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There are several reasons why David Brigham, executive director of the Allentown Art Museum, decided to showcase the work of Jacob Lawrence, among the best-known 20th-century African-American painters.

First, there is the local connection. Lawrence, born in Atlantic City, N.J., moved to Easton in 1919 because his father was seeking work as a coal miner. He lived there for about five years before his parents split up and his mother took him to Philadelphia, and, ultimately, to Harlem. And the prints on display -- works from two of the artist's major series reflecting on two signature struggles for freedom by people of the African diaspora -- are on loan from Evelyn Boulware, an important collector who is related to Ethel Dayton-Craig, director of multicultural life at Muhlenberg College and a "good friend of the museum," says Brigham.

Second, there is the diversity angle. Lawrence, who painted series that tell the stories of revolutionaries such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, fits squarely with Brigham's vision of the museum as one that "reflects the diversity of our community."

Finally, there's the simple issue of artistic excellence. Jacob Lawrence, who died in 2000, was a noted painter, whose vibrant style of flat planes of color evoke the style of Cubism.

"Jacob Lawrence: Tales of Freedom" includes 22 prints from Lawrence's series on John Brown, the famous abolitionist, and eight prints from Lawrence's series on Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led his people to independence.

The story of the prints begins in 1974, many years after Lawrence rose to international fame. By this time, he was a sought-after artist, who, when he wasn't painting narratives, often turned to themes such as migration, jazz and literacy.

The Detroit Institute of Art, owner of Lawrence's John Brown series, was approached by another museum with a request to borrow the works. "They got the paintings out, they examined them, and they decided that they were too fragile to travel," Brigham explains.

Lawrence was asked to create a series of screen prints based on the 22 paintings. "Lawrence liked the idea because he wanted his work to be shown, but also because the message was still relevant," Brigham explains. The series is "not just about historical slavery, but about the legacy of slavery in the 20th century."

Lawrence also oversaw the creation of prints based on his paintings of L'Ouverture. It is perhaps a testament to Lawrence's prominence that these became highly valued collector's items themselves.

The prints, like the originals, are stunning. The colors are sharp and vibrant, the art moving and

effective.

When Lawrence was only 21 years old, he became fascinated by L'Ouverture's fight for Haitian freedom after viewing W.E.B. DuBois' play on the general. In these paintings, L'Ouverture is depicted as a powerful leader, resplendent in epaulets or riding a white horse -- a Black Napoleon, an African-American George Washington.

This was a radical theme for a series of paintings in 1930s America. Black Americans were at that time often depicted as racist caricatures or naive primitives. "This theme of black leadership," Brigham understates, "was very unusual."

The John Brown series tells a thematically similar story of resistance. Brown, like L'Ouverture, is considered a symbolic figure in the cause of Black freedom. Richly symbolic and increasingly complicated in subject matter and theme, they tell a complex narrative of freedom and redemption. Crosses can be seen in most of the paintings, and even the image of Brown's death is more hopeful than grisly. He floats against a bright blue, causing the viewer to reflect if Brown is descending from the gallows or ascending to the heavens.

The paintings are historical and violent, important and edifying. They are also simply fine works of art. Lawrence had a great sense of color, which he used to heighten impact.

He also had an innovative personal style. Although interested in telling historical narratives, he was very much a modernist. His awareness of Cubism is apparent in the flat, angular fields, the geometric angles of limbs and the elongated non-reality of his figures. Relations to Picasso and Matisse can be seen, as well as a debt to traditional African art. Ultimately, however, he created something all his own -- something both modern and historical.

There is one Lawrence print at the Allentown Art Museum not associated with a series: "Revolt on the Amistad." At first glance, the painting seems a mass of modernist abstraction. Soon, however, forms emerge: crashing ocean waves, ropes, bloody knives, the skull of a slave being smashed by a white fist. The colors are vibrant, the historical message undeniable, the storytelling masterful. The overall effect is enlightening, disturbing and oddly beautiful. It is, in other words, a perfect example of Jacob Lawrence being Jacob Lawrence.

Lawrence is also known for capturing everyday life in Harlem, so the Allentown Art Museum's education department has cleverly re-imagined one of his best known urban landscapes, 1943's "This is Harlem," as a sort of "This is Allentown." In the museum's interactive educational area, the young and the young at heart can use stencils, crayons, markers, and other art supplies to add shops, houses, or even themselves into the art. It is a fitting tribute to Jacob Lawrence, an artist who fought to have his voice, and the voice of his people, heard, and who reminds us that everyone has a story to tell.

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THE DETAILS

"JACOB LAWRENCE:

TALES OF FREEDOM'

What: Eight prints from the "Toussaint L'Ouverture" series, dramatizing a Haitian general's fight for independence for his people, and 22 prints from the "John Brown" series, depicting the transformation of Brown from a land surveyor into a leader of the abolitionist movement.

When: Through Jan. 7

Where: Allentown Art Museum Rodale Gallery

Admission: \$5 special exhibition fee, in addition to regular admission fee of \$6; \$4, seniors and students; \$3, children 6-12,; free, members and under 6

Related events: Guided visits, 2 p.m. Saturdays; Fall Festival, featuring performances and art activities, noon-4 p.m. Nov. 12; Gallery talk by Executive Director David Brigham, noon Jan. 3.

Info: 610-432-4333, www.allentownartmuseum.org

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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