



**MUSEUM PREMIERE OF JACOB LAWRENCE'S NIGERIA SERIES  
BRINGS TOGETHER THIS MAJOR AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST'S WORK  
WITH SELECTION OF ART BY HIS AFRICAN CONTEMPORARIES**

*Co-organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and the New Orleans Museum of Art  
Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club celebrates international  
Creative exchange in 1960s West Africa*

Norfolk, Virginia (July 12, 2022) – This fall, the Chrysler Museum of Art will present *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club*, the debut museum presentation of Jacob Lawrence's *Nigeria* series of paintings and drawings—and the first in-depth look at the international artists who were members of the renowned Mbari Artists and Writers Club, many of whom Lawrence met during an extended stay in Nigeria in 1964. These artists, including Lawrence, contributed to *Black Orpheus*, a radical arts and culture journal published in Nigeria between 1957 and 1975. After opening at the Chrysler Museum from October 8, 2022 to January 8, 2023, the exhibition will travel to the New Orleans Museum of Art from February 10 to May 7, 2023, followed by the Toledo Museum of Art from June 3 to September 3, 2023.

“This exhibition explores an incredible moment in the global exchange of ideas, when people and countries around the world were fighting for independence from colonialism and when the civil rights movement was achieving success in the United States,” said Kimberli Gant, Ph.D., the exhibition's co-curator and the Chrysler Museum of Art's former McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, now Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum. “Traveling to Africa twice in the early 1960s, Jacob Lawrence connected to a vibrant crosscurrent of political and social ideas circulating there, as richly illustrated by the writing and art featured in *Black Orpheus*. Those artists, in turn, were adapting and integrating modernist theories of art with their local styles, customs, and life experiences. The results can be seen in Lawrence's less-well-known *Nigeria* series—and in the remarkable array of works in this show that represent the global south during a period of transition.”

The exhibition is organized into five sections to guide viewers from the singularity of Lawrence's series, to the



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000), *Market Scene*, 1966, Gouache on paper, Museum purchase, 2018.22 © Jacob Lawrence / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

diversity of the Mbari Club artists, and then further into the artists working in the global south during this period.

- In the first section, named for Lawrence's *Nigeria* series, viewers will see the artist's representation of the country through depictions of its splendid markets, complex communities, and permeable spiritual practices. The section also includes archival images of Lawrence and his wife during their travels and original correspondence from Lawrence about his experiences.
- *Artists of Osogbo* presents the works of numerous Nigerian artists who are less well-known to American audiences, including Duro Ladipo, Twins Seven-Seven, Muraina Oyelami, Asiru Olatunde, Jacob Afolabi, and Adebisi Akanji, all of whom were featured in Mbari Club galleries and in *Black Orpheus* journals. These artists learned a range of artistic traditions—printmaking, batik textiles and painting—from older generations of both non-Western and Western artists and inspired younger generations.
- The section *The Zaria Art Society* focuses on a small group of Nigerian artists like Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya who met at the National College of Art & Technology and developed a philosophy called “natural synthesis,” where the artists incorporated local aesthetics and cultural traditions with Western-style art techniques to create a new modern art form. Their work also provided illustrations for short stories featured in *Black Orpheus*.

The exhibition's final two sections draw out artistic themes being explored by artists elsewhere on the African continent—and in other parts of the world.

- *Across the African Continent* features original art from the *Black Orpheus* journals, which were the nucleus for features and exhibition reviews about modernist artists in the region and around the world. The journals featured incredible works of art created by Mbari Club members and others, either for the cover or inside, including the Kenyan artist Hezbon Owiti, Mozambican artist and poet Malangatana Ngwenya, Ghanaian artist Vincent Kofi, El-Salahi and Ahmed Shibrain, two members of the Sudanese Khartoum School, and the Ethiopian artist Skunder Boghossian. These artists—often trained in European art styles—featured iconography and stories from their own cultures as new modes of artistic expression.
- *Beyond the African Continent* includes artists working primarily in the global south, whose creations were the result of similar forms of artistic—and political—discovery as their counterparts in Africa, reinforcing the importance of *Black Orpheus* and the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in the broader exchange of ideas. Presented are works from artists such as Avandrish Chandra from India, Genaro de Carvalho and Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos from Brazil, and William H. Johnson from the United States, highlighting the commonalities of people around the world in the fight for freedom.

“The themes of self-representation, freedom, and independence have been motivating for artists for generations, and they are at the heart of this exhibition, from Jacob Lawrence's *Nigeria* series, to the diverse artists of the Mbari Artists and Writers Club,” said Erik Neil, the Macon and Joan Brock Director of the Chrysler Museum of Art. “This exhibition demonstrates that these artists and their works continue to resonate globally today. We are thrilled to co-organize and present this ambitious exhibition, giving Lawrence's series its long-overdue museum presentation and putting this astounding array of African and other artists in the spotlight.”

## **JACOB LAWRENCE IN NIGERIA**

Jacob Lawrence and his wife, Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, first traveled to Africa in 1962, starting in Nigeria, to present an exhibition of work from several of his series: *Migration*, *Under the Black Belt*, and *War*. His plan was to introduce Africans to moments in African American history that he hoped would resonate with them, featuring themes of joy and sorrow, oppression and triumph. While there, he met with artists affiliated with the legendary Mbari Artists and Writers Club, from visual artists like Bruce Onobrakpeya and Vincent Kofi, to writers such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, who were themselves exploring and critiquing Western art traditions and publishing their work in the groundbreaking journal *Black Orpheus*.

In 1964, the Lawrences returned to Nigeria for a nine-month stay, again meeting with contemporaries—and during which time he finalized his more than 25 works *Nigeria* series. In this series, he explored themes of spirituality and community, often centered on the marketplace, a crucial gathering place in Nigerian culture. After returning to the United States, this series was presented at his New York dealer's gallery in 1965—but has not been shown together in its entirety since then.

*Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club* is co-organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and the New Orleans Museum of Art and curated by Kimberli Gant, Ph.D., the Chrysler Museum of Art's former McKinnon curator of modern and contemporary art who was named the curator of modern and contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum earlier this year, and by Ndubuisi Ezeoluomba, Ph.D., the New Orleans Museum of Art's Françoise Billion Richardson curator of African art.

“Bank of America is proud to support the Chrysler Museum of Art, a Hampton Roads cultural jewel. Sponsoring the *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club* exhibition helps showcase groundbreaking and inspiring Nigerian and African diaspora pieces, whose artists and works represent the communities we serve,” said Frank Castellanos, President Bank of America Hampton Roads.

## **CATALOG**

A full-color catalogue published by Yale University Press will accompany the exhibition and include essays by the exhibition curators and preeminent scholars including Leslie King Hammond and Peter Probst as well as a new generation of scholars bringing forward new scholarship including Suheyila Takesh, Katrina Greven and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha.

## **SUPPORT**

Corporate partner Bank of America is the sponsor for *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club* at the Chrysler Museum of Art. This exhibition was also made possible in part by major funding from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Getty Foundation Paper Project, The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.

## **ABOUT THE CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART**

The Chrysler Museum of Art is one of America's most distinguished mid-sized art museums, with a nationally recognized collection of more than 30,000 objects, including one of the great glass collections

in America. The core of the Chrysler's collection comes from Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., an avid art collector who donated thousands of objects from his private collection to the Museum. The Museum has growing collections in many areas and mounts an ambitious schedule of visiting exhibitions and educational programs each season. The Chrysler has also been recognized nationally for its unique commitment to hospitality with its innovative gallery host program.

The Perry Glass Studio is a state-of-the-art facility on the Museum's campus. The studio offers programming for aspiring and master artists alike in a variety of processes including glassblowing, fusing, flameworking, coldworking and neon.

In addition, the Chrysler Museum of Art administers the Moses Myers House, a historic house in downtown Norfolk, as well as the Jean Outland Chrysler Library. For more information on the Chrysler Museum of Art, visit [chrysler.org](http://chrysler.org).

###

For additional information, please contact:

Kat Harding / Sascha Freudenheim

440-759-8148 / 917-544-6057

[Kat@paveconsult.com](mailto:Kat@paveconsult.com) / [sascha@paveconsult.com](mailto:sascha@paveconsult.com)