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# NORMAN LEWIS ON THE PERIPHERAL: THE RELATIONSHIP OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST MOVEMENT THROUGH THE DECADES, 1930-1950

Church, Ione

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
PLYMOUTH**

**NORMAN LEWIS ON THE PERIPHERAL: THE RELATIONSHIP OF AN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST  
MOVEMENT THROUGH THE DECADES, 1930-1950**

by

**IONE CHURCH**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree  
of

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At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

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IONE CHURCH

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Abstract Expressionism took the American Art World by storm. However, the contribution of African American artist Norman Lewis is often overshadowed. In recent years Lewis has come to light as a significant artist involved with this movement, although there has been little research identifying this.

My research identifies three decades of Lewis's career as a working artist from 1930-1950 and examines how the style of his work, politics and society form ideals on his position with the art group. The current history on Lewis is placed within the post-colonial theory of race, my research will give a greater understanding into political and social concerns. Lewis's ethnicity is problematic throughout the whole of his life and career and will evidently still be a concern. One of the main arguments sees that the U.S government has a hold over Lewis's style and meeting the government criteria is crucial in the development of his career. A formalist approach will be taken to examine Lewis's paintings, analysing the history and progress of his style of painting through compositional elements. Another methodological approach which is used is the social history of art, notions of the patrons and commissions are raised, the two methodologies will be incorporated together in the attempt to better understand Lewis's position in the New York art scene. The evidence provided within this paper suggests that whilst there is a major concern with Civil Rights, Lewis who was an intellectual and did not shy away from the art scene in New York, he chose his path which diverged him away from the current art scene, he was extremely experimental with his style of painting throughout the three decades and had a desire to explore this.

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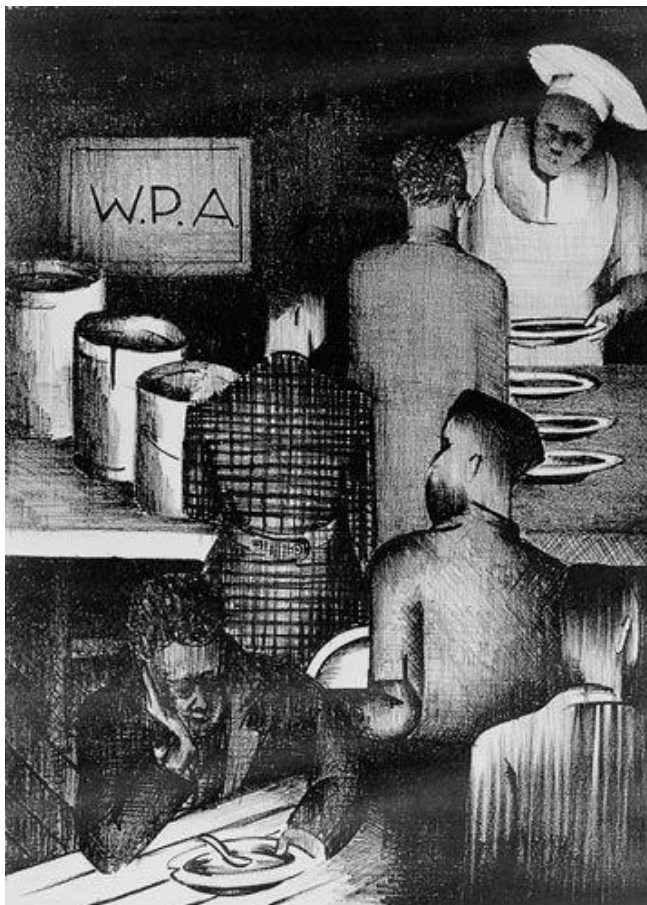


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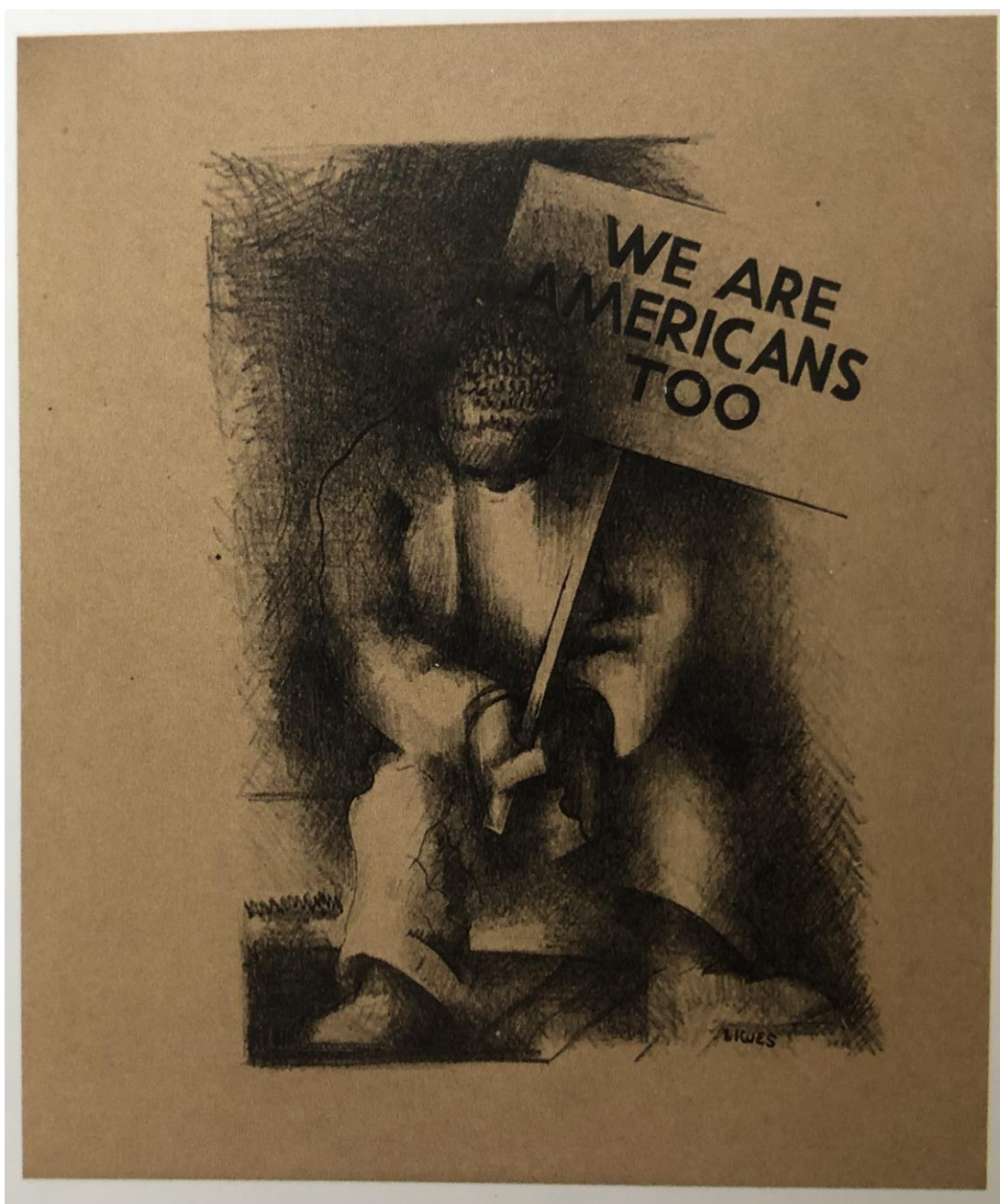


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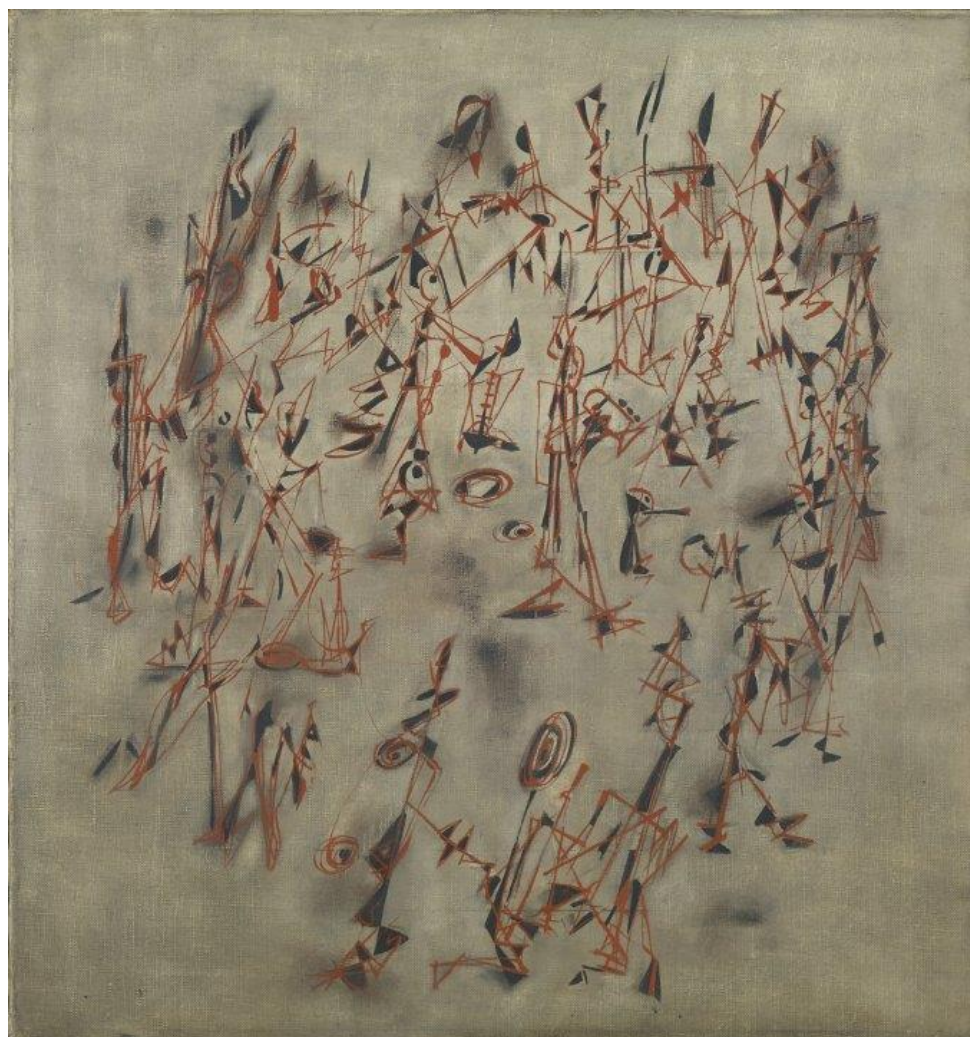


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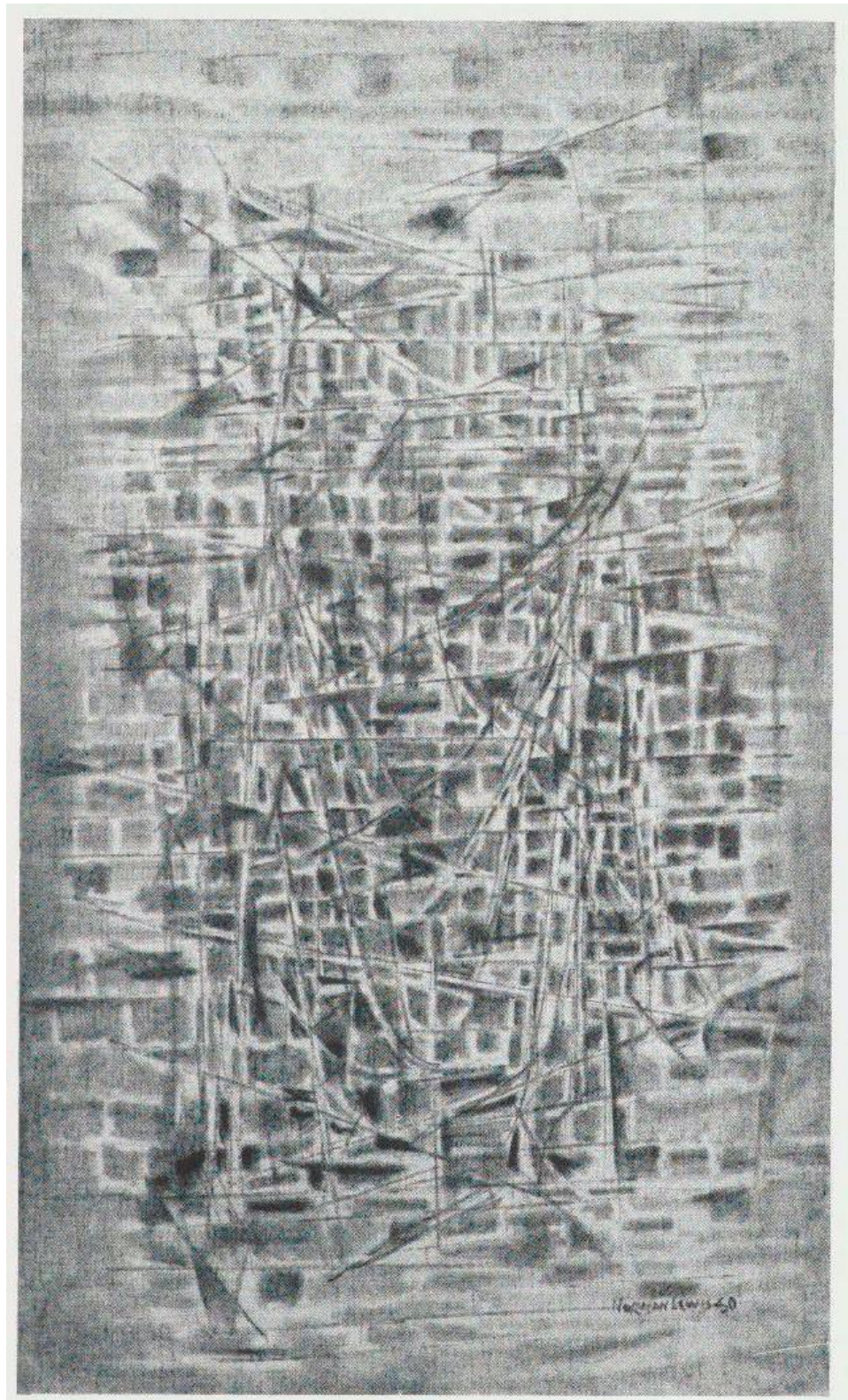


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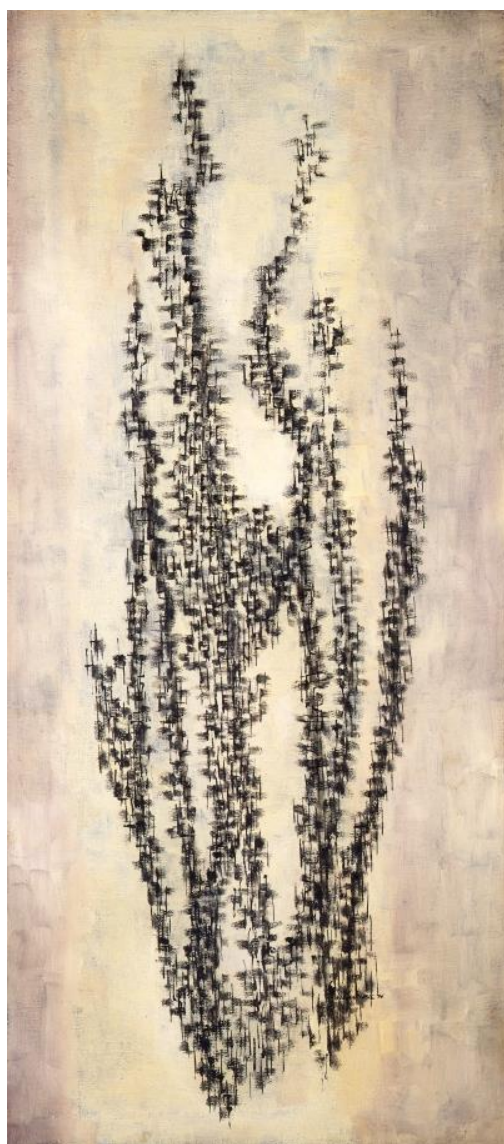


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## Introduction

In the last three decades, Norman Lewis has come to light in terms of his involvement with the Abstract Expressionist movement. There has been little research into Lewis's life and career until recently with the exhibition *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*<sup>1</sup>. There have been several different paradigms that have been explored which I will give a brief overview of, these will establish my research going forward. I will show that Lewis is either placed within the highly politicised narrative of race (postcolonial critical theory) or the narrative of modern painting (formalist focus on abstraction) devoid of societal relevance. I will further argue that a closer consideration of the context of his work is still warranted to understand what artistic and political options were available to him.

Norman Wilfred Lewis was an African American artist who was born and raised in Harlem, New York. Since he was a small boy Lewis always dreamt of being an artist, this drive is what aided Lewis in his career, he was an intellectual who engaged in lively conversations about art, music, and politics. His exploration and interests are what gave him concepts for research to further his education in the arts, Lewis was predominately self-taught, although some of his teachings did come from the female African American sculptor Augusta Savage during the first decade of his career. His awareness of the art world was not confined to the constraints of America, Lewis explored and engaged with artists within Europe such as Picasso whom he visited in his ceramic's studio in Spain<sup>2</sup>. To sustain himself and his career as an artist, Lewis applied for foundation grants and fellowships, he also taught at

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Fine, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* (California: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Juliette Harris, "Norman Lewis – Tarin Fuller A Stormy, Very Loving Relation," *International review of African American Art* 20, no. 3 (2005): 16.

several different institutions/artistic outputs. Teaching was his key source of income throughout much of his life and at times was his only source of income.

Although the narrative of Lewis's career currently focuses on his ethnicity as an African American, I will look at other factors that I believe had an impact on his fame within the art world. Ultimately, the colour of his skin is a prime subject that is placed at the centre of Lewis's life and career, it is also a factor that cannot be forgotten about or disregarded as it has multiple links to Lewis's life. However, the evidence put forward in this dissertation will explore other areas as well as ethnicity, such as institutional, social and political issues which all give a framework to his career. I will also examine his style and discuss how he interjects two different styles and the effect this had on his stature, as this becomes a significant factor to his contributions within the art world. I aim to take all of these issues into consideration and merge them with issues of ethnicity to give a clearer understanding of the barriers that Lewis faced in the New York art scene. Mapping these ideas will give a better understanding of the level of freedom and options Lewis had as a working artist.

Lewis started his career at the end of the Harlem Renaissance where a new style of painting had started to take effect, social realism. Naturally, Lewis grasped hold of this style and would use this as his output to reflect on social concerns within his subject matter. Social Realism drew attention to harrowing social conditions, joblessness and specifically in relation to Lewis's work injustice to black civilians. Artists wanted their works to reach out to the poor and middle class making them

accessible to a wider audience.<sup>3</sup> The mid-1940s sees a shift in Lewis's work when he started to experiment with abstraction although he did not abandon figuration completely. Ann Gibson states "artists who retained figurative elements were also refusing to abandon the working-class audience."<sup>4</sup> Arguably this may have been one of the reasons why Lewis did not abandon figuration, with Lewis's social and political beliefs for equality, it is likely that he believed it was important for his works to be not just for the typical upper-class which is commonly associated with the Art World, he was creating art for the masses.

Most significantly he was one of the founding members of the New York School of Abstraction, however, critics overlooked his contributions to Abstract Expressionism, the reason for this varies with the most significant ultimately being his skin colour, he was one of only a handful of black artists who made significant contributions to this art movement. In recent years the assessment of his work has become more substantial and associated with the movement, "Norman had been there at the creation in the mid-1940s, one of the founding members of the New York School. And he was an active participant among these artists as they hammered out a philosophy of abstract expressionism during forums in 1950 and '51."<sup>5</sup> This discussion of Lewis came to light in the 1990s with several exhibitions reflecting on his work, associating him with the movement and recognising him as a pioneer for abstract expressionist. The 1950s was arguably the decade in which Lewis was at his peak, he moved into Abstract Expressionism and moved away from Social Realism. He approached his work differently from other black artists at the time, Juliette Harris writes "he had departed from the sure-footed strategy of his talented black

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<sup>3</sup> Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ann E. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and Other Politics* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, *A Stormy, Very Loving Relation*, 12.

artist contemporaries. They developed modernistic styles while retaining a hold on the black subject... While his empathy for the struggles of black people was passionate and unwavering, he believed the best way to advance their cause was to unconditionally excel as an artist. And the only way for him to do that, he felt, was to be true to the ideals of the new art.”<sup>6</sup> This concept was present throughout different times in his life and more so towards the era of abstraction, before abstraction, Lewis did follow suit with black contemporary artists. This made his work move drastically in between styles, meaning there was no linear development throughout his career. Although Lewis was black, he did not want to be known as a black artist, Lewis’s stepdaughter Tarin Fuller states that he was “very saddened by the state of society, by man’s inhumanity. He did not want to be known as a ‘Negro painter,’” this reveals that Lewis was incredibly aware and engaged with Civil Rights, he did not approach these issues head-on and did not feel like there was a reason for the colour of his skin to affect his art. However, this approach meant that his achievements were not recognised within the African American community.

Lewis’s career spanned over a pertinent time in Art History, America achieved international recognition and New York was placed at the centre of the Art World with the first explicitly American art movement; Abstract Expressionism. The overall intent behind the movement was as follows “Abstract Expressionism derived its force from eliminating all narrative, figurative and implied social content so that deeper, broader, unbounded impulses could be revealed.”<sup>7</sup> Although Abstract Expressionism is thought to have been a movement which appeared in its own right it is hard to not look at what was happening in Europe in the art world, several different modern art movements may have influenced abstract expressionist in their

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 13.

styles such as German Expressionism specifically the artist Vasily Kandinsky<sup>8</sup> and the movements Surrealism<sup>9</sup> and Cubism. Although Surrealism and Cubism are not direct influences of abstract expressionism, these movements broke away from traditional notions of art and influenced an intellectual and artistic adventure for artists who would start to produce work with a deeper spiritual meaning. All of these movements had a greater meaning to that of Social Realism which directly presented a subject matter, the viewer does not have to engage fully with the painting its ideals are made clear. Whereas in a number of modern art movements, the viewer is inclined to become more engaged, the subject matter is biased.

World War Two was one of the biggest and most devastating historical events that America was involved with during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, the War did see a breakthrough for America's economy after the Great Depression. The War also led to the closure of government programs related to the creation of art such as the Federal Art Project (FAP). It is questionable whether the war had any effect on the teaching of art history and the theory of art. Wolfgang Stechow states "It is doubtful (statistics are not yet available) whether the exigencies of war caused any large-scale disturbances in the normal activities of teaching"<sup>10</sup>. One aspect of teaching that did change during this period was that "younger American teachers were called into the armed forces, with the result that more Europeans who had found or were finding a refuge in this country were brought into college and university faculties."<sup>11</sup> I believe the result of this was beneficial to the art world, it is most likely that European teachers had an even greater knowledge to that of American teachers, art in Europe

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<sup>8</sup> For further reading on Kandinsky see: Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (United States: Dover Publications Inc, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> For further reading on Surrealism see: Andre Breton, *What is Surrealism?* (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Stechow, "Art Studies During the War," *College Art Journal* 6, no. 4 (1947), 291.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

was more accessible to them, their knowledge of art would have been greatly received by artists and art historians at the time. America would have gained a better understanding of Modern Art in Europe, which may have helped develop Abstract Expressionism and its rise in the art world. War had an impact on the relationship of the art world and what art meant for the people of America, because of the position with looted art in Germany it is indicated that America had rescued a large number of paintings and felt that this should not be taken away from the people, Stechow writes “The desire for greater accessibility of those treasures to all.”<sup>12</sup> Now more than ever art was for the masses, everyone had the right to see not just art from America but from all over the world. Stechow also discusses collections of art that were donated to major institutions within the war period such as The Metropolitan Museum in New York who received several collections<sup>13</sup>.

There were some major political and social events which happened during Lewis’s life and career. The first was the rise of the Civil Rights movement; this took precedence over any other social and political event throughout the whole of Lewis’s life and career. Whilst Lewis’s style throughout the three decades sees many different shifts, his work never truly lost the socially contextual point of reference concerning the Civil Rights Movement especially within the later years of the 1950s. Although Lewis moved away from Social Realism and American Scene painting, during his years as an Abstract Expressionist painter the use of colour and symbols outlined a deeper meaning which was still associated with Civil Rights. Unlike his peers, the subtlety within Lewis’s paintings became a way of allowing him to negotiate concerns of race and class, dissimilar to previous decades where his artwork depicted prominent representations of racial and class discrimination.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 296.

Between 1930-1950 several different American art movements were formed. The Harlem Renaissance was still present during the 1930s along with American Scene and Social Realism, these two movements dominated the art world up until the exposure of Abstract Expressionism which changed the concept of American Art on an international scale, they also took precedence in Lewis's style up until the beginning of the 1940s. Pop art emerged during the late 1950s in America, although I will not consider this within my research its presence within the New York art scene was to a degree influenced by Abstract Expressionism. In terms of their style each of these movements explore social and political responses, however, they move drastically in opposite directions, with the most prominent being the move from social realism to abstract expression, these movements diverge away from each other and become two wholly different entities. Whereas American scene and social realism converge together, similarities between the two styles are present and they both critique power structures whether they are personal, social or political.

Throughout the three decades, Lewis was involved with several different artistic circles and institutions, these included Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Harlem Artists Guild, Artists Union (formerly known as The Unemployed Artists Group), Works Progress Administration (The Federal Art Project and Graphic Arts Division), Harlem Community Art Centre, The Willard Gallery, Museum of Modern Art and The Club. His involvement with these artistic circles and institutions meant that Lewis experimented more widely with a range of styles. Different institutions and artistic circles meant that's there would have been different concerns with regards to race, this ultimately would have had an impact on the style Lewis chose to work in. An example of this is when Lewis was



heavily involved with the Willard Gallery, he exhibited for 18 years at the gallery, however, his decision to leave was based on the racial disadvantages he faced with being a black artist in this period. Due to the artist not being present on the sale of their paintings, it created an illusion. The illusion for Lewis was down to the colour of his skin, discrimination was strongly present at this time which meant that if it was not known that Lewis was a black artist his paintings would sell, if the buyer discovered that he was a black artist sales and future sales were prevented and any chance of further networking would be jeopardised. This gives clarity as to why Lewis felt the need to shift between numerous styles, by moving away from race in his exploration and reception would allow him to be disassociated from black culture which impacted sales and his reputation.

Critical theory is one of the many paradigms discussed, specifically race under the umbrella term of post-colonialism which is the most discussed paradigm in connection with my topic noticeably because Lewis was an African American artist living at a pertinent time in American history.<sup>14</sup> As well as the fact it is a moderately new theory, which coincided with Lewis's rise to fame in the art world in the later years of his career as an artist. There are several essays and articles, most of which have a similar synopsis, the research that follows lays the groundwork for the theory of race concerning my topic. In her article "Seeing Black and the Colour of Representation", Fo Wilson describes the meaning of the use of the colour black. She writes "Black, a mysterious color, can be associated with both: the sum total and absence of all colors; the absorption and absence of light; a void or an overpowering gravitational field like a black hole; as well as pejorative and positive connotations

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<sup>14</sup> Further reading: Ron Field, *Civil Rights in America, 1865 – 1980* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

with race.”<sup>15</sup> She later goes on to describe what these different connotations mean.

Still, her main focus when discussing Lewis is that his use of the colour black haunts his works by summarising it as a political metaphor concerning issues with people of colour. Wilson also writes, “the Harlem Renaissance dictated that black artists assume political responsibility.”<sup>16</sup> This link that she creates between this movement and the artist is a reflection of a post-colonial quality that is being assumed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of just a handful of major exhibitions also analysed Lewis under the theory of post-colonialism, the exhibition entitled *Black Paintings 1947 – 1977* exhibited 30 years of Lewis’s work. The exhibition took place at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1988 and was curated by Ann E. Gibson and Jorge Daniel Veneciano. The Studio Museum in Harlem is known for supporting art by artists of African descent and for work that has been stimulated by Black culture. There are several essays in the exhibition catalogue for this show, all of which write under the theory of post-colonialism. David Craven’s essay, in particular, discusses Lewis’s position as an artist involved in the Abstract Expressionist movement and summarises him as a ‘contemporary man’. Craven writes “The post-1945 theory of Contemporary Man, with its multicultural practices, multilateral sense of time, and multilingual articulation of place, was a salient attribute of Lewis’s art in particular”<sup>17</sup> This can be related to an article by Annie Coombes who writes about the hybridity of post-colonialism<sup>18</sup>, Coombes text suggests that the museum is a mutual meeting ground

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<sup>15</sup> Fo Wilson, “Seeing Black and the Color of Representation,” *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no.29 (fall 2011): 112.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>17</sup> David Craven, “Norman Lewis as a Political Artist and Post-Colonial Activist,” in *Norman Lewis Black Paintings 1946 – 1977*, ed. David Craven (New York: Studio Museum, 1998), 54.

<sup>18</sup> Annie Coombes “Inventing the “Postcolonial”: hybridity and constituency in contemporary curating,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi. P 486-497. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

for a non-western object, which makes that particular object inferior to the powers of the West who are superior as they are the centre for this emergence of hybridity. She also suggests that the moment something is brought into the museum there is a tendency to appreciate its visual aesthetics. However, we are not praising the objects because of their beauty but their cultural significance. Cravens essay is stating that Lewis has a hybrid influence. This exhibition catalogue is important not just because it is one of the very few major exhibitions of Lewis's work but also because it recognises what is arguably the influences in his work relating to culture and ethnicity. The concept of this exhibition is to allow his work to have a place in the museum, Lewis, at this point in 1998 is given the recognition he warrants because his ethnicity is now an important aspect in art theory.

Another foremost scholar who has written many different papers including an essay for *Black Paintings 1947 – 1977* is Ann Eden Gibson. She discusses Lewis's later paintings as being 'ambiguous'. Not only are they objective but they are also subjective, but the subject of the paintings is unknown. She writes "Nor is one sure whether the 1962 *Ritual* is a Klan rally or a gathering around a picnic fire in celebration of a holiday or in defiant solidarity."<sup>19</sup> Even though she discusses them as ambiguous the surrounding text makes a note and gives evidence to Lewis's support for the Civil Rights movement. Gibson's next article that she writes on Lewis titled *Diaspora and Ritual Norman Lewis's Civil Rights Paintings* discusses a selected grouping of his paintings. Here is a summary of what she argues "Lewis's focus on the complex interplay of power and meaning in his representations of the charged subject matter of the freedom marches, demonstrations and Klan rallies in his Civil Rights series analyses a structure, that, if comprehended, promotes African

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<sup>19</sup> Ann E. Gibson, "Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York," in *Norman Lewis Black Paintings 1946 – 1977*, ed. David Craven (New York: Studio Museum, 1998), 20.

American agency and subject hood in both African American and White awareness.”<sup>20</sup> The idea she is putting in place is that colour and its power is the subject matter specifically in relation to politics, I would also argue that she is putting across another idea that this awareness of the subject matter is multicultural. His paintings are not directed to one racial audience but to everybody that sees them.

The exhibition *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*<sup>21</sup> was a transatlantic collaboration between the Hayward Gallery, the Institute of International Visual Arts London and the Cocoron Gallery, it took place in 1997, the show aimed to challenge conventional representations of the Harlem Renaissance and explore the Harlem Renaissance as a movement of Global Significance. In the exhibition catalogue, there is no mention of Lewis as a recognised artist in this period. However, the exhibition does explore colonization and how the Harlem Renaissance exploited the ideas of the west and the way they viewed black artists. This poses many different questions for further research which moves away from post-colonial ideas. From this, we can start to question the reasons behind Lewis’s exclusion in this period. Lewis is born in 1909 in Harlem, at the start of the Harlem Renaissance he is still a child. His presence within the period only comes about a few years before the end. Evidence in Andrianna Campbell’s chronology shows that although Lewis was interested and determined to have a career as a working artist he did not start doing this until 1933 where he rents his first studio on 28<sup>th</sup> Street. Campbell implies a post-colonial reading on this when she writes “until realising he

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Eden Gibson, “Diaspora and Ritual Norman Lewis’s Civil Right Paintings,” *Third Text* 45, (Winter 1989 – 99): 41.

<sup>21</sup> Powell, Richard J., and David A. Bailey. *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1997)

pays double the rent of white artists.”<sup>22</sup> Yet again the idea of Lewis’s skin colour is consistent when discussing his narrative.

In addition to postcolonialism, another recurrent paradigm used to explore Lewis’s work is formalism. It came about at the beginning of the twentieth century and focuses on the visual language and quality of the artwork. It analyses art by looking at the form and compositional features. Colour, shape, texture and line are considered, and context is discarded. The only thing important to this paradigm is the painting itself, not the purpose or the artist. Ruth Fine has in recent years written an extensive Formalist chronological overview of Lewis’s life works in the exhibition catalogue *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*<sup>23</sup>. She also presents an iconological reading of Lewis’s earlier artworks, “They are also identified by a range of skin colors. In all of his figurative works, the complexions of no two people share a hue, thereby echoing the diversity among Lewis’s community and offering evidence of complex social/political undercurrents embedded in his art.”<sup>24</sup>. This visual approach shifts from the ideas surrounding formalism, it examines artwork’s not by looking at its form but by what is depicted in the artwork itself. Two things are considered when understanding this paradigm, the first being that iconography describes the literal and iconology then delves further into the literal and gives a covert connotation. Another important academic who also wrote an essay for the same exhibition catalogue is David Acton, his essay crosses over between multiple paradigms but has a strong formalist structure. For some paintings, in particular, he views them as having no connection to Lewis or society, Acton writes a description

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<sup>22</sup> Andrianna Campbell, “Chronology,” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 246.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Fine, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* (California: University of California Press, 2016). This is the largest exhibition to date on the life works of Norman Lewis, it travelled to three institutions, these included Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Amon Carter Museum of American Art and Chicago Cultural Centre.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

for the lithograph 'Untitled (Umbrella)' "Unusual among Lewis's lithographs for its overt modernism. Depth is suggested by superimposed forms that yield a floating composition, layered structure, and fractured space"<sup>25</sup>. This description of the work contributes to the idea that Lewis never arrived at a signature style, as there is a clear difference in the way he produces the prints. Acton's focus in this essay is purely on the prints that Lewis produced when involved with the Federal Art Project, this gives evidence to a social art historical approach, although it is brief it is something I will touch upon later.

Another theory that has been explored is reception studies. Reception studies looks at the agenda set by institutions which in turn determines the superiority of artworks. The institute is at the forefront of communication between the viewer and the artwork, this can lead to the institution becoming more important than the dealer, critic and at times the artist. Andrianna Campbell developed a full chronology of Lewis's life and known exhibits for the most recent and largest show of Lewis's work *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*. Campbell gives evidence to the second major group exhibition<sup>26</sup> of which Lewis was involved, the exhibition took place at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and on show were three artworks from Lewis. It is clear from this piece of evidence that Lewis was accepted as a working artist by major institutions and that the early stages of his career looked encouraging. Lewis was involved with group exhibitions right up until he died in 1979 these took place at the New York public library, many different university galleries as well as many

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<sup>25</sup> David Acton, "Jammin at the Press," in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 126.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, "Chronology," 247. The exhibition took place at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, title of the exhibition was *Exhibition of Fine and Applied Arts, Work of the Pupils in the New York City Free Art Schools*, Lewis had three works included in the exhibition; Buddies (c. 1933), Morning, and The Wanderer (Johnny) (1933).

private galleries across America<sup>27</sup>. However, this research does not answer the question of why Lewis is not a key player in the Abstract Expressionist movement, this is something I intend to research further.

Another contextual approach and the final paradigm which is used to explore Lewis's work is the social history of art which starts to deal with original social context, the interest of the artist is removed, and notions of the patron and commissions are raised. Helen M. Shannon gives a brief history of the artist's funding and production she writes "this essay offers a corrective, more balanced view of the reception of the artists entire production."<sup>28</sup> She briefly mentions Augusta Savage, a female African American sculptor who for many years was Lewis's patron. From this discussion of Savage, I will investigate major factors such as her impact on the beginning years and the future of Lewis's career as I believe she is an important aspect of his position within the art world. Most of the essay looks at the cultural politics of the left and what was put in place to aid struggling artists, in some cases African American artists specifically. Ethnicity is a major concept within this text; however, she does move away from this halfway through and focuses on Lewis's involvement with the Willard Gallery.

Even though there have been several different paradigms that explore Lewis's work, there are two which have a clear distinction, the social history of art and post-colonial theory. The 1990s saw a monolithic approach in terms of post-colonial aspects of Lewis and his artworks, this approach was entirely race-driven and did not examine race with other social and political contexts. When Lewis's work was examined in this period, it was broadly associated with Lewis being a Black artist.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 245 – 270. For Lewis's Life history and list of known exhibitions.

<sup>28</sup> Helen M. Shannon, "Norman Lewis: Presence and Absence in the Exhibition History, 1933 – 1980," in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 233.

This gave a rather limited view of racial inequality and meant that his work became divorced from larger social factors. Within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a shift occurs where the two theories, post-colonialism and social history of art coincided with one another, issues of race start to become examined with political and social issues. This deeper examination and association of the two theories opens a different understanding of Lewis and his association within the art world. I will expand on this and explore this further within my dissertation.

I aim to approach Lewis through the lenses of the social history of art. Although my focus will be on this paradigm, the theory of post-colonialism in my thesis will inevitably come up at times, I feel this is something that will always have an input in any research towards Lewis. I hope that this will bring a new understanding of the artist. I will examine what funding was available for Lewis and how this had an effect on his work, I plan to inform new ideas surrounding the production of Lewis's work and the impact on his style from the early years of his career during the Harlem Renaissance through to the 1950s when America started to rise in the ranks of the art world. I intend to consider what political and economic ideas influenced his work as an artist. A key resource for my research will be Helen Shannon's essay, supporting resources will include records from the Marian Willard Gallery, records on Lewis held at the archives of American Art, and Henri Ghent's oral history interview (July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1968). I will also research into the Cinque Gallery in New York where Lewis was one of the co-founders. Lewis has a vast timeline of works, for my thesis, I intend to discuss three decades of his works from the 1930s – 1950s.

It is also my intention to indicate how different narratives converge and diverge throughout the three decades. This is to gain a better understanding of how and when different narratives come together within work which can be traced from different



angles. I will examine narratives of race, narratives of style and narratives of institutional context. These are all major concerns regarding his prominence as an artist, understanding when different narratives become a collective pair, they shed a different light and recognition on his work which ultimately changes the level of influence Lewis made in the canon, specifically his affiliation to Abstract Expressionism. It will become apparent that these collective pairs of narrative regularly alternate throughout the three decades.

## 1930's – Harlem Renaissance and Race before the War

In this chapter, I will examine the beginning of Lewis's career from 1930 – 1940. I will present several different organisations with which Lewis was associated, Augusta Savage, as Norman Lewis's patron and explore a handful of works he produced within this period. I will also explore the style in which Lewis guided his work within this decade. The works I examine will present subject matter which Lewis associated himself with this will help form a greater understanding of the social context. At this point in his career, he engages with social issues, however, his work crosses over with different styles to form his own. To help gain an understanding of Lewis's life, I will briefly look at the historiography and key events which I believe would have had an impact on his subject matter within his works. I will use these key events as evidence to support my opinions on Lewis's life as a working artist and teacher. Throughout this decade Lewis's engagement with Social Realism and American Scene painting heavily supported concerns of race, the institutions he was working with supported black artists and there was a strong narrative throughout a number of his artworks that expressed the hardships the black community faced. The main purpose of this chapter is to put into focus Lewis's position within the New York art scene at this time in history. An article by James Smalls briefly mentions Lewis's transition as an artist. He writes "Lewis became familiar with Locke's ideas but soon questioned the wisdom of creating an art based on an "African" or "Negro" idiom."<sup>29</sup> This provides evidence that suggests that Lewis neglects the ideas surrounding the Harlem Renaissance and what the

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<sup>29</sup> James Smalls. "Lewis, Norman." *Grove Art Online*. 24 Feb. 2010; Accessed 24 Jan. 2018. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oa0-9781884446054-e-7002085944>.

movement entails. This article opens up the following research in my first chapter in which I will look at Norman Lewis's position within the 1930s.

Within this decade Lewis was heavily involved with institutional context and the way the institution characterised the environment which supports African American artists and civilians. He was involved with several art-related guilds, art centres and unions. All of which supported the rights of the black minorities, all of the institutions looked to change policies and regulate them in supporting African American's. During this time Lewis was working closely with other black artists such as Augusta Savage, he also lived in a primarily black area of New York; Harlem. He was influenced and supported by artists of the same colour, the focus for these artists and Lewis was to drive the unions and guilds to persuade the government to support the black community. The subject matter for his work correlates with the institutional context with which he was involved with. This decade for Lewis was primarily related to civil rights and had a strong focus on the disadvantages black people faced. Like other artists of this period, he explored Social Realism and painted images that exploited these disadvantages. Race and its association to the art world is the biggest issue within this decade, Lewis is free to paint what he wants at the beginning of the decade and he makes the conscious decision to paint issues which concern the identity of people of colour. To some extent the institutional context may have had an influence on Lewis which converged the two together, this would have been a natural process with Social Realism being the current art movement and civil rights issues being present, the combination of the two merged with ease for Lewis.

### **Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts**

Augusta Savage was an artist, teacher, activist and patron to Norman Lewis. She is a well-known sculptor within the Harlem Renaissance<sup>30</sup> and was also a prominent female African American figure and supporter of Civil Rights<sup>31</sup>. Born in Florida in 1892, she moved to New York in the early 1920s. She was rejected to study at a summer programme in France in 1923 due to the colour of her skin, this would be the initial experience that would influence her for the rest of her career. In 1933<sup>32</sup> in West 143rd Street in Harlem, Savage launched the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts; the studio was supported by Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn, African American artists and members of the Harlem Adult Education Committee. The committee was set up by a group of artists working with the New York Public Libraries Adult Education Programme, the committee received financial support from the Carnegie Corporation and the Harmon Foundation<sup>33</sup>.

The research of Ruth Fine suggests that this is the first place where she would start a professional relationship with Lewis as a student and teacher<sup>34</sup>. Fine states that when Lewis studied under Savage he first worked with sculpture as his initial medium and then went onto painting. Evidence given from Lewis many years after meeting Savage suggests that Savage did not aid his career as a working artist. In an interview with curator and activist, Henri Ghent<sup>35</sup> in 1968 Lewis states “Just the fact

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<sup>30</sup> Sharif Bey, “Augusta savage: Sacrifice, Social Responsibility, and Early African American Art Education,” *Studies in Art Education* 58, no.2 (2017): 125-140.

<sup>31</sup> There is a discrepancy with this date, Lewis states in his interview that he met Savage when he was 23 or 24.

<sup>33</sup> For further reading on the Harlem Adult Education Committee see Mary Ann Calo, “Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920 – 40.” (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2007) 87 – 100.

<sup>34</sup> Ruth Fine, “The Spiritual in the Material,” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, ed. Ruth Fine (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2016), 22.

<sup>35</sup> There are no scholarly writings on Henri Ghent, The Museum of Modern Art states that he was a curator at the museum in 1968 but has no bio on him, see link <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2016/spelunker/constituents/11489/>

that she had a place where I could work was the most fruitful thing of our meeting. I worked with her for about two years but there wasn't any direction, she never suggested "do this" or "do that."<sup>36</sup> This suggests that Lewis only ever saw Savage and her studio as a place for him to create and that she never actually taught him anything worthy for the future of his career. It also supports the conflicting idea that Savage was never actually a teacher to Lewis and only ever his patron by endorsing him through the use of her studio and introducing him to other eminent artists in the same circle. Lewis does state that Savage was his immediate supervisor<sup>37</sup>, he does not go into further details about her role as a supervisor but does not shy away from admitting the fact that she was his senior. Through different archival materials, journals and exhibition catalogues it is evident that Lewis does not talk about Savage in great detail, vice versa Savage does not discuss Lewis throughout her short-lived career.

The conflicting responses to Savage by Fine and Lewis may be down to numerous reasons. I am swayed towards the idea that he was overshadowed by Savage because she is recognised as one of the first successful female African American artists of her time, which was ultimately more significant in terms of Lewis's position, as he had only just begun his career as a working artist. Their different interests in particular practices within art, in this case, painting and sculptor, could in Lewis's view reduce the value of his credibility in his main practice of painting. The recognition he is achieving is in response to him being trained by a sculptor who had many years of experience and whose skill was more advanced than Lewis's. I am compelled towards Lewis's response to his relationship with Savage, out of respect to Savage he waits at least a decade; Savage is no longer a part of the Art World in New York

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<sup>36</sup> Oral history interview with Norman Lewis conducted by Henri Ghent, 14 July, 1968, Archives of American Art (AAA), p.4.

<sup>37</sup> Information in a letter to Francis V. O'Connor regarding Norman Lewis's time with the WPA/FAP, from Professor Robert P. Johnston, Archives of American Art AAH page 6, Norman Lewis box.

and has disappeared from the art scene. Lewis has respectfully discredited her from his career at a time when it is safe to do so which would not jeopardise his career as well as hers.

Lewis had to find a way of starting and sustaining his career as a working artist. Savage aided his career by teaching, but he would need to afford to buy materials and tools, he tells Ghent how he did this, “Poker. Horseracing, which is an art in itself and depending on how much larceny... But this afforded me an opportunity to buy many books that I now have when I didn't have any books at all. And buy all the things I felt necessary to encourage me to go on and now I have a library of books that I want.”<sup>38</sup> This illustrates the idea that Lewis was willing to take a risk to pursue his career and was determined to become as knowledgeable in his field as possible, he not only wanted to learn to paint but he wanted to learn the academic ideas of art.

Lewis produced some of his earliest known artworks when studying<sup>39</sup> under Savage. *The Wanderer (Johnny)* (1933; fig. 2) and *Untitled (Seated Man)* (1933; fig. 3). Both the ink wash drawing and the painting depicts a seated man in the centre looking down at an angle. Both characters are wearing similar clothes; a trilby style hat, brogues, a long trench coat and trousers. In either painting the faces of the men are not visible, however, I would presume that the large facial features (wide nose and large lips) which are visible in *Untitled* are that of an African American and given the fact the clear skin tone of the man in *The Wanderer* is black that both these paintings are based on an African American citizen. Although the men take centre stage in the paintings Lewis still depicts the surroundings in detail, both men are sat outside in the snow. A suitcase is used as a seat in *The Wanderer*, with this and other

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<sup>38</sup> Henri Ghent, 14 July, 1968, Archives of American Art (AAA), p.4.

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Fine suggests that Lewis studied under Savage for two years, again the dates of when Lewis left Savage's studio are still unclear.

details of the artwork in mind particularly the exaggerated caricature style used by Lewis to mock the political and social issues faced by civilians at the time of the Great Northern Migration<sup>40</sup>, The Great Northern Migration saw the relocation of more than six million African Americans from the rural South to cities within the North, Midwest and West due to harsh segregation laws and unsatisfactory economic opportunities in the South the city would be able to offer jobs as in industrial workers, the move to the city also lead to a rise in activism by confronting racial prejudice, economic, political and social challenges within black urban culture. It is questionable whether the drawing was created before the painting in the same year and would explore the idea that the drawing was Lewis's initial influence which would eventually develop into the painting. Both drawing and painting are significant representations of the poverty and desperation felt living at the time of such great hardships, the characters solemn positioning of their postures suggests the idea that they are feeling emotionally and physically tired and hopeless in searching for work, after moving and travelling across the country.

### **A European Influence**

Following through with the same iconic subject of labour, in 1937 Lewis produced the painting *Buddies* (1937; fig. 4). The central focus of this painting is a pair of well lived-in shoes. The colour palette is similar to that used in *The Wanderer* and *Untitled (Seated Man)*. Ruth Fine suggests that the painting pays homage to Vincent van Gogh's *Shoes* (1888; fig. 5), she writes "his art has multiple roots, and that he spent several years in the mid 1930s actively searching for what they might be." This notion suggests Lewis's curiosity is at its peak throughout this decade, being self-

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<sup>40</sup> Further reading see Stewart Tolnay, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209-323.

educated Lewis is exploring concepts which he is aware of but exploiting them further, to aid his practice and become fully aware of what is happening at the time. Van Gogh produced several paintings<sup>41</sup> with this new icon of the boot. In all of these paintings the boots are not new they are well worn, it is reasonable to believe that this concept would become an icon of labour.

Besides the possible influence of van Gogh, it is important to note that a year before *Buddies* was painted, the photographer Walker Evans<sup>42</sup>, who was working for the Farm Security Administration<sup>43</sup> produced a series of photographs depicting boots. I am particularly interested in the image *Floyd Burroughs' Work Shoes* (1936; fig. 6). Again, the images sole focus is a pair of well-worn boots, idly sat by themselves.

The Farm Security Administration was an agency set up by the New Deal programme, it came about in 1937 after The Resettlement Administration<sup>44</sup>. The Farm Security Administration aimed to combat rural poverty during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Photographers such as Evans were employed by the Farm Security Administration to capture visual evidence that there was a need for the administration and that the agency met the needs of poor farmers<sup>45</sup>. Again, the use of boots is used as a representation of labour and the drudgery the working-class face.

I am coerced towards the idea that Lewis was inspired by this icon of labour, of the rural and urban working class, struggling to survive in challenging times. He has

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<sup>41</sup> Other paintings of shoes which Vincent Van Gogh produced are 'A Pair of Shoes' 1886 and 'Three Pair of Shoes' 1886.

<sup>42</sup> Jerald C. Maddox, *Walker Evans Photographs for the Farm Security Administration 1935-1938* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

<sup>43</sup> Jason Reblando, "Farm Security Administration Photographs of Greenbelt Towns: Selling Utopia During the Great Depression," *Utopian Studies* 25, no.1 (2014), 52-86.

<sup>44</sup> Created May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1935, The Resettlement Administration was part of the New Deal set up by President Roosevelt, the aim was to relocate urban and rural families who were struggling within the time of the Great Depression to communities which were developed and planned by the federal government.

<sup>45</sup> D.W. Brogan, *Roosevelt and the New Deal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 175.



taken this idea of the working man's boots and made it his own, by using a pair of shoes instead of boots. I believe that the idea of industriousness labour is a subject that is prevalent in his life even though he is not a farmer, he is flipping this idea on its head and making a statement that suggests that it is not just industrial workers and farmers that are suffering but workers within other less labour intense industries as well. If we look at all three artworks discussed within this decade, they all reflect the crossover of Social Realism and American Scene style. He is not exploring a number of different techniques; his concept is consistent, putting all of the paintings under one category which all have the same narrative.

In April 1934, *The Wanderer (Johnny)* received a cash prize and honourable mention at The Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>46</sup>. The exhibition titled 'Work of the Pupils in the New York City Free Adult Art Schools' was sponsored by several institutions; First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was also patron of the exhibition. This evidence of exhibiting at such a prestigious institution suggests the idea that the beginning of Lewis's career as a working artist was in full bloom. His skill and technical ability were becoming recognised not just in Harlem but in other areas of the City.

Throughout the first decade of Lewis's career, there is a theme within his work. Whilst Ruth Fine suggests 'while neither work appears to be based on the other' I would argue that there is a clear representation of poverty, the great depression and the effects that this had on the African American community specifically within both paintings which were created in the same year. This is the first time we start to see a theme within several paintings and the beginnings of just one of many different signature styles from Lewis. The exhibition had a strong sense of social sensitivity surrounding it. It tackled a politically engaging discussion of left-wing politics,

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<sup>46</sup> Shannon, *Presence and Absence*, 233-234.

involving works from the middle working class which explored social inequality, it would be one of the first in this decade to be shown within The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with the title of the exhibition in mind it is plausible to state that the exhibition would be used in persuading social change within an elite society. The same ideal of art for the millions would be expressed three years later in another exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art 'Work of Students in Art Classes of the Works Progress Administration. Adult Education Program of the New York City Board of Education. Arguably, New Deal, leftist policies start to become a noticeable subject within the private sector. These types of exhibitions are exploring key policies of the New Deal programme; equality for everyone and art for the millions.

### **The Institutional Context of African American Art**

The context of art patronage can be further examined if we consider the role the Harmon Foundation played in the support of African American Art. Founded in 1922 by real estate developer William Elmer Harmon, the Harmon Foundation was one of the first major supporters of African American innovation. By 1925 it began presenting cash awards to black people in the arts, business, science and education. The Foundation closed in the 1960s dispersing its major art collection to many prestigious institutions. It is essential to comment on the Foundation because evidence shows that the Artist's Union critically disagreed with how the foundation was selecting artists for exhibitions, as well as segregating them when winning awards. Bearden is known as a key figure who specifically integrated the work of African Artist's into a predominately white American culture, he was a profound supporter of the Harlem community and its artists. He discussed the foundation in

The Journal of Negro Life in 1934, he writes in great disgust in the article "Take for instance the Harmon Foundation. Its attitude from the beginning has been of a coddling and patronizing nature. It has encouraged the artist to exhibit long before he has mastered the technical equipment of his medium. By its choice of the type of work it favours, it has allowed the Negro artist to accept standards that are both artificial and corrupt."<sup>47</sup> In other words, Bearden looked for the support of artists but for them to be treated like any white artist of the time, to have a complete skill set and truly understand the complexities in the field of art was important. The artist should not be demeaned and overprotected by the foundation, the assessing and judgement of the work should be firm resembling the way white artists were treated. In the same manner by which the foundation treated these artists was something which he thought demeaned them and lowered the standards of the working artist.

Parallel to the beliefs of Bearden, the dissatisfaction of many artists who exhibited under the Harmon Foundation initiated the creation of the Harlem Artists Guild in 1935. The guild was active for six years<sup>48</sup> and was founded as an independent artists group that was affiliated with the Artists' Union. The idea behind the undertakings of the group was for artists to come together to discuss and plan policies that would foster the visual arts in the local community. There was a strong focus on political and social activities concerning African American artists. Particularly, the Works Progress Administration's unwillingness to engage African American artists within the Federal Art Project programme. The study by Mary Ann Calo gives evidence to the activities of the Guild, stating "The Harlem Artists' Guild not only launched official protests against the Harmon Foundation, but they also sought to displace

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<sup>47</sup> Romare Bearden. "The Negro artist and modern art," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 12, No. 12 (1934): 371-372.

<sup>48</sup> Sharon F. Patton, *African American Art* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1998), 147.

them as a leading advocate for African American artists”<sup>49</sup> This gives evidence to the idea that the beliefs of working African American and white American artists felt the same with regards to the Harmon Foundations policies. The venture was led by Savage, Charles Alston, Arthur Schomburg and Elba Lightfoot. Lewis is also said to be another founder of the group, however, there is little evidence<sup>50</sup> to suggest that this is true. Ruth Fine does state that Lewis was a member and later treasurer of the guild.

Gwendolyn Bennet talks of the group’s dream of having a permanent residence for an art centre “I have been talking and thinking about the Harlem Community Art Center for about four years. It was a dream when negro artists forming the Harlem Artists’ Guild met to pool their experiences in a discussion of ways to bring about the establishment of a permanent art center in Harlem.”<sup>51</sup> it is clear from the research presented that the Guilds grassroots movement and co-operation with the Federal Art Project programme were to raise awareness in the hopes that this would develop into a bigger art programme for the Harlem Community.

A year after the initial set up of the guild a manuscript by Claude McKay<sup>52</sup> dated c.1936-1941, discusses a list of six requirements they felt the guild should abide by:

1. A belief in social purpose of art.
2. That Negroes are destined to play an important part in the art of America.

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<sup>49</sup> Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>50</sup> Fine, *Procession*, 126.

<sup>51</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett, “The Harlem Community Art Center” in *Art for the millions; essays from the 1930s by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V.O’Connor (Massachusetts: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1973), 213.

<sup>52</sup> Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. ““Harlem Artists' Guild”” New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed August 13, 2018. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/90999530-75de-0133-3db1-00505686a51c>

3. A desire to awaken the people to artistic needs, which would aid the greater development of art.
4. A desire to co-operate with other art organisations.
5. The necessity of an art centre, where artists could get together to discuss ideas, and also the necessity of providing studios for artists.
6. The necessity of providing immediate work for the artists of Harlem.

These requirements suggest the pressures put on by the guild to not only give African American artists the same rights as white artists but more importantly it indicates the idea of government to step up and support artists. The aim was to entitle artists to jobs, as well as a centre where they would be able to produce work and develop their learning. The manuscript provides evidence that the guild not only came together to persuade the government to integrate African American artists in the Federal Art Project programme but also to put on exhibitions themselves which would show the work these artists were capable of to the larger community. The manifest also mentions three exhibitions that the Guild hosted early on in 1935, however, again no evidence suggests that Lewis participated in any of these three shows. The first show which was in a tea room in Harlem has no historical paperwork to state who exhibited. Evidence from McKay suggests that only 'leading' artists took part in the third show; Savage, Bearden and Douglas. This raises the question as to why Lewis was not seen as a leading artist within this group, especially when Lewis played a significant role as treasurer. I would argue that Lewis's indifference from his contemporaries affected his position in the group, Lewis understood his colleagues to be from a 'bourgeois'<sup>53</sup> society, whereas Lewis was raised from a traditional working-class family.

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<sup>53</sup> Henri Ghent, *oral history interview*. P.4.

It is thought that the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts grew rapidly in the short time it was opened, this led to members of the Harlem Artists Guild working with the Federal Art Project in establishing the Harlem Community Art Centre<sup>54</sup>, which opened December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1937. The guild had met one of their six requirements “The necessity of an art centre, where artists could get together to discuss ideas, and also the necessity of providing studios for artists.” This became the guilds first big success. The centre was established with a joint relationship between the Federal Art Project and the Harlem Citizens’ Sponsoring Committee. The committee initially consisted of eleven patrons. However, they were not artists, the group consisted of ministers, members of the education sector, a news editor and the president of the borough of Manhattan. Their efforts would raise funds, through voluntary contributions, for the overhead and operating expenses used to purchase supplies for the classes. The Federal Art Project’s funding would supply the centre with original equipment and would aid the maintenance of teaching and administrative staff, the Federal Art Project invested a substantial amount of \$50,000 into the centre, (equal to nearly a million dollars in today’s currency).

The Center was not just used as classrooms and gallery space but would also provide the public with an educational setting to conduct meetings, lectures and other activities. It was made clear that the centre was not just to be used by one particular cultural or educational group but was available to all citizens, including white Americans. It became one of four community art centres established in the City and was visited by delegates from several institutions including Columbia University, Yale University, Penn State College and New York University. The centre not only

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<sup>54</sup> Acton, *Jammin at the Press*, 126.

worked with universities but also hospitals and other Unions. Through these relationships, they would gain more funding and work with the institutions to create exhibitions that would express the nature of the organisations.

It is unclear who started as the director of the centre<sup>55</sup>, the official documentation states that Gwendolyn Bennet was on the executive board as the director of the Harlem Community Art Center. Lewis is listed only as a faculty member, not a member at large like his colleagues<sup>56</sup>. This provides evidence that only a handful of members from the Guild took on executive responsibilities, suggesting that this was more than likely by choice. The opening of the centre in December saw an exhibition of paintings and watercolours by members of the Harlem Artists Guild. It is unknown who exhibited but it is assumed that Lewis did have work in the exhibition, however, the work(s) is also unknown<sup>57</sup>. The centre's first year became revolutionary, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt<sup>58</sup> held a general membership and attended the opening ceremony of the Centre<sup>59</sup>. It would become known as one of the finest and best-equipped art centres in the City. Just five months after opening, the committee hosted a benefit dance on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1938, which saw the likes of Louis Armstrong play and support the centre.

Lewis began his art teaching career when working at the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, he then gained a position teaching drawing and painting at Harlem

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<sup>55</sup> Helen Shannon, *Procession*, 234 - 'Savage was the director' this is potentially a discrepancy as my research suggests multiple times that she was not the director but her role within the HCAC was as a consultant under the list of executive staff members, this is sourced from official documentation from the HCAC. Archives of American Art, 1936 -1939, Box 1, Folder 46. Community Art Centers Harlem, Page 8.

<sup>56</sup> Archives of American Art, 1936 -1939, Box 1, Folder 46. Community Art Centers Harlem, Page 21.

<sup>57</sup> Fine, *Procession*, 249.

<sup>58</sup> Is a patron for the artists, representing the beliefs of her husband, and supports civil rights specifically within the Arts. Archives of American Art, 1936 -1939, Box 1, Folder 46. Community Art Centers Harlem, Page 27.

<sup>59</sup> Shannon, *Presence and Absence*, 234.

Community Art Center. His teaching career was firmly controlled by the Works Progress Administration, after just ten months working at the Harlem Community Art Center he was reassigned to North Carolina to establish a new art centre, this only lasted a year. Lewis returned to the City early in 1939 and resumed teaching at Harlem Community Art Center whilst working on his artwork and exhibiting in numerous exhibitions around the City. The Works Progress Administration would direct Lewis's career as a working artist throughout this decade, evidence suggests that Lewis did not go to North Carolina by choice "after encounters with racism, although family illness is given as cause."<sup>60</sup> This explores the idea that there were multiple reasons for his return to the City and that family illness would be the best suited, which worked for Lewis and saw him return early. The opportunities and firm control of the Works Progress Administration was a major element in Lewis's success, this was his only source of income which also allowed him to gain access to materials and equipment and was his best chance at working on his skill and style. Records show that Lewis's pay decreased during his time teaching. In 1935 his monthly wage was £103.40, by the middle of 1938 it had decreased to £91.10. This was a large sum of money that Lewis no longer had, although he was continuing to do the same job. It does suggest the decline of the Federal Art Project which was the backbone of the Harlem Community Art Center, income from the Federal Art Project stabilised the centre and without this, it is questionable whether the Harlem Community Art Center would have been able to achieve what it did.

The Artists' Union, originally named the Unemployed Artists Group took initiative and came about in the Summer of 1933. In recent scholarly writings, the Artists' Union is seen as having affiliated with smaller artist groups; one of which was the Harlem Artists Guild. The Union had connections with different artist groups

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<sup>60</sup> Campbell, *Chronology*, 294.



uptown and downtown throughout the whole of New York City. Monroe discusses how the Union supported other groups, he writes “they were frequently called upon to assist other unions or left-wing organizations in picket lines and demonstrations.”<sup>61</sup> This assistance was no doubt widely available to other unions around the City because the Artists’ Union had such a great following internationally. Starting with just 25 members in the summer and by October the same year having over 300 in New York City alone. The artists’ union aimed to provide new possibilities for shared social and academic exchange. They made America’s failure in ending racial inequalities known and looked to promote cultural democracy whilst bringing social justice matters to the wider community.

Gerald Monroe discusses the manifesto in which the group set “demanding that the state sponsor art projects as an economic aid to the artist and as a cultural and artistic response for the community. “The State,” declared the manifesto, “can eliminate once and for all the unfortunate dependence of American artists upon the caprice of private patronage.”<sup>62</sup> They aimed to make art for all, they would not eliminate different classes and would treat art as being just as accessible to all social classes. However, there is no doubt that the social stigma of ethnicity at this time still segregated African American artists even within the Union, because the Harlem Artists Guild was made up of mostly African American artists and were only affiliated with the Artists Union. This was an issue that profoundly upset Norman Lewis, he talks of the issues he still faced at a time of change “I think it was \$15 a month and I discovered that despite the fact that these were a bunch of left-wing artists that I was paying twice as much rent as they. And then the whole goddamn thing upset me because these were guys, white artists, who I enjoyed being with and

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<sup>61</sup> Gerald M. Monroe, “The Artists Union of New York,” *Art Journal* 32, No. 1 (1972): 17.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

we, at that time, were fighting for a lot of things that they materially benefitted from, but I didn't.”<sup>63</sup> This provides evidence that Lewis is aware of the segregation at a time of elimination and that even though white and black artists were fighting for the same thing he still was isolated.

From Lewis’s drawings and paintings; *Seated Man and The Wanderer – Johnny*, we can assume that he was influenced by leftist policies and was encouraging when it came to exploring critical political and social concerns within his artwork. I would argue that the prints and paintings he created were influenced by the work of the union as they explore racial, ethnic identities whilst giving form to the tensions which were oppressing African American Citizens at the time. Patricia Hills speculates that “Norman Lewis might have brought back news of the meetings of the Artists’ Union, held downtown.”<sup>64</sup> I agree with Redding’s theory. We know that the Union had links with groups all over the City and that meetings were being held downtown. Lewis was politically and socially influenced at this time with what is seen in his work at this point. He associates himself with white artists such as Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, which brings the idea that he is not afraid to associate himself with the Union and was one to venture and explore the ideas of what was being discussed within these meetings.

The union would come to publish ‘Art Front’ it became one of the most forthright periodicals to be published at this time. The publication would contribute to leftist principles in tackling many different social and political themes, these included poverty, anti-fascism and affordable housing.

Herman Baron, a former writer, editor and owner of the American Contemporary

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<sup>63</sup> Henri Ghent, *oral history interview*. P.9.

<sup>64</sup>Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (California: University of California Press, 2009), 23.

Artists Gallery joined the executive board of the Union in the Autumn of 1934. This was the first issue and would lay the ideals of the journal “The urgent need for a publication which speaks for the artist, battles for his economic security and guides him in his artistic efforts is self-evident.”<sup>65</sup> Gerald Monroe writes “The editors and writers of Art Front were committed to social change and concerned about the correct role of art and the artist in a changing society” The Union was passionate about the changing role of art in society and Art Front would become one of the Unions largest public advertisements for this change in which artists would learn to address change in politics and use art as a stimulus within society.

However, relationships with the Artists Committee of Action caused a stir with the Union when the goals for both groups were not parallel, the Union had economic goals whilst the ACA had professional goals. Just five months after the first periodical was published, Art Front became the official publication of the Artists Union due to these conflicting opinions.

The Federal Art Project (FAP/WPA – Works Progress Administration) would become the fourth art project from the New Deal programme which lasted over a decade from 1935 – 1943. Scholarly work concerning the Federal Art Project is still limited, Francis V O’Connor produced *Art for the Millions; essays from the 1930s by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, this collection of essays and a foreword from O’Connor was the first of its kind to discuss the Federal Art Project in detail.

The Federal Art Project programme was directed by curator Holger Cahill, his perception of art avoided political controversy, “He perceived it as an official

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<sup>65</sup> Gerald Monroe, “Art Front”, Archives of American Art Journal 13, no. 3 (1973): 13.

function of society or as an integral part of an administration seeking to maintain the highest contemporary cultural values. In Cahill's view, 'art should not be a luxury available to the rich – art belonged to all the people.'<sup>66</sup> because of this ideal which Cahill set out for the art programme, it was supported by artists such as Lewis, ethnic minorities and class were set out to not to be a concern. One of the high moral virtues of the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project was the concept of freedom, Cahill encouraged experimental art and that all the community was involved in the production. This was not the case for African American artists when the programme started, black artists were initially excluded from the programme, Lewis did not join the Federal Art Project until 1937.<sup>67</sup> Artists for the Federal Art Project were employed from relief rolls, they would receive a basic wage every week and in return, they were expected to return a piece of work within a set timeframe, this allowed easel painters, graphic artists and sculptors to work from home. Artists also worked in the field or workshops provided by the Federal Art Project.<sup>68</sup>

Records show that Lewis did not just partake in teaching under the Federal Art Project, he also worked in the design laboratory, models service and in stained glass. The Federal Art Project classified artists on their level of skill, Lewis was classified under two out of these 4 categories; professional and technical and skilled. These two skills were superior to the four with the others being unskilled and intermediate. This gives me a reason to believe that Lewis was a valuable member of the Federal Art Project, his skill set was advanced, and he was highly ranked because of this.

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<sup>66</sup> Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1983), 19.

<sup>67</sup> Acton, *Jammin at the Press*, 126.

<sup>68</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "WPA Federal Art Project." Britannica.com. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/WPA-Federal-Art-Project> (accessed September 11, 2019)

The New York Graphic Arts division was a subdivision within the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project. It was the largest out of sixteen graphic arts departments within the Federal Art Project, debuting in 1934 in the same office as the Federal Art Project headquarters. The department was a practical option of art for the Federal Art Project programme, it would aid the idea of ‘art for the millions’ in the New Deal programme. As well as keeping costs down through the mass production of prints, the Federal Art Project’s aim of employing artists was being met whilst their need for promotion for the programme was also being fulfilled. Ninety printmakers<sup>69</sup> were employed in New York’s office alone, a substantial number of specialists in this creative field at this time.

Up until 1937, no African American artists were to be employed at the Graphics Arts Division, until the Harlem Artists Guild strove to change this policy. In the success of letting African American artists work within the department, it is believed that Lewis produced many different prints in this time whilst working as a member within the Federal Art Project programme. Lewis pushed the boundaries when producing his lithographs, he explored the idea of American society and questioned social justice within a time of great despair for the country. However, this goes against the idea of Helen Langa who put forward the idea that ‘while many artists marched and organized for social change during the 1930s, comparatively few depicted those turbulent issues in their works. Most printmakers explored safe traditional subjects such as studio nudes, still life’s...without overtly acknowledging the economic and political upheavals of contemporary American society.’<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Helen Langa, *Radical Art Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (California: University of California Press, 2004), 22-23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

These social justice themes are seen in two prints by Lewis *The Soup Kitchen* (c.1937; fig. 7) and *We Are Americans Too* (c.1937; fig. 8) both of these prints are believed to have been produced in 1937 in the GAD's new workshop on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Both images tell of the impoverished society. While neither is based on one another, *We Are Americans Too* depicts an African American man holding a placard, however, he is not at a protest, he is sat slumped and alone. This print conveys the loneliness faced by individuals, whilst exploring the idea of determination in the fight for change and progress, a labour that cannot be changed by an individual. The community relief seen in *The Soup Kitchen* is another example of the idea of labour and change which cannot be achieved by an individual, the image tells a story of communities working together to aid one another through devastating economical times. It could also be said that this particular print also gives a clear indication of how the Federal Art Project was viewed by Lewis with the use of typography, 'W.P.A' is printed on a large poster which takes the focus away from the surroundings in the image, these surroundings are of tensions being recognised, again people are sat down, slumped and consumed with grief. This gives the viewer the impression that the Works Progress Administration would be a saviour for people living in poverty and that they were fully supported by the Works Progress Administration. Although these two images express the aid that is being given by the government, the reality of being in either of these situations is an ominous experience. These images are evidence given from Lewis of some of the worst situation's civilians could find themselves in. These two prints could be emphasising several different positive and negative responses from financial aid. Though I am swayed towards the idea that these images are not just necessarily depicting the relief funded by the government, but they also make a political statement that questions the level of relief the government put forth. The placard suggests that the people felt

more relief needed to be given, the character who is sat alone puts forward the idea that the grassroots movement from the people is unlikely to be considered and there is a complete sense of hopelessness. In the soup kitchen, although several people are depicted, they are not close together which gives a sense of loneliness.

Towards the end of this decade the natural occurrence between Social Realism and Institution changes the control that Lewis has over his work, this was due to the support of the Federal Art Project, Lewis's creative output to some degree is controlled by the administration. Ultimately, for Lewis to succeed in his career as a working artist, he required financial support, his association with the Federal Art Project meant that he would have this, however, it also meant that Lewis was now producing work under the guidelines and influence of the government administration. Although this did not necessarily change his style or subject matter, I believe it would have had a subtle influence on his work. Lewis's paintings and social surroundings were sensitive to class throughout the whole decade, particularly black lower class citizens, merging with the Federal Art Project meant that he was associating himself with the white working class as the Federal Art Project was predominately implemented and supported by the US government. The institutional context within this period is placed within two different social surroundings, the first and foremost category is that of the white upper class which is placed within a major museum environment such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for the purpose of this paper I will refer to this as 'conservative'. The second institutional context lies within a lower-class environment, the institute is dependent on several factors including the geographical location, significance and funding, this type of institute is what Lewis favourably associated himself with during this decade. Whilst he associated himself with conservative institutions, Lewis still chose to work closely

with institutions that were heavily developed around concerns of the Black community. His artworks included prominent narratives which highlighted concerns of race relations and emphasised the support which the Black community sought. During the whole of this decade, a rift between the conservative institutional context and the black minority is always present, I credit this as being one of the main reasons why Lewis sat on the peripheral, this paved the way for Lewis to have a successful and varied career.



## **1940's – White Abstract Expressionism and Civil Rights during the War Years**

In this chapter, I will establish the connection we see in Lewis's paintings from this decade in response to civil rights and the war. I will explore the political and social issues which played a role in his livelihood which is further played out in his work. I will examine how notions in his work became symbols in the contribution of Lewis's identity as an artist within this period. The rise of America in the centre of the art world will also be a subject which I will explore in minor detail. I will recognise and observe the influence this had on Lewis's work which will give further details into his move to abstract expressionism in the mid-1940s.

Within this decade there is a shift in the art world, the style of art America produced starts to develop. America's involvement with the war saw an increase in the awareness of what is happening in Europe with the modernist art movement. This decade would become a turbulent one for the art world; America took an interest in modern art movements such as cubism and surrealism. The art world rapidly started to evolve and move away from traditional notions of art. Pressures of the war ultimately meant the closure of the Federal Art Project, Lewis was no longer being paid a wage by the white middle class ran programme. The New Deal programme was very quickly abandoned meaning there were no policies or procedures around to characterise his art. He became an independent black artist who was not controlled by institutions, however, unexpectedly Lewis diverged away from the idea of now being an independent black artist and started to produce 'white' art similar to that of other white artists of this period. This decade saw the biggest shift in Lewis's style, he starts to alter it and deviates towards a combination of different art movements, his paintings at the beginning of the decade still very much remain social realist but

we see a European influence starting to take effect with cubist influences and eventually moving into abstraction towards the middle of this decade. The biggest change that happens for Lewis within this period is that he became heavily involved with the Willard Gallery, a white upper-class institution, whilst the gallery supported Lewis as a black artist, he became naïve to the idea that it was acceptable to have a black artist exhibit within such a conservative environment, due to his work starting to conform to concepts of the white upper-class community it did not bring attention to notions surrounding race.

### **Closure of the FAP/WPA**

Although the official closure of the Federal Art Project happened in 1943 from 1939 operations of Federal Art Project started to wind down at the start of World War II. The Federal Art Project became known as the Works Progress Administration Art Program. Director of the Federal Art Project Holger Cahill was transferred to the Federal Works Agency this arguably became a sure sign that relief projects were no longer a priority as the fear of America joining the War began to grow. Cahill increasingly struggled to find work for artists who were assigned to the FAP “Finding a niche in America for the creative arts.”<sup>71</sup> The need to create art for the millions was a concept that was short-lived, Roosevelt’s new priority was to reduce expenditure and increase efficiency. Defence industry workers would become a primary focus, making sure workers and their families had housing, schools and other infrastructure which would aid them throughout WWII. Although, evidence states that Cahill did adapt the programme to support the national defence, “By February 1941, the program was developing for the military (1) models for teaching aircraft operations; (2) class charts in military instruction; and (3) decorations for

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<sup>71</sup> Belisario Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1983) 222.

army recreation halls... Throughout the national defence period the WPA art programme adapted its practical skills to military needs.”<sup>72</sup> However, this would not be enough to get the support for any more funding for the programme as America was now at the forefront of WWII.

It is not known when or where protests against the closure of the Federal Art Project took place, although O’Connor affirms, they did “While the remaining artists protested, there was little that could be done in the face of war hysteria.”<sup>73</sup> He also states that the protest came about due to Congress viciously attacking the cultural programme. There is no research to suggest that Lewis was involved with protests against the closure of the Federal Art Project, however, Lewis did suggest that action against social and political concerns would not be resolved through his artwork, “I found the only way to solve anything was to go out and take some kind of physical action.”<sup>74</sup> With this in mind and a photograph of Lewis protesting at The Metropolitan Museum of Art on another occasion, I would assume that he did feel strongly about the closure of the Federal Art Project and may have been involved with protests. Jillian Russo also stated the “the activities of the New York City FAP were crucial to launching the career(s) of Lewis”<sup>75</sup> if Russo’s assumption is correct, this gives reason to believe that Lewis did feel strongly against the closure and that Lewis may have clung to the project as long as he could.

## **World War II**

Talk of America joining the Second World War would become the topic of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>73</sup> Francis V O’Connor, *Art for the Millions* (Massachusetts: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1973), 28.

<sup>74</sup> Henri Ghent, *oral history interview*. P.13.

<sup>75</sup> Jillian Russo, “The Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project Reconsidered” *Visual Resources* 34, no. 1-2 (2018): 28.

discussion in the early 1940s. America began to increase its defensive capabilities which in turn would create many new jobs. African Americans would assemble from the South to the Urban North in search of new job openings. However, many defence-related and government jobs would not employ members of the black community. Labour leader, Asa Philip Randolph, became the voice for a majority of the African American community. Randolph began his career in Harlem helping establish The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters<sup>76</sup> which would become known as one of the leading unions to represent black workers in America.

Still concerning herself with matters of race Eleanor Roosevelt would report back to her husband on trepidations of the black community. Randolph managed to secure a meeting with the President, however, evidence suggests that this did not go as planned, Kenneth Kovach states that the President “only agreed to minor concessions concerning blacks in the Air Force.”<sup>77</sup> This led to an amicable conflict, plans for a march on Washington during the summer began to come together and by the spring over 100,000 people were expected to march. This grassroots activism led to Roosevelt issuing Executive Order 8802, leading to Randolph cancelling the March and claiming the order as a success. The order stated, “it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defence program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, colour, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life with the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders.”<sup>78</sup> The success of banning discrimination in the defence industry would lead to the black community securing jobs and supporting the government in the increased possibility

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<sup>76</sup> For further information on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters see: Preston Valien, “The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,” *Phylon* 1, no.3 (1940).

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth A. Kovach, “Manager, political activist, labour leader, statesman: all in one lifetime,” *Journal of Management History*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (1996): 53.

<sup>78</sup> “Executive Order 8802” dated June 25, 1941, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=625>

of entering the War. However, the industry refused to co-operate until 1943.

Roosevelt strengthened the Fair Employment Practices Committee<sup>79</sup> he increased its budget and replaced the initial part-time staff to full time and located them around the country. Evidence implies that this is when the revolution within the defence industry started to occur<sup>80</sup>. Funding for the Fair Employment Practice Committee only lasted three years and was formally dissolved by Congress in 1946. It is clear that Civil Rights still had a very long way to come, although there is an improvement, it is short-lived and still not a deep concern for congress at this time. I would argue that the negativity that would have been shed, had Randolph's march on Washington gone ahead could have symbolised the American Government as being weak and not in control especially at a time when America was caught in the restraints of war. This led to the executive order being a quick fix for the government as well as aiding them in preparation to join the war in just a few months.

War became a prominent subject within this period of Lewis's work. Exploring the effects of war on African American citizens will give a better understanding of the social history behind Lewis's work.

Although executive order 8802 had helped the black community secure jobs, it arguably now became even harder for the community, as they were now not only invested in a Civil Rights War but a World War, this became known as the 'double V' campaign<sup>81</sup>. African Americans were fighting prejudice in their home country and enemies abroad. Segregation was still in full force at the time of the war, the

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<sup>79</sup> For further information on the Fair Employment Practices Committee see: Kevin Schultz, "The FEPC and the legacy of the Labor-Based Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s," *Labor History* 49, no.1 (2008): 71-92.

<sup>80</sup> African Americans held 8% of the jobs in the defence industry by the end of WWII. For more information see: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Fair Employment Practices Committee." *Britannica.com*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fair-Employment-Practices-Committee> (accessed November 25th, 2019).

<sup>81</sup> For more information on the 'Double V' campaign see Rawn James, *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

War Department declared that only blood collected from white donors was to be used which prompted the red cross to refuse donations from African Americans<sup>82</sup>. Russell Olwell states “African Americans enlisted in the army, navy, and marines, only to find segregated training, few opportunities for promotion, and assignments for jobs as laborers, stevedores, and other manual jobs.”<sup>83</sup> This evidence suggests that the roles given to African American men in the army did not benefit a majority of these men, the army ideals returned to the ideals of slave labour, the men were being used to do the labour-intensive work and not being involved in the front line. There is also a sense that there was no appreciation for the African American workers, the notion of progress is not obtainable and was unable to fulfil dreams of working within the midst of conflict.

War overtones are unmistakable in Lewis’s work. Still very much sitting within social realism Lewis produced *Conflict* (1942; fig. 9). He stays within his comfort zone when creating caricature images of human life; exaggeration in the size of limbs and facial features. The painting explores the reality of War. Through death, Lewis pays homage to African American citizens. A clear depiction of a black soldier is laid helplessly across the canvas, the vivid red intimates a bold contrast and is a clear representation of blood which implies the figure has died in the conflicts of war. I would argue that Lewis has purposely chosen to depict the black soldier as injured/dead as it implies two contrasting issues, one being the battle happening within the United States in terms of the development of Civil Rights and Lewis’s concern for people of the same colour and the death of the black soldier being a representation of dying fighting for Civil Rights. On the contrary, it is purely a depiction of a black man being allowed to fight on the front line like any other white

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Guglielmo, “Red Cross, Double Cross,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (2010): 63-90.

<sup>83</sup> Russell Olwell, “The Mare Island Mutiny: Pressure to desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces” *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 2 (2001): 64.



American during the War. What is abundantly clear is that this image symbolises fighting for change, it is for oneself to decide whether this is a change for America or a change for Civil Rights.

The concept of War is perceived in another painting of Lewis's from the same time, entitled *Unkown (The Couple)* (1941-42; fig. 10). Again, within this image Lewis depicts his concerns of different minorities coming together, a white sailor and a black female, who are becoming intimately close, the surrounding objects suggest that the scene is set within a bar. This may be expressing one of two things. Firstly, Lewis may be wanting to show that the occurrence of two different ethnicities is the norm and perfectly acceptable, with America fully engaged with the War, civil rights politics had taken a turn and African Americans were becoming more assertive in their demands for equality within civilian life. On the other hand, he could be exploring the issue of woman's rights and the relationship this has with people of colour. He identifies and recognises that there is not just a concern regarding ethnicity but also gender. The black female is portrayed within the painting as seductive and seemingly nonchalant as there is a glass knocked over and her shoe is falling off. It is questionable whether the male is dominant over the female, that she has no control over the situation as she is commonly seen as an underdog within society or whether he is exploring the romantic aspects of war and the chaos which has developed because of it. Although socialisation of the two ethnicities seems to be a persuasive narrative the lack of evidence through previous works of Lewis's suggests that this is not the account which Lewis is attempting to put forward. I am compelled towards the idea that Lewis is exploring several subjects; ethnicity and gender. Both theories have the same narrative in terms of woman not having similar rights to black Americans, for example, white American men received a greater salary than African American men and woman and white American woman.

However, this does not discourage the fact that gender equality had just as much if not more work to do in terms of progression in comparison to Civil Rights.

*Conflict* and *The Couple* suggests that Lewis is exploring multiple formal strategies and methods. These do differ between the two images in *Conflict* he uses a neutral earthy colour pallet, soft curves which allow the different forms to melt into one another. Whereas in *The Couple* he uses an intense and cold colour pallet, sharp geometric lines which simplify the facial features of the characters. This is the start of the shift within his style and the beginnings of his move to abstraction, this is also supported by Fine, she states “Throughout the early 1940s, as Lewis increasingly moved to abstraction, this exploration of multiple formal strategies and methods took hold.” Fine recognises the change in Lewis’s style and how he is starting to explore new means of creating which would move him into this new Western movement.

Andrianna Campbell’s chronology gives a brief historical timeline of Lewis’s life. This chronology explores some possibilities with how Lewis sustained his lifestyle during the War period from 1940 - 1945. In September 1940, Lewis requested information on an aviation mechanic apprenticeship, this gives me a reason to believe that Lewis is fully aware of the treacherousness of War and is considering the fact that America will be entering to fight with their allies. At this point, it is clear that he is considering the possibility that he may have to help in the war effort and step away from the art world completely. However, this concept is short-lived. America joined the international fight and Lewis continued to exhibit his work in several different venues, these included Brown University and the Library of Congress being the most recognised of places as well as small galleries around Harlem. Throughout the five years, Lewis also applied for a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, though he was unsuccessful it is evident that he would

continue to sustain his work throughout the War. He did this in a number of ways, in 1943 he found work in Vancouver, Washington as a supervisor at a wartime shipyard but racial discrimination was intense and Lewis's crew would refuse to acknowledge his supervision which leads to his assignment being useless, from there he found a job tending lawns for housing projects. This job would be short-lived as in the same year he would get a job teaching art at the George Washington Carver School, under the direction of Gwendolyn Bennett. In 1944, he would go on to teach at a number of different art courses at the Jefferson School of Social Science. This role would also influence the start of another source of income, teaching students privately, this would become a job he continued to do throughout his career<sup>84</sup>. This evidence suggests that the war period would be a difficult time for Lewis in becoming a successful artist, his main focus is to have a source of income. Although he received no funding from the arts, he remained within the creative industry through teaching art. His experience of relocating across America may well have influenced future pieces of work. He also remained close with contacts such as Bennett which proved to benefit him so that he could maintain a viable lifestyle whilst continuing to produce artworks.

### **Move to Abstraction**

In recent years Lewis has become known as the one major black member of the Abstract Expressionist movement, art historian David Anfam states "The Abstract Expressionist themselves tended to marginalize the one black member of their ranks."<sup>85</sup> He does not state why Lewis was disregarded and there is no scholarship to suggest the reason for this. This suggestive comment made by Anfam that Lewis was

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<sup>84</sup> Campbell, *Chronology*, 251-252.

<sup>85</sup> David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990) 14.

insignificant in comparison to his peers also forms the question that Lewis was not pushed out because of his skin colour but because he was on the peripheral. Lewis stated, “In fact, people have been surprised that I am black, you know, which has been another detour.”<sup>86</sup> If this is the case in terms of him being marginalised it then poses the following question, was Lewis ever good enough to take on the art world like his peers such as Jackson Pollock or other famous artists of this movement? I am not swayed towards either reason, there is no other research to support Anfam’s comment, however, I believe both reasons play a part in Lewis being put on the peripheral.

Norman Lewis’s outlook changed during the early 1940s, following a trip to Madrid where he visited the Museo del Prado, Albright Knox gives evidence of Lewis reflecting on his experience in Europe, “Goya’s etchings didn’t stop any wars.”<sup>87</sup> Lewis’s realisation after this trip meant that he would no longer paint scenes of the unemployed or homeless, figuration would limit his outlook where he was only fortifying adverse stereotypes and the images he painted did not impact the social environment around him.

German Expressionism is said to have paved the way for mid-century abstraction in Europe. The new art movement explored unworldly and spiritual elements, formal experimentation and biased experience which would come to light not only in art but music, literature and theatre. Germany at this time was seen as challenging the conservative environment and the new movement broke away from a bourgeois society during the post-war period. Many artists in Germany became politically engaged, they identified with the left in the hopes that a liberal and open society

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<sup>86</sup> Henri Ghent, *oral history interview*. P.12.

<sup>87</sup> Albright-Knox. “Norman Lewis, Street Music.” [albrightknox.org](http://albrightknox.org).  
<https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/20098-street-music> (accessed December 5th 2019)

might at least be an outcome of tensions after the war<sup>88</sup>. The movement defied conventions with the use of spontaneous brushstrokes, distorted figures, and garish opposing shards of colour. Throughout the movement, paintings became less representational which became the stepping stone for Abstract Expressionism<sup>89</sup>. German Expressionism was present in America from the 1920s, for a long period of time it had very few supporters, Gregor Langford states “artists, gallery owners, private art collectors, patrons and art dealers all responded to modern art earlier than the museums.”<sup>90</sup> Within this essay, he discusses The Museum of Modern Art’s crucial role in “canonising this form of art” at the start of the 1930s. This evidence suggests that even from the start of Lewis’s career his awareness of German Expressionism may have been present even if it was only shrewdly placed within the American art world to begin with. He was working with patrons, gallery owners and other artists alike. At the time The Museum of Modern Art was one of the biggest modern art museums in America, it was also on Lewis doorstep, meaning he had access to any new art movements that had made their way over to America.

For my research, I am specifically interested in the works of Wassily Kandinsky. He used colour as his primary tool in his artworks, he believed colour symbolised emotive responses from deep within the psyche. Kandinsky’s work would later have a great influence on the start of Lewis’s movement into Abstract Expressionism. Lewis excels in Abstract expressionism in the 1940s. However, his first truly abstract piece of art appears in 1936 with the piece *Fantasy* (1936; Fig. 11). For an artist who is removed from the canon, he is arguably well ahead of his time with this piece of work. Lewis is fully aware of what is happening within Europe and draws

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<sup>88</sup> Gregor Langford, “How the Museum of Modern Art in New York canonised German Expressionism,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, vol. 11 (2014): 13.

<sup>89</sup> Helen A. Harrison, “Arthur G. Dove and the Origins of Abstract Expressionism,” *American Art* 12, no.1 (1998): 72.

<sup>90</sup> Langford, *German Expressionism*, 1.

influence from this within this piece. Nevertheless, it is clear from *Fantasy* that Lewis is fully aware of the expressionist movement and exploring this new concept way before it became the centre of the Western art world. Ruth Fine provides evidence of how Lewis is so aware of what is happening because of the exhibition ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ which took place at The Museum of Modern Art during the same year of the painting. Within the exhibition, the painting *Improvisation No.30* (1913; Fig. 12) by Wassily Kandinsky was on display. Lewis is very much in tune with the art world and exploring his presence and style, arguably it is likely that he was aware and attended the exhibition. I am swayed towards the assumption that Lewis attended the exhibition because of the resemblance between Kandinsky’s and Lewis’s paintings. Fine describes the similarities “Although not a slavish copy of the Kandinsky, *Fantasy* nevertheless reflects its palette, open forms, variety of shapes, rhythmic thrusts, and a sense of the spiritual component of the art with which Kandinsky’s name was associated with.”<sup>91</sup> These qualities express absolute likeness. However, this is not to say that Lewis was in any way attempting to copy Kandinsky’s work but to learn and develop the style to understand this new movement that had been introduced to the West.

Abstract Expressionism would become America’s biggest phenomenon in the era of modernism. ‘Art for art’s sake’ would see art attempting to be independent of politics. However, there have been many different responses to the political influence behind the movement. Claude Cernuschi recognises that although there is a major shift in terms of the relationship between art and politics there is still an agenda towards politics within this movement, he writes “Still sensitive to broader social issues and political interests, artists began to express their own political

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<sup>91</sup> Ruth Fine, *The Spiritual in the Material*, 23.



agendas.”<sup>92</sup> I believe this statement sits strongly alongside the notion for Abstract Expressionism, particularly in Lewis’s work, when there is a focus on broader social issues which are portrayed in his paintings.

Like artists of German Expressionism, artists within America felt free to engage in experimentation, in doing so they would explore original concepts of their own, which were not determined by aristocrats. Clement Greenberg was very invested in the idea that subject matter was rejected entirely, and art of this movement was of the purest form, quite simply art was not tarnished by any social or political influences. However, this formalist methodology was short-lived as many artists including Lewis initially associated with the Left. Although the communist movement had several changing outlines throughout the decades within the time frame of my research, most artists within the movement had an interest in the ideals of the communist party, specifically because the party, although it had a long term decline was at its peak between 1930-1940. Andrew Hemingway writes “For some it was a political lodestar for almost all of their careers, for others it stood more as a symbol of their commitment to certain aesthetic and ethical ideals, and for many more it was the object of their enthusiasm only during the economic and social dislocations of the Depression.”<sup>93</sup> This focuses on the fact that artists of this movement however minor at some point sought to agree with ideals of the left during this time period. This also goes against the ideals of Greenberg, as I believe this particular idea states that the leftist political party had an influence on a majority of artists within this time, it is a fact that can’t be overlooked and must be taken into account when understanding the true meaning of Abstract Expressionism.

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<sup>92</sup> Claude Cernuschi, “The Politics of Abstract Expressionism,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 39, no. 1-2 (1999): 30.

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 1.

It is clear that the political views of the German Expressionists are recognised globally and may have even influenced the beliefs and values of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Although the German Expressionist made their association toward politics more apparent than that of artists in America, both have leftist beliefs which challenged opposing parties in the fight for a more liberal and open society.

### **Willard Gallery**

The Willard gallery was founded in 1945<sup>94</sup> by art dealer Marian Willard. Willard aimed to nurture artists and help them grow within a contemporary and popular destination for art within New York City. She rejected commercialism and refused to conform to trends of the art world. Lewis became associated with the Gallery which firmly aided his position as an Abstract Expressionist artist at the peak of his career. Whilst still having numerous solo exhibitions at the gallery he would also go on to exhibit his work in Los Angeles and with the American Abstract Artists group<sup>95</sup>.

Norman Lewis joined the Willard Gallery in 1946, however, he did not have his first solo exhibition until March 1949. One of the pieces which were exhibited within this exhibition was *Jazz Musicians (Grey)* (1948; fig. 13), this particular piece sees a development within Lewis's style in comparison to *Fantasy*. This particular painting is one of many from the same year where he starts to develop his use of line and make it distinctively his own. Particularly within this painting, his use of line forms stiff structures which are focused towards the centre of the canvas. Although the painting is fully abstract, there is a feel of cubism because of the fragmented forms

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<sup>94</sup> The gallery was originally known as the East River Gallery and founded by Marian Willard in 1936, it had two name changes between 1936 – 1945, where it became popularly known as the Willard Gallery in its final name change.

<sup>95</sup> For a full list of Lewis's Exhibition History see: Campbell, *Chronology*, 245-270.

which have been created using resilient lines. It could be argued that the painting plays more into the idea of expressionism as the forms constructed from line and shape create a subject matter. Humanistic forms are present in the painting, an oval structure is repeated across the canvas towards the top with sharp angular lines coming down which forms the image of people, with this idea in mind and the title of the painting it could be argued that Lewis is trying to apply subject matter into the concept of Abstract Expressionism. However, further research suggests a different meaning towards one of Lewis's paintings *Street Musicians* (1948; fig. 14) which is similar to that of *Jazz Musicians*. Phillip Barcio writes "But this is not a picture of musicians. This is more of an expression of the energy and emotion of music played on the street; the excitement of notes piercing space, and the carnival of colors and sounds as they fill the air."<sup>96</sup> Presumably, this reading of the painting looks to the theory of German Expressionism and specifically works of Kandinsky, whose paintings were a visual representation of sound and the spiritual meaning of music. With both these images, various modernist styles are seen in this period of Lewis's work.

Some of Lewis's paintings between 1948-1949 suggest that Lewis is not entirely settled with his particular style and is still developing his concept of Abstract art. He is exploring numerous different things such as his use of line which varies between different paintings in some the line is spirited and defined and in others, it's as if the paint is applied in a different manner which makes the line undemanding and hazy. He is also exploring with colour and this becomes more prominent towards the latter, although the use of earthy and deep tones is present throughout splashes of vibrant blues start to surface. In all the images I have seen within this short time frame,

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<sup>96</sup> Phillip Barcio, "Norman Lewis, a Neglected Gem of Abstract Expressionism." [ideelart.com](https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/norman-lewis-artist). <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/norman-lewis-artist> (accessed 3rd January 2020)

Lewis develops a signature characteristic with the use of a blurred border which aids the viewer in focusing on the centre of the canvas.

Lewis had multiple solo exhibitions at the gallery up until 1964, all of which were extremely successful with positive reviews. After 18 years at the gallery his decision to leave was based on the racial disadvantages, he subsequently suffered from being a black artist. Lewis talked about his reasons to walk away from the gallery in his interview with Ghent “Yes, they sold, but I think I was under certain illusions—like I felt this way—that one didn’t have to see the artist.” Although his paintings sold when buyers wanted to meet and socialise with Lewis, they became greatly disappointed that he was black which prevented future sales and further networking. Willard and Lewis both believed they were naïve to the racial politics behind art dealing towards the end of Lewis’s time at the gallery. Willard stated to Lewis “I know I have failed you.” I believe that their innocence to political issues of black ethnicity had changed for the better but in reality, this was not the case, America was at its peak in terms of the civil rights movement<sup>97</sup>, change was only starting to happen at the time of Lewis leaving the Gallery.

The evidence provided within this chapter poses the idea that within this decade there was a lot of change for Lewis with the biggest challenge being funding to pursue his career as a working artist. Although Lewis was able to continue working towards this path, it did not come without struggle. The main barrier for Lewis was WWII and the consequences this had on his career. The support that Lewis had known in the previous decade was no longer available; art was no longer an aesthetic commodity that could be entertained, which lead to the closure of the Federal Art

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<sup>97</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 came in effect in July that year, it outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex and national origin.

Project, one of the biggest administrations America had seen which supported the art world. Though the support of the administration had broken down, Lewis remained close to people such as Gwendolyn Bennet knowing that he would still be supported by colleagues within the art industry would be beneficial to him. He pursued jobs in other industries and was successful but his focus was at times not solely on his career as a working artist, he did continue to produce paintings and drawings within this decade as well as exhibit his works, this suggests that he was incredibly passionate and would continue to pursue the career which he always aspired to have no matter what the conditions. His trip to Madrid ultimately meant that he became aware and understood the direction the art world was taking because of this knowledge I believe he altered his style to enable him to continue to progress within the industry and draw upon these European influences. His paintings developed the same way as they did for other artists of this era and he engaged with the new movement.

The war also meant that the Civil Rights movement was no longer a key event in America's history, although there were still major issues with racial discrimination the fight for equal rights had come to a standstill, laws for the black community had been adjusted to suit the needs of the American government to create a bigger workforce in the military. However, this did have an influence on Lewis which was a subject matter he drew upon in a number of his paintings. Race issues are still apparent but Lewis taking a step back from them suggests that he is now choosing his subject matter and not allowing political or social issues to influence his identity. Lewis came out of the War flourishing, becoming known as the one major black member of the Abstract Expressionist movement, having found the Willard Gallery as a permanent place to exhibit his works he started to rise in the ranks of the art world but still never as highly established as his peers within this movement. Even though Lewis engages appropriately with the conservative institution, it ultimately

was not at the forefront of supporting concerns of race although it supported Lewis: a black artist, when concerns of Lewis's colour came into play there is no evidence to suggest that this was dealt with appropriately and overlooked.

Multiple changes happened throughout this decade, during the first half he diverges his style of painting but still correlates his work to social issues by creating paintings that represents the black community; he does this under the style of a white artist.

During the second half of this decade, he follows the style of other white contemporary artists and his work is placed in a predominately white upper-class environment such as the Willard Gallery. During this whole period, Lewis doesn't step away completely from the black minority of his peers and does continue to associate himself with artists such as Bennet. By the end of the decade, it is questionable whether Lewis is free to paint what he wants because his work now sits within an institutional environment, it poses the idea that Lewis is now catering to the requirements of the white middle class. His paintings to some extent sit side by side with other white abstract expressionist artists; this creates a contradiction between the ideals of the movement as well as the civil rights movement which suggests that he is still conscious of what is happening.





## **1950's – One Artist Movement**

Throughout the last two chapters, many social and political issues within Lewis's life have been explored. The 1950s for Lewis was the pinnacle of his career, abstract expressionism was firmly established at this point and had taken over the art world. This chapter will focus on the works Lewis produced and the institutions which would aid his career as an artist. Lewis is still exploring throughout this decade; I will examine different styles within his work and summarise how this would pave the way for the rest of his career. Within the 1950s Lewis had works exhibited at some major institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, he also attended artists sessions at studio 35, an artist circle which was also attended by major white artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement including Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning. Lewis was now solely engaged with conservative institutional environments, concerns of race within these types of institutions were not however at the forefront of their policies even though they supported black artists through exhibiting their work and allowing them to attend meetings, this became apparent for Lewis when he had none of his work exhibited at one of the largest early Abstract Expressionist exhibitions known as The Ninth Street Exhibition in 1951.

One of the most defining elements of the 1950s was the Cold War. America became increasingly worried that the political and economic ideals of communism would destroy society. The Soviet Union favoured the spread of communism which called for the diffusion of classes and society to be government-run. In New York, Abstract Expressionist artists had taken the American art world by storm, it aided the dominance of American art within the art world on an international scale. A number

of different elements came into play during the 1950s, political and social concerns had a prevalent impact on the Abstract Expressionist movement. World War Two had ended and America's tensions with Russia and its communist reign had finally come to a head. During the late 1990s, the movement became vastly associated as a monolithic expression of Cold War ideology, this led to new ideas on paintings from this movement and its association with propaganda which was implemented by the CIA. Frances Saunders writes, "it spoke to a specifically anti-communist ideology, the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise. Non-figurative and politically silent, it was the very antithesis to socialist realism."<sup>98</sup> This emphasises the fact that the art movement could be used as a silent weapon which would preach the significance of an anti-communist country and what it meant to be a civilian living in America at this time. Paintings from the movement were also used to express the effects of the atomic age "the discovery of the atomic age had made the world so difficult to understand in its totality... Only abstract art could communicate the new meaning of human experience, the incredible feeling of total disintegration."<sup>99</sup> Exploiting the reality of the atomic age was not feasible in any other painting style because the effects of nuclear weapons were so disastrous that nothing could be pieced together, similar to the effect of abstract paintings where there is no clarity, these two concepts diverged together and were arguably used more so by the artists who were showing the realities of modernity.

The organised effort from black Americans led to the rise in Civil Rights, they would defy policies that had been put in place by the American government, specifically within this decade there was a strong focus on removing segregation

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<sup>98</sup> Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999) 254.

<sup>99</sup> Serge Guilbaut, ed. And trans., *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 96.

laws. The movement was in full force and change was becoming even more feasible due to the rise of activism. Lewis's work within this period does not directly correlate with the Civil Rights movement, the paintings he produced diverged away from any social or political narrative. However, if at the time Lewis's history and biography are known different associations may have been made, I will explore this idea within this chapter.

### **Figuration within Abstraction**

One of the first paintings that Lewis produced in this decade was *Street Music* (1950; fig. 15). Although Lewis had stepped away from the figuration after his trip to Europe, humanistic forms are still present. At first glance, it can be assumed that these are just lines and shapes, but after closer scrutiny figures are depicted as well as musical notes which goes hand in hand with the title of the painting. This painting brings together a clustering of people who share the same values, it moves away from the negativity and realities of the social environment which surrounds them, draws together a sense of community and reflects on the positive responses. The colour palette he uses has followed through from the previous decade, a neutral dirty background gives emphasise to the orange lines and black shapes. The forms and colours give the painting a post-colonial subject matter, these can be associated with an African tribal culture, which implies that the human-like forms is people of black culture. In 1947, Harlem saw one of the first Carnivals in New York City, West Indian Day Parade was supported by The Trinidad Carnival Pageant Committee, they established the force behind the parade for it to go ahead outside on the streets, previous to this it would take place indoors during the cold winter months. Jacqueline Francis discusses the significance of carnivals, "indicative and symbolic forms that are culture – dynamic, communicative, transformative, and responsive to

specific conditions.”<sup>100</sup> With this statement in mind, I believe that for Lewis the carnival became a representation in which he could assert his ethnicity and his works could be given place within society, the carnival had a positive impact on all aspects of culture not just black culture, it became an encouraging celebration for spectators and those involved and displayed heritage and culture of those from an ethical background.

Jacqueline Francis discusses and gives evidence of Lewis’s involvement within exhibitions that prized Lewis of his works. In 1955 Lewis exhibited at the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, he won the Popularity Prize for *Migrating Birds* (1953; fig 16). This particular painting differs dramatically from the pieces discussed in Chapter two from the 1940s. Although with this piece he is still using a darker shade around the edge to embody the detail which is central to the canvas his colour palette is much lighter but still earthy. This painting is one of a kind in terms of his portfolio and subject matter as at first it is not associated with black culture, the name of the painting and the image at face value purely go hand in hand with one another. At a closer look, the white of the painting is a depiction of thousands of birds crowded together set within a vast landscape. With Lewis’s previous subject matter in mind, I firmly believe that this image is ambiguous and is still a representation of black culture. The Great Migration had risen again, the war had increased job opportunities, opening up more jobs to black civilians for work. The birds are purely a metaphor for the vast amount of people who were travelling from the South, a majority of the birds in the painting are not flying, their wings are not spread which gives even more meaning to the title and the use of the word migrating, when I initially think of migrating birds I would assume birds being in

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 205.

flight. It is also interesting to note that this painting in particular won a prize, the subject matter of black culture is not clear like it is in his other works, he dials the subject matter back dramatically in this image, making it unclear to the viewer what story he is telling. With this and the title of the painting in mind, it puts the piece into a different box which to the viewer means that Lewis is exploring the idea that America belongs to the land of the free. If the history of Lewis is unknown it creates this image which I believe was the reason Lewis won an award for this particular painting, he is now fully aware of what the audience wants and how this has an impact on society, he is purely feeding into this need from society that these paintings are no longer a representation of reality, however, he has ingeniously done this so that the viewer sees only what they want to see, he is allowing the viewer to create their narrative.

In 1955 Lewis produced the painting *Harlem Turns White* (1955; fig. 17), the colour palette imitates that of *Migrating Birds*, neutral earthy tones cast across the whole of the canvas, the signature fade of colour which borders the canvas is no longer present. He also goes back to using resilient yet blurred lines which forms stiff structures across the canvas. Again, this piece has an ambiguous deeper meaning behind the image on the canvas. The painting is crowded and hectic, there is no particular space that automatically draws the viewer in. This represents the chaos that unfolds in Harlem at the time in which Lewis produced the painting. Jeffrey Stewart writes “the artist grew up in Harlem when it was still white, and he was part of a Black minority that was teased and tormented by racial discrimination. By 1955, Harlem was not only overwhelmingly black, but poor, drug infested, and criminally

challenged.”<sup>101</sup> The title of the painting gives irony to the history within Harlem, the African American community had taken over the area, which ultimately leads to its demise from it once being an energetic, vibrant and culturally infused suburb. There is potential that Lewis is making a statement towards Harlem reverting to being an all-white community and that this would change the realities of the suburb once again. He could also be using this painting as a reflection of his opinions on Harlem, it is now seen as an African American community but is not different in terms of the social status of black civilians, they are still experiencing hardship similar to that too when Lewis grew up. I am swayed towards the idea that the overall statement that Lewis is trying to make is that being a black man in a white community or a black man in a black community, the outcome remains the same, racial discrimination is still present no matter what type of cultural community you live in.

### **Institutions and Exhibitions**

Throughout his life, Lewis contributed to many major exhibitions. The 1950s saw him firmly establish himself as a perpetual artist for the Willard Gallery as they continued to promote his work within the business. In 1956, Lewis participated in the Venice Biennale. He represented himself with the piece *Cathedral* (1950; fig. 18), his piece was seen in one of the exhibitions of the Biennale *American Artists Paint the City*, his was one of the first paintings by an African American artist to be shown at the Biennale. Although this painting was produced in the same year as *Street Music* there is no link to suggest that these two paintings were part of a series. The painting is fully abstract and takes a completely different route in terms of his style. He is delving into the idea of light and space and how this becomes a reflection in terms of an object. The canvas is mood filled, the black insinuates an absence,

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<sup>101</sup> Jeffery Stewart, “Beyond Category: Before Afrofuturism There Was Norman Lewis” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 175.



which implies an ambiguous yet sophisticated ambience to the viewer. The structured lines and obvious title indicate the painting is of a Cathedral within an urban environment. I am swayed towards the idea that the use of black represents the absence of a supreme being, with the size of the canvas also considered this is an overwhelming feeling of power that is not visible. The use of colour represents the omniscience within a place of worship and evokes the viewer to create their principles on such a place. Again, was this piece chosen not because Lewis was rising in the ranks of the art world or was it because the viewer is allowed to create their narrative. The painting does not suggest any political or social concerns. Raffaele Bedarida discusses the reason why Kuh used Lewis's painting within the exhibition "*Cathedral* evokes the cityscape of New York through its main formal qualities – grid composition, verticality and luminosity – without illustrating it. By comparing the American metropolis to a cathedral... Lewis's painting evoked simultaneously the stained-glass windows of a cathedral and the advertisements of Times Square."<sup>102</sup> This suggests that the painting was used to aid the viewer in creating a connection to the Urban Cities of America and the culturally rich cities of Europe, making the skyscraper the equivalent to the Cathedral.

It is also important to note that Lewis was not the only artist of this movement to exhibit at the Biennale, other contemporaries such as Jackson Pollock, Georgia O'Keefe and Willem de Kooning also exhibited. It is easy to assume that Lewis was overshadowed by the fame his contemporaries had already received, leaving no room for Lewis. However, Kuh emphasized on diversity for the show and wanted to ensure this was a key feature of the American metropolis. Bedarida states "Ignoring stylistic tendencies, here Kuh emphasised the diversity of age, degree of

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<sup>102</sup> Raffaele Bedarida, "Katharine Kuh, Norman Lewis and the Italian Reception of Abstract Expressionism." Tate.org.uk. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/cathedral/kuh-lewis-italian-reception> (accessed December 28th 2019)

recognition and race in her show. The exhibition used the rhetoric of the American metropolis as a vibrant and multifaceted environment with multiple cultural roots”<sup>103</sup> Although Kuh recognised the cultural diversity within American, she did not select works which represented the truth and the harsh realities of racial conflict. Whilst other artists in the show had multiple pieces of work on display Lewis only had one along with Jacob Lawrence the only other African American artist whose work was also exhibited in the show. The whole concept of the exhibition raises many questions on Lewis as an artist and where he stood in terms of how his work was used. This particular painting and the major institutional environment in which it was placed is another piece of work that is ambiguous with its narrative similar to that of *Migrating Birds*. It represents an urban, culturally rich and vibrant environment, which masks the realities of social and political concerns which are unfolding in America. The opinion on his work within these environments may have impacted his whole career, as the viewer would believe that Lewis’s work influenced by the extravagance of American culture, this also suggests that his work may have been used to aid America in the propaganda it set out to present to a worldwide audience, there is no research to support this idea and specifically associate Lewis’s work as a cultural weapon of the CIA.

A significant and major group exhibition where Lewis had his work on show was at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The exhibition ran in 1951 for eight weeks and was entitled *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. It included more than 100 paintings and sculptures by about 85 artists. The concept behind the exhibition stated “enough distinctive examples of abstract painting and sculpture will be shown to give the visitor an appreciation of the variety and extent

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

of this 20<sup>th</sup>-century form of art in the United States”<sup>104</sup> Other contemporaries included Abstract Expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko. Curator Andrew Carnduff Ritchie chose to exhibit Lewis’s painting *Urban* (1950; fig.19). The only image that is readily available of this painting is from the 1951 exhibition catalogue, the black and white photograph provides evidence that the painting was another of Lewis’s that is fully abstract, figuration is not present, he uses harsh geometric lines at the forefront of the painting, these come from different angles on the canvas but sit in the centre. The title of this painting gives me reason to believe that Lewis encapsulates a narrative of the metropolis, specifically a borough of the city as the painting focuses towards the centre of the canvas leaving a vague edge that still has a presence. It could be assumed that the area this represents is that of a different community within a City, which ultimately may create a narrative that corresponds to the racial concerns of Lewis. However, it is difficult to assume the true narrative behind this painting as we don’t know the colours on the canvas and whether this colour palette drew similarities to other paintings from Lewis during this time. The intention of the exhibition was as follows “to give the observer and reader a sufficient appreciation of the variety and extent of this form of art in this country. Furthermore, the emphasis in the selection has been placed upon the more extreme directions of the abstract movement.”<sup>105</sup> This suggests that Ritchie specifically selected works that allowed viewers to form their own opinion on the art movement, he enabled them to do this by exhibiting a broad selection of Abstract Expressionist artworks, this would show the viewer how versatile the new art movement could be.

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<sup>104</sup> MOMA Press Release for Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1951, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1989> (accessed December 28th 2019)

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951), 9.

Lewis created a series of drawing's in the early 1950's entitled *Winter Branches* (1953; fig.20). According to the description of these drawings by The Cleveland Museum of Art the works were based upon black and white photographs of barren trees, this idea is also supported by the photograph which is assumed to be taken by Lewis. All of these drawings were linear in style and monochromatic. However, in 1946 he had already created the painting *Winter Branches* (1946; fig.21), he is engaging with different mediums across both decades to produce similar effects. He returns to this linear monochromatic style in 1950 with the ink drawing *Echoes*. Although the title of the painting is not directly linked to the *Winter Branches* series, it is evident that the drawing is part of this series. What makes this series of drawings and paintings notable is that the subject matter is not relatable in any of his other paintings or drawings. His subject for inspiration does not have any social or political essences, he is solely focused on nature. It could be argued that the images that he produces in this series are a representation of many different unbiased subjects. On one hand, the images he produces are desolate and purely non-representational. On the other hand, if we are to look at previous works outside of this series and major influences on his style, it could be said that these linear lines with different depths are patterns and notes within music, Lewis has been producing images related to music since the very beginning and may well have been influenced by this within his move to abstraction. Through this series he is allowing the viewer to construct their narrative, the different perceptions of what the viewer sees gives more of a stimulating insight into his works.

One of the most significant and ground-breaking exhibitions for the Abstract Expressionist artists was The Ninth Street Exhibition which took place in 1951 in New York. Around seventy artists took part in the exhibition, which was organised

by the artists themselves, nearly every artist in the show was a member of a social circle named *The Club*. The exhibition was hung by Leo Castelli an immigrant from Italy who had some experience as an art dealer when living in Europe. The group of artists who organised the show were concerned about who would have precedence in the exhibition space, they all trusted Castelli with his choices and gave him the task of hanging all the pieces.<sup>106</sup> Although Lewis was friends with members of the club, there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever a member himself, which is surprising considering Lewis was an intellectual and attended meetings at “The Subjects of the Artists School” a precursor of *The Club*<sup>107</sup>. This also meant that Lewis had none of his work exhibited at The Ninth Street Exhibition, I believe this would have had a major impact on his rise to fame as it is stated that “Amongst the viewers were some of the most influential people in the New York art world – dealers, collectors, and museum directors.”<sup>108</sup> This exhibition would have been a prime opportunity for Lewis to show off his skill and ability as an artist and to prove his worth with other contemporaries who were also stepping back and challenging traditional notions of art.

During his time at the Willard Gallery Lewis had a numerous solo exhibitions, the title of these exhibitions are not known, only the dates of the shows and names of paintings that were exhibited. I am specifically interested in one of the exhibitions he had at the gallery in November 1951. All seventeen paintings in the exhibition were produced the same year, the narrative of all these paintings are believed to have been based on nature, however, recent research suggests that the meaning behind the narrative is not solely focused on nature but the relationship with the cultural,

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<sup>106</sup> Phillip Barcio, “How the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Art Exhibition Stepped Out of the New York Art Canons in 1951.” *ideelart.com*. <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/9th-street-art-exhibition> (accessed January 11th 2020)

<sup>107</sup> Campbell, *Chronology*, 254.

<sup>108</sup> Barcio, New York Art Canons in 1951

political and social environment that Lewis was mindful of Campbell gives evidence of this, “His insistence on an interplay between illegible visual form and legible titles intensifies the tensions of their abstraction... In this case, the line from Nature allows Lewis to dually reference American transcendentalism and current atomic policies.”<sup>109</sup> I am swayed towards Campbell’s idea that there are underlying narratives in place within this series of paintings, the subject of nature correlates with paintings from the Abstract Expressionist movement but this basic link seems too modest for an intellectual artist like Lewis whose previous work had a strong focus on social and political concerns. This iconographical reading of this series of paintings can be further supported because of the monochromatic pallet which Lewis has used on a number of the paintings. Black embodies a large surface of the painting *Every Atom Glows* (1952; Fig.22), within this particular painting he uses black to emphasize the uninhabited space on the canvas whereas in *Blending* (1951; fig.23) the combination of black and white creates light tones of gray which is used to create uninhabited space on the canvas. Although these two paintings are purely abstract because of his choice of only using black on the ecru background of the canvas it evokes an underlying narrative, the paintings move away from having a nature-inspired narrative as a link is now formed between the use of the black from the canvas which may be a representation of black culture. Campbell also writes, “To Lewis, creation could be seen as the blending of experience and action, born out of what he called ‘the expression of the artist’s reaction to the world’”<sup>110</sup> this indicates and supports the idea that there is an underlying narrative within these paintings, the paintings themselves do not overtly represent this, the narrative is created through the use of colour and marks which communicated these themes

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<sup>109</sup> Andrianna Campbell, “One World or None: Hints of the Future in Norman Lewis’s Abstract Expressionism” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 223.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 224.

visually. The marks created symbols that Lewis associated with the narrative; this did not necessarily mean the viewer would depict these in the same way as him.

It is suggested that “Lewis was dedicated to explaining the motivations of modernist artists to his audience”<sup>111</sup> He achieved this by attending the artist sessions at Studio 35 in New York. Lewis as well as other artists such as Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell and many more would attend the gathering for a round table discussion, the ideas conveyed from these sessions were published in the book *Modern Artists in America*. Lewis firmly believed that artists should try to explain their practices to viewers, he stated “ People no longer have this intimacy with the artists, so that the public does not know actually what is going on, what is being done by the painter.”<sup>112</sup> This ideal from Lewis explored the idea that the viewer of an Abstract painting would understand the narrative better if they understood the concept, however, Lewis had been through the period with the Federal Art Project where paintings would be handed over to the government-funded programme and then distributed to where they would be displayed, artists did not have a choice in their final location. This gives reason to why Lewis felt the need to explain the practice especially when it came down to the production of Abstract Expressionism and the narrative behind the painting. There has been little research on Studio 35 with the most significant being the book *Modern Artists in America* which included transcripts of the lectures which could be interpreted in many different ways. A key participant in the discussions was Alfred H. Barr Jr., an American art historian and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art<sup>113</sup>. The attendance of Barr and

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<sup>111</sup> Jacqueline Francis, “The Presence of Norman Lewis” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* ed. Ruth Fine (California: University of California Press, 2016) 197.

<sup>112</sup> “The Second Day,” in *Modern Artists in America*, first series, eds. Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt (New York: Wittenborn Shultz, 1951), p.16.

<sup>113</sup> Further Reading on Alfred H. Barr see Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred h. Barr., and the intellectual origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).



several well-established artists involved with the discussions suggests that Lewis had firmly established himself in the New York Art Scene, it is also questionable whether concerns of race at this point had an impact on his career.

Something to consider with Lewis's style is that he did not follow his peers in terms of exploration of the way a painting is produced. Many essays have been written about how Abstract Expressionism formed a new concept in painting. The canvas would become part of the act/performance of the painting itself, as well as the tools and materials used, with the tools purely being used as an extension of the hand and the artist himself. The act of applying the paint to the canvas was notably a signature statement for artists such as Jackson Pollock. Pollocks unconventional style helped free painting, "Traditionally, line had been used quite literally to delineate forms, to draw the outlines of forms, which would be filled in. The lines define the mountains, clouds, and so on. Well, here the line is not defining anything. Line becomes here autonomous, and for the first time is liberated from its historical role in painting of describing other shapes."<sup>114</sup> He challenged traditional notions of art, these challenges became signature to Pollock. This puts forth the question of what Lewis's signature statement was within his art. Unlike other contemporaries, Lewis's work was produced on a smaller scale than that of Rothko's, Pollocks or de Koonings. A theme that is consistent throughout Lewis's career as a working artist is that he verges back to previous styles or jumps between them, he never seems to follow through with one specific style. This gives me the impression that Lewis is impulsive, his work is unpredictable, and he is not performing to this new movement like his peers. This poses the idea that Lewis's work is volatile because it is not sitting in one particular area within Abstract Expressionism. He is inspired

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<sup>114</sup> "How to Paint like artist Jackson Pollock – One: Number 31, 1950 – with Corey D'Augustine | In the Studio." YouTube Video, 4:01, posted by "The Museum of Modern Art," October 24, 2010, [https://youtu.be/EncR\\_T0faKM](https://youtu.be/EncR_T0faKM)

by numerous different aspects, which builds his portfolio up in a number of different chapters, he then floats in amongst these and the different styles become loose ends which he never ties together. However, this sense of his work being unpredictable and impulsive aids him in sitting within the Abstract Expressionist style because like Pollock he is challenging traditional notions through his portfolio of work.

The final piece of work I want to discuss was produced in 1960, *American Totem* (1960, fig.24). At first glance this is purely abstract, the eye quickly recognises that this is also figurative and reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. The painting creates a significant political and social statement. Totem refers to a group of beings as sacred and spiritual, but most importantly serves to unite a lineage, it also represents peace. Mostly recognised as being used within tribes and with people of a different ethnic minority, Lewis is inventive in using the totem as a symbol within his painting to show a quality within American society but turns it on its head with the clear representation of a violent racial hate group. It is also important to recognise that in previous years Lewis stepped away from creating art that had a social or political meaning behind it, this particular painting reverts to Lewis's previous motives. This makes Lewis's story of development even more unclear, originally, he was painting American Scene and crossing over with social realism, he then moved gradually into Abstract Expressionism. Now in this final decade that I am examining he is crossing over between two different styles again. The painting gives me a reason to believe that Lewis was challenging adherence to one movement within art, which may have been the reason why he was on the fringe of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Lewis himself became a member of a 'one artist movement'; Phillip Barcio suggests "Norman Lewis was a movement unto

himself. His work evolved according to his own inner development as an artist and as a human being. It transcended everything his peers were doing at the time, and adhered only to his own sense of what was beautiful and true.”<sup>115</sup> Although he took inspiration from other artists ultimately his work and the style he sat in was personal to him, he did not confine himself to the structures of one specific movement, because of this it sways me to believe that this was one of the major factors which impacted his fame within the art world.

For several years during this decade his style remains the same, there is no evidence to suggest that the new ideals of cold war ideology would be associated with Lewis’s work, although notions behind the ideology do discuss Abstract Expressionism in a general context as well as discussing specific artists from this movement. In my opinion, the cold war had no major political connection or influence in supporting Lewis’s career, but had an influence on the hidden narratives of his work. Within this decade Lewis is predominately exhibiting his work within a conservative context. The Willard Galleries geographical location was practically on the opposite side of New York away from Harlem near Greenwich Village. His work had been taken out of a setting that was influenced by black culture and he was producing non-political work which fed into a white context. This notion is also apparent when his work is used in exhibitions, an example of this is when his work is placed in a major institutional environment such as the Venice Biennale or The Museum of Modern Art it is important to recognise which works are being used. The paintings selected for these environments do not have a clear narrative, they are either purely abstract or gives the viewer the impression of a positive narrative to which they can relate to. This is intentional of the institutions, it allowed them to meet the

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<sup>115</sup> Phillip Barcio, “Norman Lewis’s American Totem, Whitney Museum’s Newest Acquisition.” ideelart.com. <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/norman-lewis-american-totem> (accessed January 11th 2020)

requirements of the essentially white middle class who came to the institution, meaning they did not foreground concerns of race even though they supported black artists by using their works within the constructs of a conservative environment. I don't believe Lewis is intentionally meeting the needs of the institution, if it is the case that he was he did this in an ingenious way which meant his social, political and cultural beliefs were still being highlighted within his paintings. Within this decade he almost completely diverges away from creating paintings that correlate with either the black or white community, his works sit in limbo, they don't necessarily have a place in terms of narrative for example without knowing Lewis's history they don't depict social issues concerning black culture or political issues concerning white culture, the narrative is for the viewer to create and not the artist.

## Conclusion

This research aimed to identify factors other than race that affected on Lewis's career as a working artist and to enable us to have a deeper understanding as to why he was removed as a key player in the Abstract Expressionist movement. By analysing social, political, cultural and historical events, linking these to his paintings and his ever-evolving style several contributions into Lewis's career have been recognised and brought forward in the current historiography of his establishment within the canon. This research has shown that Lewis often seemed to be on the verge of fame for his contributions to the new American art movement, however, several different variables have come into play with all of them being in some way linked to his ethnicity. Black culture is inescapable, especially in recent years when reflecting on Lewis's work, there is now more of an awareness of what was happening within the three decades I have explored. The method of combining institutional context with social and political context created several different pairings which led to a combination of ideals on Lewis's position within the art world and the style of art he would produce.

The 1930s was the only decade in which Lewis produced black art within a black institutional context, however, there was involvement with the white working class. The only way Lewis was able to fund his creative output was through the help of the Federal Art Project, the government run programme. Although his work didn't reflect the conservative society, he did have to produce work that abided by the guidelines of the Federal Art Project, these guidelines were heavily influenced by the government. In my opinion, for Lewis to be successful at this time and continue an art career, he had no other options but to be supported by the government and had he

not chosen this path he may not have had any success as a working artist. Social Realism was an idyllic style of painting for Lewis to use, it was the most current style and Lewis understood the advantages of this. It allowed him to drive his work into a political notion and for it to be acceptable. He was able to critique the work and policies which had been historically and recently been put in place from the conservative society ensuring that voices of the working class were being recognised and heard through visual representations of social conditions.

The following decade Lewis merged traditional notions of European art (predominately white), social realism and American scene painting and moved into a conservative institutional environment where he created a mirage of his identity as a black artist. The 1940s saw his style of painting develop and merge to create his concept which eventually leads him into Abstract Expressionism. The outbreak of WWII meant art was no longer a commodity of American life, funding for art programmes were cut and political and social concerns now surrounded the impact of war. The presence of Civil Rights became anomalous, even though there would be developments in how black Americans were treated during the war effort, these never fully came to light. Lewis had no choice but to take on jobs outside of the art realm like many other citizens, especially within the war years, it is reasonable to believe that his race was not the concern during this time.

The 1950s was a turning point for Lewis, although at first, his work explores Abstract Expressionism, figuration is still present within some of his paintings, which brings me to believe that these pieces of work were not Abstract Expressionism in its purest form. I also believe that this may have been a dominating factor in his position; he sits on the peripheral because his works aren't purely

abstract like other artists of this movement. When he does remove figuration from his work clarity does start to form with where his style sits, however his divergence between these styles moves to frequently, he does not settle for one or the other. Had he settled for a particular style may have meant that he moved from the margins into the centre with other eminent artists of this period. Most importantly from this period, Lewis is mostly exhibiting his work in conservative spaces, his works that were selected for major exhibitions had been selected very carefully to fit the niche of the white middle class. Out of the three decades which have been examined the 1950s was the longest decade in which Lewis's style stayed to a certain degree the same. His ethnicity plays a massive role within this decade and is a concern that Lewis recognises but does not let it reflect as strongly as it did in previous artworks.

Lewis was not affiliated with a commercial gallery and had no negotiator in the art world during his last 15 years<sup>116</sup>. This is important to take into consideration when examining the first three decades of his career, as a result, Lewis's presence within an institutional and commercial setting seems to exist, unlike his contemporaries whose work was still present within both of these settings. This response to the art world from Lewis gains a better insight into how he felt towards the institutions, one of two factors can be assumed. The first poses the idea that Lewis may have felt his work did not belong in a primarily upper-class environment, in previous years when his work was placed within this environment this went against his moral beliefs and his work would become wrongly associated when no biography on Lewis was given from the institutions and commercial galleries.

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<sup>116</sup> Shannon, *Presence and Absence*, 240.



Within the three decades, Lewis's position on his political beliefs changed repeatedly. Although, I do believe that he fully supported the civil rights movement his level of engagement changed dramatically, especially toward the end of the 1940s when he abandons making political and racial subject matter self-evident. I believe he does this not because it is morally right but because he realises he needs to engage with the white middle class to gain the support for his art, however, Lewis implements subject matter subtly through colour and marks which he can relate to and not necessarily the spectator. For Lewis, this is his only solution at this point, if he is to be as successful as his peers such as Rothko, Pollock or de Kooning. Even with Lewis giving the New York art scene what is required of him to be successful he realises that this is not an option that will benefit him and he is not free to create his art. My research has shown that race was not the sole issue. A combination of factors had an impact on Lewis and at times those factors may have been enforced by Lewis himself. Lewis was an intellectual and understood the social environment of the world. Political involvement is present throughout all three decades, whether it comes from the images which are painted, the funding from the government or the propaganda set by the government to create a haze on an International stage that presents America as the land of the free. This means for Lewis as an artist he cannot escape political ideals, when Lewis responds by incorporating two styles within his painting he is not following the new notions of art that have been set out, instead, he is following his path and diverges away from the current art scene.

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