

Recent Acquisitions: Jacob Lawrence's "Revolt On The Amistad"

By Franz Jantzen*

The Supreme Court of the United States is not often a subject found among the visual arts. The Justices themselves, of course, have always been the subjects of portraitists in all mediums, and have often attracted prominent and important artists of their day. But with the notable exception of editorial cartoonists, the work of the Court is not frequently the subject of expressive works by artists. Where the work of the Court has provided inspiration, it has usually been in response to a particular opinion or the rights that flow from it; *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), for example, has inspired work by a number of artists, including Ben Shahn, Romare Bearden and Norman Rockwell. One of the most significant cases to strike a powerful chord with artists is *United States v. The Amistad* (1841), which has been the subject of many dozens of paintings, prints, sculpture, street murals, and in other media over the past 180 years.

Recently the Supreme Court Historical Society purchased "Revolt On The Amistad," an original silkscreen print by Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). Its subject is the famous overthrow of the slave-trading schooner *La Amistad* by its cargo of West African captives, kidnapped from Sierra Leone, whose fate was determined by the 1841 case. Lawrence made the print in 1989 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 1839 revolt.

The silkscreen print depicts a climactic moment of intense, hand-to-hand combat between the prisoners and the ship's crew. The composition is a striated tangle of slashing, angular shapes, most in the form of arms and hands, with many holding blood-tinged black knives. The captives, depicted in warm shades of brown and umber, are clustered near the top while the ship's crew, wearing blue, are being subsumed within the thicket of dark arms and rigging. Blue and black water roils violently below. In analyzing Lawrence's prints

of historical struggles against oppression, Lawrence scholar Patricia Hills has said of this print that "...the movement of the ribbonlike shapes (flailing knives and ropes of the rigging)...suggests not only a shipboard rebellion but also the streamers of celebration...Hence, although Lawrence's scene represents a rebellion, it also hints at the eventual victory."

The ordeal for the Sierra Leoneans began with their abduction by Portuguese slave traders in February 1839. They were taken across the Atlantic to the slave-trading hub of Cuba and sold at auction. Two plantation owners purchased fifty-three captives and loaded them on to *La Amistad*. The ship then headed for nearby sugar plantations but the crew was overtaken during the uprising, which took the lives of the ship's captain and cook. The captives ordered that they be returned home, but the remaining crew surreptitiously headed for the United States instead.

After two months at sea, the ship docked at New London, Connecticut in August 1839, where the captives were imprisoned on charges of murder. The two plantation owners claimed the ship and its cargo as their own; lawyers for the prisoners said no,

they had been forcibly kidnapped in the first place and were thus still free. Their case rose through the courts, arrived at the Supreme Court, and was argued on February 23, 1841. Former President John Quincy Adams and Roger Sherman Baldwin represented the Sierra Leoneans, and Attorney General Henry Gilpin argued for the plantation owners. On March 9, 1841, Justice Joseph Story announced the opinion of the Court, stating that the prisoners were not property since they had been kidnapped and transported illegally, and should be released immediately. Thirty-five of the freed captives ultimately returned home; the remaining eighteen



"Revolt On The Amistad"; 1989, ed. 27/120 (silkscreen on two-ply rag paper)

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either died in jail or on the return voyage.

In 1989, Aetna Life and Casualty commissioned Jacob Lawrence to create a new work commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Amistad uprising. Lawrence was born in Atlantic City and grew up in Harlem in New York City, where his development as an artist coincided with the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance. Throughout his long and distinguished career, Lawrence often created a series of works on a particular subject in order to accommodate a complex and detailed narrative. One of his early influences may have been Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), known for epic narratives about African-American heroes often told through murals or series. Lawrence was undoubtedly aware of Woodruff's *Amistad* mural cycle which was commissioned by Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama in 1938 to commemorate the revolt's 100th anniversary.

Lawrence's research into the history and struggle of early black leaders led to his first epic narrative, a series of 41 tempera panels created between 1936 and 1938 about the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Haitian slave who led a slave revolt in 1791 that helped to create an independent Republic of Haiti. This series quickly led to national recognition after Alain Locke, a Howard University professor and philosophical architect of the Harlem Renaissance, included the entire series in the *Exhibition of Contemporary Negro Art* at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1939. Following the L'Ouverture series, he created similarly complex cycles on the lives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown. He is probably best known for *The Migration of the Negro*, a series of 60 panels painted in 1940-41 which is now co-owned by the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

To translate his original gouache painting of "Revolt On The Amistad" into an edition of 120 silkscreened prints, Lawrence turned to master printer Lou Stovall of Washington, D.C. An artist in his own right, Stovall founded the printmaking studio Workshop, Inc. in 1968 and had since collaborated with many artists, including Alexander Calder (1898-1976), Josef Albers (1888-1976), Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), and Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), whose portrait of Thurgood Marshall was acquired by the Society in 2017.

Silkscreen prints are made by using a squeegee to evenly apply paint on to paper through a fine-mesh silk, stretched tightly onto a wood frame, on which a stencil has been cut. The paint transfers onto the paper only where the silk has been exposed, and each color requires a new stencil. Once a particular color has been printed on each of the prints, the stencil is peeled off and replaced by a new one so the next color can be printed. It took Stovall and eight assistants four months to make all of the prints for "Revolt", which required 46 separate stencils.

Prior to making the final prints, Lawrence and Stovall would supplement in-person visits with telephone calls to discuss various details on a series of proof prints that Stovall



Printmaker Lou Stovall (left) looks on as artist Jacob Lawrence signs prints at Stovall's Washington, D.C. studio, 1992; © photograph by Carol Harrison.

would mail to Lawrence as the piece evolved. Stovall described the process:

Like his ideas, the principal elements in his paintings, were never static.... His use of color enhanced action especially in pieces like "Revolt On The Amistad", a work of unusual complexity and abstraction. This piece is unique to me because I was frequently going back and forth between Jacob's original painting and the developing imagery in the print. There were moments when the ambiguity of shapes in the composition was increased because the force of Jacob's ideas demanded a stronger statement. I use the word force because he was imagining how a mutiny aboard a ship would look. Using silkscreen printmaking at its best, Jacob was able to compare the state of one proof to another, as he adjusted his composition to suit his idea. What happened and how to represent what happened on the deck of *La Amistad* mattered to him. His knowledge of history told him about the violent struggles, slashing knives and gnashing teeth set against the colors of rope, skin, and uniform, with the turbulence of the waves lifting the ship. This particular print is like a symphonic selection. We were creating meaning, in other words, making an art language that would take us beyond conventional expectations of what was possible in the silkscreen medium.

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