



Train Station

1935

By Walter Ellison

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center

ART
INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

Walter Ellison, American (1900–1977)

Train Station, 1935

Oil on canvas; 8 in. x 14 in. (20 x 36 cm)

Charles M. Kurtz Charitable Trust and Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith funds; through prior gifts of Florence Jane Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, and Estate of Celia Schmidt, 1990.134.

“His eye is always on the line of the **diaspora**, from Africa, across ... the deep rural South and on into the Northern cities,” declared writer Clyde Taylor, describing the centuries of continual resettlement, often forced, of African Americans since they were removed from their ancestral homeland. This very small, brightly painted picture by Walter Ellison captures the most massive relocation of all—the Great Migration—when more than six million blacks left their rural southern homes for industrial cities in the North. The mass emigration began around the First World War (1914–1918), in which more than two hundred thousand blacks had served, and continued through 1970. The war spawned jobs that beckoned southern blacks northbound—some two million, for instance, between 1920 and 1925 alone. Without this new concentration of blacks in urban centers, coupled with the economic boom, the cultural explosion known as the **Harlem Renaissance**, or New Negro Movement, would not have occurred. For many African Americans, the exodus toward the land of promise in the North began by train. As Vernon Jarrett, a retired columnist for the *Chicago Sun Times* who migrated to Chicago from Paris, Tennessee, after World War II, described: “You couldn’t do without the train spiritually. It was the vehicle that could take you to heaven before you died. Heaven meaning away from here.”

Shown here, in fact, may be the very train station in Macon, Georgia, where Ellison as a teenager joined this immense migration by boarding a train heading North. He grew up nearby in the small town of Eatonton. With his distinctive broad areas of color and simple, almost naive style, Ellison divides the station into three sections to illustrate the **Jim Crow laws** that legalized segregation in the South. All public spaces, such as streetcars, trains, and the railway station here had separate, but rarely equal, sections or facilities. Here, whites and blacks pass each other, but rarely connect. In the upper right-hand rear of the painting, for example, the woman exits through her designated “Colored” doorway.

Ellison uses just a few brushstrokes to capture the characters about to depart. On the left, well-dressed white passengers board trains headed South for such vacation spots as Miami, West Palm Beach, and Tallahassee, Florida. The only blacks to break the racial barrier and enter this exclusive white area are the orange-garbed porters, who held what was then considered a prestigious job. In the **foreground**, a little girl with her dog, who peers around the corner, carries our eye to the middle section. There, a porter directs a confused man toward the trains heading North.

In the right-hand section, we sense the momentum of the Great Migration. With their worldly possessions in sacks, boxes, and trunks, black mothers, fathers, and children scramble, rushing to board trains to the three most popular northern destinations—Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Assisting them are black porters, who served as invaluable conduits of news, helpful hints, and information during the upheaval of the Migration. Perhaps to prove that he was part of this historical relocation, Ellison paints his initials on the suitcase in the right foreground, which an old man struggles to lift.

While Ellison leaves the illustration of the actual train-ride to our imagination, a child later described the experience to a friend:

As soon as she got on the train to leave ... she felt free. Said she felt like she was being born all over again. Sure she was sitting in the Jim Crow section, up front where all the coal, smoke, and dust rose up, got in the windows and ruined your clothes. But she said the chugging of the train couldn't hardly keep up with her heart, she was so excited.

Ellison's actual destination was Chicago, the largest industrial center of the nation, whose potential jobs in meatpacking, rail, and steel mills had attracted the greatest single number of migrants —some 60,000—by the end of **World War I** (1914–1918). The black population almost doubled two years later, by 1920. Although discrimination existed, the city also offered better schools, voting rights, leisure activities, and the chance to live daily life with more freedom than that which existed in the South.

Like most blacks, Ellison probably ended his journey at the Illinois Central Railway station, now demolished, at 12th Street and Michigan Avenue. Once in Chicago, he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the vital institution where a number of noted black artists trained, including Archibald J. Motley Jr. (1891–1981) and Charles White (1918–1979). During the 1940s, Ellison played a pioneering role in the creation of the **South Side Community Art Center**, sponsored by the **WPA/FAP** and modeled after the highly successful Harlem Community Art Center in New York. Scholar **Alain Locke** came to New York to lead the South Side Community Center's opening ceremony in 1941, accompanied by Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962), whose husband was then president of the United States. "The center had quite an impact on Black artists," recalled one of its first students, "because there wasn't anything else around." Although WPA/FAP funding ended in 1943, with the advent of **World War II** (1939–1945), the South Side Community Art Center continues to this day to provide professional training and opportunities for aspiring young artists.

Ellison also exhibited at the historic **American Negro Exposition**, one of the first commercial gallery exhibitions to feature African American artists, held at Chicago's Tanner Gallery in 1940. The exhibition became the basis of Alain Locke's *Negro in Art*, the first monograph, or memoir, on black art that was published later that year. Ellison's **monotype** *The Sunny South*, 1939 (at right), appeared in the monograph, bringing Ellison the most attention that he would receive as an artist.

Ellison depicts in this print both the hope and despair of life in the city. People working and relaxing are side-by-side with gangsters with guns poised, or jailbirds escaping from prison. As in *Train Station*, we see Ellison's simple, direct style juxtaposed with his sophisticated insights, providing us with another telling image of the black experience in the decades between the two world wars.



Walter Ellison, *The Sunny South*, 1939. H. Karl and Nancy von Maltitz Endowment.

THE GREAT MIGRATION

From 1910 to 1970, six million southern-born African Americans were enticed or forced to leave southern farms to work in northern industrial cities. The American labor pool changed dramatically in 1914 with the beginning of World War I (1914–1918). The war not only slowed European immigration, it cause thousands of recent immigrants to the United States to return to their home countries to fight. Factories in the North were left with a dangerously low supply of workers just as war-time industries began to boom. Manufacturers sent recruiters to the South to offer blacks free transportation, the promise of well-paying jobs, and greater freedom.

Fearing the loss of cheap labor, southern white farmers attempted but failed to slow northern recruitment. The African-American community in Chicago, the largest industrial center in the nation, grew at a very rapid rate. The city was known to many southerners through the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper that not only provided information about the North and Chicago, but also denounced lynching and other forms of racial oppression in the South and portrayed the North as a place of greater freedom and opportunity. By 1918, Chicago had attracted 60,000 southern blacks, the largest number in the nation; by 1920, Chicago's black population numbered about 109,000. It was mostly concentrated in the area of the city on the near South Side, known as Douglas/Grand Boulevard, the Black Metropolis, and/or **Bronzeville**.

After World War II (1939–1945), mechanized cotton pickers appeared on southern farms, forcing many blacks who had stayed in the rural South to find jobs elsewhere. In Chicago, the black population more than doubled between 1950 and 1970, from 492,000 to over one million.

FAMILIES ON THE MOVE

Moving from the South to the North was difficult for many southern African-American families. Buying a train ticket to the North was very expensive, and many people had to sell their belongings, houses, land, and even clothes to do so. Other families pooled their money to buy a ticket for one family member, hoping that the person would make enough money to send for the rest of the family. Men often left their families temporarily to find jobs and housing in the North, leaving the women behind to support the family until they could afford to move.

Families arriving in Chicago usually ended their journey at the Illinois Central Railway station (demolished) at 12th Street and Michigan Avenue. Many families moved into South Side “kitchenette” apartments, which typically comprised several small rooms equipped with a hot plate, icebox, and a shared bathroom down the hall. Even the most basic factory or service job paid an average of four times the amount a worker could earn picking cotton, and northern black children could go to school instead of working, which was often not the case in the South. But as the South Side population grew, housing became scarce, forcing people to live in overcrowded tenement houses. Poor housing conditions soon instigated health problems such as tuberculosis. Race riots also occurred, as discrimination was still widespread in the North. “Fair and equal treatment” promises made by whites frequently were not kept.

GLOSSARY

American Negro Exposition: (Art of the American Negro) One of the first commercial exhibitions of African-American art, it was held in 1940 at Chicago’s Tanner Gallery and became the basis of **Alain Locke’s** *Negro in Art*, the first monograph on black art, published later that year.

Bronzeville: Chicago’s vibrant South Side community whose population mushroomed due to the Great Migration, from 14,000 in 1890 to 109,000 by 1920. Also known as the Black Belt, this area around Douglas/Grand Boulevard became home to more than 90 percent of Chicago’s black population by the 1930s.

diaspora: Dispersal and resettlement of blacks, or of any people, far from their ancestral homeland.

foreground: Front of a two-dimensional (flat) work of art.

Great Depression: Also called Depression of 1929, or Slump of 1929. Economic slump in North America, Europe, and other industrialized areas of the world that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world. Though the U.S. economy had gone into depression six months earlier, the Great Depression may be said to have begun with a catastrophic collapse of stock-market prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. The failure of so many banks, combined with a general and nationwide loss of confidence in the economy, led to much-reduced levels of spending and demand and hence of production, thus aggravating the downward spiral. The result was drastically falling output and drastically rising unemployment.

Harlem Renaissance: The creative outburst during the 1920s of African American literature, music, dance, and art centered in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem, which spread to other cities as well, including Chicago. Also known as the New Negro Movement, the renaissance encouraged blacks to reclaim their African ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own creative expression.

Writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Nathan Eugene Toomer

Musicians and Singers: Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, John Coltrane, Scott Joplin, Josephine Baker, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Marian Anderson

Artists: Hale Woodruff, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Lois M. Jones, Archibald Motley, Jr.

Jim Crow laws: Any of the laws that enforced racial segregation in the South between the end (1877) of the formal

Reconstruction period and the beginning of a strong civil-rights movement (1950s). “Jim Crow” was the name of a minstrel routine (actually “Jump Jim Crow”) performed beginning in 1828 by its author, Thomas Dartmouth (“Daddy”) Rice, and by many imitators. The term came to be a derogatory epithet for blacks and a designation for their segregated life. In 1954 the Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional and in subsequent decisions ruled similarly on other kinds of Jim Crow legislation.

Alain Locke: (1886–1954) First African American Rhodes scholar and Howard University philosopher who was a leading spokesperson for the **Harlem Renaissance**. His seminal book, *The New Negro* (1925), urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expressions.

monotype: Method of making prints from a flat, freshly painted or inked surface of glass or metal. A sheet of paper is pressed down over the still-wet image and, although a number of prints can be made from the same plate, each print is unique.

South Side Community Art Center: WPA/FAP-funded arts center modeled after the highly successful Harlem Community Art Center in New York and dedicated in 1941; continues to this day to provide professional training and opportunities for aspiring young artists.

World War I: (1914–1918) Also called the First World War, or Great War. International conflict that embroiled most of the nations of Europe along with Russia, the United States, the Middle East, and other regions. The war pitted the Central Powers—mainly Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey—against the Allies—mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, from 1917, the United States. It ended with the defeat of the Central Powers. The war was virtually unprecedented in the slaughter, carnage, and destruction it caused. World War I was one of the great watersheds of 20th-century geopolitical history. It led to the fall of four great imperial dynasties (in Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey), resulted in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and, in its destabilization of European society, laid the groundwork for World War II.

World War II: (1939–1945) War broke out in 1939 when Germany, led by dictator Adolph Hitler, invaded Poland. In accordance with a previously signed treaty France and Great Britain came to Poland’s aid and declared war on Germany. This conflict that eventually involved virtually every part of the world lasted for six years and cost over 40,000,000 lives. Countries were divided into the Axis powers, including Germany, Italy and Japan, and the Allied powers, consisting of France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. The war ended in 1945 and marked the decisive shift of power in the world away from Western Europe and toward the bipolar power structure of United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

WPA/FAP: (Works Progress (later Projects) Administration/ Federal Arts Project) Federal agencies created in 1933 (WPA) and 1935 (FAP) by Franklin Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, to support artists during the **Great Depression**. Lasting through the advent of **World War II**, WPA/FAP was the largest and most well-known governmental agency to assist the arts through its federally-sponsored social programs, employing at its height some 5,000 artists.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

•Look and See

Look carefully at this painting and describe what you see. List all of the words that are included in this painting. Then answer these questions, based on some of the text found in the painting:

Southbound: White people are on their way further south for vacation. How are they dressed?

Miami: This city is in the southern part of the United States. Why do you think Miami is a popular vacation spot?

Trains North: African Americans are headed north in search of more freedom and better-paying jobs. How do you think they feel about their journey?

Chicago: What kinds of jobs do you think were available in this city for African Americans coming up from the South?

Detroit: What kinds of jobs were available in this city?

W.W.E.: Why do you think the artist painted his initials on the suitcase?

•Dear Diary...

Choose one character in *Train Station* and create a diary entry describing their journey. Give the character a name, describe what he/she chose to wear and why, describe what is in their suitcase or bag, who they are traveling with, the train trip itself, etc. Illustrate another moment in this person's day.

•What I did on my summer vacation

Create a picture that represents a journey you have taken. Where did you go? What did you pack for your trip? Who did you travel with? What did you do when you got there?
Additional: Write a poem or story about your trip. Or create a postcard (image and letter) based on your trip that you would have mailed to a friend.

•Pack your bags!

Describe the suitcases or bags the travelers in *Train Station* are carrying. What would you guess was in each of them? Have students create their own suitcases. Using shoeboxes or other containers of a similar size, have students decorate their suitcase according to where they want to travel. Have each student fill their suitcase with objects from home or objects they created, and present their suitcase to the class. Or have students trade their suitcases with classmates, who then have to describe the person who owns the suitcase based on its decoration and contents.

Walter Ellison. *Train Station*, 1935.

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