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2021: The Year Of David Driskell

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David C. Driskell (American, 1931–2020), 'Homage to Romare,' 1976, collage and gouache on Masonite, ... [+]

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRAVIS FULLERTON. © VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS. © ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL.

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Born in 1931 in tiny Eatonton, Georgia and raised in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina, Driskell possessed prodigious intellect and ambition. He would be the rare Black man from the rural South during Jim Crow to attend college. Howard University. Washington, D.C.

So he went.

He started attending classes.

It's easy to imagine a youthful Driskell on the edge of his seat, soaking up knowledge.

One problem.

He didn't realize he had to register for those classes.

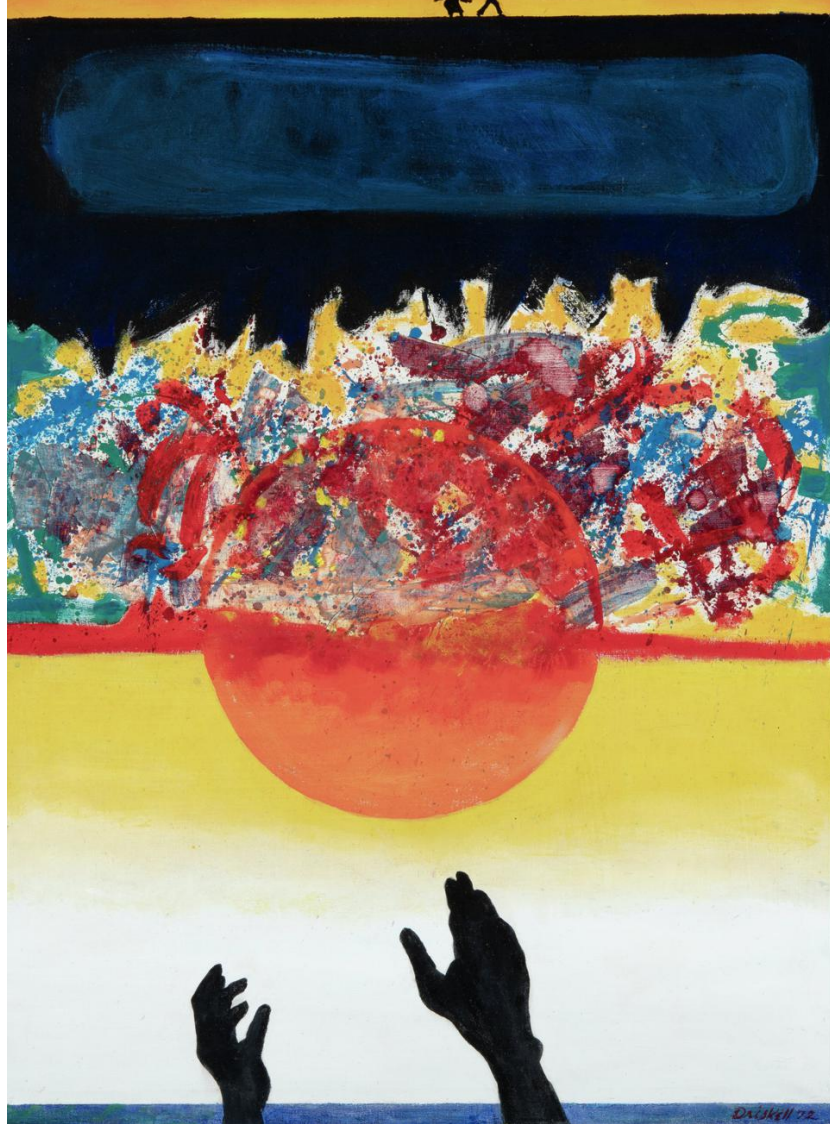
Someone had to tell him that. The rest is history.

After graduating from Howard in 1955, Driskell would go on to become one of the 20th century's preeminent art historians, educators and curators. A titan in all three fields.

He was an exceptional painter as well.

["David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History,"](#) on view now through May 9 at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, brings together approximately 60 of his artworks, highlights of a long career.

"There is no question that David's work as a practitioner was preempted by the enormity of his achievements as a scholar and educator," Michael Rooks, Wieland Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the High Museum in Atlanta told Forbes.com. "The absolute need for an African-American art history that redressed the yawning void brought about by historically exclusionary practices, and a vision for charting a course forward to consider the influence of African art and that of the diaspora, was much larger than any individual's own practice."



David C. Driskell (American, 1931–2020), 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' 1972. Acrylic on canvas ... [+]

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David Driskell – the painter

Putting aside Driskell's scholarly achievements to focus on his painting is akin to focusing on Hank Aaron as a right fielder, ignoring his ability as a hitter. Painting, however, is the focus at the High.

An artist who holds his own with any from the era reveals himself plainly.

“One of his greatest talents as a painter was his constant investigation of syncretic form—whether fusing African and European imagery, investing his

images of the natural world with the sacred or metaphysical, or oscillating between the observations of the world around him and pure abstraction,” Rooks explains.

Color. Energy. Exuberance.

Driskell’s paintings burst with life and spirit.

“Driskell’s command of vibrant color and line, and his attentiveness to what he called ‘the symbolic presence of form,’ endowed his subjects with a kind of frisson, like that of an electrical charge, which made his work esthetically vigorous, bold and spirited,” Rooks said.

The influence of [Romare Bearden is apparent](#), most obvious in *Homage to Romare*.

Driskell’s “use of collage as a painting medium equivalent to the visceral quality of paint,” as Rooks describes it, mirrors Bearden’s approach.

[Lois Mailou Jones’ chunky blocks of bold color](#) are also recognizable. Jones was one of Driskell’s professors at Howard.

Driskell never lost his individuality, though.

“Among the many gifts Driskell bequeaths to us is the delight of seeing the world through his eyes, and it is a journey of immeasurable beauty and grace,” exhibition guest curator Julie McGee, associate professor of Africana studies and art history at the University of Delaware, said.

“Beauty” and “grace,” two words perfectly suited for Driskell who died in April of 2020 at age 88 due to complications from COVID-19. The avalanche of [deeply reverential obituaries](#) and remembrances following his death are proof of the decency he walked through the world with.

“His spirit as a man and an artist was so generous and egalitarian that it would not surprise me if, by joining the ranks of fellow artists when he walked into his studio every day, he purposefully avoided the privileging of his own work,” Rooks imagines.



David C. Driskell (American, 1931–2020), *Ghetto Wall #2*, 1970 Oil, acrylic, and collage on linen 60 ... [+]

© ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL, COURTESY OF DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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In January of 2021, HBO debuted an original documentary, “Black Art: In the Absence of Light;” [a film reviewed by Forbes.com](#). The documentary’s wellspring was the Driskell-curated and organized “Two Centuries of Black American Art,” exhibition which debuted in 1976. It traveled to the High the following year. The show, utterly revolutionary in its time, posited that Black art and Black artists didn’t merely exist in America, they were equals.

“What David did was, he said, ‘this is Black art, it matters, and it’s been going on for 200 years—deal with it,’” art historian Maurice Berger says in the documentary.

However badly the nation's art museums lag in [acquiring and presenting African-American artworks](#), were it not for “Black Art,” the situation would be even worse.

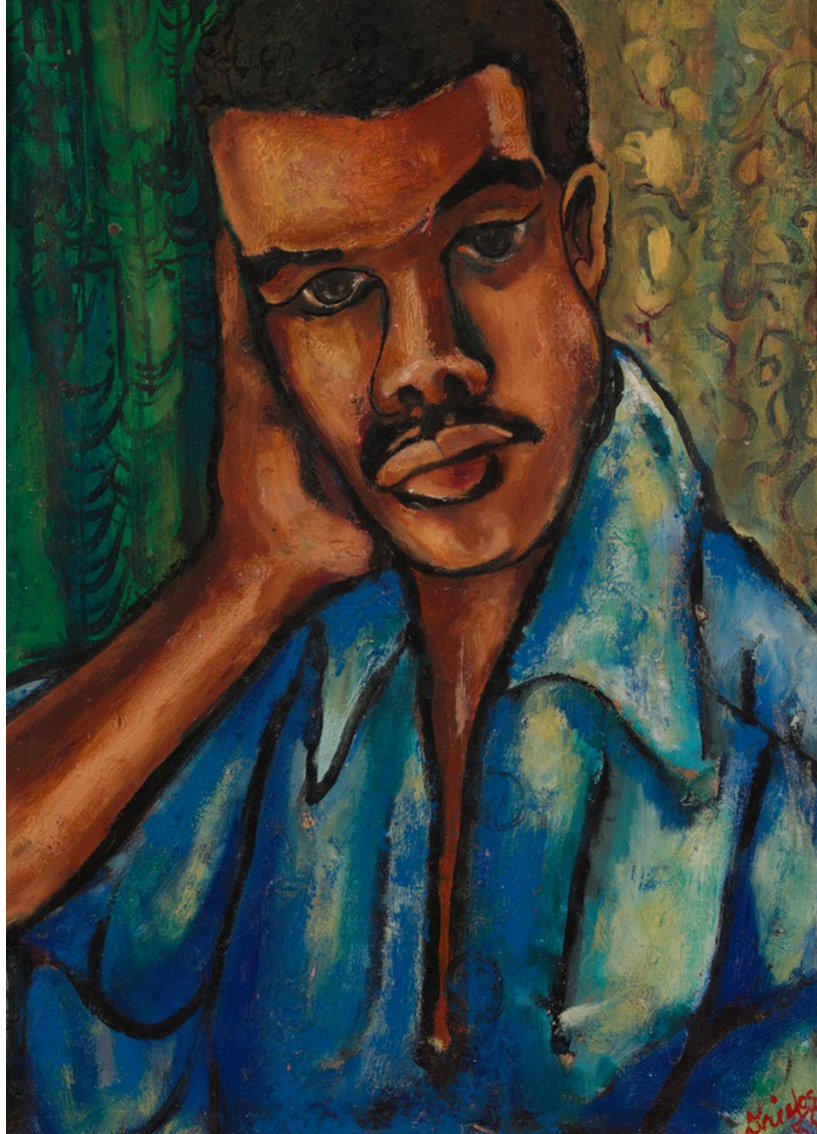
“His role as one of the principal authors of Black art history who significantly reshaped the canon of American art has been nearly singular in its effect on museum culture,” Rooks said.

Between the documentary, this exhibition, and [a gorgeous 224-page, coffee-table book which doubles as the exhibition catalog](#), 2021 shapes up as the year of David Driskell.

(Driskell's *Ghetto Wall #2*, above, appears on the cover of the catalog as well as in the exhibition.)

“The recent exposure of David's influence is the result of the commercial and critical sectors of the industry playing catch up,” Rooks said. “Although greater diversity in every arm of the arts and culture sector, and rooting out systemic bias, remain goals that require much work, artists, academics, and (largely) private collectors have been paying attention to David's pivotal work for many decades.”

In addition to his crucial roles as educator, historian, curator and promoter—and painter—he advised private collectors for decades, promoting and helping support hundreds of artists while placing thousands of artworks.



David C. Driskell (American, 1931–2020), 'Self-Portrait,' 1953, oil on board, collection of the ... [+]

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David Driskell at the High Museum of Art

The High has a long history of collaboration with Driskell. In addition to exhibiting “Black Art” in 1977, the museum acquired his paintings through the years. “Icons of Nature and History” includes key works from the High’s collection, including one of Driskell’s self-portraits.

In 2005, the Museum established the David C. Driskell Prize, the first national award to honor and celebrate contributions to the field of African-American art, including distinctions for both artists and scholars. Funds raised through

the prize's annual dinner have supported the acquisition of 48 works by African-American artists for the High's collection.

"David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History" travels to the Portland (Maine) Museum of Art (June 19-Sept. 12, 2021), [The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.](#) (Oct. 6, 2021-Jan. 9, 2022) and Cincinnati Art Museum (Feb. 25-May 15, 2022) after leaving Atlanta.