

# “IN GREAT COMPANY”

PROFESSOR DAVID C. DRISKELL: 1931-2020

A 1955 graduate of Howard, Professor David C. Driskell began his studies in 1949 as a history major, however, his outstanding work in the drawing class of Professor James Wells not only led him to become an art major and afforded him a full scholarship. It was Professor James A. Porter who then urged him to switch to art history, stating: ***“You just can’t afford to be an artist, you must also show the world what our people have contributed.”***

Driskell excelled in the rigorous art history curriculum, as well as in design, drawing, painting, and printmaking. He soon achieved his greatest triumph as a student—a scholarship to the prestigious summer program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where he won the 1953 Leonard Bacour Progress Prize in Art. In the Fall, Dr. Driskell assigned his own painting studio by the Howard University College of Fine Arts and studied under Dr. Albert Carter (1915-1977) the Curator of the Art Gallery, who Dr. Driskell assisted with the a major exhibition of African Art.

Quickly recognizing the importance of the Howard University Gallery of Art and its collection, Dr. Driskell curated shows that introduced 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, Dr. Driskell looked to university teaching. His professorial career began at Talladega College in 1958. In 1961, he exhibited at the Howard's new art gallery in the show, "**New Vistas in American Art.**" Over time, he evolved into a true art historian, a curator and author, art consultant, and most importantly, a practicing artist.

In 1962, Dr. Driskell was selected as a full-time faculty member at Howard; and in 1963-64, he was appointed Acting Chairman of the Art Department and Director of the Art Gallery during Professor Porter's sabbatical year. During this period, Dr. Driskell published a complete informational brochure of the Art Department for the public. As a member of the American Federation of Arts, he secured funding for the 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. As gallery director, Professor Driskell cultivated a relationship with two of America's' greatest artists. **Georgia O' Keeffe** (1887-1986) was known as the "mother of American Modernism" and her husband, photographer **Alfred Stieglitz** (1864-1946) pioneered urban nocturnal views as fine art. Thanks in large part to Professor Driskell, the couple donated over 100 works by modern masters to Fisk, including Paul Cezanne, August Renoir, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Charles

Demuth, Diego Rivera, and John Marin plus works by themselves.

In the 1970s, Professor Driskell exhibited his own work widely and he cataloged the Fisk University collection with Professor Earl Hooks. His greatest achievement of this period was the curation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition: "Two Centuries of Black American Art, 1750-1950," which included 200 works by 63 artists. It was a monumental undertaking that exposed black artistic achievement to the masses on a grand scale. The 1970s also saw Professor Driskell's departure from Fisk to assume a professorship at the University of Maryland, where he became Chairman of the Department of Art in 1978. In 1980 he was honored with a solo exhibition at the gallery there: "David C. Driskell, a Survey"; and in 1981, his alma mater, Howard, bestowed upon him the Distinguished Alumni Award.

Over the next two decades, following the career path of his mentor, James A. Porter, Dr. Driskell embarked upon an exhilarating journey of exhibiting, publishing, teaching and most importantly, world-wide consulting about Black American art. Notable publications 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; and "Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent" for The California African-American Museum in 1989.

He exhibited at the prestigious, “American Academy of Arts and Letters” in New York in 1993; edited “African American Visual Aesthetics: A Post-Modernist View” for the Smithsonian in 1995. Consulted for The White House in 1996, arranging for the purchase of “Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City 1895” painted by Henry O. Tanner in 1909. This feat, of national news interest, strongly contributed to his Distinguished Alumni Award from The Catholic University of America that same year. In 1997 Professor Driskell was honored as a Distinguished Professor of Art at the University of Maryland; and in 1998 he retired with the distinction of having established there “The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans, and the African Diaspora,” which houses his archive and which sponsors exhibitions, seminars and research opportunities, as well as 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 and entitled “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.”

His most ambitious undertaking in the fields of exhibiting and teaching African American art and contextualizing black art history 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 shown at the major civic museums adjacent to each school but, the ancillary shows of additional masterpieces from their permanent collections helped to continuously spark headlines. This undertaking embodied the passion that Professor Driskell had for black art institutions, especially HBCUs.

At the turn of the century, Professor Driskell was honored at the White House for his numerous contributions as an artist, art historian and a teacher. He received the National Humanities Medal which is personally 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”. Professor Driskell’s work surely did this. Indeed, he was cited for “Distinguished Service to Education in Art, and for his ability to awaken in students, a sense of our visual inheritance.”

Since 1977, Dr. Driskell had been the family art consultant for film and television star Bill Cosby. A 1986 episode of the *Cosby Show* titled “The Auction” brought national attention to black art collecting and centered on 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 acclaim to the University Gallery of Art. This event hastened the later publication in 2001 of the long-awaited book: “The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.,” published by Pomegranate in California. The press continued its 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. Among the series is the book “Faith Ringgold” which our current Associate Dean, Dr. Lisa Farrington, a one-time student of Dr. Driskell’s, wrote with his blessing and approval.

2005 brought three distinct honors to him. He became a lifetime Trustee of the High Museum in Atlanta where the \$25,000 “David C. Driskell Prize” was created for beginning and mid-career scholars and artists who make significant contributions to African American Art through their artistic practice or scholarship.

Four years in making, “A Proud Continuum: Eight Decades of Art at Howard University” was the first major exhibition for Art Department alumnae. I had the honor of sharing the limelight with Dr. Driskell and Professor Richard Powell as both an exhibiting artist and an essayist for the accompanying

catalog. The show included one work by each of the 122 alumnae over an eighty-year period.

For inclusion in the annual **James A. Porter Colloquium** (commenced in 1989 by Howard University Art Department Chairman, Floyd Coleman for the exchange of scholarship, ideas, lectures and exhibitions, to celebrate and keep the legacy of James Porter's work alive), Professor and Art Chair, Floyd 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 biographical 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."

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

June, 2020

## SCOTT BAKER PERSONAL STATEMENT

One of the most endearing memories I have of Dr. Driskell was how he loved to talk about how proud he was of his classmates and the Howard University faculty. Household names included 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 at that time. Always the gracious host with endearing manners, he delighted in touring us through the facilities, and the future expansion plans of the Cole Building.

Allow me to close with a small story of great importance to me. Dr. Driskell taught so many of us through his own teaching, painting and exhibiting. He also guided us through successes in archiving, researching, curating and most of all, and consulting. 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 than 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

June, 2020