

On the Cover

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) was an award-winning artist who dedicated his life to portraying the life and culture of the African American community. In honor of this great American artist, the Phillips Collection, a museum of modern art and its sources in Washington, DC, is mounting a retrospective of his work, “Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence,” May 27–August 19, 2001. Another work by this prolific artist was featured on the January 2001 cover of the *American Psychologist*.

Lawrence’s early life mirrored that of many African American children in the first part of the 20th century. His father, a cook for the railroad, was rarely home. By the time Lawrence was seven, his father had abandoned the family. Lawrence’s mother, a domestic laborer, moved the children several times before finally settling in New York City’s Harlem in 1930. Lawrence’s first art training occurred when she enrolled him in an after-school art workshop. Lacking encouragement, needing to help support his family, and preoccupied with art, he dropped out of high school after two years. He said of that time, “I may have been working at a print shop and delivering laundry, but all I was *thinking* of was art” (Smith, 1999, p. 68). He took several community art classes and in 1937 received a scholarship to the American Artists School. By 1938, he had his first individual exhibition and was on his way. His productivity and acclaim grew exponentially with the passing years. When he was 55, Lawrence and his wife, Gwendolyn Knight, left Harlem for Seattle, WA, where he joined the faculty of the University of Washington as a professor of art.

Lawrence has been described as “a master storyteller” creating works that are “accessible, uncompromising, and driven by his empathy with those he portrays” (Smith, 1999, p. 69). Every life experience was likely to end up on his canvas. Not content with telling a story on one canvas, he created serial works. As Lawrence explained it, “I guess I was impressed by everything in my environment without even knowing it . . . and I was interested in story telling. As a young artist, I wasn’t getting big mural commissions, naturally, so the way I thought to tell the story of a person’s life was through a series of panels, a little like comics” (Smith, 1999, p. 68).

The pressure of producing works of art and the spotlight of his fame took their toll. In 1949, Lawrence voluntarily entered the Hillside Hospital in Queens, NY to undergo therapy for depression. This period yielded a series: *Creative Therapy*, on the cover of this issue, is one of 10 paintings collectively titled the *Hospital Series* (1950). Art has long been considered an appropriate way for mental patients to work through certain issues. Indeed, as *American Psychologist* Editor-in-Chief Raymond D. Fowler wrote in *Outsider Art* (American Psychological Association [APA], 2000)—the catalogue for the APA exhibition on loan from Hospital Audiences, Inc.—“psychologists’ interest in the arts is not a new phenomenon. APA’s third and best-known president, William James, was a painter long before he became a psychologist and Division 10 [Psychology and the Arts] was one of APA’s 19 charter divisions” (p. 1).

What is going on in *Creative Therapy*? At first glance, it depicts a group of artists; however, these artists are patients in a mental institution. The one on the left is working on an easel, but his painting is situated above him—he is working over his head. Several painters hunch over their work. In the center, a man working on a grid forces his images into boxes. A brawny, almost threatening figure stands at the right side of the canvas, his hand behind his back holding brushes. Lawrence once said that he saw tools as extensions of hands and movement, and this is the way the paintbrushes appear. In the picture, an unanchored blue object seems to be floating and looks as if it is going off into the sky. The inside and outside of the room are somewhat ambiguous—it is difficult to tell what is inside and what is outside. It appears that all painters are White except one, who is African American.

There is little space, and the figures are compressed into the frame of this discomfiting picture. The easels create many strong diagonal lines, and the line of one easel cuts across the back of another man like a constraint. The painting can be seen as a picture of forcible restraint, but it also resembles a stained glass window—the easel lines creating the spaces into which the stained glass would be divided. One contemporary reviewer of Lawrence’s *Hospital Series* wrote that the paintings “bring into focus the dark underside of man’s emotional life as it is revealed under clinical conditions” (quoted in Marks, 1984, p. 476). *Creative Therapy* reflects both Lawrence’s commitment to social commentary and his empathy with his fellow patients.

REFERENCES

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- Smith, T. (1999). *Celebration and vision: The Hewitt Collection of African-American Art*. Charlotte, NC: Bank of America.

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