Coming Soon: ‘Icons of Nature and History,’ a Major Survey of David Driskell Opens at High Museum in Atlanta in February 2021

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Dec 29, 2020 - 11:58 pm


About 60 paintings and works on paper will be on view, dating from 1953 to 2011. The works are informed by abstraction and figuration; reflect the African American experience; express his keen observations of the American landscape; and draw on spiritual symbolism and African aesthetics.


Years in the making, the exhibition is the first survey of Driskell’s practice since his death less than a year ago, from COVID-19 (April 1, 2020). He was 88.
Julie McGee guest curated the exhibition. The author of “David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar” (2006), she is an associate professor of Africana studies and art history at the University of Delaware. McGee paid tribute to Driskell in September during the John Wilmerding Symposium on American Art 2020: A Tribute to David C. Driskell, hosted online by the National Gallery of Art in partnership with the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She gave the keynote address, speaking at length about Driskell’s life and artistic practice.

“David was the best storyteller. He was the best chronicler of his own life. Those who had the opportunity to listen to him and be around him know this. He would say that the importance of storytelling is very much rooted to the South. And he would then also point to Bearden, Romare Bearden, who was a colleague, a mentor of sorts, a friend, and Bearden’s own interest in storytelling, Southern folklore, creating images that spoke to a narrative of Southern traditions,” McGee said.

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“ICONS OF NATURE AND HISTORY” is co-organized with the Portland Museum of Art in Maine, where the exhibition will be presented in June 2021, and then will travel to a third and final venue next fall, The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

“David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History” touring schedule:

- High Museum of Art, Atlanta | Feb. 6-May 9, 2021
- Portland Museum of Art | Portland, Maine | June 19-Sept. 12, 2021

The choice of venues reflects Driskell’s biography. The exhibition will be on view in cities and at institutions with close connections to Driskell, who was born in Georgia, lived part-time in Maine, and first visited The Phillips Collection as an undergraduate at Howard University.

An artist and scholar, Driskell was a highly regarded authority on African American art. He helped build the field; served as a nexus for three generations of artists, curators, and art historians; and taught and mentored untold numbers.
Driskell led the art departments at Howard University (two stints as acting chair), Fisk University, and the University of Maryland, College Park. After 21 years as a professor of art, he retired from UMD in 1998 as a Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of Art. He split his time between Hyattsville, Md., and Falmouth, Maine.

His ties to the High Museum were established more than four decades ago. In 1976, Driskell organized “Two Centuries of Black American Art” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). An expansive presentation showcasing works produced between 1750 and 1950, the landmark exhibition was the first historically comprehensive survey of African American art. The show traveled to three additional institutions, including the High Museum (Jan. 8–Feb. 20, 1977).

Driskell was a friend of the High Museum and established an important collaboration with the institution in 2005. Administered by the Atlanta museum, the annual David C. Driskell Prize, recognizes the contributions of artists and curators to the field of African American art. Funds raised through the Driskell Prize dinner support acquisitions by African American artists. Since its inception, 48 works have been added to the High’s collection.

Maine served as a retreat, a haven of creativity where he built his first official studio. Prior to earning his BFA from Howard (1955), Driskell spent the summer after his junior year at Skowhegan in rural Maine (1953). The experience was transformative, altering the lens through which he viewed nature and seeding a desire to return. In 1961, Driskell purchased a home in Falmouth, Maine, and it became his summer home. He added a studio and maintained expansive gardens on the property, which is about 15 minutes from Portland.

Over the decades Driskell was active in the area, serving on the boards at Skowhegan, Maine College of Art, and the Colby College Museum of Art. He also taught at Bowdoin and Bates colleges. A few years ago, the Center for Maine
Contemporary Art in Rockland presented "Renewal and Form," a solo show featuring Driskell's woodcuts, serigraphs, linocuts, and monoprints.


Maurer, an associate curator at The Phillips Collection, wrote about Driskell’s connections to the museum, which span about 70 years, beginning with his tenure as a Howard student. He enrolled at the HBCU in 1950. Washington was segregated, but similar to museums on the National Mall, the Phillips was open to all races.

Driskell first visited the museum with his instructors. Maurer cited an oral history interview with Driskell from the Phillips Collection Archives (conducted Dec. 23, 2008, by Donita M. Moorhus at Driskell's home in Hyattsville, Md.). Maurer said the artist felt at ease in the galleries, marveled at seeing his professor James Lesesne Wells's work on display, and even courted Thelma Deloatch, his future wife, at the museum. (They married in 1952.)
“I was obviously very race conscious, having been brought up in the South and coming here and experiencing the extension of the Southern way of life. I still felt accepted at the Phillips,” Driskell said. He added: “I couldn’t go to any other gallery in Washington, any other place, to see my teacher’s work, and I think some of it was race consciousness, but for the most part, it was pride that I knew this person, and his work is in the Phillips. It extended that welcome to me.”

Decades later, the Phillips acquired its first work by Driskell in 2009, and he served on the museum’s board of trustees from 2016-19.

At the conclusion of her keynote address, McGee shared a few words about “Icons of Nature and History.”

“This exhibition, which includes about 60 objects with a focus on his practice as a painter, an artist who trained in conventional practices that were Eurocentric, who understood American painting, who was tremendously moved by African art and the ancestral impulse that he saw in African art, and then an artist tied to Southern roots,” she said.

“Exhibitions, including this one, are one of the markers of a lifetime of joy and beauty. The way that he understood the significance of the creative practice was very much connected to the sense of the divine, that the creative act is a connection to a divine. Nature, too, was connected to the divine, because nature brought us nourishment and joy and beauty.”

McGee continued: “There was a saying that he would use from an Old Testament psalm written by King David, right? So we can laugh and think about David as King David. He was certainly a king for us in many ways. And the line that he would quote is ‘Joy cometh in the morning,’ and he referred to that in many ways, that the studio practice, that sacred space, brought joy, but it came out of the turmoil of finding the right form.”

“David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History” is forthcoming at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Feb. 6–May 9, 2021

FIND MORE about The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park, on the institution’s website
DAVID DRISKELL (American, 1931–2020), “Self-Portrait as Nkisi Nkondi Figure,” 2010 (graphite, charcoal and mixed media). Collection of the artist. © Estate of David C. Driskell
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