Art of Our Time

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art

Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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One of the first African American artists to achieve widespread national acclaim, the painter Jacob Lawrence was a keen observer of American culture and a committed storyteller. While still in his teens, he took classes at the Harlem Art Workshop, which operated as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, and later studied at the Harlem Community Art Center. Lawrence both learned from and participated in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, during which African American art, literature, music, dance, and social commentary flourished. Developing a distinct, modernist approach to history painting, he dedicated himself to illustrating the stories of blacks from the Civil War up to his own day.

Lawrence animated these stories with expressively simplified and energetic figures executed in rich, often primary, colors, and he worked frequently in a series format—each narrative advancing through successive paintings. The series that first brought him national attention and remains his most famous project was The Migration of the Negro, which he completed in 1941 at age twenty-three. In sixty small paintings, it told of the large-scale movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North after World War I.

In addition to producing forthrightly historical narratives, Lawrence explored broader, more symbolic themes. He was especially intrigued by labor in all its forms, and he frequently portrayed people working—for example, doing laundry, teaching, painting, repairing radios, mining, shelving library books, cooking, or performing surgery.

In the late 1960s, he focused particularly on scenes of construction workers, subject matter to which he repeatedly returned until the end of his life. Collectively known as The Builders, these paintings of men and women working with wood and tools of the building trade are among the artist’s most iconic images. Black Cowboys reflects Lawrence’s dedication to both history painting and labor imagery. Although their contributions are often overlooked, African Americans were instrumental in settling the American West, a fact the artist celebrates in this depiction of two black men driving cattle. A 1998 letter from his art dealer to the Ulrich indicates that Lawrence wanted the painting to live in a museum that had geographic and historic links to its content. No doubt he considered Wichita, which first thrived as a cattle town, to be a fitting home for this colorful and lively work.

27 Black Cowboys
ca. 1967
Casein tempera on illustration board
20 x 30 in.
Museum Purchase, 1998.0052

Emily Stamey

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**Toby Kamps** is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

**Patricia McDonnell** is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

**Laura Moriarty** is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

**Antonya Nelson** has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the *New York Times Book Review*. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, *Living to Tell* (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, *Bound*, is set there as well.

**Timothy R. Rodgers** is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

**Robert Silberman** is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images*.

**Larry Schwarm** is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, *On Fire: Larry Schwarm*, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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