

Arts Obituary

David Driskell, Scholar and Advocate for African Diaspora Art, Dies at 88



Brenda C. Siler • April 5, 2020 0 65 2 minutes read



****FILE**** David Driskell, a foremost authority on visual arts and culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora and the namesake of the the David Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park (Brigitte White/The Washington Informer)

The stunning news of the death of David Driskell began circulating on April 1 following a post on the David C. Driskell Center website. Surely it could not be, since on March 3, I interviewed this African American art luminary at an event for a Romare Bearden exhibition in the Driskell Center at the University of Maryland. Throughout the art community, his death was hard to believe. It was reported that Driscoll died from coronavirus complications.

Born in Eatonton, Ga., Driskell had many attributes connected to his career throughout his life. He was an artist, art scholar, art historian, art collector, author and curator. He graduated from Howard and Catholic universities, then taught at Howard and Fisk universities as well as other institutions.

He joined the faculty of the Department of Art at the University of Maryland, College Park in 1977, serving as its chairperson from 1978-1983. In 1995, Driskell was named Distinguished University Professor of Art and taught until his retirement in 1998. In 2001, the University of Maryland established the David C. Driskell Center to honor his significant contributions to the art world.

Driskell was considered a mentor to young artists and a guide to art collectors. It is well-known that he advised Bill and Camille Cosby as they built a large African American art collection. When discussing how he and Bearden supported students, Driskell talked to me about inviting Bearden to speak to students at Fisk and Howard.

“He spent three days at Fisk. There are recordings of those conversations in the archives,” Driskell said.

The courteousness and generosity between Driskell and Bearden are shown in personal letters that also are in the archives.

“I was surprised to see the letters, because I had forgotten about them,” he said to me.

Those letters now in the Driskell Center archives, illustrate how both artists wanted to ensure Black art and art education was accessible to people who could not get to New York City.

Driskell’s mentoring of art collectors can be seen through the recent donation to Howard University by Patricia Turner Walters. In January, Walters announced she was donating 152 works by African American artists to Howard University. The collection, valued at \$2.5 million, honors the legacy of her late husband, Dr. Ronald W. Walters, an influential political scientist and former Howard University professor who had expertise in Black politics. She credits Driskell as one of the people who educated her about art. When the donation was announced, Driskell called Walters.

“Pat, I wanted to reach out to you to let you know this is such a wonderful philanthropic gift,” he said to Walters. “Howard is very fortunate to get this collection. I am very proud of you and you did the right thing of gifting it to Howard.”

“He was the leading voice in art in our community,” Walters said. “There will never be another like him.”

In 1976 while a Master of Fine Arts student at Howard University, Dr. Richard Powell met Driskell. Powell is the John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art & Art History at Duke University. Driskell, who was at Fisk University in 1976, would come back to Howard University to chat with students. Powell’s relationship with Driskell grew over the years out of a mutual interest in thinking about, writing about and organizing art exhibitions.

“David at that time was a leading advocate of African American artists,” Powell said. “He had that big show, ‘Two Centuries of Black Art,’ which was at several major museums around the country.”

Reemphasizing Driskell’s support of younger, up-and-coming artists, Powell said, “He was not just an advocate for the likes of Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas or Lois Mailou Jones. ... It is not an exaggeration to say that David has been at the center of so much important work with African American art which is why this is such a great loss.”