



Whitney Acquires an Iconic Norman Lewis Ab-Ex Painting for its Collection

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by Pat Rogers

The Whitney Museum of American Art has acquired an iconic painting by Norman Lewis, the first Lewis work to be added to the Whitney's collection. Lewis (1909-1979), who was born in Harlem, was a central but often under-appreciated figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement, according to the museum.

One of the few African American artists associated with the New York School, he was the only black artist to participate in the 1950 closed-door sessions that Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline organized to define this burgeoning movement, according to The Whitney. The painting, *American Totem*, 1960, one of Lewis's iconic paintings, will go on view at the Whitney in June 2019 as part of a permanent collection exhibitions in the museum's seventh-floor Robert W. Wilson Galleries.

The work was made over a decade after his solo exhibition at the Willard Gallery in 1949, a period where he gained recognition but not exhibition opportunities or sales, according to The Whitney. During this time, [Norman Lewis](#) began moving away from the figurative forms evoking groups and made in a calligraphic manner to paint black-and-white abstract atmospheric works that explored the emotional and psychic impact of this turbulent historical moment in American history.

The totem in *American Totem* conjures the image a hooded Klansman with its disjointed figure consisting of multiple forms, set upon a deep black background. Painted at the height of the civil rights movement, Lewis's implication is that terror is both representable and abstract, conscious and unconscious, visible and hidden, explained the museum.

"One of Lewis's most important paintings, his acquisition will allow the Whitney to more effectively portray the complex history of American art at mid-century," stated Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney "Lewis's painting suggests the power of an object to accommodate both reflection and action."

Curator and art historian Ruth Fine, who curated the 2015 traveling solo museum show, "[Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis](#)," noted: "The paintings and drawings that are grouped as Norman Lewis's civil rights works are among the most provocative and charged of their period, brilliantly melding the artist's political and aesthetic concerns."



Norman Lewis (1909-1979), "American Totem," 1960. Oil

on canvas, 73 1/2 x 44 7/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund in memory of Preston Robert and Joan Tisch, the Painting and Sculpture Committee, Director's Discretionary Fund, Adolph Gottlieb, by exchange, and Sami and Hala Mnaymneh 2018.141. © Norman Lewis. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Throughout his career, Lewis pursued his unique artistic vision while also remaining committed to his political beliefs. From 1965 to 1971, he taught for HARYOU-ACT, Inc. (Harlem Youth in Action), an antipoverty program designed to encourage young men and women to stay in school.

In 1969, Lewis joined Bearden, Benny Andrews, Roy DeCarava, Clifford Joseph, Alice Neel and others in picketing the infamous "Harlem on My Mind" show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. That same year, he, Bearden, and Ernest Crichlow co-founded [Cinqué Gallery](#), dedicated to fostering the careers of emerging artists of color and offering community educational programs.

Lewis had his first retrospective exhibition in 1976 at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York. It took another 20 years before his art began to take a central place in American art.

In 1998, The Studio Museum in Harlem presented the survey "Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977." His work went on to be presented in group shows at major museums across the world including the Museum of Modern Art (New York) (2010); The Jewish Museum (New York) (2016); Haus der Kunst (Munich) (2016); Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) (2016); Royal Academy of Arts (London) (2016); The Phillips Collection (Washington, DC) (2017); Tate Modern (London) (2017) and elsewhere.

In 2015, Lewis's art had the first comprehensive museum overview when the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) organized "[Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis](#)." The survey traveled to Amon Carter Museum of American Art (Fort Worth) and Chicago Cultural Center.

Most recently in New York, his art was the subject of a solo show at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, who has exhibited his art since at least 1999, according to the gallery's [website](#). "[Norman Lewis: Looking East](#)" was exhibited from November 16, 2018 to January 26, 2019.

BASIC FACTS: *American Totem* will be viewable by the public in a show that opens on June 28, 2019 in the Museum's seventh-floor Robert W. Wilson Galleries. The gallery will also exhibit works by New York School artists Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, Mark Rothko and others.

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street, New York, NY 10014. www.whitney.org.

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