
NORMAN
LEWIS

A RETROSPECTIVE



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THE MALL
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CENTER
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The organization of this exhibition and catalogue was undertaken as part of my study for a doctorate in Art History at the City University of New York, and I am therefore indebted, above all, to my supervisor, Professor Milton W. Brown, Executive Officer of the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the University, who conceived this project and offered support and guidance throughout.

Thomas Lawson

FOREWORD

As part of a great urban university complex, the City University of New York's Graduate Center is committed to active participation in the city's intellectual and cultural life. The activities of the Graduate Center Mall are in part an extension of the educational functions of the Graduate School, utilizing the resources of its faculty, students, and staff. Situated literally at the "cross-roads" of the city, its constituent audience is the working and transient population of midtown Manhattan. The Mall was intended from its inception as a cultural center for them as well as for our own academic community and it has offered a wide range of programs, free to the public, in music, theatre, and dance, and exhibitions of art, architecture, and design. In the short years of its existence, the Mall has become part of the New York cultural scene and achieved a notable critical acceptance for the variety and quality of its offerings.

The major thrust of the exhibition program of the Mall is to present current developments in the visual arts to a general transient public, but it also serves the students in the Ph.D. Program in Art History as a training ground in exhibition practice and techniques, and as a facility where the results of their research in the fields of Modern and American art, to which the Program is dedicated, can be presented in visual form. Although the financial resources of the Graduate School and the physical character of the Mall are limited, we have also felt that the particular scholarly resources of the Program offer a unique opportunity to supplement the city's already vast cultural range through occasional major exhibitions of historic interest and perhaps more lasting import, which other institutions might not undertake.

Among such are comprehensive or retrospective exhibitions of older and established New York artists who have made a significant contribution to American art, but, who, for various and unaccountable reasons, have not received the recognition that is their due. The present exhibition of the work of Norman Lewis is such a case. A black artist who emerged in Harlem during the '30s, along with so many others under the aegis of the Federal Arts Projects, he has been part of the American art scene for the past 40 years. Yet, he is largely unknown to the art public and unrepresented in major American collections. The exhibition is not a "discovery" of Norman Lewis; he has had a long and distinguished career as an artist and teacher. It is an opportunity for re-assessment.

Milton W. Brown
Executive Officer
Ph.D. Program in Art History

That the Thirties was a desperate decade throughout the Western world is by now a well established historical cliché, yet it was a period which paradoxically saw the earliest heroic attempts of American painters to become more than provincial imitators of European modernist styles. Initially they did this by emphasizing their provincial separateness from the cosmopolitan art world in a move towards artistic nationalism and isolationism similar to the trend in Federal political and economic planning. Only gradually, as the decade advanced, did more artists feel the confidence or the necessity to build on the achievements of European artists rather than trying to ignore them. It was a time of intellectual questioning and daring, during which artists were forced into a recognition of their economic interdependence. As a result of simple physical need, artists began to cooperate professionally, and became increasingly political both in expression and in action. There was political art and there were political artists, in various unstable combinations; and at the start of his career, Norman Lewis was a political artist making political, though not propagandist, art.

As he developed, however, he began to separate political content from his aesthetic concerns. Like many black artists he was attracted to the idea of purely black art, but found himself instead being absorbed into the mainstream of modern art. As Hale Woodruff, the black painter who had created, at Atlanta University, one of the most vital centers of black learning, wrote for an exhibition entitled *Patterns of American Culture: Contributions of the Negro*, held at the University of Michigan in 1956:

"The 'Decade of the Depression' may be marked as the coming of age of the Negro artist. He became part of the new and vital currents that gave fresh meanings to American art. Any racial elements that might have identified his works were submerged in the mainstream of the general and specific qualities of all art produced in this period. His concerns were those of all artists and the concerns of all artists were his. He was now, as previously, simply an American artist. To expect him to have been otherwise would have been fruitless. His aspirations toward full integration in American life found expression in his art. This was, inevitably, how it should have been."

Lewis never lost his sense of political commitment, but rather came to believe that direct action was more useful than a so-called political art directed at a handful of friends

and connoisseurs with little or no political weight. Like his friend Ad Reinhardt, he sought to separate the aesthetic from the useful, seeing his paintings as contemplative rather than didactic images; they were designed to please, not to instruct. His mature work is sensual and sensitive in its evocation of an essentially emotional response to beauty. Charmed and fascinated by the effects of sparkling light, on city streets and in night clubs, or in the country, as it glints on water and rock, as it is diffracted through leaves, Lewis creates a body of work full of wonder and enjoyment.

Norman Wilfred Lewis was born in New York of parents who had moved to the city from Bermuda. The family had settled in Harlem, and Lewis' father worked as a longshoreman, eventually becoming a dock-forman. Lewis' early life was like that of any other black youth in the city, and he soon learned what it meant to be black and poor. With little likelihood of steady employment, he learned to make a living at poker and the pool table. It was only natural that he, along with many intelligent men of his generation, should be attracted to the politics of communism, with its promise of a better future through the cooperative action of the poor and oppressed. But if Lewis' introduction to radical politics was inevitable, his introduction to art was fortuitous. One day in 1933, on his way home from the pool room, he chanced by the studio of Augusta Savage, looked in the window, and was intrigued by what he saw. On impulse he stepped inside and was immediately entranced by the atmosphere of creative energy. He decided to stay and learn more, and so began his career as an artist.

At that time Savage's sculpture studio was fast becoming the center of a growing movement among artists in Harlem to create an art with a recognizably black identity. Between 1928 and 1933 five large-scale exhibitions of the work of black artists had been sponsored by the Harmon Foundation. These had helped present the major black artists like Savage, Aaron Douglas, James Porter and Hale Woodruff to a wider public and, at the same time, offered younger artists early exposure to an informed critical response. At that time, however, the Foundation, in its eagerness to present an impression of artistic vitality in Harlem, often came under attack for being too easily impressed with black subject matter, regardless of the quality of execution. Romare Bearden, among many younger painters, felt this only en-

couraged easy answers, poor echoes of styles that were not only European, but white. This debate, running parallel to a similar one within the larger context of American art as a whole, flavored much of Lewis' early training. His work through the Thirties and early Forties, while he was still seeking a mature style of his own, oscillates between the extremes of an international abstract style and a local, illustrative realism. Like the majority of American artists seeking a specifically American style, Lewis was initially attracted to a realism based on the indigenous tradition of the Ashcan school, a realism invigorated, in his case, by a knowledge of the work of the Mexican muralists, who were developing a simplified pictorial vocabulary suitable for making propagandist art. But at the same time a growing awareness of abstract styles in Europe and in America led him progressively towards a less representational, more experimental expression.

Despite its aesthetic limitations, the Harmon Foundation was primarily responsible for encouraging the tremendous growth of the plastic arts in Harlem in the early years of the Depression, providing financial support for artists before the Federal Arts Project went into operation. It helped create a sense of community among artists, which in turn helped foster a growing professionalism. Still, this proliferation of artistic activity was not without its drawbacks; and Aaron Douglas, the father figure of the Harlem Renaissance, rather scathingly described the situation in the following terms:

"Harlem was sifted. Neither streets, homes, nor public institutions escaped. When unsuspecting Negroes were found with a brush in their hands they were immediately hauled away and held for interpretation. They were given places of honor and bowed to with much ceremony. Every effort to protest their innocence was drowned out with big mouthed praise. A number escaped and returned to a more reasonable existence. Many fell in with the game and went along making meaningless and hollow gestures with brush and palette."

It was during this period of enthusiasm that Norman Lewis walked into the studio of Augusta Savage, and he never did escape.

Savage had returned to New York from Europe in 1932 with the idea of starting a community art school in Harlem.

With help from the Harmon Foundation, the Urban League, and the State University of New York, she organized an adult education project in her apartment on West 135th Street. Lewis initially attended as an unskilled assistant, sweeping floors and shifting clay. However, fired by the enthusiasm of the place, he began to teach himself to draw and paint, and discovered an unsuspected talent. His first models were the magazine illustrators and, to a lesser extent, fine art reproductions. Savage herself, though an important source of encouragement right through the Thirties, was never Lewis' teacher, primarily because he was never really interested in sculpture.

He soon sought out a formal painting class, attending the John Reed Club Art School on a scholarship offered by Robert and Lydia Gibson Minor. The Club had been founded in 1929, within days of the collapse of the Stock Market, to organize artists and writers in the creation of a revolutionary art which could be used as a weapon in a revolutionary struggle. It was a popular meeting place for left wing intellectuals during the early years of the Depression; and among its many educative projects, it sponsored a free art class for poor students. Lewis' teacher at the School was Raphael Soyer, but the superior abilities of the other students so intimidated the beginner that he soon stopped attending. However, he received his first chance to exhibit through this class, when the John Reed Club organized a group show on the theme of *Hunger, Fascism and War* in December of 1933. And the following April, the Metropolitan Museum sponsored an exhibition of the work of unemployed adult students who had been studying art for less than a year. Lewis received his first public recognition at this show when he won an honorable mention for an oil painting called *The Wanderer*. This picture, which depicted a destitute man seated in the corner of a fence in an open, snow covered field, attempting to warm himself before a small fire in an old oil can, was painted in a loose, slightly distorted style clearly reminiscent of that of Soyer.

Just as the art movement in Harlem was beginning to gather momentum in terms of wider access to professional galleries and exhibitions, the Depression threatened any possible gain. However, the activities sponsored by the Harmon Foundation and continued under the WPA not only allowed a certain level of stability but actually encouraged a

growth of interest in the arts. Black artists had traditionally suffered from a lack of significant private patronage, and this public funding allowed for an economic freedom hitherto unknown. For it was in poor areas like Harlem that the Roosevelt Administration's attempts to lessen the impact of unemployment by creating jobs for artists, musicians and actors had its most far-reaching impact, creating, in effect, a "golden age" of cultural activity, a local renaissance. Artists working in collaborative projects were encouraged by their peers to produce more work and to produce better work. And a larger, more informed public was created through the proliferation of performances, exhibitions, and educational opportunities. Art centers grew up in Harlem, in Chicago, in Memphis, and in New Orleans, and developed into important community centers. And in offering free access to the productions of the different arts, they not only stimulated the expansion of these arts but also created an effective program in public education.

One of the first of these centers grew up around Savage's studio in Harlem as a result of the energetic campaigning of both Savage and her chief assistant and eventual successor, Gwendolyn Bennett. In March 1935, an exhibition of Negro art was staged in the 138 Street YWCA in response to the question, "Does New York need an Art Center?"; and Lewis, who was now working at the studio as a teacher under the WPA, helped in its organization. As a result, more Federal funds became available and Savage was able to employ more teachers and enroll more students, leading her eventually to move her studio to larger premises on West 123rd Street. Lewis himself believed the studio/art center to be more useful as a community center than an art school, considering it a place where all manner of social problems might be attacked. And in a newspaper article covering the opening of the Harlem Community Art Center, the official name given the studio on its final move to the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in 1937, Lewis is reported as saying that he considered himself more a social welfare worker than an art teacher.

"Perhaps unconsciously, the children of Harlem paint little houses in big lawns and space between everything. Art is the key to understanding children and their problems."

Already, it seems, Lewis was beginning to question the efficacy of art as an agent of social reform, seeing it more as an indicator of the ills of society than as an active cure.

In February 1936 another exhibition was organized at the Harlem YWCA, once again concentrating on the issue of race. Exhibitors confined themselves to subjects connected directly with their own race and tended to avoid using abstract styles which might be understood as pale reflections of white art. As a result, the majority of artists exhibited work based on the most retardataire of modernist styles. Harlem genre scenes, crap shooters, colorful street life or portraits of local characters covered the walls, all too often demonstrating an acceptance of a white vision of black life. Lewis' work at this time still fitted the ultimately sentimental tradition of those painters of black life like Hale Woodruff and Aaron Douglas, who tentatively incorporated modernist elements in their basically traditional compositions. His paintings tended to be quiet and undemonstrative, usually with single figures or couples in introspective poses. Yet despite an understandable reluctance to abandon this regionalist tradition, with its easily accepted sense of social relevance, we find him now experimenting ever more boldly with a Cubist inspired structure, breaking his subject into planes of flat color. For while it is true that the simplification of form in a very early work like *Girl with a Yellow Hat*, 1933, would not have been possible without the Cubist precedent, the fragmentation of recognizable form in *Madonna*, 1934, is much more adventurous and prefigures Lewis' interest in a rhythmic, rather than architectonic, space.

This openmindedness to the, by then largely accepted, innovations of the School of Paris also allowed Lewis to key in more quickly than others to the important issue of African art as a formal and iconographic source. Several black painters sought authenticity in a return to African tribal culture, feeling that the legacy of ancestral arts offered a ready-made racial heritage. However in 1940, Alain Locke, one of the leading champions of black culture, sadly admitted that, "when the younger Negro artists first became aware of this heritage, a sudden hectic interest flared up which led, unfortunately, to relatively superficial understanding and shallow artistic results. African art could yield little through direct imitation."

Lewis was one of the first to realize that the transformation wrought on primitive art by, among others, Picasso and Modigliani, was both more powerful and more useful than this slavish imitation. From these painters he learned to

simplify his forms, and strengthen his color. More importantly, he learned the rhythmic possibilities of the angular displacement of lines he found in Cubist composition, a discovery which allowed him to go on to develop a visual equivalent to the jazz music his brother played. And what could be more closely identifiable with black American culture than jazz? By allowing himself to look hard at modern European painting, Lewis made the first steps towards a mature style which could convincingly contain his black identity without losing its integrity as modern art. Along the way, he also discovered himself in the midst of the increasingly bitter quarrel between realist and abstract artists, a quarrel which, as it spread through the American art scene, inevitably drew Lewis into the mainstream of American art.

During the years from 1935 until the outbreak of the War, Lewis was variously employed as a teacher under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. Originally with Augusta Savage and then Gwendolyn Bennett at the Harlem Art Center, he was also given work at P.S. 139. There he supervised the children in the making of two large murals depicting the freeing of the Negro slaves and their progress since as a result of education. In 1937, he asked to be sent to Mexico; he found himself instead in Greensboro, North Carolina, in charge of a small education project. But the racial tensions created by his position as supervisor grew intolerable and within the year he was back in Harlem, once again teaching at the Art Center. Because of the uncertainty of tenure in any of the Federal Arts Projects (most positions were assigned for only six months at a time), radical artists quite early formed an Artists' Union, affiliated with the CIO. The Union agitated not only for artists' rights but also joined in many CIO picket lines. It was at union meetings that Lewis first met Ad Reinhardt and David Smith, who were both to become important friends. Through personal experience on the picket line, these three, along with many other politically acute artists, began to feel that the gap separating aesthetic and political action could not, and should not, be bridged.

The artist as human being was obliged to remain politically active, but the artist as artist should only be concerned with the problems of aesthetic expression and, of necessity, the politics of the art world. In 1936 several American art-

ists who had been connected in various ways with the European abstract movement joined together, to combat the apparent rejection of non-European abstraction by the major American museums. Among those early members of American Abstract Artists were Balcombe Greene, Ilya Bolotowski, Burgoyne Diller, I. Rice Pereira, and Carl Holty, while Reinhardt and Smith joined the following year. Lewis was never a member of the organization, but was closely associated with it and exhibited by invitation. Another early member who exerted a brief influence on Lewis was Vaclav Vytlacil, who gave a series of lectures at the Harlem Art Center which Lewis found particularly stimulating. Lewis was never Vytlacil's pupil as such but at a time when he was making his first tentative moves toward abstraction, the European's grasp of current developments must have been valuable.

At the same time there was a growing concern about the cultural policies and implications of the rise of Fascism on an international scale. Following along the lines of the League of American Writers, a committee of artists, under the chairmanship of Stuart Davis, was formed to prepare an American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism; and by the autumn 114 artists had signed a call for such a meeting to be held in New York on February 15, 1936. The response was so widespread that the meeting was finally extended to three days and some 360 artist-delegates attended. The sessions ended with a sense of euphoria as the delegates voted to form a permanent organization called the American Artists' Congress, with Max Weber as Chairman and Stuart Davis as Executive Secretary. Lewis was invited to join, which he considered an honor, but despite the undeniable prestige of the Congress, he continued to feel that the Union and the Harlem Artists' Guild, which concentrated on the problems faced by black artists, were more valuable. The international situation was certainly disquieting, but for a black artist living in Harlem there were more pressing problems nearer home.

Although gradually moving towards a complete separation of art and politics, Lewis continued to exhibit regularly in Harlem in politically oriented group shows. In the spring of 1937, there was an exhibition of the Harlem Artists Guild in the 115 Street Library, and the following year the Art Center sponsored a show of *21 New York Negro Painters*,