

Basic Detail Report



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Title: Dreams #1

Date: 1965

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e771

Medium: Gouache on paper

Description: "Dreams #1" depicts a black man and woman on a brass bed whose yellow bars suggest the bars of a jail cell and whose rounded corner ornaments suggest, perhaps, the globes of street lamps. In keeping with his Cubist collage aesthetic, Lawrence brought both sets of bars up against the frontal plane of the composition, which makes the couple appear to be dancing (if they are vertical) or asleep in the midst of a nightmare (if they are horizontal).(1) The quality of a "danse macabre" is conveyed by the clenched teeth and splayed rigid right hand of the man and by the elongated fingers and anguished expression of the woman; the nightmare is also embodied in the devilish figures framed in the rectangles formed by the brass bars. From left to right, we see a figure walking, holding a severed head by its hair in one hand and an arrow-headed knife in the other; a half-bull half-man holding a long horizontal drum; a figure seen in profile holding two pitchforks, one in each hand; and an upside-down figure holding a head. On the left side of the front bars is a figure holding a shield with a white face (his own head, masklike and black, mirrors the shape of the shield), and on the right, a figure with the head of a bull and the body of a man. The final, central icon is an actual crucifix hanging by a string from the bed, the figure of Christ outlined in white against a blue cross. The iconography of these figures may relate to Lawrence's earliest art projects, in which he painted fantastic gargoylike papier mâché masks. This early interest in masks was related to the general interest in African art shared by young black artists in Harlem in the 1930s. "Professor" Wylie Seyfert, a carpenter by trade who had become an informal teacher of the younger generation of African-American artists, constantly stressed the importance of African art and the richness of black history in the Americas. When the Museum of Modern Art installed an exhibition of West African sculpture in 1935, Seyfert took Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis to see it.(2) The show had a great effect on Lawrence, who returned home to carve two small wooden sculptures from two four-by-four-inch blocks of wood. "I think he has continued to be influenced," Bearden commented.(3) "It particularly demonstrated that black people were capable of significant art and were in themselves suitable subjects for such art."(4) "Dreams #1" gains immeasurably from Lawrence's handling of color, which is striking in its economy and elegant simplicity. The couple is rendered starkly in black, with white highlighting the man's clenched teeth, the slit of an eye, his shoulder, arm, fingernails, toenails, and ribs;

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his pajama pants are striped in slate blue against white, creating the effect of diagonal bars against the brass verticals of the bed. His head is set against a red pillow, which in turn echoes the red blanket beneath them. In the woman, the black-on-white effect that so starkly defines the man's anatomy is softened by the yellow of her dress, which in turn echoes the yellow, tan, and green of the background. Most striking of all is the way Lawrence used the colors that define man, woman, and bed to relate the dream images not only to one another but also to the couple. Although the man and woman do not embrace, much less touch each other except where two fingers of the man's left hand touch the woman's hair, they are truly interlocked in a nightmare. While its title suggests more than one "Dream", this composition is not part of a narrative series.⁽⁵⁾ It is a particularly strong work that may be seen as a watershed, looking back to Lawrence's earliest work with masks and bridging the stark reality of the 1930s Harlem street scenes and such series as "John Brown" with the highly stylized patterning of the later "Builders".

MBES Bibliography: "Interview with Jacob Lawrence," Carroll Greene, October 25, 1968, "Archives of American Art", Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Elton C. Fax, "Seventeen Black Artists" (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971); David C. Driscoll, "Two Centuries of Black American Art" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Ellen Harkins Wheat, "Jacob Lawrence: American Painter", exhib. cat. (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1986); Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, "A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present" (New York: Pantheon, 1993). Notes: 1. See Patricia Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Expressive Cubism" in Wheat, "Jacob Lawrence", pp. 15-19. 2. Ann Gibson, "Norman Lewis in the Forties," "Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction", exhib. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), p. 10. 3. Myron Schwartzman, "Romare Bearden: His Life and Art" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 84. 4. Bearden and Henderson, "History of African-American Artists", p. 296. 5. Telephone response by Terry Dintenfass to author, 1996. In a 1996 telephone interview, however, Lawrence remembered that he had created other Dreams, though he did not recall the titles. Dimensions: 31 x 22 1/2 in. (42 3/8 x 34 x 1 1/8 in. framed)