

## THE LOST WARTIME PAINTINGS OF JACOB LAWRENCE

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While serving at sea in World War II, renowned American artist, Jacob Lawrence, completed 17 paintings of colored and white sailors on duty on the first completely integrated ship in the history of the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, all but one of these since lost.

Eight of these paintings were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in October and November of 1944. Subsequently, the U.S. Coast Guard sent them to various places in the country for exhibition. Sometime in late 1945 or early 1946, the paintings were not sent back to the Coast Guard in Washington and they dropped from sight. No one knows if they have disappeared, been destroyed, or even stolen to reappear in the future when the smoke of their illegal retention has blown over.

It was not unusual for valuable and unusual government property to disappear just after World War II. The armed services were undergoing massive demobilization. Personnel would be assigned to a job and replaced in a few weeks as reduced levels of manning were ordered and discharge orders came through. At such a time it was difficult to keep track of property on loan to civic or cultural organizations, since there was virtually no continuity of responsible personnel.

The MOMA exhibit consisted of sixty paintings from Lawrence's famous prewar series Migration of the Negro, depicting the movement of the Negro population Northward since the time of World War I plus eight of the World War II paintings done on the USS SEA CLOUD, or the SEA CLOUD series.

In announcing the exhibition, MOMA said:

"Coast Guardsman Lawrence paints facts, not propaganda. In spite of the stark simplification of forms and bold contrast of primary colors that give so much strength both to his Migration series and to his more recent paintings, his pictorial statements are quiet, even tempered, non-inflammatory. His pictures do not mount a soap box or preach a sermon. Yet almost imperceptibly his Coast Guard paintings suggest the gradual beginnings of a solution to the problem so movingly portrayed in the Migration series.

"The earlier series, painted in 1940-41 on a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation, depicts the poverty-stricken, fear-ridden existence of the Negroes in the South; their hopeful migration to the labor-starved markets of the North in World War I; and the conditions they met there -- disillusionment because of segregated, over-crowded districts, fear because of occasional race riots, yet on the whole a step forward because they could exercise their right to the ballot and their children's right to an education.

"In Lawrence's Coast Guard pictures both races face the same fundamental problem -- the war. Colored and white men

mingle in recreational sports on deck, eat together, work together. Colored and white hands reach out with equal eagerness at mail call. Death and injury play no favorites, and all Uncle Sam's nephews rate the same pay in their non-racial classifications."

Half of the sixty paintings in the Migration series are owned by the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington and half by the Museum of Modern Art which has been circulating the entire series to museums, art galleries and colleges throughout the country during the past two years. Although the series particularly concerns the migration of Negroes to the North in World War I, it is extremely pertinent today because of the similar labor shortage brought about by World War II.

The Migration pictures were shown in May 1943 at the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum at a time when there were severe racial difficulties in the Kaiser shipyards. With the aid of a prominent Negro organization the Portland Museum arranged a forum for discussion of the immediate problems of World War II against the background of pictures which so understandingly portrayed the same problems during World War I. The forum produced good results.

Jacob Lawrence, born September 7, 1917 in Atlantic City, joined the United States Coast Guard in October 1943. He went in as a Steward's Mate but through the aid and encouragement of the Captain of the ship, Lt. Commander Carlton Skinner, found time to do some painting. While in the Service he has turned in

seventeen paintings, all of Coast Guard activities and all in his favorite medium, gouache. Recently transferred to the Public Relations Branch of the Service, Lawrence has been given the rating of Specialist Third Class, and will be able to devote his time to painting. There are approximately 4,000 Negroes in the Coast Guard, about 1,000 of whom have ratings as Petty Officers.

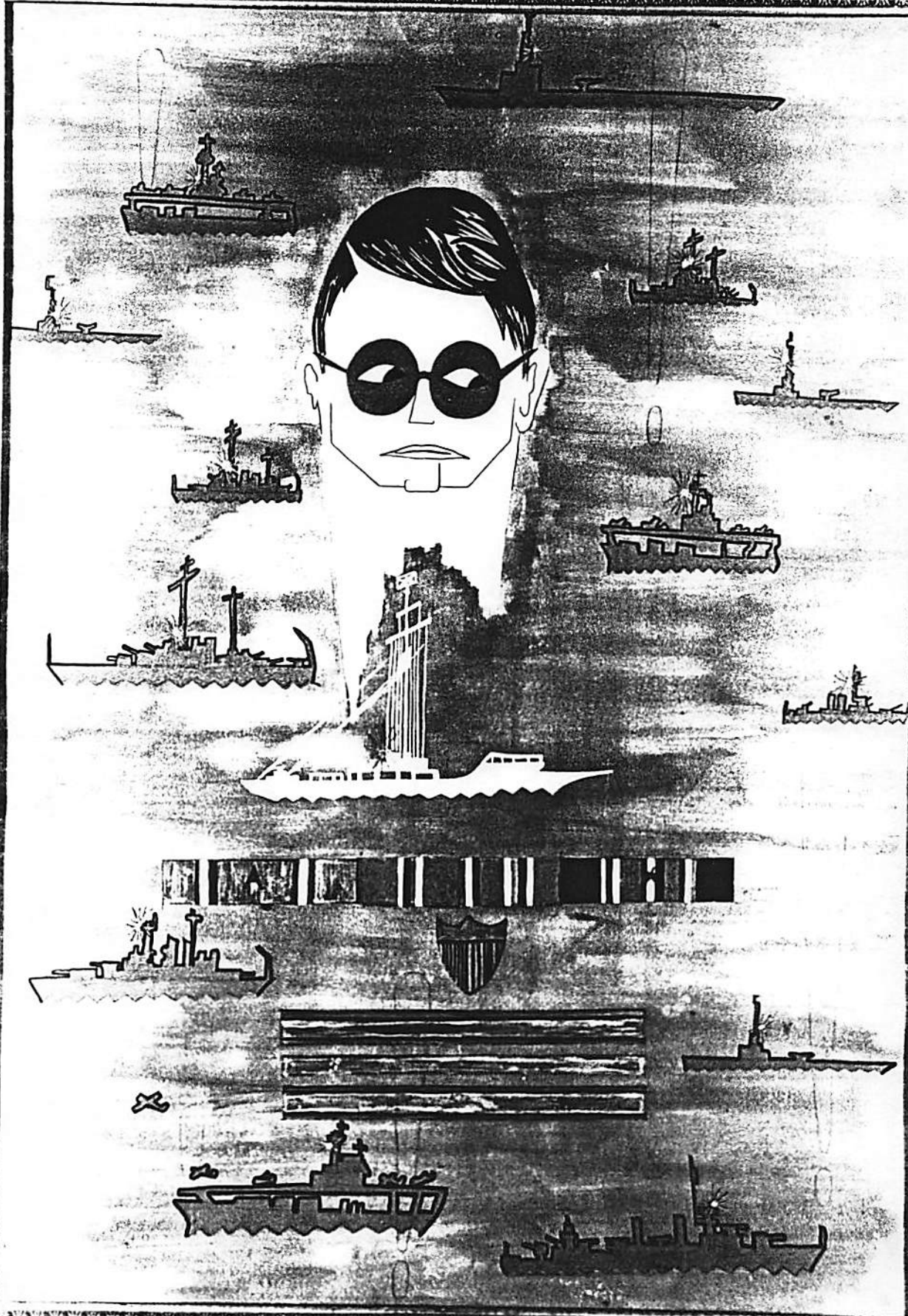
Lawrence drew and painted since early childhood and received his first chance for recognition through the WPA Art Program. He has studied under Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn. He received a scholarship to the American Artist School and was the recipient of a painting fellowship by the Rosenwald Foundation in 1941, 1942, 1943. In the 1943 Artists for Victory exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, his canvas won the 6th prize of \$500. His work is represented in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., Howard University, Washington, D.C., the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Rhode Island Museum; University of Arizona; and the Worcester Art Museum, Mass.

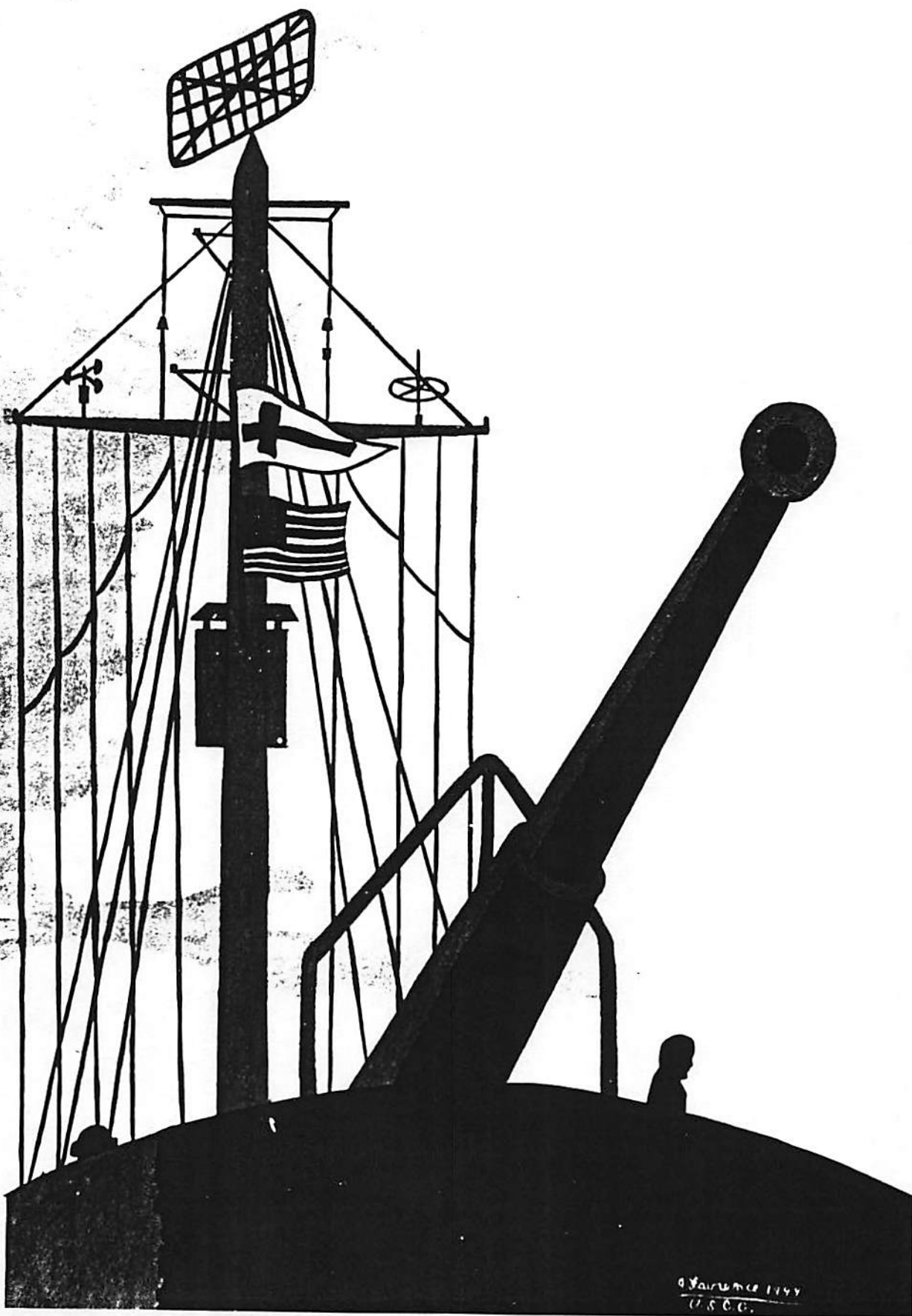
While the process of integration of blacks and whites in the American community is still going on, progress in the Armed Forces has been enormous since World War II. Prior to that war, there were no black service personnel serving in integrated units in the Navy, Coast Guard, Army or Air Force. Now there are black and white servicemen in integrated units at all levels, including

Generals and Admirals. Even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, is a black.

The ferment to correct the scandal of segregation in the armed forces was stirring from the beginning of World War II. However, the first practical application of the overdue ideal and practice of integration was in the U.S. Coast Guard. In 1943, the Coast Guard, then part of the U.S. Navy, began to assign Negro personnel for general duty on the USS SEA CLOUD, then patrolling in the North Atlantic with a primary mission of taking weather observations for use in planning bombing missions over Europe.

The SEA CLOUD integration was the result of a recommendation by Lieutenant Commander Carlton Skinner that Negroes be assigned to general duties at sea to make effective use of their skills. Previously, the Navy and Coast Guard had enlisted Negroes only for duty as Steward and Mess Attendants -- Officers' Servants. Skinner had argued that since Negroes were 11% of the population and that officers' servants were only two per cent of any ship's complement, the draft then applicable would result in losing the skills of qualified Negroes at sea and disproportionately assigning them to shore duty in the U.S. Skinner said the integration should be accomplished gradually and at sea so that the sea-going skills could be developed in a normal fashion, that it would be a mistake to create an all-Negro ship because all the necessary skills might not be available and further that an all-Negro ship could suffer from racist attitudes of personnel of all-white ships.





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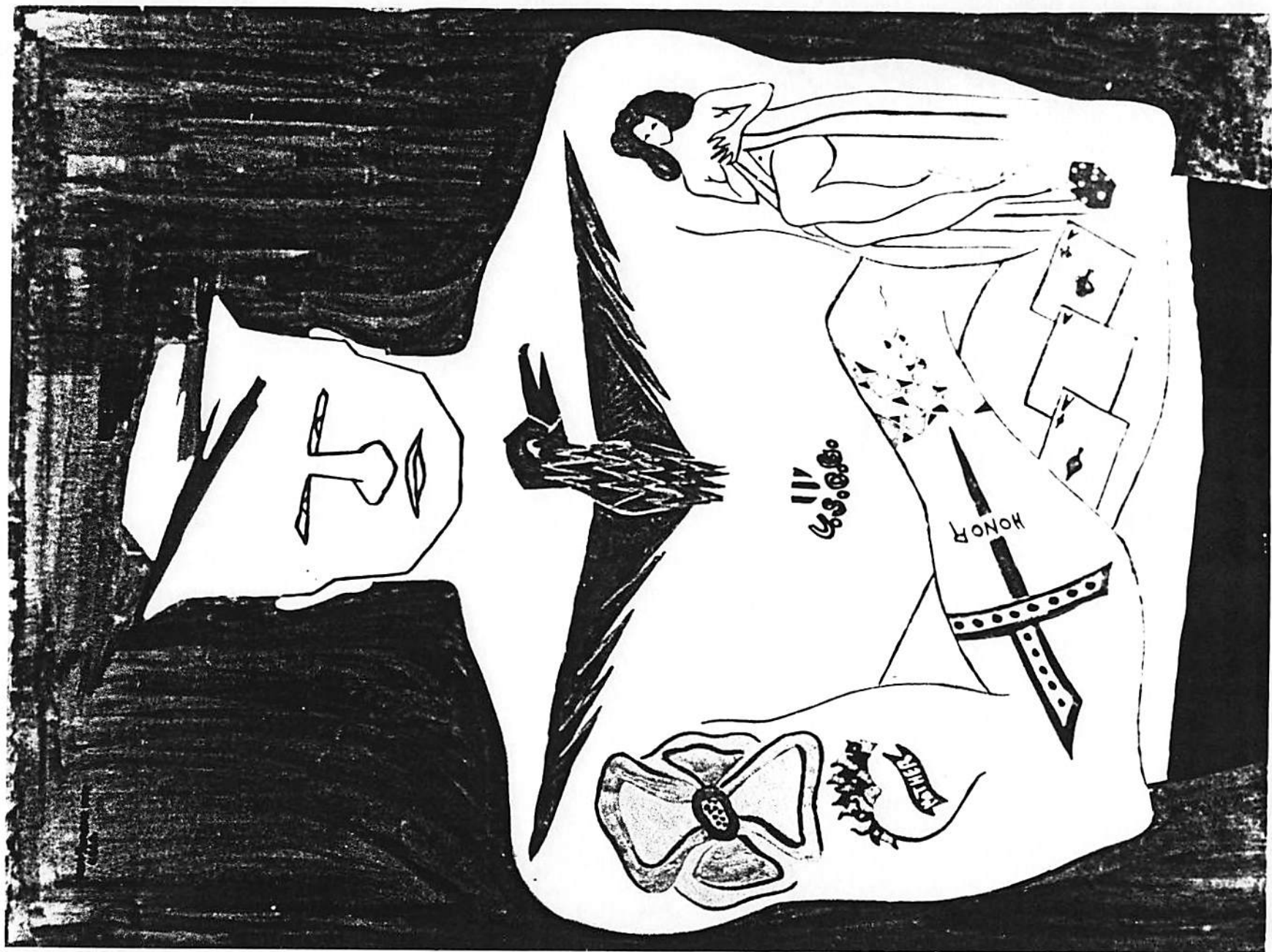






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easygoing and reserved, she is emotive and gregarious. Their lives are focused on art and they have many friends in art, but their work and closeness eliminate most external activities. There is no doubt that Gwen has been a decided influence in Lawrence's life and in the development of his attitudes and the content of his art.

THE UNITED STATES ENTERED WORLD WAR II ON THE EUROPEAN FRONT WITHIN A week of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On October 20, 1943, Jacob Lawrence was drafted into the U.S. Coast Guard, at that time part of the Navy. He was given a steward's mate rating, the assignment then commonly given to blacks entering the Navy. After basic training at Curtis Bay, Maryland, he was stationed in St. Augustine, Florida, where he was assigned to servicing the dining and living quarters of the officers. While in the service, he initially underwent unpleasant experiences of discrimination:

I remember being annoyed at the induction center . . . when a sergeant told me I'd like being a steward's mate because the food was so good and I could eat all the food I wanted. . . .<sup>40</sup>

St. Augustine is a tight little town. You see and feel the prejudice everywhere. In the Hotel Ponce de Leon, where we were first stationed, the steward's mates were stuck way up in the attic.<sup>41</sup>

At the Christmas dinner held for servicemen and their wives, the Lawrences were snubbed, and a woman refused to sit next to Gwen.<sup>42</sup> Fortunately, Lawrence's commanding officer, Captain J. S. Rosenthal, was sensitive to the situation; he encouraged Lawrence to continue painting, even offering the artist space to do so in his quarters.<sup>43</sup>

Lawrence was first assigned to the USS *Sea Cloud*, the yacht of Joseph E. Davies, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, now converted to a weather patrol ship in the Atlantic. He was stationed out of Boston, and the couple could commute back and forth to New York (fig. 36). In her husband's absence, Gwen had moved to Brooklyn to be closer to her mother. During this period, Gwen continued to paint. She also studied dance with the New Dance Group under Jane Dudley and Sophie Maslow, who were two star members of Martha Graham's troupe.<sup>44</sup>

In his first ship assignment, Lawrence again was fortunate: the captain of the vessel, Lieutenant Commander Carlton Skinner, was conducting what the press called an "experiment to combat racial discrimination at sea." Commander Skinner was very proud of having initiated integration in the Navy. He had become acutely aware of racial discrimination in the service when he had found it impossible to promote one of his black crew because of race. This led him to write to his admiral requesting the experiment. He received permission to take a racially mixed crew "on a tour of duty to determine whether abandonment of the segregation policy would work out in actual operation. . . . At the end of a year, his ship got a grade AA rating on every operation." As a result of Skinner's program, the Coast Guard concluded that "the experiment was a success and that the team work was first rate." This was the first integrated ship in the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard.<sup>45</sup>

In the atmosphere created by Carlton Skinner and his officers, Lawrence experienced what he called "the best democracy I've ever known."<sup>46</sup> Skinner helped Lawrence obtain a public relations rating so that in addition to his regular duties, he could purchase materials and paint documentary works of Coast Guard life (fig. 37). Skinner remarked, "There were several other shipboard artists by 1944. The Service was getting used to it."<sup>47</sup> In addition to his official work (see pls. 32 and 33, discussed below), Lawrence painted a portrait of Skinner while serving on the *Sea Cloud* (pl. 34). Skinner's face is surrounded by Coast Guard symbols floating in an all-encompassing blue oceanic expanse. The work exemplifies Lawrence's characteristic tendency to capture likeness through caricature—to reinforce recognition through distilled overstated representation.

After about eight months, Lawrence was assigned to a troop transport ship, the USS *General Wilds P. Richardson*. Captain Rosenthal, his commanding officer at boot camp and captain of this ship, had requested Lawrence as his combat artist.<sup>48</sup>





1939); *The Negro Migration Northward in World War* (60 panels—1942).

Born in 1917 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Jacob Lawrence received his early training at the Harlem Art School and the American Artist School. His rise to prominence was ushered in by his painting of several series of biographical panels commemorating important episodes in Afro-American history. A narrative painter, Lawrence creates the "philosophy of Impressionism" within his work. Capturing the essential meaning behind the natural appearance of a historical moment or personality, Lawrence creates a formal series of several dozen small paintings which relate the course of a particular historic event in American history, such as *The Migration Series* ("... and the Migrants kept coming"), which traces the migration of the Afro-American from the South to the North, or the discussion on the course of a man's life (e.g., *Toussaint L'Ouverture* and *John Brown*).

Jacob Lawrence is a visual American historian. His paintings record the Afro-American in trade, theater, mental hospitals, and neighborhoods, or running in the Olympic races. Lawrence's works are found in such

collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, and Whitney Museum of American Art.

*Jacob Lawrence's Tombstones.*

