

# Events in the pages of my story

from Bill H. Ritchie's memoirs

*The best thing about having lived into the future is being able to write one's memoirs in machine language, a language compatible with computers, enabling me to share fragments from one's memoirs on the Internet. For example, whenever I have a moment I can look at the pages of my life on my smart phone Kindle app. In these occasional PDFs I can copy out a few lines about people whose lives touched mine and share the words from my memoirs. - Bill*

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## Jacob Lawrence is visiting professor

The art school offered visiting professor positions to artists for years, but the proposal to ask Jacob Lawrence to be one of them was especially important because this was a steppingstone to a job offer which he could hardly refuse.

He and his wife, Gwen Knight, were renowned artists not only for their art but also for the struggles they too in making their achievements because they were African Americans. Jake's appointment to a position would come after a 12-week stay in 1970. In that time, he proved he was a good teacher as well as an artist.

As for racial balance, the art school had had only one African American on the faculty when I was there, and he had left out of frustration. There were no women studio artists and no Hispanics on the painting faculty, either.

I was glad to learn that Jake (as he liked to be called) made prints that were on par with his paintings – mostly screen prints. However, Jake would be teaching only painting graduate students, which meant printmaking students could not benefit by contact with him.

At the time I got word of his coming, I was making progress in bringing lithography back to the UW, the medium having been closeted for many years. Something clicked. Jacob Lawrence's stay was an opportunity for a program for printmaking students to get experience working with visiting artists. Whether those visitors belonged to other art divisions – that is, painters, potters, glass artists, or whatever – printmaking students could benefit by working with them.

With an idea to boost lithography, I asked Jake if he would let me help him make a lithograph in his ten weeks here. If he would draw on a litho stone, I and Christie Wyckoff, one of the printmaking graduate students, would be his artisan

printers. Jake agreed, without hesitating!

Right away I ground a litho stone (it's the first step in making a stone lithograph), assembled lithograph crayons, pencils, tusche, and anything else I thought he might need. I carted the stone up to Jake's private studio on the third floor of the art building. He listened patiently while I explained the basics; he was fine with that and had no questions. I said to let me know when he was ready to have us process and print it.

painters and printmaking students, like what a few other art schools offered.

Weeks went by and Jacob was silent. I was uneasy. In the hallway one day I asked him how it was going, and he said fine and that it was finished! Privately I wished he had told me sooner because the quarter's end was near and things were getting hectic.

We agreed that I would come and get the stone, cart it down to the basement



1970 Jacob Lawrence lithograph, The Chess Players.

From time to time I'd see Jake in faculty meetings or passing in the hall. He'd smile and nod but said nothing about the project; and I didn't pester him. He'd be leaving in June; however, I didn't want to rush him. It was only April, after all. Weeks passed and I turned my attention to another project much on my mind – my first printmaking seminar.

## (continuation, pp: 376-379) Jacob Lawrence departs

Back in April Jacob Lawrence had agreed to draw a lithograph. Our graduate student, Christy Wyckoff, would print it under my guidance. I knew this would be the start of collaborations among visiting

studio and start processing his drawing. The composition was of men playing chess and I noticed, pinned to the wall, the master drawing which he'd worked from. By this time, it was late, and Christy's interest had faded and, besides, he was absorbed in finishing his work for finals.

Next I told Jacob we needed to get together to print the stone so he could approve it for editioning. His response was he was packing to leave Seattle! He said go ahead and print it. It was a straightforward crayon drawing and should present no problem.

When the ink dried, I was to package them and send them to him in New York. I brought paper from my studio since the school had no budget for my skunkworks



Image for a display in the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington School of Art.

me. I'd see him in the hallways and sat in faculty meetings with him, yet he never brought up the subject.

Years passed. He said nothing, so I assumed he had not liked the print and didn't want to embarrass both of us. He was senior to me in every way, so I thought it best to be silent and assume that I had failed him, and it was best forgotten.

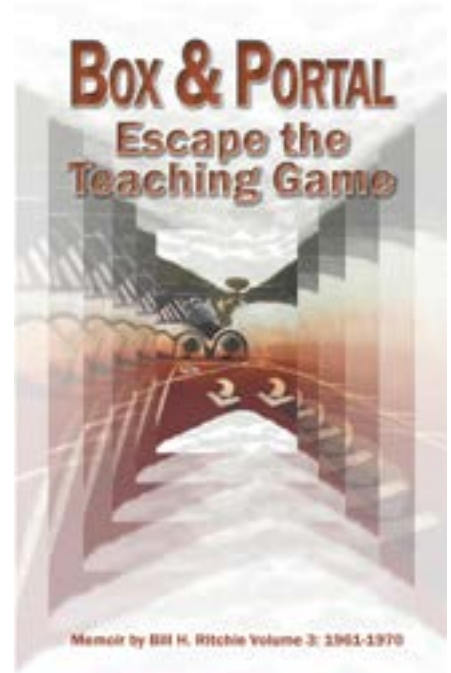
I was wrong. The project rose up again. It happened thirty years later that I got a telephone call from Peter Nesbet at the Seders Gallery. He was preparing a catalog for a show of Jake's graphics. He learned that I was the printer and he asked for verification.

Imagine my surprise! Not only had the edition sold out, the last proof sold for \$5,000, according to the gallery assistant I spoke with. She owned an impression and said it was in poor condition, but she had it repaired by a Seattle paper restorer, Alice Bear. Perhaps the package that I had sent ended up in storage

said with a cheery smile – they might be worthless. I could only laugh.

I offered them as fundraisers to Barbara Earl Thomas, who was serving as organizing curator at the Northwest African-American Museum in Seattle but I got no response from her. I made a video to put on YouTube to document this bizarre undertaking and eventually, I drew the story to an end by auctioning the prints at Pacific galleries and there all three eventually found happy homes.

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Ritchie, Bill H. "Box & Portal: Escape the teaching game." Memoir by Bill H. Ritchie - 1961-1970. Kindle Direct Publishing, 2018. Available on amazon.com in both paperback and eBook. This section is also in Ritchie's "My Artscript Catalog," where his memoirs from 1941-1970 close the text part of his complete collection of art in the family's Mini Art Gallery. Available as hardcover on amazon and blurb.com.

**See Bill's 2015 video:  
Homage to Jacob Lawrence on YouTube**



Input the title or go to  
<https://youtu.be/R75oSLipytg>



Screenshot from video, "Homage to Jacob Lawrence."

project and, alone at night, I printed about thirty or thirty-five proofs.

On July 15 I removed three trial proves from the edition because they had small but discoverable flaws. The rest I packaged to send to Jake, and I included a letter explaining the standard signing protocols in the unlikely event he had any questions. (This letter ended up in the Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight papers, 1945-2005, Box 5, Folder 14, No. 11., Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian.) Reading it now, I note we had agreed that he would return five for the UW collections. Jake never responded to this letter. This ended my idea of visiting faculty and students collaborating – but there would be a surprise for me several decades later.

The strangeness of the outcome didn't end there but grew stranger still. Even though he returned to the UW the next year, Jake never mentioned the prints to

and was a little moldy.

Then, once again The Chess Players – like a sea serpent – would rear up again for me five years after Jake died. It happened as I was searching through my print drawers for a 1972 print. I discovered recycled the three trial proofs I'd held back in 1970. I reused the paper a few years later. I was poor and, in my pecuniary practice, I printed on the backs of those proofs.

This I would discover in 2005. As I was deep into new things, I decided the right thing to do was make them into a memento of our 1970 collaboration 35 years ago. I embossed my linoleum title cut, Emerald, along the bottom side.

Later, I went to see Francine Seders and asked what she thought their value might be – if any. She had no idea, but she said maybe they were worth more because of the nature of the collaboration; or - she