



JACOB LAWRENCE
Bar and Grill, 1941

JACOB LAWRENCE (1917–2000)

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gouache on paper, 16 3/4 x 22 3/4 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger
through the National Academy of Design

Background Information for Teachers

Bar and Grill shows the interior of a café that is divided by a floor-to-ceiling wall that separates the commercial space into two realms—one occupied by white patrons, the other by black customers. Apart from obvious segregation by race, the image also reveals subtle differences in status. White customers drink in comfort, cooled by a ceiling fan, while the bartender lingers on the left, ready to serve these patrons. The number of figures occupying each side of the room reflects the racial makeup of New Orleans at the time.

Jacob Lawrence painted *Bar and Grill* shortly after arriving in New Orleans in late summer 1941. Raised in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, Lawrence had only secondhand knowledge of the South, the point of origin for thousands of rural African Americans who had made the great migration north to industrial cities. Living in a city where legislation required that he ride in the back of city buses and reside in a racially segregated neighborhood, Lawrence discovered the daily reality of the Jim Crow South, a reality he makes abundantly clear in *Bar and Grill*. Black and white patrons are served separately and are made to use separate entrances. Customer service, symbolized by the barkeeper, is more readily provided to white

customers. Amenities, such as a ceiling fan and ashtray, are not available to black patrons. Water faucets and glassware are kept separate.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- Describe the physical layout of the bar. What amenities are available or not available to the customers on either side?
- How are the patrons depicted on either side of the dividing wall? Does their experience of the bar differ?
- This artwork was intended to be viewed by people living in the North who may not have known anything about life in the South under Jim Crow laws. How does Lawrence's painting communicate the experience of segregation to them?

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with the "Night Life" section (excerpted below) of the 1938 *New Orleans City Guide*. Read pages 37 to 40. The stark divisions between the ample facilities listed for white customers (not designated as separate, but just assumed) and the meager and condescending listings of "Negro" facilities provide ample evidence of the segregation that was in full force in New Orleans in the 1930s, not long before Jacob and his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, arrived there.

The Negro night clubs of New Orleans are patterned after those of Harlem. The proprietors visit Harlem to study the color schemes and acquire the atmosphere of night clubs there, because 'it serves well along publicity

lines.' Even the music and floor shows are handled in the Harlem manner—nothing less than 'red hot.' The tunes are loud but have the 'swing' that causes Negroes to move their bodies and tap their feet. 'They b'lieve in mugging.' All kinds of whiskies are served; champagne or any kind of cocktail may be purchased. 'When a colored man steps out he is out.'

Suggested Questions

- What are the "Harlem clubs"? How do you think the descriptions of them in the 1938 *New Orleans City Guide* differ from those of the "whites-only" clubs?
- What can this excerpt from a city guide book, compared with the visual narrative told in *Bar and Grill*, tell us about the African American experience in the South?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the poem "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, an African American poet, novelist, and playwright and one of the icons of the Harlem Renaissance. Written in 1935, the poem compares the idea of the "American Dream" with the reality of 1930s America. Hughes called for a revival of what he considered the true principles of the American Dream—equality and opportunity for all, with no more exceptions.

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Suggested Questions

- Analyze the voice of Hughes's poem. Who is the "I," or the "we," or the "you"? How does the voice change throughout the poem?
- Just as Hughes contrasts experiences through the use of voice, Lawrence's *Bar and Grill* contrasts two very different American experiences, set side by side. Choose one of the people in the painting to be an "I." From that person's perspective, who is the "you" and who is the "we"?

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