

DAVIDSON GALLERIES

JACOB LAWRENCE AND TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE

As a young boy, Jacob Lawrence was confused and frustrated by the palpable absence of black leaders and history figures in his school lessons. While attending an after school program at the Utopia Children's House in Harlem, Lawrence finally learned of such great figures as Toussaint L'Overture, Harriet Tubman and John Brown. Lawrence believed strongly that these stories should be told, not only as a part of black history, but as key moments in human history. He vowed that he would, one day, do his part to spread knowledge of these great figures and their stories.

In 1938, while working for the WPA Easel project, Lawrence had his opportunity and executed his first major series, *Toussaint L'Overture*. Finding the story much too complex for one image, Lawrence devised forty-one separate panels. This series attracted a lot of attention for the young artist and was shown at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the American Negro Exhibition in Chicago.

Between 1986 and 1997, Lawrence revisited his famous L'Overture series and reimagined it in print form. Working with Lou Stovall, master printer at Workshop Inc., Washington D.C, fifteen of the forty-one scenes were translated into silk screen prints and published by Amistad Research Center in New Orleans and Spradling Ames in Key West.

François-Dominique Toussaint L'Overture (1743 – 1803) was the leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution. He emancipated the slaves and negotiated for the French colony on Hispaniola, Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), to be governed, briefly, by black former slaves as a French protectorate. His political acumen and leadership mobilized and entire society of slaves into what would become the Republic of Haiti.

Toussaint was the son of an educated slave. He won the favor of the plantation manager and became a livestock handler, healer, coachman, and finally steward before he was legally freed in 1777. L'Overture began his military career as a leader of the 1791 slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint-Domingue wherein he taught his troops guerrilla tactics. The revolt ended in November of 1803 with the French defeat at the Battle of Vertières.

In 1801, L'Overture issued a constitution for Saint-Domingue which provided for autonomy and decreed that he would be governor-for-life, calling for black autonomy and a sovereign black state. In response, Napoleon Bonaparte dispatched a large expeditionary force of French soldiers and warships to the island who were under secret instructions to restore slavery, at least in the formerly Spanish-held part of the island. During the ensuing struggles, some of Toussaint's closest allies defected to Napoleon.

L'Overture was promised his freedom if he agreed to integrate his remaining troops into the French army. He agreed to this in May 1802, but was later deceived, seized by the French and shipped to France. He died months later in prison at Fort-de-Joux in the Jura region.

TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE PRINTS FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION

Dondon (No. 16)

Toussaint captured Dondon, a city in the center of Haiti, 1795.

The Opener (No. 21)

General Toussaint L'Ouverture attacked the English at Artibonite and there captured two towns.

The March (No. 23)

General L'Ouverture collected forces at Marmelade, and on October the 9th, 1794, left with 500 men to capture San Miguel.

Contemplation (No. 27)

Returning to private life as the commander and chief of the army, he saw to it that the country was well taken care of, and Haiti returned to prosperity. During this important period, slavery was abolished, and attention focused upon agricultural pursuits.

Flotilla (No. 31)

Napoleon's troops under Leclerc arrive at the shores of Haiti.

The Burning (No. 32)

Henri Christoph, rather than surrender to LeClerc, sets fire to La Cape. Christoph, one of Toussaint's aides, sent word that the French were in Haitian waters - that he had help them off as long as possible.

Deception (No. 36)

During the truce Toussaint was deceived and arrested by Leclerc, Leclerc felt that with Toussaint out of the way, the Blacks would surrender.

To Preserve Their Freedom (No. 38)

Napoleon's attempt to restore slavery in Haiti was unsuccessful. Desalines, Chief of the Blacks, defeated LeClerc. Black men, women and children took up arms to preserve their freedom.

Strategy (No. 40)

The Declaration of Independence was signed January 1, 1804 by Desalines, Cleveaux and Henri Christoph. These three men made up a new constitution, writing it themselves.