

JACOB LAWRENCE:

“The Legend of John Brown”

In 1947, Jacob Lawrence, the iconic Black artist most widely known for his 60-panel “The Migration Series” (1940-41), created a series of 22 works reflecting upon the legendary Kansas abolitionist John Brown.

Brown, a Connecticut native, believed he was an instrument of God, raised to strike the “death blow” to American slavery. He, along with his sons and followers, conducted bloody raids against pro-slavery forces during the “Bleeding Kansas” Border War between 1855 and 1859. His attempt to capture the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry resulted in his arrest, conviction for treason, and subsequent execution by hanging Dec. 2, 1859.

The print series on display at the Spencer is based on a suite of original gouache paintings that Lawrence created in 1941. Inspired by the artist’s research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, the paintings are now in the permanent collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. In 1977, he produced the portfolio of screen prints because the paintings were too fragile to be on view.

In the “Legend of John Brown” prints, Lawrence employed his signature style of breaking down a scene into overlapping angular shapes to convey the dramatic nature of Brown’s life. The result is a series of works that are striking without being sentimental and visually compelling without being emotionally manipulative.

Among the exhibit’s magnificent images is “John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America.” Here, Lawrence reflects upon the religious overtones of Brown’s activities by portraying him with a crucified Christ figure. At the center is a thin, white Jesus on a black cross, streaming blood onto the ground from the long yellow nail piercing his feet. Brown is portrayed at the side of the cross, gazing outward past the end of the hill and into the unknown. Above, the artist uses shades of brown and blue to portray a giant, sharp, dark blue cloud casting a shadow over the

land. The intersection of fate, faith and finality speaks to the intersection of Brown’s mortality, spirituality and humanity.

In “John Brown formed an organization among the colored people of the Adirondack woods to resist the capture of any fugitive slaves,” the artist uses shadow, contrast and chiaroscuro to depict Brown handing firearms to fighters. Lawrence uses long, sharp strokes to contrast the aged Brown with the young fighters. The mostly neutral tones and sharply defined subjects give this work, and the others, a clinical feel that reminds us that these events were more than just chapters in history books; they involved the lives and deaths of people who lived and breathed just like us.

Born in 1917, Lawrence attended the American Artists School before securing a position with the Works Progress Administration. He studied under Charles Alston in the Alston-Bannam workshop and in the Harlem Art Workshop. Prior to a professorship at the University of Washington, Lawrence taught at Black Mountain College, The Art Students League, Pratt Institute, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

At 21, his series of 41 paintings of the Haitian general Toussaint L’Ouverture, who led the revolution of the slaves that eventually gained independence, was shown at the Baltimore Museum of Art. This was followed by a series of paintings about the lives of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. In contrast to Lawrence’s peaceful activism through much of his art, his portrayal of the life of John Brown is saturated with bloodshed and violence.

— Harold Smith

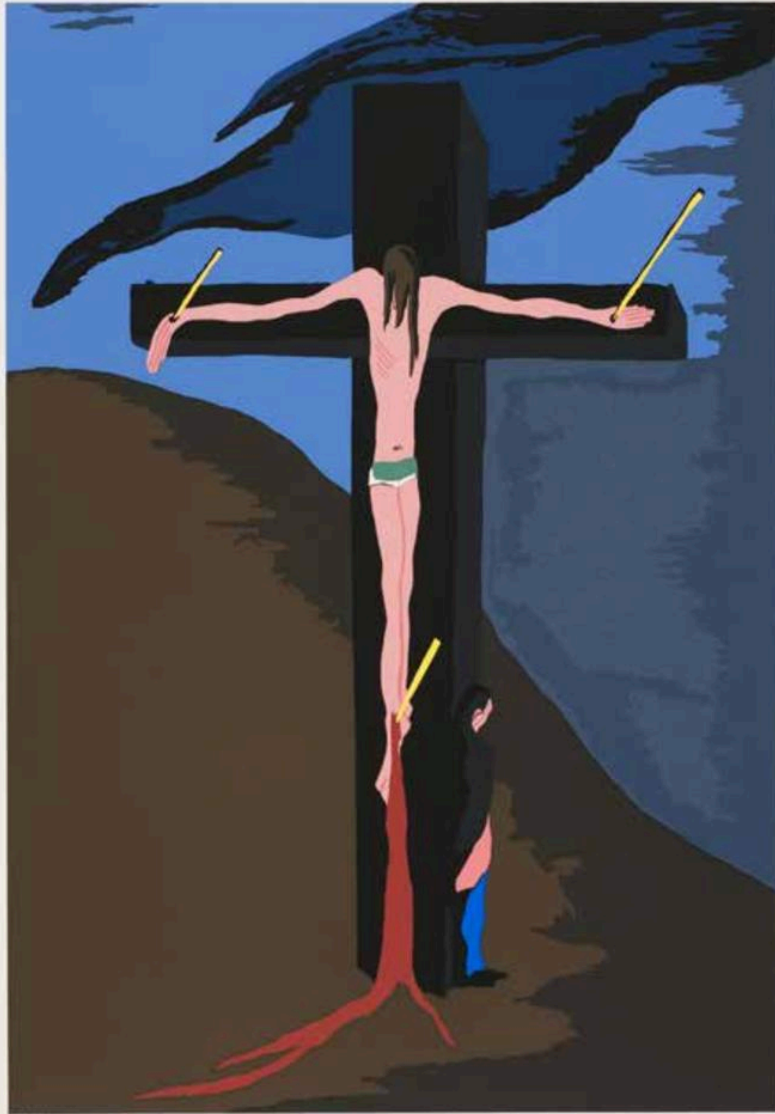
“Jacob Lawrence and the Legend of John Brown” continues at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas through June 16. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday, and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. For more information, 785.864.4710 or www.spencerart.ku.edu.

MUSEUM PURCHASE: GIFT OF JEFF AND MARY WEINBERG, 2020.0068.07, COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS



Jacob Lawrence, "John Brown formed an organization among the colored people of the Adirondack woods to resist the capture of any fugitive slaves." (1974–1977)

MUSEUM PURCHASE: GIFT OF JEFF AND MARY WEINBERG, 2020.0068.02, COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

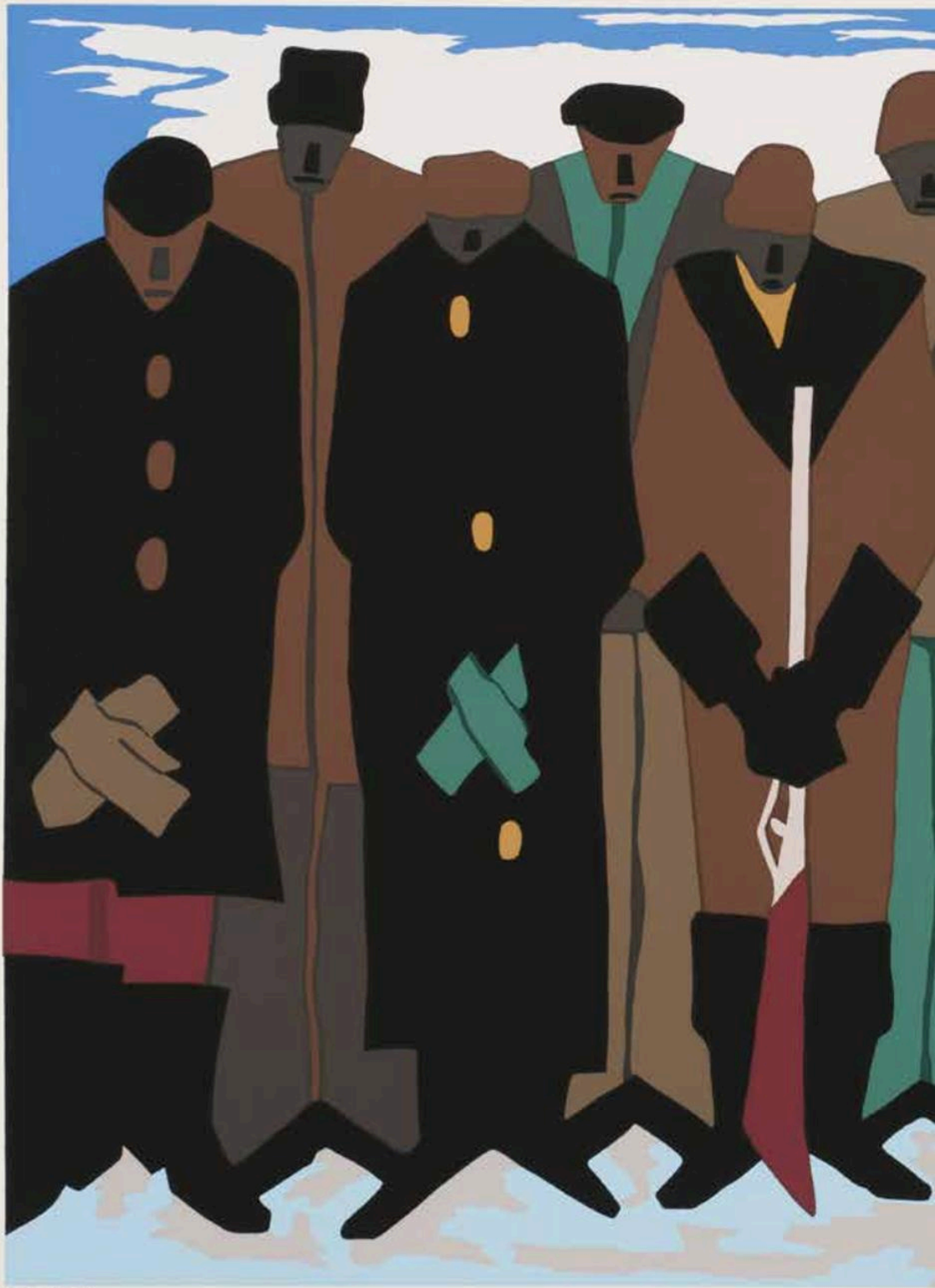


Jacob Lawrence, "John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America." (1974–1977)



JACOB LAWRENCE, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1859. JOHN BROWN WITH A COMPANY OF 21 MEN, WHITE AND BLACK, MARCHED ON HARPERS FERRY, 1974-1977

Jacob Lawrence, "Sunday, October 16, 1859. John Brown with a company of 21 men, white and black, marched on Harpers Ferry." (1974-1977)



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Jacob Lawrence, "John Brown remained a full winter in Canada, drilling negroes for his coming raid on Harpers Ferry." (1974-1977)



MUSEUM PURCHASE: GIFT OF JEFF AND MARY WEINBERG, 2020.0068.18, COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Jari Tauron - 1977



MUSEUM PURCHASE: GIFT OF JEFF AND MARY WEINBERG, 2020.0068.22, COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Jacob Lawrence, "Portrait of O. J. Simpson's attorney as he was put on trial for his life in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia)." (1974–1977)