People’s Choice top pick: Jacob Lawrence, Street Orator’s Audience

Jacob Lawrence is one of the Northwest’s most celebrated artists. He was an impassioned observer and storyteller whose art documented both the African American experience as well as the larger human struggle for freedom and social justice.

Lawrence was raised in Harlem, and his works from the 1930s and 1940s capture the ever-changing street life in gouache, watercolor, and tempera. He also created a body of work focusing on important African American figures and several large multi-part narratives. In 1970, he moved to the Northwest and became an art professor at the University of Washington where he also continued to build an international career. A major retrospective of his work was organized in 2001 by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., and in 2015 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, reassembled for exhibition his sixty panel *Migration Series*.

Street Orator’s Audience exhibits several characteristic elements of Lawrence’s work. Rather than focusing on detail, he chose to use broad, flat areas of color to create his figures and shapes. Further, to better create an interesting narrative, he selected an unusual viewpoint for his scene, recording the crowd’s reaction rather than the orator in action.