

SCHOLAR CURATOR CREATOR

The multifarious achievements and talents of the late David Driskell are commemorated in a retrospective at the High Museum of Art.

David Driskell's accomplishments are innumerable. As a scholar, he played a pivotal role in the recognition of African American art and the significance of its contribution to the art-historical canon. He authored numerous publications, including some 40 exhibition catalogues and seven books on African American art. As a curator, he organized the landmark exhibition "Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950," which toured the country in the mid-1970s, and more than 30 other shows. In 1996, Driskell advised the White House in its first purchase of an artwork by a Black artist—*Sand Dunes at Sunset: Atlantic City* (1885) by Henry Ossawa Tanner. As a collector, he collected hundreds of works by artists such as Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas,

and James Van Der Zee. The 1998 exhibition "Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection," which began at the University of Maryland and went on to several other cities, featured 100 works from his cache. And as an artist, he created powerful paintings and prints for some seven decades. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in museums and galleries around the world and is in the collections of a number of major institutions.

Driskell died at 88 in April 2020 due to complications of Covid-19. This month, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta mounts "David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History" (February 6–May 9), the first major survey of Driskell's work since his death. The exhibition brings together 60 works dating from the 1950s to the 2000s.

By Sarah E. Fensom



Previous spread: David C. Driskell, *Memories of a Distant Past*, 1975, egg tempera, gouache, and collage on paper.

This page: *Flowing Like a River*, 1996-1997, collage and gouache on paper.

The paintings, drawings, and prints on view are drawn from museums, private collections, the artist's estate, and his longtime dealer, DC Moore Gallery in New York.

The High has a long relationship with Driskell. It hosted both "Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1950" and "Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection" during their national tours. The museum has several works by the artist in its collection. And in 2005, it established the David C. Driskell prize, the first national award to honor contributions by artists and scholars in the field of African American art (past recipients include Mark Bradford, Rashid Johnson, Amy Sherald, and Naima J. Keith). "Beyond David's prolific career as an international artist and scholar," says the High's director, Rand Suffolk, "he was a dear friend of the Museum, in fact a life trustee. Without question, his work, as well as his generosity of spirit and intellect, have been transformational for the field."

The exhibition traces Driskell's career from his education at Howard University and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture to his early teaching post at Talladega College and later, the studio at his summer refuge in Falmouth, Maine. Julie McGee,

a guest curator and associate professor of Africana studies and art history at the University of Delaware, says, "Among the many gifts Driskell bequeaths to us is the delight of seeing the world through his eyes, and it is a journey of immeasurable beauty and grace."

Present in Driskell's work is a diverse ecosystem of elements: the Black American experience, the imagery and aesthetic innovation of the African diaspora, and his own incisive observations of the American landscape. Themes like pine trees and aspects of the natural world, still life, African masks, and iconographies drawn from his Christian and Southern upbringing recur throughout Driskell's oeuvre and are viewable throughout the High's show. Driskell often incorporates elements of collage in his work, which the exhibition reveals time and again. His rigorous exploration of materials led to his development of the hybrid technique Driskell called "collage-painting."

Michael Rooks, the High's Wieland Family curator of modern and contemporary art, says. "Driskell's command of vibrant color and line, and his attentiveness to what he called 'the symbolic presence of form,' endowed his subjects with a kind of frisson like that of an electrical charge, which made his work esthetically vigorous, bold and spirited."

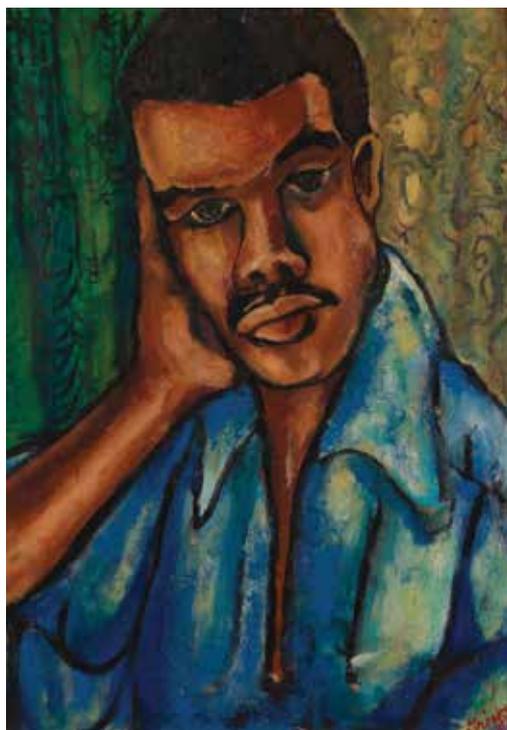
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Clockwise from top left: *Shaker Chair and Quilt*, 1988, encaustic and collage on paper; *Young Pines Growing*, 1959, oil on canvas, *Self-Portrait*, 1953, oil on board.

Two standouts of the exhibition are self-portraits. The earlier of the two, simply titled *Self-Portrait* (oil on board), was painted in 1953 and comes to the show from the artist's estate. When Driskell painted it, he was in his early 20s and studying art at Howard University in Washington, D.C. That same year, he also received a scholarship to participate in the Skowhegan School's intensive program. The expressive portrait shows a serious and confident young man. Clad in a blue shirt and wearing a thin mustache, the artist gazes directly at the viewer. The attention to pattern and texture in the work provides an early example of Driskell's ability to balance a confluence of elements in one picture.

Driskell painted the other self-portrait two decades later. *Self-Portrait as Beni* ("I Dream Again of Benin") (egg tempera, gouache, and collage), is in the



High's collection and dates to 1974. In this work, Driskell's face morphs partially into a Benin mask, while rich patterns akin to African textiles and elements of collage swirl around his head and upper torso. The 16th century ivory masks of the Benin Empire in West Africa are considered masterpieces, and were stolen by the British during the punitive Benin Expedition of 1897. Today, examples of these ornate and evocative masks are in the collections of the Met, the British Museum in London, and the Linden Museum. James Baldwin said that in African art, "the artistic image is not intended to represent the thing itself, but rather the reality of the force the thing contains." By portraying himself with elements of these masks, Driskell acknowledges that force as well as a vast history of African royalty, ritual, and colonization. This convergence of his own image with the

BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, BRUNSWICK, MAINE; MUSEUM PURCHASE, GEORGE OTIS HAMLIN FUND, 1990.2 © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL, COURTESY OF DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK; CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM, JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN PURCHASE AWARD, © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL; COLLECTION OF THE ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL; MARYLAND. © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL. COURTESY DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTOGRAPH BY LUC DEMERS

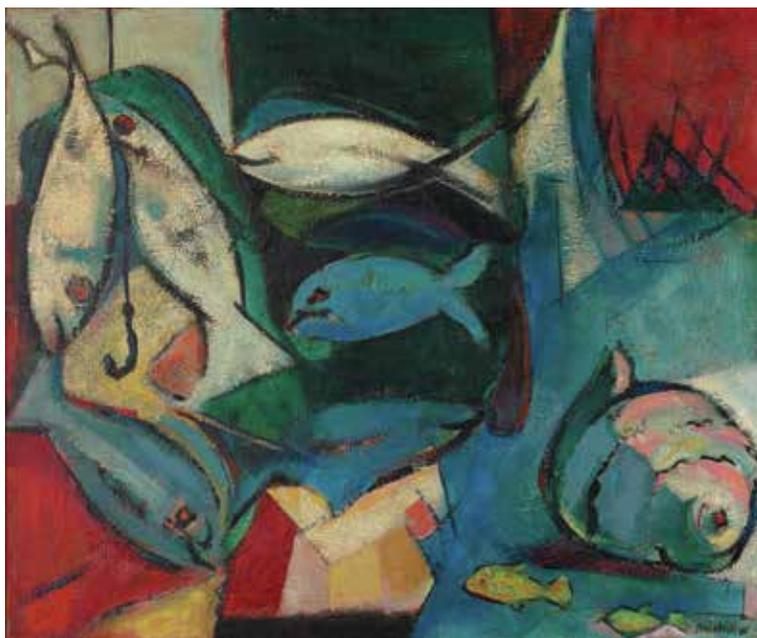


From top: *Untitled*, 1958, ink and charcoal on paper; *Fisherman's Pride*, 1956, oil on canvas.

mask represents at once a cultural lineage and the rupture of that lineage caused by American slavery.

Driskell was born in Eatonton, Georgia in 1931. His father, a minister, created religious paintings and drawings, and his mother, a homemaker, made baskets and quilts. At five, Driskell moved to North Carolina. There he worked on a 13-acre farm with his family and attended segregated schools. His mother passed down to him a washing pot that her mother, Driskell's Grandma Leathy, used during slavery. She would, recounted Driskell in an oral history interview with the Smithsonian, stick her head in the pot so no one would hear her praying for her freedom.

While at Howard, Driskell met the renowned African American art historian and artist James A. Porter, who guided him to study both studio art and art history. After attending the Skowhegan school, he graduated from Howard in 1955. He held a teaching post at Talladega College in Alabama for several years before he earned his MFA from the Catholic



University of America in 1962. Afterwards, Driskell spent nearly two more decades as an educator at historically Black colleges and universities, starting at Howard in 1963 and moving to Fisk University in Nashville in 1966.

Among the works in the exhibition dating to this period in the 1950s–60s are several depicting pine trees—like the geometric abstraction *Young Pines Growing* (1959, oil on canvas) that features an almost Cubist composition; *Two Pines #2* (1964, oil on canvas), an abstracted work with thick lines that jut out from the surface like pine needles; and even *Untitled* (1958), an ink and charcoal on paper that features fluid expressive lines and cross-hatching that just hints at fir trees surrounding a central cross. Driskell devoted his MFA thesis to a series of pine trees, which he saw as a spiritual symbol representing everlasting life. He continued depicting the subject in his work because, as he told the Smithsonian, “it doesn’t change.” Driskell said, “I always felt that nature was the basic influence in my work and

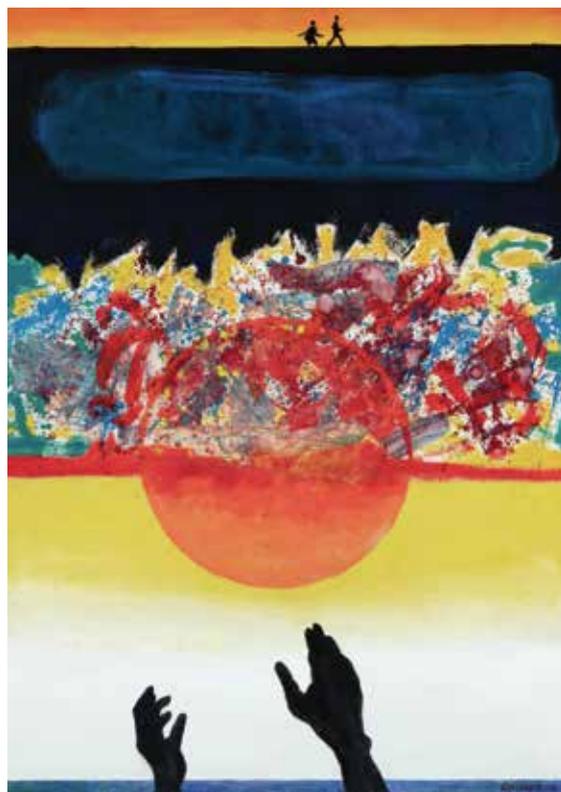
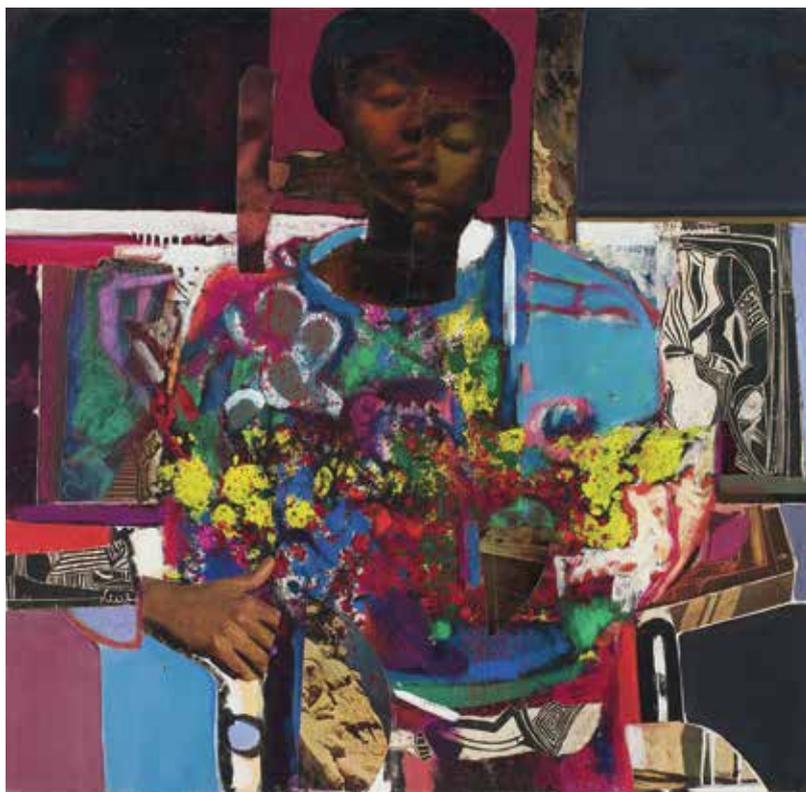
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Ghetto Wall #2, 1970, oil, acrylic and collage on linen.

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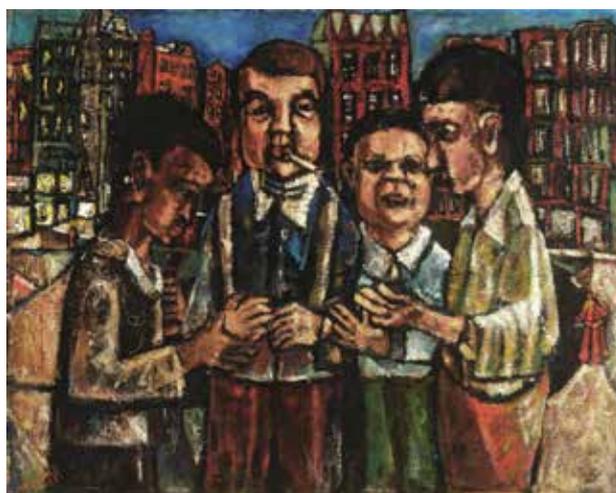


Clockwise from top left: *Woman with Flowers*, 1972, oil and collage on canvas; *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, 1972, acrylic on canvas; *City Quartet*, 1953, oil on canvas.

that there was this spiritual role that nature played: the evolution of form; the idea that it is up to us to have the intellect to see within the confines of nature those things that will add to our visual understanding of the world—our visual literacy in the sense that the tree is out there for us to see, use and experience”

While at Fisk, he curated exhibitions that showcased Black artists, like Ellis Wilson, William T. Williams, and Aaron Douglas. He also began to catalogue and archive works of art made by Black artists, essentially building the context and skeletal structure of a new sector of arts scholarship. Referring to Driskell’s achievements in the forward to Julie L. McGee’s biography *David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar*, Keith Morrison, then dean of the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, wrote, “Very few scholars in the annals of human history can be said to have established an entire field of study.” Driskell “did just that.”

Driskell’s scholarship eventually led to “Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950,” which opened at LACMA in 1976. The most significant exhibition of its kind, it featured 200 works by both anonymous craft workers and 63



named artists. Recognizing that white Americans, and as he recalled LACMA’s board, had little or no knowledge of art by Black Americans, Driskell set out to educate and earn overdue credit. “I was looking for a body of work which showed first of all that blacks had been stable participants in American visual culture for more than 200 years,” he told the *Times* in 1977, “and by stable participants I simply mean that in many cases they had been the backbone.” Driskell also noted that it was important for work by Black artists to be distinguished in the broader art context. “We don’t go around saying ‘white art,’ but I think it’s very important for us to keep saying ‘black art’ until it becomes recognized as American art.”

Driskell’s works from this period became even more robust in color and denser in forms, with a dialed-up usage of collage passages. After his first trip to Africa in 1969, Driskell began creating works influenced by African masks, like the graphic *Memories of a Distant Past*, a 1975 egg tempera, goache, and collage on paper in the High’s exhibition. The figure also became important in his work again. In *Woman with Flowers*, a 1972 oil and collage on canvas that



comes to the exhibition from the Art Bridges collection, Driskell depicts a seated female figure in a nuanced collage technique. The result is a complex union of Picasso and Romare Bearden.

The exhibition also features *Homage to Romare*, a 1976 collage and gouache on Masonite, that was very directly inspired by Bearden, a close friend and mentor of Driskell's. In fact, Driskell was so deeply influenced by Bearden during this period that at the opening of his first one-person show in New York in 1980, Bearden took Driskell aside and encouraged him to find his own voice. Driskell recalls that Bearden showed him one particular landscape in the exhibition and said "Now, that's a collage; it's not me, it's you. That's your voice in collage." Taking the advice to heart, Driskell spent two months at Yaddo in the summer of 1980, developing a collage technique that involved tearing paper rather than cutting it, as Driskell did in works like *Dancing Angel* (1974). A work from Driskell's stay at the artist's retreat, *Yaddo Circle* (1980, egg tempera and gouache on handmade paper), finds pride of place in the High's show. An homage to another major influence and friend of Driskell's, *Night Vision (for Jacob Lawrence)* is from much later. Dated to 2005, the collage and gouache on paper, marries several of Driskell's themes—elements of nature, African masks, a celebration of the history of Black art, and a transcendent representation of the figure.



At the time of his death, Driskell held the title of distinguished university professor of art, emeritus at University of Maryland, College Park. The university, where he taught from 1977 through 1998, established the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora in 2001. He was the recipient of nine honorary doctorates and several foundation fellowships, among them those from the Harmon Foundation, the Danforth Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. He was given numerous awards including a Presidential Medal of Honor in the Humanities and the Skowhegan Lifetime Legacy Award. In 2018, he became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Morrison wrote in 2006, "The achievements of David C. Driskell are as grand as Mount Everest." Many more people, however, have reached the Himalayan peak.

"David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History" travels to the Portland Museum of Art on June 19 and will be on view through September 12. After that, it moves to the Phillips Collection on October 6, staying there through January 9, 2022. [A](#)

From left: *Night Vision (for Jacob Lawrence)*, 2005, collage and gouache on paper.