



**JACOB LAWRENCE**  
*The Library, 1960*

**JACOB LAWRENCE** (1917–2000)

*The Library*, 1960

tempera on fiberboard, 24 × 29 7/8 in.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum,  
Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

## Background Information for Teachers

This colorful view of a crowded reading room depicts the 135th Street library in New York’s Harlem neighborhood. Remembering his youth in Harlem, Jacob Lawrence recalled that in high school, black culture was “never studied seriously like regular subjects,” so he taught himself by visiting libraries and museums. In fact, the standing figure in the foreground studying a book on African sculpture may represent the artist, delving deeper into his heritage. The library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) played a critical role in Lawrence’s artistic development, offering him a place where he could learn about the lives of civil rights leaders and abolitionists such as John Brown, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass, all of whom became subjects of his work.

The bright colors and decorative patterning in *The Library* may be references to traditional African kente cloth. The word *kente* means “basket” or “woven cloth” in the Akan or Ashanti dialect. Narrow strips of fabric are woven together to form patterns, each having its own meaning and story. During the 1960s the bright colors and patterns of kente cloth were appropriated as an emblem of the Black Pride movement. Then as

now, African Americans wear kente cloth to represent pride in their ancestors and African heritage.

Painted six years after school desegregation in 1954, *The Library* serves to remind African Americans of the importance of education and of preserving their African history and culture. During the civil rights movement, libraries like the 135th Street branch provided safe learning spaces for African Americans to study their history and culture when it was not part of the curriculum in integrated classrooms throughout the country.

## Guided Looking Questions for Students

- ▶ How would you describe the setting and the people shown in this painting?
- ▶ What is the mood of the artwork? How does the artist achieve this?
- ▶ Think about the history of school desegregation in America. What might this tell us about the message the artist is trying to convey in this artwork?

## Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with the following excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois’s speech “Criteria of Negro Art,” which he presented at the NAACP’s annual conference in June 1926. It was published a few months later in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP.

*I do not doubt but there are some in this audience who are...thinking something like this: “How is it that an organization like this...can turn aside to talk about Art?”*

*After all, what have we who are slaves and black to do with Art?”*

*Or perhaps there are others who feel a certain relief and are saying, “After all it is rather satisfactory after all this talk about rights and fighting to sit and dream of something which leaves a nice taste in the mouth.”*

*Let me tell you that neither of these groups is right. The thing we are talking about tonight is part of the great fight we are carrying on and it represents a forward and an upward look—a pushing onward.*

## Suggested Questions

- ▶ Why does Du Bois believe that art is so important when talking about racial equality?
- ▶ Do you think Lawrence’s painting depicts the idealized future that Du Bois envisioned? Why or why not?

## Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the opening paragraphs of the prologue to Ralph Ellison’s first novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). A milestone book in African American literature, *Invisible Man* is a first-person account of a young black man’s experiences growing up in a Southern black community, attending college, and moving to New York. The unnamed man claims that he is an “invisible man,” that is, that others refuse to “see” him because he is African American.

(continued)

(continued)

## Suggested Questions

- The prologue begins with the sentence, "I am an invisible man." According to the narrator of this passage, what does it mean to be "invisible"?
- Jacob Lawrence said that he spent a lot of time in libraries and museums to teach himself about black culture because it wasn't taught in school. What does *The Library* say about invisibility and how to counteract it?
- Both Ralph Ellison and Jacob Lawrence examine their own personal autobiography through their work, drawing on individual experience to address larger cultural issues. Ask students to consider Ellison's text and Lawrence's painting together, to compare the power of both textual and visual imagery. How do both seek to make themselves visible to a larger society?

---

To read the full text of extended quotes, visit:

[www.americanexperience.si.edu/teaching-resources](http://www.americanexperience.si.edu/teaching-resources)