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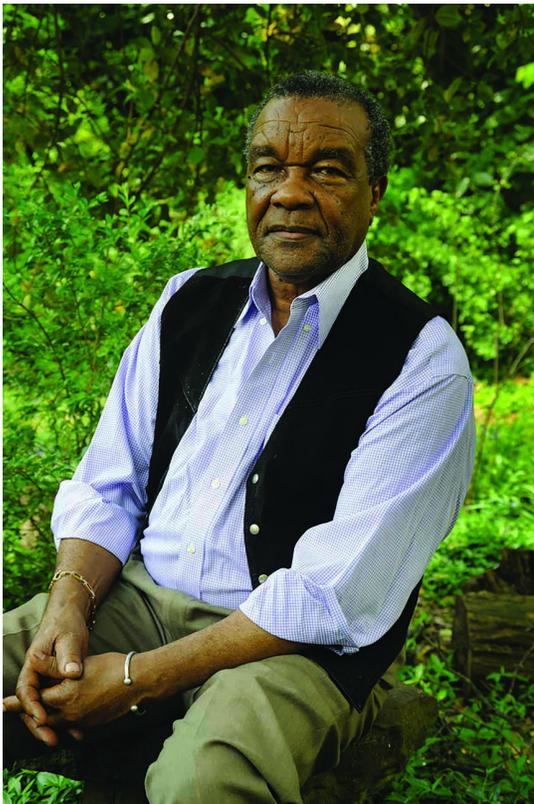
CULTURE TALKS

In Memoriam, Artists, Curators, and Scholars Share Memories of David C. Driskell: 'He Was an Agitator for African American Art'

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Apr 8, 2020 • 6:58 am

1 Comment

DAVID C. DRISKELL (1931-2020) helped build the field of African American art history and was a nexus for three generations of artists, curators, and scholars who have studied and are fortifying the discipline. A pivotal figure in American art and leading authority on African American art, Driskell died on April 1. He was 88. An artist, art historian, and educator, over the course of his more than six-decade career, Driskell touched the lives of many who considered him a mentor and friend. "He was a humanitarian and a renaissance man," photographer Frank Stewart said. "He was one of the key beacons that lit the way in our lives and careers," said curator Lowery Stokes Sims. Art historian Richard J. Powell described "Two Centuries of Black American Art" (1976), the landmark exhibition Driskell organized at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, as "paradigm-shifting." I reached out to more than two dozen people who learned from Driskell, collaborated with him, sat at his dinner table, and marveled that he always showed up for them. They provided reflections on his life, work, influence, and legacy:



David C. Driskell, Hyattsville, Md., 2011. | Courtesy DC Moore Gallery

CURLEE RAVEN HOLTON
Director, David C. Driskell Center
University of Maryland, College Park

DAVID CLYDE DRISKELL was a giant figure in American Art and a catalyst for greater recognition of artists of the diaspora. It's so hard to imagine a world without him. He heroically demonstrated his love for the arts, his cultural heritage as well as his fellow artists around the world. We at the Driskell Center will double our efforts to celebrate his contributions as an artist, historian and friend. At the core of his being Dr. Driskell was a mentor and teacher. The Driskell Center will continue to highlight the many ways in which he changed the lives of his students. He enriched and inspired me as a colleague, artist and friend. He loved us all and we all loved him.

SARAH WORKNEH
Co-Director, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture
Skowhegan, Maine

DAVID WAS A STEWARD of Skowhegan. After having attended in 1953, he was one of the longest affiliated artists and went on to play every possible role as a guardian of the school.

From my first days of working at Skowhegan, I felt David was always looking out for me. At Skowhegan's Annual Awards Dinner in 2015, I had written the speech that I was to deliver to close the evening. All day, I felt uncomfortable celebrating because there had been riots in my hometown of Baltimore for days following the murder of Freddie Gray. And so, in the cab on the way to the event, I re-wrote what I was going to say to talk about it. I was nervous obviously, because talking about riots, and police brutality, and death isn't what is typically discussed at a fancy gala. But when I stood at the podium and started to speak, I looked at David and he looked me straight in the eye and simply nodded a few times in approval, encouraging me on. That moment for me was one of the most important because it allowed me to know that what I was doing was right.

Having the support of this person, who had done so much more during moments where it was so much harder for our community to do anything at all, was something, and is something, that has propelled my work further. David was a constant reminder to me that our social and political worlds aren't separate from our art world, as distant as it may sometimes seem. I am truly grateful. It was a deep, deep honor to have known him, to share Skowhegan in common, to have his grace as an example, and his quiet, steadfast fire as a guide. The world would be a different place, and I would be a different person, without him.

"When I stood at the podium and started to speak, I looked at David and he looked me straight in the eye and simply nodded a few times in approval, encouraging me on. That moment for me was one of the most important because it allowed me to know that what I was doing was right."
— Sarah Workneh



April 26, 2016: David Driskell, Sarah Workneh, co-director of Skowhegan, and Thelma Driskell at Skowhegan 70th Anniversary Celebration Awards Dinner at The Plaza in New York City. | © Patrick McMullan, Photo by Sylvain Gaboury/PMC

ADRIENNE L. CHILDS

Independent curator, scholar, and art historian
Great Falls, Va.

DINNER WITH DRISKELL. In 1996, I went to the Driskell home to have dinner and discuss my hopes and fears about returning to graduate school in art history. Presiding over the beautifully laid table and delicious food he said, easily, "Come to Maryland!" And that warm invitation was all I needed to go back to school as thirty-something mother of two small children. Never could I have imagined curating exhibitions of Driskell's art, writing about him, collaborating with him on exhibitions and publications, and upon graduating with a Ph.D. serving as curator in the David C. Driskell Center. Like many former students, he has supported my career in profound ways—championing my work, writing letters, happily giving access to his network of friends and colleagues in the art world. I was one of the many beneficiaries of his fearless and successful effort to "grow the field." The field of African American art history that Driskell helped to build with erudition, elegance, and a generosity of spirit will live on in all of us he touched. In the past 24 years, I have dined with Driskell, family, and friends in Paris, Florence, New York, Atlanta, College Park, Los Angeles, Virginia, Martha's Vineyard, and around a beautiful pine table in Falmouth, Maine. He will be missed.

"The field of African American art history that Driskell helped to build with erudition, elegance, and a generosity of spirit will live on in all of us he touched." — Adrienne L. Childs

BRIDGET R. COOKS

Associate Professor, Department of African American Studies and Department of Art History
University of California, Irvine

I FIRST GOT TO KNOW Professor David C. Driskell when I was conducting research on exhibitions of art by African Americans for my book, "Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum." Up until that point, I had admired him from afar, like thousands of others, as a reader of his scholarship, viewer of his art, and audience member for his truly wonderful colloquium presentations. During our conversation about his role as curator of the landmark 1976 exhibition, "Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950," his relationship to me began to shift to mentor and friend. He encouraged me to write with confidence at a time when I needed it the most. Throughout the years, he continued to be generous with his time and invaluable insights.

David's work as an artist, curator, educator, scholar, and institution builder has made an immeasurable impact on the field of American art history. The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park, is one of several examples of his dedication to creative and academic work by and about Black people in particular. David was a model of excellence because, for him, that was the only way to get things done. I will forever be grateful for his selfless generosity and care.

HENRY JOHN DREWAL

Evjue-Bascom Professor Emeritus of African and African Diaspora Arts
University of Wisconsin, Madison

I HAD THE HONOR AND PRIVILEGE to work with David on a traveling exhibition project in the 1980s: "Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent" at the The California Afro-American Museum in Los Angeles.

We traveled in 1987 to Brazil with Aurelia Brooks, then director of CAAM, to meet and select Afro-Brazilian artists for the exhibition. We had a marvelous time with a wide range of artists and collectors during which David would regale us with stories about his life and the many artists he met in his travels around the globe. His sense of humor and warmth would captivate us as we listened and learned. His words and spirit nourished us...and I think it was that same nurturing energy that helped to make his garden (in Falmouth, Maine) flourish as it did! Those crops would then be transformed into delicious meals, shared with joy. His light shone brightly and touched many.



March 17, 2017: From left, Artists Lou Stovall, Martin Puryear, Keith Morrison, Sam Gilliam, and David Driskell at the Wyeth Foundation for American Art Symposium, Moderated by Ruth Fine, *The African American Art World in Twentieth-Century Washington, DC*, presented by CASVA | © 2017 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

RUTH FINE

Curator and Artist, Philadelphia

DAVID C. DRISKELL had an extraordinary memory, and generously shared his storehouse of information and insights on historical, racial, cultural, and nature subjects. He uniquely was a speaker at the National Gallery of Art in three categories, artist, curator/historian, and collector, in all of which his publications are legendary. His melding of abstraction and representation, and presentation of Black culture's concern with the natural world, will long be emulated and treasured.

Dr. Driskell's support for "The Art of Romare Bearden" and "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" exhibitions contributed to their success; and his "Foreword" to Romare Bearden: Photographs by Frank Stewart set the stage for the images, owing to his deep understanding of both artists' work. While writing about his prints for the retrospective organized by the University of Maryland's Driskell Center, I was privileged to study this immense body of work in his magical Maryland and Maine studios and enjoy their surrounding gardens, private worlds filled with art from around the globe, and special plants and trees, including bottle-trees. These visits often were enhanced by his loving wife Thelma's edible art. On one occasion Dr. Driskell insisted I accept as a gift a small painting of a chair I had previously admired. As my appreciative "no, thank you" was dismissed, I promised eventually to offer it to a museum. And will.

JACQUELINE FRANCIS, PH.D.

Associate Professor and Chair, Graduate Program in Visual & Critical Studies California College of the Arts, (San Francisco campus)

CHEZ DRISKELL. A couple times, decades ago, I was invited to David and Miss Thelma's home in Hyattsville. The visits happened after the Porter Conference in D.C., or a symposium at the University of Maryland. David always had many pots on the stove and something in the oven. Yet he would stop and answer our questions about the art in their home. Nothing ever burned; nothing was ever overcooked. It was always a congenial gathering, maybe because the only thing we were drinking was that homemade "wine" he concocted with fruit from his garden and elsewhere. Eating, drinking, and talking about the Driskells' time at Fisk University, the people they met there and at UM, and about their art collection. There was a backstory for every art object; I can't remember a single one of them now. Instead, I remember the warm fun of it all. I am so grateful for these memories. We honor him by carrying on.

“David always had many pots on the stove and something in the oven. Yet he would stop and answer our questions about the art in their home. Nothing ever burned; nothing was ever overcooked.” — Jacqueline Francis

JAMES LARRY FRAZIER, ESQ.

Washington, D.C.

DAVID WAS AN INSPIRATION and humanitarian example for me. As my friend and confidant, he was very generous with his time and heart. Not only was he an agitator for African American art and history, he was a consistent promoter of African American culture, always emphasizing the importance of documenting our culture accurately. David's career legacy was the positioning of African American art to the place it deserves in American art.

ALLAN M. GORDON, PH.D.

Art Historian/Critic

Professor Emeritus, California State University, Sacramento

DAVID AND I WERE FRIENDS for many years and collaborated on several projects including “Two Centuries of Black Art” and “Amistad II.” His contributions toward developing and advancing the African American art canon create an enduring legacy. Although David was worldly and sophisticated, he never lost the common touch. Instead, he always remained a truly proud son of the South. Rest in peace, old friend. May we meet again when I put out to sea and have crossed the bar.

“Although David was worldly and sophisticated, he never lost the common touch. Instead, he always remained a truly proud son of the South.”
— Allan Gordon

NAIMA J. KEITH

Vice President of Education and Public Programs

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

I WAS DEEPLY SADDENED by the passing of David Driskell, who was one of the pioneers in the field of African American art history as curator of the landmark exhibition “Two Centuries of Black American Art” at LACMA in 1976. Prof. Driskell was a leading authority on, and advocate for, African American art; he was also an art collector and renowned painter whose work is in major museum collections nationwide.

I had the opportunity meet Professor Driskell when I was an undergrad at Spelman College. I was, of course, very familiar with his work and honored to meet someone whose lifelong scholarship reshaped the way the world understands African American art history. In 2017, I received the David Driskell Prize from the High Museum of Art, the first national award that honors and celebrates contributions to the field of African American art and art history. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to receive his guidance, mentorship, and support. I hope my work at LACMA honors his legacy. He will be deeply missed.

LESLIE KING HAMMOND

Professor Emerita and Founding Director of the Center for Race and Culture

Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore

I AM FROM THAT GENERATION of African American arts professionals and practitioners who are deeply and profoundly indebted to the consummate scholarship, artistry, and intellectual presence of David Driskell. Not only

did he pave the way for all our careers to blossom and thrive, he was also a tireless and relentless supporter of all the cultural work and scholarship we were able to accomplish. The American art world continues to struggle with its negation of the cultural heritage and artistic legacy of people of African descent. David Driskell was a compelling mentor, ardent supporter, and stealth agitator—fiercely committed to advancing the role and contributions of Black artists, scholars, curators and historians—whose contributions helped to define and expand the range of American identity and aesthetics. With elegance and excellence—laced with a rich, subtle, wry, sense of humor—David Driskell’s humanity taught so many of us how to fight for recognition and representation with dignity and humility. I am numbed by his passing! He leaves us holding the torch of his fiery brilliance—a legend and an icon for eternity.

“David Driskell was a compelling mentor, ardent supporter, and stealth agitator—fiercely committed to advancing the role and contributions of Black artists, scholars, curators and historians—whose contributions helped to define and expand the range of American identity and aesthetics.”
— Leslie King Hammond

SHAUN LEONARDO

Artist, Brooklyn, N.Y.

AT THE START of one of my first artist lectures, this time at my alma mater Bowdoin College, I looked out at the audience to see Dr. David Driskell. (If I am recalling correctly, it was 2005.) Just a few months earlier, I had met David at the Skowhegan School for Painting & Sculpture. At the time, the experience still seemed so surreal to me. Admitted to the residency at the age of 23 and being wholly unprepared for the level of critique that would surround my work, David, as he did during our encounters in the Maine woods, just looked on from his chair with a nod, offering a calm sense of encouragement. That moment would be just one of many periodic check-ins—often presented as an invitation to a meal, a studio visit, or more grand events like his receiving an honorary doctorate. Rather than ask me what was happening in my practice, it was if he was saying to me, “Just come around. I want to be sure you are good.” And every time I saw David, he was sure to mark the moment with a photo. His quiet assurance that derived from such wisdom, it would be all the validation I would ever need.

DESMOND LEWIS

Artist, Memphis, Tenn.

THE PASSING OF DAVID DRISKELL has without a doubt had a profound effect on me the past couple of days. As someone who has lost seven family members over the past 15 months, I can only feel for his family at this time. Death within the black family is something that is both challenging and complicated. I hope that the cultural bond that prevails will make his family stronger as it has mine. David Driskell’s legacy on Skowhegan is one that can only be revered. Without Driskell’s trailblazing endeavors, I couldn’t do what I do and love (and also develop a love for Maine). African American art history wouldn’t exist. I am forever grateful for the conversation we had about Tennessee and our humble love for HBCUs on the patio of the Red Farm at Skowhegan in 2018. David Driskell gave me hope that no matter the challenges we may face as artists, just keep going and continue grinding and everything will be alright.

“David Driskell gave me hope that no matter the challenges we may face as artists, just keep going and continue grinding and everything will be alright.” — Desmond Lewis

Dec. 5: 2018: David C. Driskell and Curlee Raven Holton in conversation at Prizm Art Fair 2018 in Miami, during Living Legacy National Speaking Tour celebrating the art historical contributions of Driskell. | Photo by Sean Drakes, Getty Images

NASHORMEH LINDO

**Artist and Chair of California Arts Council
Oakland, Calif.**

I FIRST BECAME AWARE of David Driskell when I was in college in the early 1970s. My professors at Penn State couldn’t help me in my pursuit of information and inspiration by Black artists. I found his “Two Centuries of Black American Art” in the library along with other books by Black artists and scholars. These became my first informal course on African American art history.

I eventually met him and spent time with him on several occasions over the years. In the mid-1980s, I encountered Dr. Driskell when the exhibit “Hidden Heritage” came to the Baltimore Museum of Art, where I was on the education department staff. It was then that I had the opportunity to literally sit at his feet and hear his knowledge and insights first hand.

One of the last times I remember being with Dr. Driskell was when we were at a dinner at the home of Asake Bomani and Danny Glover in San Francisco. It was probably early 1997. My father was visiting from Philadelphia.



David, as he insisted I call him by this time, had made a special sauce for the meal with his “secret” ingredients. He proudly placed it on the table in front of my 80-plus-year-old father, who accidentally knocked it over. Daddy was mortified, and I was horrified. But David took it in stride and graciously made my Daddy feel ok about it. He said, “Don’t worry about it Norman., I made just enough,” and proceeded to serve him some over his rice. And it was good. There just wasn’t quite enough for seconds.

I am grateful to Dr. Driskell for his knowledge, generosity, artistic inspiration, talent, and scholarship. But I’ll never forget the kind graciousness he showed my father and the encouragement he gave me. He was truly a Renaissance Man of our time. I salute him.

RHONDA MATHEISON
Chief Financial Officer
High Museum of Art, Atlanta

REMEMBERING DAVID C. DRISKELL. Throughout the past 15 years, David has accompanied Driskell Prize supporters on several day trips. On the occasion of his 75th birthday, we took a group of Driskell donors to his birthplace in Eatonton, Ga. His father was a Baptist minister and we made a quick stop at his father’s church. David and our companions entered the church during a service, and he went to the front and started playing “This Little Light of Mine” on the piano and invited his daughters to join him. Michael Shapiro, the former director of the High Museum of Art, was amazed, as were all of our fellow visitors.

On another occasion, we took a group to Talladega College in Alabama, where David held his first teaching job. In the Deforest Chapel on the campus, there are 69 of David’s stained glass windows that are truly amazing. He gave an in-depth overview of each window.

While in David’s presence, you always departed enriched. He was truly a renaissance man. I loved him dearly as I was a better person and professional having him as a mentor and adopted father. He was always willing to spend time helping me think through strategies on how to keep the Driskell Prize fresh and advance the goals of the High Museum. The 48 works acquired through the David C. Driskell African American Art Acquisition Fund have enabled the High to become a leader in celebrating the diversity in American art.

JULIE L. MCGEE
Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Art History
University of Delaware

REMEMBRANCES OF DAVID DRISKELL necessarily recall “Two Centuries of Black American Art.” Indeed, they should, as we are still discussing (or introducing) it some 44 years after it opened! We are studying this “text” in my graduate seminar now—the exhibition, the catalogue, its reception history, and Driskell’s own account of its making. Less discussed is that Driskell spent some two decades preparing for “Two Centuries” in his years of research and curatorial work, while teaching at HBCUs (Talladega, Howard, Fisk). “Two Centuries” has HBCU foundations.

Driskell was an artist of tremendous imagination and ingenuity. This underpinned his broader practice and supported his boldness as a cultural broker and knowledge maker. He embraced the world of art and its unending variety of aesthetic offerings, even if we associate him foremostly with African American art history. For Driskell, beauty is everywhere and it starts and returns to nature, and a nature that ignores boundaries. For Driskell, being

an artist was a profession, one connected to a higher spiritual plane of creativity. That he took up this profession is an everlasting gift to us. His passing instills sorrow of immeasurable depth yet his own grace is our palliative.

“David Driskell spent some two decades preparing for ‘Two Centuries of Black American Art’ in his years of research and curatorial work, while teaching at HBCUs (Talladega, Howard, Fisk). ‘Two Centuries’ has HBCU foundations.” — Julie McGee



April 25, 2017: Rodney Moore, David C. Driskell, and Bridget Moore, President of DC Moore Gallery, at Skowhegan Awards Dinner. | Photo by Jard Siskin/Patrick McMullen via Getty Images

BRIDGET MOORE

**President, DC Moore Gallery
New York**

I FIRST MET DR. DRISKELL in the 1990s and we started representing him in 1995 at DC Moore Gallery. We shared a love of art, history, a deep connection to the state of Maine, as well as a love of all that goes on in the art world in New York.

What an honor to work with such a brilliant artist, brimming with vision and curiosity. And what a pleasure to enjoy his generosity, artistic dedication, and wry wit. Before the advent of cell phones and email, it was very hard to keep up with David. With his generosity to others, and his commitment to further knowledge and understanding, he seemed to be always traveling, in this country and internationally. His schedule was packed as he was continually teaching, giving lectures and talks, traveling to museum panels, while at the same time finding studio time. This rigorous schedule did not let up much in later years, or even till a few weeks ago, with the mandatory shutdown. Throughout all of this, his commitment to family, friends, other artists, and his own work was constant.

David's art, words, and actions were intertwined, inseparable, and inspiring and as we come to terms with the great loss of his absence, we will begin to understand that they will continue to teach and inspire.

“Before the advent of cell phones and email, it was very hard to keep up with David. With his generosity to others, and his commitment to further knowledge and understanding, he seemed to be always traveling, in this country and internationally.” — Bridget Moore

KEITH MORRISON

Artist, Meadowbrook, Pa.

I MET DAVID IN 1966 when Dr. James A. Porter introduced us at Howard University. I was a baby in my crib then, I used to joke, and David would laugh. David hired me to teach at Fisk University, then later at the University of Maryland, where we took turns being each other's bosses. Together, we wrote books and articles, promoted African American art worldwide and supported each other's solo exhibitions. David shaved his head like mine, his only brother, he said, then when he quickly grew it back. I said it was because he feared my creditors might mistake him for me. I tried to teach David to drink alcohol, but didn't succeed until he was almost 80. That's the only thing I could ever teach him. A few years ago, he took a trip to Jamaica and visited my birthplace. David was

my best friend. But David had a vast network of friends, well beyond little me. He was the most kind and generous person I ever knew. He helped artists and scholars of every culture and race. Every African American artist and art historian alive owes a debt to David C. Driskell.

“He was the most kind and generous person I ever knew. He helped artists and scholars of every culture and race. Every African American artist and art historian alive owes a debt to David C. Driskell.” — Keith Morrison



Feb. 6, 2020: Mary Lovelace O'Neal and David Driskell at the opening of “Mary Lovelace O'Neal: Chasing Down the Image” (Feb. 6-March 21, 2020), her five-decade survey at Mnuchin Gallery in New York City. | Photo by Benjamin Lozovsky/BFA

MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL

Artist and Professor Emerita, University of California, Berkeley

I HAVE KNOWN MR. DRISKELL most of my adult life. He was my mentor and dear friend. I met him in my late teens at Howard University. He arrived in it in a white lab coat for my fall or perhaps it was the spring semester painting class. I thought he was a graduate student.

With Mr. Driskell, on this rainy night (April 4) which has quietly closed in on me, I am pretty much speechless, except perhaps to say, he taught me and shared with me so many really, really sustaining and profoundly important pieces in this puzzle of life. And that was not an easy thing for him to deal with considering my dyslexic ass, but he taught me how to research and respect my own thoughts and my own work as I looked into and examined the lives and the work of others.

RICHARD J. POWELL

**John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History
Duke University**

DAVID C. DRISKELL—a dedicated artist and advocate for African American art—was one of the last links to a generation of Harlem Renaissance-era personalities. Although born in the rural South just as that cultural movement was under way, as a Howard University undergraduate and, later, as a junior faculty member at several HBCUs, David made the acquaintances of, or worked closely with, such legends as Mary Beattie Brady, James V. Herring, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and James A. Porter.

Following his paradigm-shifting exhibition “Two Centuries of Black American Art” (1976), David was at the center of the scholarly, curatorial, and institutional efforts to make African American artists and their offerings key parts of the modern and contemporary art enterprise. Long before historians and theorists began writing about “the Black Atlantic,” David was connecting with artists in Africa and with artists of African descent working abroad.

But perhaps most important about David was his renowned collegiality and his genuine interest in the activities and labors of others. Like so many, I'm a beneficiary of David's tireless endeavors and kindness, and I celebrate his unmatched contributions to the field and to American culture writ large. And I thank David's beloved wife and confidant, Thelma Deloatch Driskell, for her inestimable role in her husband's world-altering work and its enduring legacy.

"I'm a beneficiary of David's tireless endeavors and kindness, and I celebrate his unmatched contributions to the field and to American culture writ large." — Richard J. Powell

JOHN SIMMONS, ASC

Photographer and Cinematographer, Los Angeles

IT WAS 1969. I was 18 when David Driskell, chairman of the Art Department at Fisk University saw my photographs and facilitated me getting two scholarships—one to Fisk and next to USC film school. Mr. Driskell would become the compass that helped navigate and shape who I am today. Fisk University was a cultural epicenter at that time. "Mr. D." brought incredible artists to our campus: Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, Charles White, Walter Williams, Elizabeth Catlett, John T. Scott, Jacob Lawrence, and so many others. My art instructors were Earl Hooks, Stephen Pogue, Martin Puryear, Michael Borders, all there because of David Driskell. Aaron Douglas needed an assistant to help him restore a mural. We spent over a year together. It was a year that changed my way of seeing forever, all because of David Driskell putting us together.

In my sophomore year, film director Carlton Moss was invited to guest lecture as a way of bringing cinema to the university. The first film we made was "Missing Pages." Our next film was "Two Centuries of African American Art." I was the cinematographer. I called Mr. D. a few weeks ago for advice on a gallery contract. He told me just what I needed to do and I did it.

"Fisk University was a cultural epicenter at that time. "Mr. D." brought incredible artists to our campus: Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, Charles White, Walter Williams, Elizabeth Catlett, John T. Scott, Jacob Lawrence, and so many others." — John Simmons

V. JOY SIMMONS, M.D.

Collector, Los Angeles

FOR ME, PERSONALLY, Dr. Driskell changed my life as a collector. I was fortunate enough to share the story with him while he was alive and I got to be friendly with him over the years.

His exhibition, "Two Centuries of Black Art" at LACMA, was pivotal in my career as a collector. I was in my 20s when that show opened at LACMA. I went to that show to see my first survey exhibition of African American artists. As a "youngin," I looked at the names of all the collectors of the works by Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Charles White, and others, and none of the names of the people who owned the work sounded "Black." I was so disappointed. But it made me realize my responsibility as a collector to share my work via loans to ensure that other black children know that we, African Americans, appreciate, support, and collect, OUR artists. I was able to share that story with Dr. Driskell at the 25-year anniversary of the exhibition symposium at LACMA. I've made good on my vow. Whenever I'm asked, I do loan work from my collection to shows around the country and world so that the importance of the honor, opportunity, and responsibility that we have as collectors, is shared and taught to others.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS

Independent Curator and Art Historian, New York City

FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS in the visual arts, David Driskell was one of the key beacons that lit the way in our lives and careers. Perhaps the most important thing was that he was accessible to our generation, which came to maturity in the 1960s and 70s, as he carried on the contributions of Alain Locke and James Porter. I remember how we were galvanized by his pioneering scholarship which set the standards for our own work, and we always benefited from his natural graciousness and generosity. Too often, however, as we celebrated him as an art historian and art collector, we were distracted from remembering his preferred role as an artist, who over the last two decades at last found recognition for his unique vision. And now it is time that his work enters the lexicons of African American art that are being written by yet another generation of artists, critics, and scholars.

March 17, 2017: From left, Artists David C. Driskell, Floyd Coleman, Sylvia Snowden, Lilian Thomas Burwell, and moderator Ruth Fine at the Wyeth Foundation for American Art Symposium, "The African American Art World in Twentieth-Century Washington, DC" presented by CASVA at the National Gallery of Art. | © 2017 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington



SYLVIA SNOWDEN

Artist, Washington, D.C.

I HAVE ALWAYS REFERRED to David C. Driskell, respectfully and affectionately, as Mister Driskell. He was a person who influenced my painting with knowledge, understanding, and an eye on growth from the early 60s to 2020s. Last week while painting, I recalled a factor which he was aware of, prominent in my work (placement of certain colors next to each other). That represents the impact Mister Driskell has and will continue to have on my work. The renaissance man in the sense that he knew through his personal experience art from ceramic glaze to fresco, he had an encyclopedic knowledge of art, past and present, produced by African Americans. Even that which history ignored. Mister Driskell used creativity in all aspects of his life which illustrated his wide range of understanding art — intellectually and emotionally. Mister Driskell went to my first one-person exhibition in Dover, Dela., in 1966 and to date, my last one-person show in Washington, D.C. He signed his emails to me, the last dated March 2020: “Mister D.” It was my honor to know Mister Driskell.

LOU STOVALL

Artist and Master Printmaker, Washington, D.C.

DAVID HAD A LONG, FRUITFUL, and victorious life. He was my mentor, for years and years, since the late 1960s early 70s. I was his assistant teacher in art appreciation at Howard University and that was a wonderful experience. One thing that was unique about David is that, like James Lesesne Wells, who was his teacher and mine, he attended exhibition openings and events and made an effort for all of his students, myself included. I’ve never known anyone who was so religiously tied to his former students. He was my hero, for years and years.

I did three of prints with him. It was very, very easy. He said, “Well, Lou just do it. Just do whatever you do.” He was terrific in that way. I was such a disciplined and exacting print maker because I wanted everyone to make the best prints possible through me. He taught me ultimate patience, which made it possible for me to work with a few dozen artists (such as Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Lois Mailou Jones, and Jacob Lawrence), as a print maker.

FRANKLIN SIRMANS

Director, Pérez Art Museum Miami

I CAN’T REMEMBER EXACTLY when I met Dr. Driskell. I imagine I didn’t call him David until probably 2007 when I received the Driskell Prize. My father met David sometime in the mid-to late 1970s probably at the Studio Museum in Harlem. As with so many, David helped him acquire great art. So, I would have met Dr. Driskell sometime as a child, as I was often “dragged” to art openings at SMH, but also Peg Alston, June Kelly, Cinque, and Kenkeleba, among other places.

But, I didn’t really understand the depth of his feats until I was at LACMA and studied his efforts and great success around “Two Centuries.” This massive show that started at LACMA in 1976 and finished in Brooklyn in 1977 after stops in Atlanta and Dallas, was the stuff of dreams. With jugs and walking sticks, he included works that were evidence of visual art making traditions in slavery and thus made a case for the utilitarian object of beauty that tied back to Africa, and then brought it forward to the works of contemporary artists in the 20th century. Though, it may have been seen as revolutionary at the time, the whole idea of a visual representation of a black aesthetic was writ large for all to see and hear... And, he marketed the heck out of the show in a way that was brilliant and penetrated wide swaths of a museum public that had never felt so welcome in the museum... So, personally, I always knew he was a genius, scholar and artist and advisor but only later understood it.

I am grateful for moments of being in his presence and just feeling the warmth and generosity and then for more personal moments like having him with us at PAMM in 2016, with Sherry Bronfman interviewing him and, in 2018, when we honored him as part of our Art + Soul Celebration of the Fund for African American Art. And, the moments when we sat together at dinners like that... It was these moments that I’ll treasure. And, seeing him in

Basel two years ago at Sam Gilliam's opening and hanging with him and Thelma and Theaster... which reminds me how he always quietly mentored all of us...



David Driskell and Deborah Willis at Black Portraiture(s) III in Johannesburg, 2016. | Photo by Terrence Jennings, Courtesy Black Portraiture(s) III

FRANK STEWART

Photographer, New York City

IN 1968, I RAN TRACK for a college 25 miles outside of Nashville. At the time, I had a cousin attending Fisk University's art department, which was headed by David Driskell. I would often end up joining my cousin in David's classes. David was a teacher who was a repository of 5,000 years of griot history, which he used to fight ignorance and elevate the importance of the contributions people of color made to American culture. He came from sharecroppers in rural Georgia, who were descendants of Africans and Native Americans. They lived close to the earth—growing what they ate. Because of this, David could tell you what weeds you could eat and their medicinal properties. Over the years, I worked on many projects with him. David was truly a humanitarian and a Renaissance man. A void has been left in the universe because of his passing.

“David was a teacher who was a repository of 5,000 years of griot history, which he used to fight ignorance and elevate the importance of the contributions people of color made to American culture.” — Frank Stewart

DEBORAH WILLIS

**University Professor and Chair, Department of Photography & Imaging
New York University**

DAVID C. DRISKELL mixed history, memory, and the creative practice in building a narrative about African American art. Today, on the 52nd anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4), I am remembering David's contributions to African American art history. Dr. King imagined a “Beloved Community” during that time, while David created one.

It was the 1960s, a time of great social and political change in American culture, an awakening of black cultural and artistic consciousness emerged. He focused on empowering the viewer to fully appreciate visual representations of black peoples and inspired many of us to study art and art history. David's genius as an artist-

scholar was measured by his ability to create a new narrative that evoked beauty and justice. Not only did he create, he also developed a more inclusive history of American art by researching and writing about other black artists. Evidenced in his scholarship is a plethora of publications, essays, articles, and interviews of his quest to bring to light this history.

In his gardens and studios in Maine and Maryland, David expanded his practice. He wrote: "Art for me is a way of life. It is as much a vital part of my lifestyle as all of the other experiences that have helped to make me a particular individual. I try to exercise certain value judgments each time I choose one subject over another when painting. Yet, somehow, these choices of rendering form, regardless of how abbreviated they may seem, always tell the viewer something about my experiences and the culture out of which I have come." **CT**

FIND MORE [Renée Ater remembers David Driskell](#), who guided her through MA and Ph.D., degrees at the University of Maryland, where she went on to teach for 17 years

BOOKSHELF

["David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar"](#) by Julie McGee documents the life and work of David C. Driskell. ["Two Centuries of Black American Art"](#) coincided with the landmark exhibition guest curated by Driskell in 1976 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Driskell co-authored the exhibition catalog ["Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America."](#) These volumes consider David Driskell's artistic practice: ["Creative Spirit: The Art of David C. Driskell,"](#) ["David Driskell Painting Across the Decade 1996-2006,"](#) and ["Evolution: Five Decades of Printmaking by David C. Driskell"](#) by Adrienne Childs with contributions by Ruth Fine, Deborah Willis, and Julie McGee. Driskell documents the Cosby art collection in ["The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby, Jr.,"](#) and Driskell's own art collection is the focus of ["Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection."](#) Volumes in the ["The David C. Driskell Series of African American Art"](#) consider the art of individual artists including Keith Morrison, Hughie Lee-Smith, Faith Ringold, Charles White, and Betye Saar.

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