

Teacher Resources

SEE | THINK | IMAGINE | CREATE

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle



In the Fall 2019, PEM education staff had the opportunity to collaborate with two students from Harvard University's *History 1776, The American Revolution* undergrad class. As part of their Capstone project, the students focused on Lawrence's *Struggle* series and created reference materials and open-ended conversation prompts for PEM's volunteer guides with the caveat that these materials might also be helpful as teacher resources. Some of these materials are peppered throughout this document.

Classroom Discussion prompts

The following essential questions were developed as part of the Harvard Capstone project to serve as either pre and/or post visit classroom discussion points for teachers to consider with their students.

How do we understand the term struggle?

What does it mean to construct a democracy?

What tools do we have that could help us understand the stories of others?

Why does it matter that some stories are told and some are not?

How do we reconcile patriotism with our knowledge of the past?

How often do you feel you're called upon to demonstrate civic responsibility?

Exhibition Overview

[Source: PEM exhibition Introductory panel text]

In 1949, Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), a leading modern American painter and the most prominent black American artist of the time, went to the New York Public Library in search of new perspectives.

The national political climate was fraught, freedoms were threatened, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum—and Lawrence responded boldly. He wanted to visualize a more complete American history through word and image. For more than five years, he read and researched. Then, in May 1954, he began to paint a new series—just as the Supreme Court of the United States ruled to end racial segregation in public schools. The result was *Struggle: From the History of the American People* (1954–56).

In this series of 30 intimate panels, Lawrence interpreted pivotal moments from the American Revolution and the early decades of the republic between 1770 and 1817. His goal was to revive the struggles of the founding fathers and underrepresented historical figures in his art—for his day and for future generations.

This exhibition reunites Lawrence’s *Struggle* series for the first time in more than 60 years. And it includes three contemporary artists who, like Lawrence, find new ways to see the past as present through their rediscovery of historical records.

[Excerpts from the Harvard Capstone Project] *Lawrence proposes an integrated, unifying history of the United States, aimed at attributing credit, seeking historical justice and pursuing the idea of a continuous, all-encompassing struggle. This productive form of viewing our struggles as a nation requires constant thought and reassessment.*

Lawrence observed the injustices that surrounded him at the time he was painting (The murder of Emmet Till, the events that led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, McCarthy’s Red Scares ,among many others) and sought to confront these through images of the American Revolution and surrounding years.

Through a masterful use of egg tempera, Lawrence creates the page-size panels with painstaking manual labor and absolute attention to the effect of the material. As a visual synopsis, we’ve found that the panels share the same abstract, dynamic sensation that makes them difficult but rewarding to read. Visual weight and composition are paired to give the panel a strong sense of variance, often causing us to feel off-center or slightly uncomfortable. Lawrence executes the difficult task of imbuing his art with the same degree of difficulty that surrounds the teaching of the Revolution.

Lawrence revived the struggles of America’s founding fathers, but also viewed early American history from the perspective of the marginalized. His landmark series has never been more important than in today’s political climate, especially to young Americans.

The exhibition includes four thematic sections as mile markers: **Demand Freedom, Commit to the Cause, Democracy Now** and **Struggle On.**

There are three contemporary artists that are featured within the exhibition who each focus on a conceptual pillar of *Struggle*: Word, Image, and Place through time. Bethany Collins works with language, Hank Willis Thomas works with the visual archive, and Derrick Adams dives deep into place.

Visual Analysis: Deconstructing an Image

Lawrence masterfully uses the elements of art and principles of design - line, shape, color, space, movement, emphasis and rhythm to create powerful compositions and uses a combination of the figurative and abstraction to create an effect on the viewer and convey his intent.

Taking the time to deconstruct an image will help to better understand Lawrence's work.

Example: Panel #2: Massacre in Boston



[Source: Harvard Capstone Project]

Questions from formal analysis

- *Who has Lawrence chosen to represent and who has he chosen to omit? How is the figure of Crispus Attucks emphasized as the center of the painting? Color? Light? Position?*
- *How do the figures of the soldiers emphasize the group that is not represented (the British)? Do we see a pattern in the way their bodies are positioned that indicate a relationship with something outside of the painting's limits?*
- *Notice how many of the same colors are used to paint both the human figures and the background.*

Main Visual elements:

Color (same palette used in background and foreground, creates visual confusion and indicates the confusing legacy of the Massacre). This could also indicate something about the equality Lawrence hopes to achieve through his panels; as all the figures are painted with similar tones, evoking the earth, as if all men were born from the earth in a state of equality. Color is also used to emphasize Attucks' centrality (lighter shades of yellow and eye-catching red)

Direction and rhythm (The light shade of blue that features in different moments of the panel guide our eye from left to right, leaving us looking beyond the limits of the painting, in search of the British) The direction of the figures (their bodies and limbs) also create a visual flow of movement. This emphasizes the dynamic outburst of movement that characterizes the Massacre, as well as enhances the violent energy of the event.

Visual analysis and interpretation: The subject of the painting, the Boston Massacre, is an event that confuses us even today, despite its prominence in our education of the Revolution. Lawrence is able to capture the chaotic movement and violent action of the Massacre itself, express the fragmented historical legacy it has left and, most importantly, tell the story of the Massacre through the visual centrality of its most forgotten figure: Crispus Attucks.

Back to the source: Library research serves to inform the creative process



Before picking up his paintbrush to begin the epic series, *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, Jacob Lawrence spent five years researching at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library.

To honor the importance of library research in the artist's creative process, PEM's exhibition design team created a mid-century library experience within the gallery. A touch table showcases some of Lawrence's primary sources – letters, speeches, petitions and political documents.

A visitor response station prompts us to consider the following:

- Jacob Lawrence worked on the *Struggle* series between 1949 and 1956. From your lived experience or your recollections from history class, what events from this area do you think still resonate today?
- What momentous national events in your lifetime do you see as a symbol of struggle?
- How do you use your community library?

Further reading. See excerpt below. To read the entire story, go to *PEM* Blog post: <https://www.pem.org/blog/libraries-that-spark-creativity>

[Excerpt] *Original research was essential to Lawrence's process and he spent countless hours at the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints, a special collection area at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem (today known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). He took the subway from his home in Brooklyn to the library where he pored over historical texts that included first-person accounts, coded messages, and letters from a diverse array of historical players including women, Native Americans, and black people.*

Revisiting History: A Comparative Discussion

What image comes to mind when you think about the story of George Washington crossing the Delaware?

Emanuele Leutze's infamous painting which idolizes this event, might be ingrained in your mind's eye, but is it really based on the historical context?

Consider the following essential questions: [Source: Harvard Capstone Project]

- *Who is creating our history?*
- *What figures are we used to seeing?*
- *Who chooses the narrative of history we follow?*

Compare Lawrence's **Panel 10: The River, 1954**, including the accompanying quote below, to Emanuel Leutze's, ***Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851***

What is the same? What is missing? How does it compare to the quote that Lawrence accompanies his painting?

We, crossed the River at McKonkey's Ferry 9 miles above Trenton...the night was excessively severe...which the men bore without the least murmur...Tench Tilghman, 27 December 17



Consider the following research, thoughts and comments.

[Source: Harvard Capstone Project]

Historical Context: *On June 15, 1775, Congress unanimously elected George Washington to be the commander of the Continental Army. He fit the part as "tall, strong, and erect, he looked the masculine part of a commander" (Allen, 142). The Emanuele Leutze painting of George Washington idolizes a glorious and brave crossing of the Delaware that changed the course of the war. However, the story is more complicated.*

While this victory reversed the downward spiral of Patriot morale at the time, the crossing of the Delaware was arduous and complicated. The plan was to attack the Hessian garrison at Trenton that held 1,500 soldiers who were tough and well-trained. In contrast, Washington initially had 6,000 men, but that number shrank to about 1,400 due to desertions and expiration of enlistments. Washington's troops lacked proper uniforms, had a shortage of gunpowder, were riddled with disease and severely underpaid. Furthermore, the Delaware was icy, twisty, and risky to cross.

On December 25th, 1776, Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware in the midst of a snow storm of both hail and rain. An officer reported, "The wind is northeast and beats in the face of the men. It will be a terrible night for the soldiers who have no shoes. Some of them have tied old rags around their feet." Lawrence in his panel portrays the harshness and reality of this event. The panel is chaotic and the men are huddled together for protection from the severe weather conditions. The troops are covered in blankets, not uniforms. There is no Washington leading the charge, but instead faceless soldiers that endured the crossing and managed this victory. It is a democratic statement to show the masses of soldiers who made the victory possible.

It is important to consider who is fighting in the Revolution. It was not the same people who were writing the Constitution or the Declaration like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who we remember in our history books. Instead it is showing the thousands of faceless soldiers that were critical to the success of the war. It is not trying to foment the narrative, instead to build a new one that is closer to the truth.

An invitation to participate

Within the exhibition, visitors are invited to reinterpret Lawrence's series through their own lived experiences. Prompts located in the exhibition are:

When I look at Panel #_____, I think about...

When I look at Panel #_____, I feel...

When I look at Panel #_____, I hope...

When I look at Panel #_____, I see today's struggle to....

Recommended Resources:

Exhibition Catalogue, ***Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle***
Edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner and Austen Barron Bailly
Peabody Essex Museum / University of Washington Press, 2019

PEM Website:

<https://www.pem.org/exhibitions/jacob-lawrence-the-american-struggle>

<https://www.pem.org/blog/jacob-lawrences-inclusive-america>

Written by Lydia Gordon, Associate Curator of Exhibitions and Research, PEM

<https://www.pem.org/jacob-lawrence-the-american-struggle-panels>

Click on the link to view and read background information about the 30 panels here.

American Struggle: Teens Respond to Jacob Lawrence,
Edited by Chul R. Kim, Six Foot Press with the Peabody Essex Museum

This exhibition publication, for and by young adults, is a collection of interpretative essays written by a diverse group of teens in response to Lawrence's *Struggle* series, reflecting the experiences of youth in American today. Young writers were invited to contribute a short narrative that expressed their point of view and how a selected *Struggle* panel speaks to them on a personal and emotional level.

For younger audiences:

The Great Migration: An American Story by Jacob Lawrence; paintings by Jacob Lawrence
A great book to introduce Jacob Lawrence to younger students.

My Country, 'Tis of Thee: How One Song Reveals the History of Civil Rights,

Murphy, Claire Rudolf (Author) Bryan Collier (Illustrator)

A good book to use in connection with Bethany Collins' contemporary installation.

Additional Reference:

Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle

Harvard University, History 1776, The American Revolution

Capstone project on **Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle**

by Elizabeth Kupervaser-Gould and Jacinta Crestanello