

## KU opens art exhibit of the ‘legend of John Brown,’ featuring prints from acclaimed modernist

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photo by: Spencer Museum of Art

A print from the the new exhibit "Jacob Lawrence and the Legend of John Brown" is pictured.

A new KU exhibit is providing a rare look at images from the 1940s that depict abolitionist John Brown, as produced by one of the era’s most acclaimed Black modernist artists.

KU’s Spencer Museum of Art has opened to the public its complete collection of 22 prints by artist Jacob Lawrence that explore the life and death of Brown, who ran much of his abolitionist movement from Kansas.

Lawrence, the first Black artist to have a piece of artwork acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, created the John Brown pieces in 1941. However, the original paintings became too fragile to display, so he created prints in 1974. The Spencer Museum of Art acquired the

complete set of prints in 2020, and the current exhibit marks the first time the museum has displayed the set in its entirety.

Kate Meyer, a Spencer curator who organized the exhibition, said the works are particularly meaningful because of the time they were created.

“Jacob Lawrence is reflecting on John Brown’s actions of the 1840s in 1941, during segregation,” Meyer said in a KU press release.



photo by: Ryan Waggoner/Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas

Works from “Jacob Lawrence and the Legend of John Brown,” the newest exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art, are pictured.

Lawrence researched Brown extensively and particularly focused on his influence on Black culture. Lawrence gained a reputation of choosing subjects that were important to Black history, including paintings of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. In his John Brown works, Lawrence goes beyond the violence that Brown often was involved in as he became militant toward slaveholders and those who supported slavery. Several of Lawrence’s works portray the behind-the-scenes efforts of Brown as he raised funds and organized the abolitionist cause.

The Spencer exhibition — titled “Jacob Lawrence and the Legend of John Brown” — opened earlier this week and is scheduled to run through June 16. Admission to Spencer, 1301 Mississippi St. on the KU campus, is free. Visitors to the museum also can park on the ground floor of KU’s Mississippi Street parking garage and have their parking ticket validated at the museum.

Museum staff plans to host two other events in conjunction with the exhibition. At noon on March 20, Meyer, the show’s curator, and graduate intern Claire Cox will discuss the history of Lawrence’s prints and speak more about the artist and his relevance.

At 6:30 p.m. on May 9, local John Brown impersonator Kerry Altenbernd will arrive at the museum in character to answer questions about Brown and his time in Kansas.



photo by: Spencer Museum of Art

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