

# Art in America

[Home](#) | [Art in America](#) | [Reviews](#)

## A CENTRAL AXIS: DAVID DRISKELL AT THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

By *Logan Lockner*

June 9, 2021 11:40am



David C. Driskell, *Homage to Romare*, 1976, collage and gouache on Masonite, 23 7/8 by 29 7/8 in.  
PHOTO: TRAVIS FULLERTON. © VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS. © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL.

When [David C. Driskell](https://www.artnews.com/t/david-c-driskell/) died of COVID-19 in April 2020 at the age of eighty-eight, commentators tended to emphasize his career as a curator and

scholar of African American art, especially his landmark 1976 survey, “Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950,” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. While this was certainly a foundational contribution to African American art history—a story told with loving detail in this year’s HBO documentary *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*—the relative lack of critical attention to Driskell’s work as an artist is puzzling. His interviews in the film, like other accounts of his life and work, make clear that operating in multiple modes was integral to Driskell’s understanding of and participation in Black culture. By the time he mounted “Two Centuries,” he had spent almost twenty years studying some of the sixty-three artists in the exhibition—Elizabeth Catlett, Selma Burke, and Hale Woodruff among them—and developing his own artistic perspective, which drew on collage techniques, forms from the natural world, and the flat, geometric qualities of both African and Byzantine iconography.

Presented at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta just before the one-year anniversary of his death, and opening June 19 at the Portland Museum of Art before traveling to The Phillips Collection this fall, “David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History” is—incredibly—the artist’s first major survey. With nearly sixty paintings and works on paper, the exhibition reveals the remarkable ways in which Driskell’s art refracts the broader cultural and political concerns of Black Americans during the second half of the twentieth century, from the **Civil Rights** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/civil-rights/>) movement to the aesthetics of **Pan-Africanism** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/pan-africanism/>) and the **Black Arts Movement** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/black-arts-movement/>), to the continuing influence of the Bible and the Black church. The show also makes space for narrower concerns, such as his career-long fascination with pine trees as a symbol of endurance and grace, which likely began during his residency at Skowhegan in 1953 and inspired his MFA thesis. Distinguished by an almost Cubist mode of indirect representation, his early, modernist paintings of the trees—such as *Young Pines Growing* (1959)—feel somewhat confined by the impulses of their art historical context.



David C. Driskell, *Behold Thy Son*, 1956, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 in.  
COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE, WASHINGTON, DC. COURTESY OF  
DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK. © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL.

Other works from the same period, however, stand out for their deft integration of abstract techniques into direct responses to events then current. Expanding on the recurring compositional device of a central vertical axis, derived from his paintings of pine trees, Driskell's 1956 painting *Behold Thy Son* depicts a dark amalgamation of the Crucifixion and the murder of **Emmett Till** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/emmett-till/>), which had occurred a year earlier in Mississippi, one state over from Alabama, where Driskell was living with his family. The axis in *Behold Thy Son* is a skeletal figure resembling Christ, but with a mutilated, foreshortened face partly obscured by the painting's top border. The hands of a shadowy figure in the background emerge to maternally embrace the central subject's waist, evoking a pietà, while the shapes of a railing and a candelabra—visually echoing the emaciated body's ribs and possible lacerations—structure the dim background. (It is regrettable, in retrospect, that *Behold Thy Son* was not mentioned more frequently in the heated debates surrounding Dana Schutz's 2016 painting of Till's brutalized face, *Open Casket*.)

Later works, such as those in Driskell's "Ghetto Wall" series (1968–71), combine collage and painting to evoke the flypaper-like textures of the urban environment, suggesting the influence of

previous collaged street scenes by Romare Bearden (including *Sunday After Sermon*, 1969) and anticipating subsequent works by artists such as Larry Walker and Mark Bradford. *Ghetto Wall #1* (1971) is particularly emblematic of Driskell's most distinctive work, incorporating abstract forms, layers of paint, a magazine clipping, and half of a masklike face that could be of either Greco-Roman or West African origin. Given Driskell's position as both a student of modernism and a pioneering scholar of African and African American art, the visual prominence of the mask within his oeuvre—possibly an indirect reference to Picasso, who was, in turn, inspired by African masks—reads as an attempt to grapple with the complicated questions of cultural heritage throughout art history. While often serving as a traditional, even stereotypical signifier of African culture broadly, the mask is also a surface used to conceal oneself or a tool for becoming another. While evoking the Pan-African spirit of its time, works such as *Ghetto Wall #1* refuse clearly representative depictions of Blackness, balancing symbolic suggestion with opacity and abstraction.

