

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

1. “Cabinet Makers,” 1946, was Jacob Lawrence’s first attempt to capture what he later described as “a dance to see people moving around, moving tools about.”



2. A year later, Lawrence painted his first “Builders.” In 2008, the White House Acquisition Trust purchased it for \$2,504,000.



3. About “Builders,” 1980, Lawrence said, “I like the symbolism of the builder. I think of it as man’s aspiration to build harmony.”



The Builders

No other storied American painter has celebrated the building trades quite like Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000). From the 1930s to 2000, he created more than 60 paintings and countless studies titled “Builders” that capture, in a style often called “visual blues,” his admiration for “people, forces in the world that build community.”

The “Builders” works were inspired by Lawrence’s experience as a teenager hanging out at a local cabinet shop. “When I was fifteen or sixteen,” he’s reported as saying, “I was exposed to the workshop of these three brothers in Harlem, cabinetmakers ... They worked with tools that were aesthetically beautiful, like sculpture.”

The cabinet shop was one of several workshops and artists’ studios in a building at 306 West 141st St.—a three-story stable converted into shared work space by painter Charles Alston and sculptor Henry Bannarn. Lawrence was just a kid in the neighborhood with no formal training but tons of enthusiasm to paint what he

experienced. He had been taking after-school art classes from Alston at a nearby library when Alston—after winning a grant from the Works Progress Administration—moved the classes to “306.” Once it became an official WPA Workshop, 306 flourished as a meeting and work space for a wide range of artists and writers, including printmaker Robert Blackburn; writers Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and William Saroyan; cartoonist William Steig (originator of *Shrek*); and painters Gwendolyn Knight (who would eventually marry Jacob Lawrence), Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis.

Among the who’s who of the Harlem Renaissance at 306, the cabinetmakers Addison, John, and Leonard Bates opened their shop to Lawrence for his first solo show of paintings, in 1935. In an interview in 1998, at age 81, he said “I didn’t realize what an impression they were making as cabinetmakers. I didn’t realize at the time that this would be one of my life subjects.”

Photos courtesy Jacob and Gwen Knight-Lawrence Foundation (www.jacobandgwenlawrence.org)