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How David C. Driskell Shaped the Story of Black Art in America: From the Archives

BY **PAMELA NEWKIRK**

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David C. Driskell at the 50th Anniversary Gala of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. in 2014.
KEVIN WOLF/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

In 1976, the year of the United States bicentennial, **David C. Driskell** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/david-c-driskell/>) mounted the exhibition “**Two Centuries of Black American Art** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/two-centuries-of-black-american-art/>)” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition staked a claim for the profound and indelible contributions of black and African American art makers

since the earliest days of the country and Driskell, **who died last week** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/david-c-driskell-dead-1202682906/>) at the age 88, forever changed art history. His legacy is enduring, impacting generations of artists, curators, scholars, collectors, and more in the four decades since “Two Centuries of Black American Art” traveled to institutions across the country. In May 2000, *ARTnews* published a profile of Driskell by renowned journalist **Pamela Newkirk** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/pamela-newkirk/>). The occasion was Driskell receiving his 10th honorary degree, from Colby College in Maine, and a traveling show of artworks from his personal collection making a stop at the High Museum in Atlanta. Newkirk’s profile follows the arc of Driskell’s life and his career as a curator and scholar, art collector, and artist. Speaking about the artists whose work he curated and collected, Driskell tells Newkirk, “The artists I have known were in search of their place in American society.” The profile follows below in full. —*Maximiliano Durón*

“Shaping the Story of Black Art”

By Pamela Newkirk

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The son of Georgia sharecroppers, artist David Driskell has become the world’s leading curator, collector, and scholar of works by African Americans

In 1952 David Driskell was a sophomore at Howard University, studying painting and history, when one of his teachers, James A. Porter, encouraged him to switch his focus to art history. “He said, ‘You can’t afford to just be an artist,’” Driskell recalls. Porter, a scholar of African American art explained, “You have to show people what we’ve contributed.”

Driskell continued to paint, making images drawn from nature and African American life. But he heeded Porter’s advice—a decision that would shape his career as a scholar, curator, teacher, and collector of African American art. Porter introduced him to the rich legacy of black American artists, including the work of Aaron Douglas, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and William H. Johnson, whose reputations had not yet been firmly established. Meanwhile, in his spare time, Driskell apprenticed at the Howard University Gallery of Art, which had been founded by another of his professors, James V. Herring. Herring instilled in him a passion for collecting, cataloguing, and curating art.

Today, the 69-year-old Driskell is widely regarded as the world’s foremost authority on black art in America. “He has probably had more to do with the seriousness of the way African American art is treated than has any other single person,” says Harry C. Parker, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Joseph Jacobs, curator of American art at New Jersey’s Newark Museum, agrees that Driskell is “an absolutely seminal figure”

for black art in the United States. “I’d be hard-pressed to come up with someone as distinguished as David from the art world,” he says.

Over the years, Driskell has received nine honorary degrees and curated more than 35 exhibitions of works by black masters, including Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Elizabeth Catlett. In 1972 he organized a substantial Johnson retrospective for the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. “Two Centuries of Black American Art,” a traveling exhibition that Driskell put together for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, was the highest-profile show of its kind at a major museum in the United States. In 1996 Driskell advised the White House on its first purchase of a work by a black artist, *Sand Dunes at Sunset: Atlantic City* (1885) by Tanner. Driskell has also advised Oprah Winfrey and is currently the curator for Bill Cosby’s collection.

Since 1998, highlights from Driskell’s own holdings have been traveling to museums nationwide and will be on view at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta from June 22 through September 10. Titled “Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection,” the show includes some 100 works by artists such as Johnson, Bearden, Robert Colescott, and Augusta Savage, many of whom Driskell knew as a teacher, student, curator, or friend. An exhibition of Driskell’s own paintings, “Echoes: The Art of David C. Driskell, 1955–1997,” has been touring the country since 1998 and is at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta through the 22nd of this month.

Driskell’s collection fills his home in Hyattsville, Maryland, a 112-year-old Victorian house he shares with his wife of 48 years, Thelma G. DeLoatch. Ranging from African tribal objects to protest art from the 1960s to contemporary works, the pieces reflect Driskell’s interest in the themes of nature, Christianity, and African art, as well as in abstract and political art. Outside his house, beyond the teeming vegetable and herb garden, is a wood-frame studio, filled with his own vivid collage and gouache paintings—works-in-progress. “This is my hangout,” says the slight, lively Driskell of the rustic, one-room structure, bathed in sunlight. He points to a suitcase that he will use for a sculpture. “I don’t throw anything out.” As with his collection, Driskell’s own works reveal his interest in collage, religious images, nature, and African crafts.

Many of the pieces in Driskell’s collection reflect the history of the black American experience. “The shared struggle to break free of the confines of race in America, while embracing a common cultural heritage,” Driskell explains, is part of the identity of the artists whose work he owns. “They had the same training as mainstream artists. But as good as they are, they are still viewed as black artists.” In the traveling show, Johnson’s undated watercolor *I Baptize Thee* depicts the outdoor baptism of an African American boy, while Lawrence’s *General Toussaint*, a 1986 silkscreen image taken from the artist’s

41-panel series, completed in 1938, commemorates Toussaint L'Ouverture's battle to emancipate Haiti. *The Last Bar-B-Que*, a 1989 lithograph by Margo Humphrey, portrays a black Christ and his disciples at a table covered with African *kente* cloth and laden with chicken and watermelon. Traditional 19th-century landscapes by Hale A. Woodruff and Edward Mitchell Bannister are also here, along with formal, early 20th-century studio portraits by the Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee.

"The artists I have known were in search of their place in American society. Lois Mailou Jones, as good as she was, was still an African American artist," Driskell says of his former teacher, whose paintings *Ethiopian Boy* (1948) and *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1936) are in his collection. "Her question was, 'Will I ever live to be just an artist?'"

During the Harlem Renaissance, in the 1920s and '30s, Driskell says, black talents like Aaron Douglas and Langston Hughes were eager for mainstream recognition. In their work, they strove to portray blacks "in a more human way" than the caricatured renderings of African Americans they saw in mass media. They often referred to Africa in order to emphasize African Americans' long tradition of art and culture. Beginning in the 1950s, Driskell and his fellow artists, including Bearden and Colescott, were less concerned with society's approval than with infusing their work with social commentary. In 1955, for example, Driskell was outraged by the Mississippi lynching of Emmett Till, a black boy accused of whistling at a white woman. The next year he painted *Behold Thy Son*, in which Till's portrayal recalls the crucifixion. "In the 1950s and '60s, I don't think artists cared about social acceptance anymore," says Driskell. "We were impatient—disillusioned with integration. We wanted to be left alone. Some of us severed relations with majority culture." But as a curator and collector, Driskell emphasizes, he has always esteemed the quality of an artwork above any overtly black symbolism. "Just because it has a fist doesn't make it art," he explains, referring to the popular icon of black power during the 1960s and '70s.

Driskell was born in Eatonton, Georgia, into a family of sharecroppers. When he was five, the family moved to the Appalachian mountains in North Carolina, where he lived until leaving for Howard in 1951. Making art has been a family tradition. Driskell's grandfather was a sculptor in the African style, fashioning ornaments from bark, and his father, a Baptist minister, made drawings and paintings of religious themes. His mother created woven baskets and quilts.

In college Driskell met Mary Beattie Brady, an arts patron who went on to work with him throughout his career promoting black artists. Brady ran the Harmon Foundation, an organization that collected and preserved more than 4,000 works by African Americans. She was especially keen to advance Johnson's art. When Driskell took a teaching job at Alabama's Talladega College after graduating from Howard, Brady sent Talladega's

Goodnow Art Gallery several Johnson pieces as a long-term loan. In 1962, when Driskell returned to Howard to teach, that university became the beneficiary of Brady's philanthropy. She would subsequently loan works to Fisk University in Nashville, where Driskell was chair of the art department and director of the art gallery from 1966 to 1977. She also recommended Driskell to curate the Johnson show at the National Museum of American Art in 1972. Brady had retired by the time Driskell began teaching at the University of Maryland, where he ran the art department from the time he left Fisk until 1998.

It was at Fisk that Driskell first made his mark as a serious scholar. During his tenure there, he curated several shows spotlighting black artists, including Douglas, William T. Williams, and Ellis Wilson. "Fisk was the only place doing this work," he says of the college's efforts to exhibit and document African American art. He oversaw the college's Alfred Stieglitz Collection, which includes pieces by Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Georgie O'Keeffe, and Stieglitz. O'Keeffe had given the collection to the college in Stieglitz's memory, and Driskell, who was in charge of maintaining it, got to know her well. "I said to her that it was wonderful that she had given 101 works to Fisk, a black institution. But I was very concerned that she did not endow the collection," he recalls. "She hesitated, looked at me, and said, 'You know, you've got guts. I like you.' She donated \$50,000 after that."

He consulted closely with O'Keeffe about the collection. "I had the chance to really sit and confer with her about art matters," he says. O'Keeffe had carefully pruned the works to include only high-quality pieces, which were then meticulously documented. Driskell would be just as rigorous when cataloguing African American works, creating a scholarly context for black art in America.

Driskell's greatest strength may be his "encyclopedic knowledge about a large range of works, even when they're not catalogued," says Mary Schmidt Campbell, dean of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. "He has relationships with an enormous number of artists and their patrons. If you have a conversation, he provides you with a context to help you understand your subjects. He is an incredible mentor." Campbell calls Driskell's 1976 show "Two Centuries of Black American Art" a turning point for black art. "Almost everybody uses the catalogue for that show as a reference," she says.

The catalogue caught the attention of Bill Cosby, who telephoned Driskell in the fall of 1977. "He called and said, 'This is Bill Cosby,'" Driskell recalls with a chuckle. "My brother-in-law, Scott, is always teasing. I said, 'Scott, what do you want?'" Unfazed, Cosby responded by explaining that he and his wife, Camille, would like to begin collecting and wanted Driskell to be their adviser. By the end of the conversation, Driskell

realized that it really was Cosby on the phone. Soon after that, he started working with the Cosbys and has been their personal curator ever since. Driskell has also selected artworks that have appeared on *The Cosby Show* and is writing a book about the couple's collection, *The Other Side of Color: The African American Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby, Jr.*, scheduled to be published by Pomegranate Publications next spring. While buying work for the Cosbys at Sotheby's in 1981, Driskell placed the \$250,000 winning bid for Tanner's painting *Thankful Poor*, which, with the buyer's commission, was at that time the largest sum ever paid for the work of a black artist. Camille Cosby gave the work to her husband for Christmas. "I had no limit," Driskell beams, still basking in the memory of the bidding war.

Driskell's own collection, he is quick to point out, was built on more modest means. "I collected what I could get my hands on," he says. "The saving grace for me is that I had a trained eye." As Parker of San Francisco's Fine Arts Museums observes, "To see what he bought, who he knew, and what artists he selected is a very interesting aspect of the collection. You feel like you're in touch with living history."

These days, when he isn't lecturing around the country or advising collectors, Driskell busies himself at home in Maryland, tending his garden, painting, occasionally quilting, and attending his local church, whose stained-glass panels are decorated with black biblical figures that he designed. During the summers, he settles in for a few months of painting at his second home in Falmouth, Maine, which he purchased in 1961 by selling a Kandinsky print from his collection. This month, he will receive his tenth honorary degree, from Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

"If I had to do it over again, I would," he says. "Art is a priestly calling. It's the kind of visual mobility that shows us life can be so beautiful. I've been blessed to have that happen to me."