

“IN GREAT COMPANY”

PROFESSOR DAVID C. DRISKELL: 1931-2020

In 1969, the legacy of the achievements of African American artists and their history, was in dire need of an absolute continuum to rescue it from the suffocation of its' national importance. That year, James A. Porter (1905-1970), reprinted his 1943 textbook, “**Modern Negro Art**”, with a new introduction by him. In 1992, I had the pleasure of working on the revised edition by the Moorland library at Howard, and to work with Professor David C. Driskell, who also wrote a new introduction. This provided for a connecting and continuing discourse for new audiences of students, art historians, and researchers, in what he stated as “**enabling a permanent continuity of the worthiness of serious research, and critical analysis of Black artists, and Black art history**”.

A 1955 graduate of Howard, Professor Driskell began his studies in 1949 as a history major but, his outstanding work in the drawing class of Professor James Wells, not only afforded him to be an art major, but justified full scholarship status. It was Professor Porter, one of the 73 Negro artists in the trailblazing 1930 Harmon Foundation show, at the U.S. National Museum, who then urged him to switch to art history: “***you just can't afford to be an artist, you must also show the world what our people have contributed***”.

Driskell began to excel in the stringent art-school type curriculum of art history and art appreciation, followed by design, drawing, oil painting, watercolor and printmaking. After what he thought was unfair criticism in Professor James Herrings class, he achieved his greatest triumph, being recommended to attend on scholarship, the prestigious summer course at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, winning the 1953 Leonard Bacour Progress Prize in Art. In the Fall, the Art Department had expanded tremendously in the fields of advanced and Graduate studies, and he was afforded his own studio to paint, and to work as a student curator under Dr. Albert Carter (1915-1977) the Curator of the Art Gallery, and assisted with the first major exhibition of African Art in Washington, D.C.

It was around this time he began, and probably unknowingly, a serious emulation of Professor Porters' career-path endeavors.

He was introduced to Harmon Foundation Director, Mary Beattie Brady by him as a student in 1954, who eventually was instrumental in the future transfer of their archives to him upon her retirement in 1967. By quickly absorbing the importance of the Gallery exhibitions, he contributed to their carefully constructed designs to enhance art history to the student body. This introduced the art majors, the University community, and the general public, to the works of **generations** of African American artists.

After earning his B. F.A. from Howard in 1955, and his M.F.A from Catholic University in 1962, he took advantage of the many available southern collegiate teaching opportunities. His teaching career began at Talladega College in 1958, and he exhibited in the exhibition at the new art gallery at Howard, **“New Vistas in American Art”**, in 1961. He evolved into a true art historian, excelling as a Gallery Curator and author, but most importantly, establishing himself, like Porter, as a practicing artist through teaching and exhibiting, as well as successes as a consultant. When discussing the importance of being associated with Howard as a student, teacher, director and administrator, he would exude a quiet and poignant happiness, especially when emphasizing the successes of his classmates. He would cite friends such as **Franklin White** and **Earl Hooks**, attributing their steadfastness during the legal segregation eras, to be competitive and to overcome the fatal “stage of experimentation” that befell many hoping for an artistic career. He admired Professor Herring, who as the only Black member of the College Art Association, gave illustrated gallery lectures and, **radio** talks on Negro Art, in the 1930’s at the Metropolitan Museum of Art He would always encourage students to do research into the lives of ignored Black artists such as, John Henry Adams and William A. Harper. To celebrate the 75th anniversary of Howard, Mr. Herring curated what was billed as the “greatest” show of Negro art ever seen.

The “**Negro in the American Scene**” despite the fact, that all of the artists were non-African Americans, was indeed a great success for the religious community of integrationists, and enriched the “**Negro Theme**” in art created by Dr. Alain Locke (1886-1954) in 1940. That same year, history Professor Walter Dyson (1882-1958) produced the straightforward but elegant compendium celebrating Howards’ 75th anniversary.

Always recommended by Professor Driskell, “**Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education**” is still critical to understanding the historical position of Howard’s art department within the national scope of artistic events. Additionally, study materials written about the department by authors, Alonzo Aden, Ruby Kendrick, and James Herring were complimented by special student exhibitions at the Department of the Interior. By the 1960s’ Professor Driskell continued to help shape the story of Black art in America. The construction of the new Fine Arts Complex at Howard in 1960, and the publication of “**American Negro Art**” by British author Cedric Dover, afforded greater opportunities while teaching at Talladega College in Alabama. His former mentor, now colleague James Porter, invited him to do illustrated lectures in art history, and to participate in the 1961 celebratory inaugural exhibit, “**New Vistas in American Art**”.

In 1962 he was selected as a full-time faculty member, and in 1963-64, was appointed Acting Chairman of the Art Department and Director of the Art Gallery, due to Professor Porter's sabbatical to Africa. It was during this period that he published a complete informational brochure of the Art Department for the public. As a member of the American Federation of Arts, funding was approved for his selection and purchase of 15 modern masterworks for the permanent collection. In 1966, Professor Driskell became Chairman of the Art Department and Director of the Carl Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk University. Mr. Van Vechten (1880-1964), was a leader in the Harlem Renaissance as an author, (*Nigger Heaven*, 1926) and as a celebrity photographer. As gallery director, Professor Driskell inherited the collections, and the works of two of America's greatest artists. **Georgia O' Keeffe** (1887-1986), was known as the "mother of American Modernism" and her husband, **Alfred Stieglitz** (1864-1946) who pioneered foul-weather photography with urban night views, as fine art. They gifted Fisk over 100 works by modern masters which included Paul Cezanne, August Renoir, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Charles De Muth, Diego Rivera, and John Marin plus, works by themselves. Driskell's congenial relationship with Mrs. O' Keefe resulted in not only her financial contributions, but enabled Fisk to become a solid foundation in the community with nation-wide admiration.

That same year, Professor Porter was honored at the White House for the 25th anniversary celebration of the National Gallery of Art, as one of 25 artists honored for “**Distinguished Service to Education in Art**”. The following year, he and his wife, University Librarian, Dorothy Porter (1905-1995) curated, researched, and exhibited a monumental art history achievement. His continuous research on Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) since 1933, led to the purchase of 3 works for the collection after their exhibition: “**Ten Afro-American Artists of the Nineteenth Century**”. Along with the “**Charles White: Images of Dignity**” show, they both created remarkable documents of learning for the University Centennial. These achievements enabled art history study at HBCU’s, to attain a deserved embrace within the Academy. In February 1968, Ebony Magazine updated the world on the history and current status of Black artists with a major treatise: “**The Evolution of Afro-American Art: 1800-1950**”. Not only did this exhibition at City College in New York include Professor Driskell’s work, but also included fellow Howard alumnus and award-winning illustrator, Robert Pious (1908-1983). In the November issue, Howard Watercolor and Design Professor Lois Jones’ career and achievements, were honored as “**The Artist of Sunlit Canvases**”. The next year, Professor Porter’s **Modern Negro Art** was reprinted with a new introduction, announcing its’ legacy as the definitive textbook on the subject of African American Art.

Related events include the outstanding publication of “**Black Artists on Art**” a first-time look at personal descriptive narratives by contemporary Black artists, by Samella Lewis (1924) in 1969. The sudden passing of James Porter in December of 1970, resulted in the naming of the two campus galleries honoring him and Professor Herring. The Art Department was then chaired by Art Students League professor, Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999). He single-handedly cured nation-wide campus unrests with his mural painting classes and installations, which were highlighted in the Ebony magazine December 1971 issue: “**The Metamorphosis of Howard University**”. The first graduate of the Department of Art, Alma Thomas (1891-1978), celebrated her first solo professional show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, but always remembered the segregation indignities she and Professor Porter endured in joint showings at movie theaters and department stores! Along with Professor Herring and Art Gallery Curator Alonzo Aden, she attempted to alleviate this exhibiting embarrassment by creating the **Barnett-Aden** house gallery in 1940. It proved to be an exciting addition to Washington art patronage into the 1960’s, along with another house-gallery, James and Helen Masons’ “**Smith-Mason Gallery**” in 1966.

In 1975, Professor Driskell was extremely busy exhibiting his work and in 1976, cataloging the collections at Fisk University with Professor Earl Hooks, but his greatest achievement to date was the curation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition: “ **Two Centuries of Black American Art, 1750-1950**”, was an oddly-dated Centennial celebration of American Independence that included 200 works by 63 artists. It was a monumental undertaking which literally vowelized artistic achievement to the masses, on a grand scale. That same year, he departed Fisk to assume a professorship at the University of Maryland, and became Chairman of the Department of Art in 1978. In 1980 he had an exhibition: “**David C. Driskell, a Survey**” in the Art Gallery there, and in 1981, Alma Mater, after Alma Thomas in 1974, bestowed upon him the Distinguished Alumni Award. In the next two decades he unintentionally enriched his emulation of his mentor, James A. Porter, embarking upon an exhilarating journey of exhibiting, publishing, teaching and most importantly, world-wide consulting about Black American art. Notable feats include:

“**Hidden Heritage: African American Art, 1800-1950**” for the Art Museum Association of America, 1985.

“**Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America**” for the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987.

“ Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent” for The California African-American Museum, 1989.

Exhibited the at prestigious, **“ American Academy of Arts and Letters”**, New York, 1993.

Editor for **“African American Visual Aesthetics: A Post Modernist View”** for the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.

He was fervently sought as a consultant to The White House in 1996 for the purchase of **“Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City 1895”** by 1909 N.A.D. inductee, Henry O. Tanner, (1859-1937). This event of national news interest, strongly contributed to his Distinguished Alumni Award from The Catholic University of America. In 1997 Professor Driskell was honored as a Distinguished Professor of Art at the University of Maryland, and in 1998 retired with the distinction of the creation of **“The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans, and the African Diaspora”**. It sponsors exhibitions, seminars and research opportunities, plus the **James A. Porter and David Driskell Book Award** for writing on original historic subjects pertaining to African American Visual Culture.

That same year, the University of Maryland Art Gallery held a 100-work retrospective curated by Juanita Holland: **“Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection”**.

The year closed out with him being highlighted five times in a new textbook by Dr. Sharon Patton, "**African American Art**".

The most ambitious undertaking in the field of exhibiting and teaching African-American studio art, and contextual art history analysis together, occurred in 1999. Sponsored by the Andover Academy of American Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, "**To Preserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities**" was an eight city, two year journey, exhibiting the collections of six institutions: Howard, Fisk, Hampton, Clark-Atlanta, Tuskegee and North Carolina Central. Not only were their collections absorbed at the major civic museums adjacent to each school but, it was the ancillary shows of *extra* masterpieces from their permanent collections, that continuously made sparkling headlines. This event simply personified the passion of the person even more, because Professor Driskell was exuberantly pleased to be a part of both the Fisk and Howard contributions, which he loved to converse about on occasions of his presence.

At the turn of the century, like James Porter, he was honored at the White House in 2000 for his numerous contributions as an artist, art historian and a teacher. **The National Humanities Medal** is personally selected and awarded by the President of the United States to living individuals. The awardees' work "**must have deepened the Nations' understanding of the Humanities, that helps expand American access to important resources in the Humanities**".

Along with 12 others, he was especially proud to be honored alongside Toni Morrison and Quincy Jones, and was cited for: **“Distinguished Service to Education in Art, and for his ability to awaken in students, a sense of our visual inheritance”**. In 1977, Dr. Driskell became the family art consultant for film and television star Bill Cosby. A 1986 episode of the **Cosby Show** titled **“The Auction”** caused a national avouchment for African American Art. It centered around the purchase of a masterwork by the award-winning artist **Ellis Wilson (1899-1977)**. Because Howard has three of his oil paintings in its’ permanent collection: **“Fishermens’ Wives” 1960**, **“Mother with Three Sons” 1946**, and **“Harlem Belle” 1949**, this media exposure brought national repute to the gallery and the University.

This event precipitately hastened the 2001 publication of the long-awaited book: **“The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.”** Pomegranate Publishing continued their relationship with Professor Driskell by creating the **“David C. Driskell Series of African American Art”** in 2002, beginning with Charles White and ending with Hughie Lee-Smith in 2010. 2005 brought three distinct honors to him.

He was a lifetime Trustee of the High Museum in Atlanta. “The **David C. Driskell Prize**” of \$25,000.00 was created for beginning or middle scholars/artists, who contribute an original and important contribution to African American Art, through their artistic practice or scholarship.” I had the honor of sharing the limelight with he and Professor Richard Powell, as one of the triumvirate entries...as both exhibiting artist and essayist. Four years in the planning, research, and location of alumni, **“A Proud Continuum: Eight Decades of Art at Howard University”** was the first major exhibition for Art Department Alumni. Its’ notable enduringness was attained, by strictly adhering to only one work by the 122 alumni within the broad octamerous timeline. The Department of Art was created by Professor James Herring for **“jobs in the industry”** in 1922, and its’ exhibiting mission was nationally established with the inclusion of it’s first graduate, Alma Thomas (1891-1978), class of 1924. She previously exhibited at Fisk University in 1971 for Professor Driskell: **“Recent Paintings by Alma Thomas: Earth and Space Series, 1961-1971”**. She was also the first art graduate to receive the **Howard University Distinguished Alumni Award** in 1974, followed by Professor Driskell in 1981, and his classmate Lou Stovall in 2001.

The James A. Porter Colloquium, was created by Howard University Art Department Chairman, Floyd Coleman (1939-2019) in 1989, for the exchange of scholarship, ideas, lectures and exhibitions, to celebrate and keep the legacy of James Porter's work alive. When Professor Coleman created the **David C. Driskell Annual Lecture** in 2001, it turned out to be a double delight, when Professor Driskell was himself honored at the 2005 Colloquium Awards Gala to an adoring capacity crowd. Our tribute to Professor Driskell will end with what he cherished most...academic references. In 2006, Julie L. Mc Gee published: "**David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar**" and in 2007, Adrienne Childs published: "**Evolution: Five Decades of Printmaking by David C. Driskell**".

One of his most endearing memories he loved to talk about was how proud he was of his classmates **and** the Howard University faculty. Household names included of course, beginning with James Porter, Lois Jones, Ed Love, James Wells, Albert Carter, Tritobia Benjamin, Starmanda Bullock, Jeff Donaldson, Hughie Lee-Smith, Yvonne Carter and most importantly, Lila Asher.

I had the pleasure of visiting his Center in 2018 with Dr. Gwendolyn Everett, our Gallery Director. Always the gracious host with endearing manners, he delighted in touring us the facilities, and the future expansion plans of the Cole Building.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I would like to end my tribute to Dr. Driskell with a small story of great importance.

He has taught us to be practicing artists through his own teaching, painting and exhibiting. He also taught us to be our own art historians by guiding us through successes in archiving, researching, curating and most of all, to engage in consulting opportunities. Like James A. Porter, and the entire Howard University art faculty family: “he has always inspired his students to heights of achievable artistic attainment, theretofore unknown amongst themselves.” He has provided us with a storehouse of culture, to nurture the mind...from a true “**son of the lake**”...that satisfies the soul.

I told him about my insistence to Mrs. Porter to personally request that her husbands’ academic photograph occupy the last remaining spot in the Moorland Library’s “**Hall of Heroes**” reading room. After three attempts I remarked to her: “There is only one spot left, and it is next to the clock. When you come in, its’ “Porter time to get to work, and when you leave, its’ Porter time to come back”. He looked at me very quietly and said : “I did not know that” and simply remarked with a smile, “you know, **we are in great company**”.

@Scott W. Baker, B.F.A. 72, M.A. 75