

Basic Detail Report



Tools

Date
1977

Primary Maker
Jacob Lawrence

Medium
Lithograph

Description

A celebrated twentieth-century artist, Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000) is known for his depictions of contemporary African American life. His lithograph *Tools* (1977) provides a social commentary from a marginalized perspective in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Compositionally, the collection of tools, depicted in various sizes with juxtaposing geometric and organic shapes, deemphasizes the figure by commanding the viewer's attention, as does Lawrence's color palette: Bright, saturated primary colors articulate the tools while spare black and white lines delineate the figure's brown color from that of the background. Lawrence, then, creates a tension between the figure and the tools, in which the latter dominates the former—even the

title seems to overlook the central figure. This visual tension reflects the anguish and strife of black urban community and the omnipresent discrimination in American life. Lawrence created the print after moving to Seattle to accept a tenured position at the University of Washington in 1971. This was a significant change for him, as he was raised in Harlem, New York City, from the age of thirteen. (Born in New Jersey in 1917, Lawrence was the child of migrants who moved to the Northeast during the Great Migration, a movement that entailed a massive relocation from the rural South to the urban, industrialized Midwest and Northeast.) It was in 1930, on the heels of the cultural and intellectual explosion known as the Harlem Renaissance, that Lawrence arrived in the neighborhood, and its textures and vibrancy influenced the artist's perspective: "All these people on the street, various colors, so much pattern, so much movement, so much color, so much vitality, so much energy." In 1934, his mother enrolled him in Charles Alston's after-school art workshop. Working with poster paints and brown paper, Lawrence depicted city life during the years of the Great Depression. His early style featured geometric shapes and repeating patterns, flattened forms, asymmetrical angles, and unmixed colors. Lawrence often represented the harsh realities of living in black, urban communities, ennobling manual labor, admonishing racial stereotypes, and highlighting family and spiritual values in the midst of hardship. In 1946, he declared that an artist must "develop an approach and philosophy about life . . . he does not put paint on canvas, he puts himself on canvas." Inspired by his interest in black history, Lawrence produced a series of narrative paintings that celebrated African American heroes. In 1941, he produced *The Migration of the Negro*, a sixty-panel series that depicted the Great Migration. Through abstract figures, Lawrence portrayed the exploitation, poverty, and injustice that southern blacks encountered, their aspiration for a better life in the north, and the advantages and disappointments they experienced upon their arrival. Following this acclaimed series, Lawrence's style evolved from race-conscious abstracted social realism to become increasingly surreal, characterized by symbolic figures with layered patterns and subtle shadowing. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, he depicted street protests in *Praying Ministers* (1962) and a tense standoff of marchers and police in *Confrontation at the Bridge* (1975). Through his works, Lawrence juxtaposes the pervasive discrimination in American life with vivid coloring and angular forms that embody the vitality of the human spirit and hopeful resolve. The theme of builders first arose in Lawrence's work in the mid-1940s and became a major focus in the late 1960s. In these artworks, he depicted carpenters, cabinetmakers, bricklayers, and construction workers in scenes from their workdays and family situations. Populated by saturated colors and solid, unmodulated shapes, his foregrounds and backgrounds often merge toward the picture plane, flattening space. Likewise, the colors of some figures' faces, arms, and clothing blend into the surrounding colors, reducing the figures to silhouettes with no recognizable features as is the case here with *Tools*. Mary Bei Prince, Class of 2020

Dimensions

Image: 21 7/8 × 18 3/16 in. (55.6 × 46.2 cm) Sheet: 25 7/8 × 21 3/4 in. (65.7 × 55.2 cm) Frame: 28 7/8 × 24 7/8 × 2 in. (73.3 × 63.2 × 5.1 cm)