurtz Charitable
Trust and Barbara Neff
Smith and Solomon Byron
Smith funds; through prior
gifts of Florence Jane
Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Carter
H. Harrison, and Estate of
Celia Schmidt, 1990.134.

Train Station

Walter Ellison

Overview

Walter Ellison was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1900. As a teenager, he left his rural southern home for Chicago. His move was part of the Great Migration, which took place between 1910 and 1970. During those years, six million African Americans left their homes in the South to start new lives in cities up North. Ellison studied at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago and exhibited his paintings in the American Negro Exposition, held in Chicago in 1940, and at the city's South Side Community Art Center. He painted scenes from his own life that tell both his story and the story of other African Americans living during the early decades of this century.

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This painting shows a train station in Ellison's native Georgia. White passengers board southbound trains for vacations, while black passengers board northbound trains for work in industrial cities. Ellison painted this scene in 1936, during the "Jim Crow" period in southern history. "Jim Crow" laws required public spaces such as railway stations to provide one waiting room for blacks and another for whites. Trains also had separate cars for the two races, and on streetcars and buses whites sat in the front and blacks in the rear. Facilities were separate but rarely were equal.

Chicago was an appealing destination for blacks moving North. It had an established African American community dating back to before the Civil War. Although discrimination existed in Chicago, the city offered better schools, voting rights, leisure activities, and the chance to live day to day with more freedom than Southern towns did. The *Chicago Defender* was the most widely circulated black newspaper in the South (and continues to be an influential newspaper). Black southerners interested in moving North sent letters to the newspaper and got the information they needed to find jobs. The *Defender* portrayed the North as a place of freedom and opportunity.



What's the Story?

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T*rain Station* shows black people headed north for work in Chicago, Detroit, and New York. White people are headed south for vacation in Miami, West Palm Beach, and Tallahassee, Florida. Porters wearing orange suits help the travelers by carrying luggage and giving directions. One man carries a suitcase with the artist's initials, W. W. E. The people traveling north are part of the Great Migration during which thousands of rural southerners moved to cities in the North for jobs.

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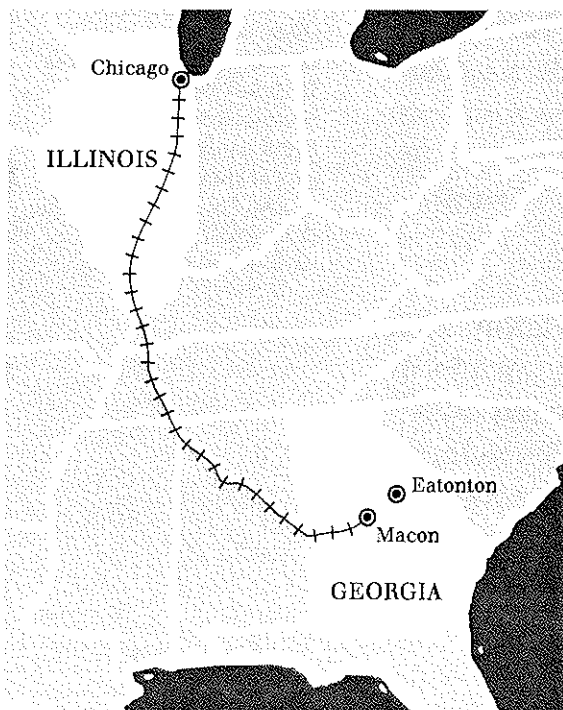
The artist Walter Ellison was part of the Great Migration. This train station might be the one in Macon, Georgia, a town located near his home in Eatonton. Ellison came to Chicago from Georgia when he was a teenager. Though the images in the painting may come from his own life, they also reflect the experiences of many who migrated in search of a better life. Their stories — told in print and music as well as in art — are part of this painting.

The Great Migration

From 1910 to 1970, six million southern-born African Americans were enticed or forced to leave southern farms to work in northern industrial cities. The American labor pool changed dramatically in 1914 with the beginning of World War I (1914-1918). The war not only slowed European immigration, it caused thousands of recent immigrants to the United States to return to their home countries to fight. Factories in the North were left with a dangerously low supply of workers just as wartime industries began to boom. Manufacturers sent recruiters to the South to offer blacks free transportation, the promise of a well-paying job, and greater freedom.

Fearing the loss of cheap labor, southern white farmers attempted, but failed, to slow northern recruitment. The African American community in Chicago, the largest industrial center in the nation, grew at a very rapid rate. The city was known to many southerners through *The Chicago Defender*, a newspaper that not only provided information about the North and Chicago, but also denounced lynching and other forms of racial oppression in the South, and portrayed the North as a place of greater freedom and opportunity. By 1918, Chicago

had attracted 60,000 southern blacks, the largest number in the nation; by 1920, Chicago's black population numbered about 109,000. It was mostly concentrated in the area of the city on the near South Side, known as Douglas/Grand Boulevard, the Black Metropolis, and/or Bronzeville. After World War I, blacks continued to be recruited as industrialists attempted to replace striking white workers. After World War II (1939-1945), mechanized cotton pickers appeared on southern farms, forcing many blacks who had stayed in the rural South to find jobs elsewhere. In Chicago, the black population more than doubled between 1950 and 1970, from 492,000 to over a million.



Families on the Move

Moving from the South to the North was difficult for many southern African American families. Buying a train ticket to the North was very expensive, and many people had to sell their belongings, houses, land, and even clothes to do so. Other families pooled their money to buy a ticket for one family member, hoping that the person would make enough money to send for the rest of the family. Men often left their families temporarily to find jobs and housing in the North, leaving the women behind to support the family until they could afford to move.

Families arriving in Chicago usually ended their journey at the Illinois Central Railway station (demolished) at 12th Street and Michigan Avenue. Many families moved into South Side “kitchenette” apartments, which typically comprised several small rooms equipped with a hot plate, an icebox, and a shared bathroom down the hall. Even the most basic factory or service job paid an average of four times the amount a worker could earn picking cotton, and northern black children could go to school instead of working, which was often not the case in the South. But as the South Side population grew, housing became scarce, forcing people to live in overcrowded tenement houses. Poor housing conditions soon instigated health problems such as tuberculosis. Race riots also occurred, as discrimination was still widespread in the North. “Fair and equal treatment” promises made by whites frequently were not kept.

Trains and the Great Migration

The train station here is possibly that of Macon, Georgia, the same station that appears in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. Ellison may have painted this scene based on events of the 1930s or on his memories of coming North as a teenager. Black porters in orange suits serve both the southbound and northbound travelers, carrying the luggage of whites and pointing a confused traveler to a northbound train. Being a Pullman porter for the railroads was considered a good job at this time, and African American porters often helped

immigrants by providing them with news, information, and support on their journeys to the North.

Vernon Jarrett, a retired columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* who migrated to Chicago from Paris, Tennessee, after World War II, described the train as a vehicle of opportunity. “You couldn’t do without the train spiritually. It was the vehicle that could take you to heaven before you died. Heaven meaning away from here.” But another black characterized the journey as bittersweet, remembering that trains also carried passengers away from childhood homes, churches, and family and friends, to uncertain futures. He also recalled that southern train stations were places where African Americans could be harassed or arrested to force them to stay and provide cheap labor in the South.

Walter Ellison (1900–1977)

Walter Ellison (1900–1977) was born in Eatonton, Georgia. He came to Chicago as an adolescent during the Great Migration. After studying at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he exhibited in Chicago at the 1940 American Negro Exposition at the Tanner Gallery, the first exhibition to feature African American artists, and in the 1940s he was active in the South Side Community Art Center.

Chicago and African American Artists

African American artists in Chicago came to form a community not only through the forces of the Great Migration, but also through their own determination to take advantage of the Works Progress (later called *Projects*) Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP). The WPA/FAP was created on October 14, 1935 to support artists, after the 1929 Stock Market Crash led to the unemployment of 25% of working adults during the period called the Great Depression. The largest and most well-known of a number of government projects designed to assist artists, the WPA/FAP at its height employed 5,000

people. Under this program, artists created 108,000 paintings, 18,000 sculptures, 2,500 murals, and thousands of prints, posters, and photographs. The WPA/FAP also helped to create community art centers throughout the country, including the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago.

Chicago artists also took advantage of the example set by the African American arts community that developed in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. Called the “Harlem Renaissance” and begun as a literary movement, this cultural explosion reshaped black identity in the early twentieth century. With the 1925 publication of *The New Negro*, edited by Dr. Alain Locke, the black artist as well as the black writer became a force in the evolution of black culture in the United States. New York artists such as Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, Vertis Hayes, and Augusta Savage took the initiative to open their studios to students. In 1921, the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library began hosting regular exhibitions sponsored by the Harlem Art Workshop. By 1935, Harlem artists joined to form the Harlem Artists’ Guild for the purpose of establishing an independent art center under the WPA/FAP. By 1938, when the Harlem Community Art Center had been open for only a year, 3,000 students were enrolled. The center became a model for other community projects sponsored by the WPA/FAP, such as Chicago’s South Side Community Art Center.

Chicago’s vibrant art community similarly established its own center in the 1930s. In order to raise money, artists gave benefit theater performances and organized an annual gala dance called the “Artists and Models Ball,” for which they designed elaborate costumes and awarded prizes for the best creations. These balls raised enough money for the downpayment on a brownstone at 3831 South Michigan Avenue. This brownstone was once owned by the Comiskey family — the family that owned and managed the White Sox from 1900 to the late 1950s — and was located in what, in the nineteenth century, had been the Gold Coast of Chicago. The mansion became the South Side Community Art Center on May 7, 1941, in a ceremony led by Dr. Alain Locke and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the president of the United States. In addition to Ellison,

Margaret Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, Charles White, and Archibald Motley (each of whose work is also in the Art Institute's collections) were also active in the early years of the center. With World War II came the termination of the WPA and the community of African American artists of the 1930s. The South Side Community Art Center, however, continues to this day to provide professional training and opportunities for young artists to work together.

Many of the artists who founded the South Side Community Art Center became professionals through their studies at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Ellison, Burroughs, Elizabeth Catlett, Cortor, and White all studied at the School. Between 1936 and 1948, the School was also one of the institutions where African American students from Kentucky studied under the financing of the Anderson-Myer State Aid Act, which provided funds for out-of-state graduates and professional training for African Americans.

Chicago was also the home of one of the most important exhibitions of work by black artists in America to date. Held in 1940 at the Tanner Gallery in Chicago, the "American Negro Exposition," also called "The Art of the American Negro," featured the art of many African American artists active at that time. The exhibition was the basis for the first American monograph on African American art, Alain Locke's *The Negro in Art*, published later in 1940. Ellison's monotype *The Sunny South*, now owned by the Art Institute, was published in the book, bringing Ellison the most attention that he would know as an artist.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Train Station by Walter Ellison

Ask the students to tell where their families came from: another city, state, or country?

Look carefully at the slide of the painting. Which trains are going north and which trains are going south?

List as many words as you can find in the painting. When the words are found, answer these questions:

SOUTH-BOUND: White people are on their way south for vacation. How are they dressed?

MIAMI: This city is in the south. Why was Miami a popular vacation spot?

TRAINS NORTH: Black people are traveling north to find freedom and well-paying jobs. How do you think they feel about their journey?

CHICAGO: What kinds of jobs do you think blacks found in this northern city?

DETROIT: What kinds of jobs do you think blacks found in this northern city?

EXIT: Where do you think this door leads?

COLORED: When this painting was made, public places in the south were required by law to provide separate facilities, such as restrooms, for blacks and whites. What do you think about these laws?

W.W.E.: Whose initials are these? Why did the artist include the initials on the suitcase?

WALTER W. ELLISON: This is the artist's signature.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Walter Ellison's painting includes people traveling to many different places. Each of the people in his painting has a story to tell about the past and the future. Many people have stories about when journeys changed the lives of their family members.

ART ACTIVITY: *Drawing a Journey*

Draw a picture that represents a journey you have taken.

- ❖ Draw a line down the middle of the paper.
- ❖ On one half of the paper draw a picture of the starting point of your journey.
- ❖ On the other half of the paper draw a picture of your destination.

WRITING ACTIVITY: *The Story in the Painting*

Write the story you think Walter Ellison is trying to tell or tell your own story about this painting.

- ❖ Choose a character in the picture. Give the character a name.
- ❖ Describe the starting point of the character's journey and final destination.
- ❖ OR, pretend you are a character in the painting. Write a letter to someone to ask for help with your journey and your final destination.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: *A World of Families*

Using a map of the world, have students locate where their family or ancestors came from. Using colored yarn and push pins, have them trace the path that their family traveled to get to Chicago.

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