

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

David C. Driskell

David C. Driskell: Life Among The Pines

Getty Trust Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes
in 2019

Interviews sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust

Copyright © 2020 by J. Paul Getty Trust

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Copyright in the manuscript and recording is owned by the J. Paul Getty Trust, which has made the materials available under Creative Commons licenses as follows: Manuscript is licensed under CC-BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) and recording is licensed under CC-BY-NC (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) Rights to reproduce images must be secured from the original rights-holders: DC Moore Gallery and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

David C. Driskell, "David C. Driskell: Life Among the Pines" conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes in 2019, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust, 2020.



David C. Driskell, 2011
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

Abstract

David Driskell is an artist and professor of art. He was born in Georgia in 1931, but mainly grew up in North Carolina. Driskell graduated from Howard University with a degree in painting and art history in 1955, attended Art Program at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1953, and earned an MFA from Catholic University in 1962, as well as a study certificate in art history from Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in 1964. Beginning in 1955, he taught at several colleges, including Talladega College; Howard University; Fisk University; and the University of Maryland, College Park. His influential artwork includes *Young Pines Growing*, *Behold Thy Son*, *Of Thee I Weep*, and *Ghetto Wall #2*. Driskell has curated important shows highlighting African American art history, including *Two Centuries of Black American Art* and *Hidden Heritage: Afro-American Art, 1800–1950*. He also helped establish 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, in 2001.

Table of Contents

Foreword by Bridget Cooks	viii
Interview 1: April 13, 2019	
Hour 1	1
Birth in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1931 — Story of being named — Memories of Eatonton — Mother's job as a domestic worker during the Depression — Ghosts in Eatonton cemeteries — Family lineage — Father's work as a minister at several churches — Move to North Carolina in 1936 — Cherokee lineage — Sharecropping and farming in North Carolina — Attending segregated schools — Values acquired from family — Herbal remedies learned from mother — Tradition of hiding Cherokee lineage — Exposure to the arts at home and school — Childhood foods — Practicing craftsmanship at home — Field trips and curriculum — Teachers at segregated schools — Learning to fish — Family support for art and education — Reputation for drawing ability — Attending school with a Cherokee boy passing for black — Early exposure to art — Decision to attend Howard University	
Hour 2	21
Earning money for tuition and living expenses — Trying to enroll at Howard — Coursework at Howard — Mentorship from Howard professors, including James Herring, James Lesene Wells, and James Porter — Decision to become an art major — Tensions among Howard faculty — Pressure for black students to be the best — Jobs at Arts and Crafts Supply Company and as taxi driver in Washington, DC — Mentorship from Lois Maliou Jones — Researching at the library — Work at Arts and Crafts Supply Company — First seeing artist Martin Puryear in a children's art school	
Interview 2: April 13, 2019	
Hour 1	35
Meeting wife, Thelma Driskell — Thelma's education — Gospel music — Connection to Nina Simone through church gospel choir — Uncle's passing as white — Marrying Thelma in 1952 — Driving a taxi — Working at the Howard University Gallery of Art and at the Barnett-Aden Gallery — Reflections on Alonzo Arden and James Herring — Morris Louis and his connection to Barnett Aden Gallery — Fellowship at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1953 — Relationship with Leonard Bocour — Artwork while at Skowhegan — Inspiration for <i>Behold Thy Son</i>	

Hour 2

57

Transition from social realism to painting trees — Description of *Behold Thy Son* — Leaving works behind in Talladega — Teaching at Talladega College while earning an MFA at Catholic University — Studying French for MFA degree — Purchasing a home in Maine — Aunt Millie's upbringing — Work as an assistant professor at Talladega College — Associate of the Danforth Foundation — Early exhibitions and awards — Becoming department chair at Howard University — Position at Fisk University in Nashville — Raising the arts profile at Fisk as a curator — Studying Rembrandt in the Netherlands — Students at Howard University, including Stokely Carmichael, Ed Brown, and Jessye Norman — Working with Aaron Douglas — Meeting artists in New York, such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence — Decision to teach at the University of Ife in Nigeria in 1969

Hour 3

79

Difficulty in traveling to Nigeria during the Biafran War — Visiting different places while abroad and observing African art — Keeping sketchbooks from travels — Impact of African art on own work, including *Ghetto Wall #2* — Curating *Amistad II* exhibition in 1975 and connection to United Church of Christ — Curating *Two Centuries of Black American Art* starting in 1974 — Curating *Hidden Heritage* exhibition — Creating a film program at Fisk — *Two Centuries* catalogue — Decision to leave Fisk and start at the University of Maryland College Park in 1977 — Establishing African American art history classes at University of Maryland — Consulting for the Cosby Collection

Interview 3: April 14, 2019

Hour 1

105

Mentoring art students — Upcoming retrospective exhibition — Writing art history — Doing printmaking — *Two Centuries of Black American Art* catalog — Themes in own artwork since the 1950s — Romare Bearden's mentorship and friendship — Collectors of his artwork — Becoming a collector himself — Teaching methodology — Impact of place on artwork — Using natural materials to make paint — Artwork after retirement — Creating sketchbooks and journals while traveling — David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at University of Maryland College Park

Hour 2

121

Recognition as an artist and scholar — Interest in music — Artist Terry Adkins — National Humanities Medal awarded by President Bill Clinton in 2000 — Other recipients of the National Humanities Medal — Lifetime Legacy Award from Skowhegan in 2016 — Membership in the Academy of Arts and Sciences in

2018 — Professorship at Bowdoin College — Establishing the James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award in African American Art History — The Driskell Prize at the High Museum of Art — Former student Ed Brown and the creation of the Driskell Prize — Prize recipients — Search for new forms of expression — Achievements despite childhood adversities — Health challenges — Connection between gardening and art — Marriage and family

Appendix: Images

147

Foreword

First published by Bridget Cooks as "Passages: David Driskell (1931-2020)" on [Artforum.com](https://www.artforum.com), April 10, 2020.

We are often advised against meeting our heroes, lest admiration becomes disappointment. But sometimes, on pure adrenaline, we take the risk to introduce ourselves. When I met David C. Driskell, his status changed from hero to superhero. He also became a mentor and friend, as he had for so many others. He was elegant, measured, and funny. He was generous with his time and knowledge, and he supported younger artists and scholars. David maintained his characteristic down-to-earth demeanor while compiling a nearly unbelievable record of achievements. He was an artist, scholar, and curator. He was a master gardener. He loved his family.

I've heard David's passing likened to the falling of a great sequoia. He was irreplaceable. His art, scholarship, and conversations have expanded American art history and inspired countless people. He was an archive of personal stories about legendary artists and writers. He was also the epitome of cool. I loved when he would talk about Langston Hughes coming over to read to his daughters, or Romare Bearden giving him feedback on his first solo exhibition in New York. He formally taught and informally mentored thousands of people, many of whom influenced thousands of others including Stokely Carmichael, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Terry Adkins, Deborah Willis, and Jessye Norman. Willis testifies to Driskell's legacy. "I have written before that David Driskell was a chronicler of black life in text and image," she told me. "But he was so much more. His work revealed that he was inspired by beauty, justice, and spirituality. In short, David influenced many of us who embraced the broader histories of art. He was my mentor and friend who shaped the history of art and the making of art while referencing his cultural heritage to the South and African American traditions."

David welcomed me when I asked for a conversation with him as part of my research on exhibitions of art by Black artists. Our initial conversation about his groundbreaking 1976 exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950*, which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, lasted over three hours. When he would tell me a particularly illuminating and hilarious story, we'd laugh, and he would pause to say, "That's a true story, but don't put it in the book." And then he'd tell it again. David would begin his stories about seeing an art exhibition by telling me the street address of the gallery. It was like a parlor trick, but it was both accurate and uncanny. He enjoyed life. He had vivid memories. He trusted me with the honor of sharing his recollections of how he navigated the art world's deeply engrained color line.

Last year, as part of the African American Art History Initiative at the Getty Research Institute, together with Amanda Tewes from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, I was privileged to conduct David's oral history. Over two days, surrounded by his singular art collection, he spoke like the great orator he was and told us the story of his life, beginning with a childhood in Eatonton, Georgia, and later working with his family on a thirteen-acre farm near Polkville, North Carolina. Near the end of our visit, he said, "I'm looking back from whence I came. I picked the cotton. I was a sharecropper. I was this, I was that. But importantly, I was a part of the

human equation that said there's no limit to what you can be or what you can do. That's what I hope my life will be to others in that regard, that they will say, 'Well, if he could do it, look at all of what I have. I can do even more.' " Although David started with very little, what he accomplished is immeasurable. I am grateful to have known him.

Bridget R. Cooks is Associate Professor in the department of African American Studies and the department of Art History at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum (University of Massachusetts, 2011) and the inaugural winner of the James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award in African American Art History. She was also the co-interviewer for Driskell's 2019 oral history.

Interview 1: April 13, 2019

01-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a first interview with David Driskell for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Driskell's home in Hyattsville, Maryland, on April 12, 2019. So thank you both for sitting with us today. Bridget, why don't you kick us off?

01-00:00:27

Cooks: Okay. David, we're starting right at the very beginning. Could you tell us when and where you were born?

01-00:00:37

Driskell: I was born in Eatonton, Georgia, which is in Putnam County, not very far from Macon, Georgia, 1931. I lived there for the next five years before my family moved to Appalachia in Western North Carolina.

01-00:01:05

Cooks: And you were born on June seventh, so your birthday's coming up.

01-00:01:10

Driskell: Yes, I was born June seventh. My father at that time was an AME [African Methodist Episcopal Church] minister, my mother a homemaker. The record shows that there were four Driskell children. I was actually the fifth, but the first son died. He was born a year ahead of me and he died two or three days after birth. And obviously it was this great excitement when I was born June seventh, their having three daughters ahead of me. My father never told me this but I was told by my mother that three days after I was born, my father, against her wishes, took me out of her arms and carried me into the church, which was immediately next door. In those days the parsonage was next door to the church. It was the pastor's house; the church, the cemetery, sometimes the school, in this case a little one-room schoolhouse not much larger than this room for black kids. I was told that dad took me out of my mother's arms and said, "I must take him into the church, to the altar, and offer him up to the Lord." My mother never saw *Roots* but she indicated that this was some kind of practice that they did in the family. I tried to make it into a *Roots* situation by saying, "Did he give me a name?" She said, "Yes, your name was King David." I said, "Oh no. No." I said, "Is that on record?" She said, "Yes, it's on record." I said, "Well, I want to obliterate it. I want it taken off."

01-00:03:41

Cooks: So your official legal name was King David?

01-00:03:46

Driskell: But it's not on my birth certificate.

01-00:03:47

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:03:50

Driskell: But that's what she said. I said, "No. Absolutely not." But it's not on my birth certificate, thank heavens. [laughs]

01-00:04:02

Cooks: Do you have any memories of Eatonton? Are your first memories there or are they in North Carolina?

01-00:04:13

Driskell: No, no. I have vivid memories of Eatonton. And they tell me they go back to two-and-a-half or three years based on what I told them about it. I guess it's accurate. My sisters never confirmed it. They said I took all the sense from them. I said, "How could that happen? I was born after you." Because I've always had a pretty good memory. I don't remember the house near the church but I do remember the second place where we moved in the community. We were renters, of course. We moved to a little house near the brook down from Mrs. Walker's home. Mrs. Walker, we thought she was well-off, one of the few African Americans in the town that we thought may have been well-off. She was the grandmother of Alice Walker.

01-00:05:24

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:05:27

Driskell: And the Walkers attended my father's church—he had two churches in the little town of Eatonton. I was born at the site of Hunts Chapel AME Church but he also had a second pastorate across town in the black community, which was Ward's Chapel. Hunts Chapel is still in existence.

When the people from the Arts Council of Great Britain came to film me in 1989 they took me back there. Actually, they asked me ahead of time, "What do you remember about this place?" I told them about the town, the square, and I told them where the church was, I told them all of these things I remembered. They went down two weeks ahead of me and found things exactly as I described them. It seemed like time had stood still. Except Ward's Chapel, the second church, they are trying to restore it, but it's really in bad shape.

I mention this because I mention Mrs. Walker, Alice Walker's grandmother, had one of the largest houses in town, as I recall. It had a big white fence around it. We didn't have running water. Mrs. Walker had running water and electricity. We didn't have electricity, we got water from a spring. Some people said artisan well; it was a spring, it was popping up out of the ground. It was a neighborhood community spring. We would all meet there and get water. I remember the joyous experience of going across the green with my mother to get buckets of water, bringing it back to the house.

01-00:07:37

Cooks: And that's all in Eatonton. So you were—

01-00:07:39

Driskell: All in Eatonton.

01-00:07:41

Cooks: So you were very young.

01-00:07:42

Driskell: I could not have been more than three years old. We didn't move to a second house on the other side, the better side of town, if you call it that, until I was four years old. We couldn't use the upstairs because it was in disrepair, but as kids, climbed up to look out the window and see the train come in.

My mother was a domestic. We could see her coming from afar: "Oh, here comes Mom—" We wanted to know what she was bringing home. She worked for fifty cents a week during the Depression, and whatever she could tote home from these people's houses. Biscuits, meat, fruit, etc. We were anxiously waiting for her to bring tote daily.

So that was the second part of the area where we lived. We didn't have a garden, which is also interesting to me because, as I remember, some of the neighbors had one. My father was away a lot, in and out with his ministry.

The thing I remember most about that was dollar day. You had to scrape up a dollar somehow to go to the bishop, and who could afford a dollar back then? A loaf of bread was five cents.

01-00:09:22

Cooks: And your mom was making fifty cents a week.

01-00:09:25

Driskell: Yes, my mom was making fifty cents.

01-00:09:25

Cooks: That's half a month's wages.

01-00:09:27

Driskell: Yes, but we lived on that. We didn't live well but we managed.

Over the years my sisters went to school. I didn't go to school there. And there was this little one-room school down from the church, which I visited again in 1989. It's not in use any longer.

01-00:09:54

There are two cemeteries at Hunts Chapel. There's the ancient cemetery, I called it. Ancient as the church in 1989 was 125 years old, so that meant that that church was there pre-slavery. We called it the slave cemetery. It was adjacent to that house and the little school where we lived. The new cemetery is on the north side of the church. My second sister, Vertie, who was born in 1926—there was the practice that somebody would come in and look at the child and say, "That child's going to be so. That child was born with the veil.

That child will be knowledgeable." They said about me, "Oh, he's going to be very bright," you know. Anyway, Vertie, the second daughter, was supposedly born with the veil and she could see spirits. They said she could see things.

01-00:11:26

Cooks: And was that true for her?

01-00:11:28

Driskell: Well, she, without any knowledge of—because in those days nobody talked about slavery, nobody talked about Africa; those were like forbidden subjects. I am told that in the evenings she would come running back in the house—because the house was here, the cemetery was there—saying, "Those folks with the chains are out there."

01-00:11:58

Cooks: No.

01-00:11:59

Driskell: My mother told the story and my older sister did as well—my three sisters are deceased, but all of them told the story of how Vertie would come running in the house saying there are people out there with the chains at dusk. They said she was born with the veil. I came up with those stories, which were oral, scary, and yet from the point of view of heritage, when I became older I wanted to know what was that all about. But then mouths were closed. You don't talk about that because it isn't proper. It isn't good company. I got very little of it, but somehow or other I wanted to ask about these stories, and ask questions about Africa—

My father's father, we called him Pop Phut [William]; he was a little Geechee man. He spoke with an accent. And we'd say to my father, "Why does Grandpa talk so funny?" Because he'd say non for man and he called peanuts "goobers" and things like that. We had to really get reacquainted with what he was talking about to understand. But he was a very bright man, and very interesting. He had the equivalency of a third-grade education. He was born right after slavery; we never knew the exact date. We do know the lineage of his father, who was Douglas Driskell, who must have been born in the 1840s or so; and then John Driskell, who must have been born around 1820. We don't think he was born in Africa because the names are still Driskell. Pop Phut died 1949, the year I graduated from high school. I last saw him in 1948 when he came to North Carolina to my Aunt Vertie Lee Gordon's funeral. My second sister was named for that aunt, which was very common in those days.

01-00:14:32

By today's standards, I guess you would say he was sexist. I read a letter that he had written to my father. He wrote in the letter, which I wasn't supposed to read, in 1947—he said, "Don't waste your money on trying to educate your girls. All they're going to do is get married." He said, "Save your money and send your boy to school." I never let my father know that I read it. They didn't

have any money. We were at that time sharecroppers in North Carolina. He came up and surveyed the situation and said, "No, no. Don't try and send your girls to school. Save your money. Send your boy to school."

01-00:15:55

Cooks: Did your sisters go to school?

01-00:15:56

Driskell: No, not beyond the seventh grade.

01-00:15:58

Cooks: They didn't?

01-00:15:59

Driskell: They did exactly what he said: they got married early, so he was kind of prophetic in a way.

01-00:16:11

Cooks: Let me look at some of these other things I wanted and make sure that you spoke to us about. Your dad was a minister. He had two churches at the same time, so he had to preach at both of them every Sunday?

01-00:16:24

Driskell: No, every other Sunday.

01-00:16:27

Cooks: Oh, every other Sunday, okay.

01-00:16:28

Driskell: The first Sunday at Ward's Chapel, the second Sunday at Hunts Chapel, the third Sunday at Ward's Chapel, back and forth. And later he left the Methodist Church and became Baptist and he did the same thing with two churches in North Carolina.

01-00:16:43

Cooks: At two churches?

01-00:16:44

Driskell: He even had three at one time. He was preaching at one church twice. I mean, preaching at two churches nearby on a Sunday.

01-00:16:56

Cooks: So why did you leave Eatonton, Georgia, to go to North Carolina? Was it because of opportunities for him?

01-00:17:05

Driskell: They thought family-wise the opportunities were greater because we had family who had already moved to North Carolina, to Western North Carolina, to Appalachia, to Cleveland and Rutherford County. They actually had moved to Rutherford County and they became sharecroppers and farmers. We weren't sharecroppers in Georgia. I've heard people say, "Born a sharecropper in

Georgia." No, no, I wasn't born a sharecropper in Georgia; became sharecropper later. Wasn't born in a hospital; midwife, we called her Ma Smith, who came and made the delivery for all of us.

We moved to North Carolina in 1936 because the opportunities were supposedly better. I'm not sure that I agree. My mother had a sister, Mae Ethel, who left Georgia in 1930. They didn't live in Eatonton, they lived in Jasper County. She left early and they moved to North Carolina. To them, this was the promised land.

01-00:18:31

Now, something that we were never able to totally check out and make sure that it was accurate. But on my mother's side of the family, the Clouds, C-L-O-U-D, they had, as most African Americans say, "Oh, we had Native American blood, and so forth. I don't know how much blood was there. I just remember Grandma Hon as we called her, my mother's mother, was a little lady of fair complexion with long black hair. Very wise when it came to talking about what you eat, what to make medicine from and things like that. The association was with Cherokee people, but she didn't call herself Cherokee. They had certain traditions which obviously indicated that there was the origin. The name Cloud and the first five—she had ten children—the first five were named for things. The first child was Good Cloud, and so all we knew was Aunt Good. Later we learned that she had a Christian name, so it was Essie. The second child was Sat Cloud, like sat on a cloud. The third child was Sweet, Sweet Cloud. And so that tradition was in the family. We didn't know why. But later on we learned why, because they did have this native association. The story is that in the twenties they had a large body of land but it was taken, just literally taken by force, and they could get no legal help to get it back or anything. And so they left, they just packed up and left Georgia and came to North Carolina and settled over near the Cherokee reservation in Western North Carolina.

01-00:21:05

Cooks: I see.

01-00:21:05

Driskell: Not too far From Asheville, so Rutherford County.

01-00:21:09

Cooks: I see.

01-00:21:10

Driskell: Henderson County, Buncombe County. Buncombe is where the Cherokee reservation is. You'd have to think about it to put all that together, as I look back on it. And I don't spend any time trying to piece it together because it doesn't really make sense to me because we were treated that way.

We moved to this little community where my relatives were sharecroppers, so we became sharecroppers for the next ten years. Later, my father saved

enough money from his ministry to buy his own land. Now, most blacks couldn't do that because many of them were illiterate. They couldn't read or write and they were just forever in debt to the owner, to the landowner. But my father kept records and books and we'd go to the cotton gin, I remember going to the gin with him, to sell the cotton and he would stand there and say, "How much does this bale weigh?" And then he'd come back and he would get half of everything. So that's how; he saved the money and from his preaching to buy our little thirteen acres of land near Polkville.

01-00:22:34

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:22:36

Driskell: Our land was contiguous with the land owned by whites, the Elliots and the Lattimores. The interesting thing there, wasn't that you had a little piece of land off over in someplace that nobody could find you. Blacks lived here, whites lived adjacent to each other. Our county, unfortunately, at first they supposedly had three school systems. They supposedly had a school for the Cherokee people or the native people, which went through the seventh grade. And then for us [African Americans], we could go through the eleventh grade. But that was to keep you from going to college. You had to go through the twelfth grade to get into college, okay. It was well all designed, it was a plan. First we could go through the eighth grade. Then when more enlightened people say, "Well, we need high schools for black kids." And some of the whites pitched in and said, "Yes." We only went through the eleventh grade until the forties. That's why the black colleges had high schools, so you could do your twelfth-grade year at a historically black college. Talladega [College] had a high school. Fisk had one.

01-00:23:59

Cooks: And it was just part of the campus.

01-00:24:01

Driskell: You could do your twelfth grade while you were doing your freshman year.

01-00:24:04

Cooks: I never knew that.

01-00:24:06

Driskell: Yes, so the system was set up for failure. Make sure you were defeated from day one. If you were smart enough you could figure it out, because it wasn't really very smart, the system wasn't very smart. By the time I came into high school we could go through twelfth grade. That is why we had some private schools. In Asheville you always had through the twelfth grade in the cities but not in the country, because the assumption was you were going to be on the farm all your life.

01-00:24:39

Cooks:

Well, what did you think you were going to be when you grew up? Did you think you would be a preacher like your dad?

01-00:24:46

Driskell:

I'm sure my family wanted me to be a preacher because, my grandfather, my father's father was a preacher. He had the equivalency of a third-grade education but, as I said, he taught school, he preached, he wrote so beautifully; the Palmer method.

01-00:25:00

Cooks:

Yeah. How did he learn how to write like that with a third-grade education?

01-00:25:03

Driskell:

On his own. Just pioneering and engineering on his own. My father had very beautiful handwriting. He went through the sixth grade, he and my mother. But he would write off to these writing houses, Palmer Method and get the books, and they'd want you to enroll in the courses. He would get the sample books but he never did. He sat down and practiced. I remember this company in Chillicothe, Ohio, in the 1940s. He would write and get the penmanship book, and then I would take the book and practice from it. That was a part of not just the Palmer Method but that was part of my learning to do all the fancy writing.

01-00:25:55

Cooks:

Well, tell us, what do you think were the important values that you got? I mean, you have a pretty diverse family background and people know things from different cultures and different places, different skillsets. What would you say were the important values in the house?

01-00:26:18

Driskell:

Well, first and foremost was religion. Second was the extension of religion: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Family values. And then thirdly was lifting yourself up out of the condition, getting an education. We moved to North Carolina when I was five, but when I saw all this hard work of plowing and picking cotton and farming and so forth and I said, "I'm not going to be a farmer." My father said, "The way out of this then is through education. Get an education, you won't have to be a farmer."

I set my sights on being a teacher from day one because they were the most highly respected people in the community, not the preachers. We didn't have any doctors and lawyers. We were twenty miles from a town where there was one black doctor or one lawyer, so we didn't know about them.

01-00:27:36

We didn't go to any doctors anyway—well, I did later on—because my mother was an herbalist. She knew all the herbs and I'd follow her around in the woods. And, "This is what you get from this, this is what you get when you have a cold, this is what you get," and so on. We were twenty miles from

the nearest doctor, so if you got a cold, there were no telephones. You would go to the woods and you'd get, first of all, the pine needles, which, interestingly enough, had all kinds of chemicals and turpentine and stuff like that. You'd boil that and then you would add to it what we'd call horsemint, which was a mint that grew in that part of the world, and you'd add honey or syrup. Hardly anyone had lemon, so if you had a lemon you'd add the peel or something like that. But you would make your compound for the cold. I still do it. And it works. [laughs] Later on I learned you add cherry bark to it. We often sold vines and barks to the medicine men who would come around collecting. We called it medicine stuff. The bark from the cherry tree, you'd get so much bark. If you got 10 pounds, you could earn a dollar.

01-00:29:27
Cooks:

Wow.

01-00:29:28
Driskell:

You know, a dollar would go a long way in the 1940s. And what we called the Maypop, which was really the passion flower, the wild passion flower, we would gather those and they'd come and buy those. Big bags of it. They'd ship it off to wherever they make their medicine, but we knew all of that and we'd use it there at home.

01-00:29:55
Tewes:

Considering that, I'm wondering if you feel you got your first exposure to the natural world through your mother and her medicinal training?

01-00:30:03
Driskell:

Oh, definitely. And I'm sure that some of that, it wasn't just the African experience, some of it was the Native experience, which they shied away from. If you say, "Do we have any cousins over there with the Ripleys?" "No, no. We're black." "Oh, I got an Indian cousin." Well, you'd better not say that back then. And when we'd try and ask about Africa, no, don't know anything about Africa.

01-00:30:40
Cooks:

Do you think that was true?

01-00:30:41
Driskell:

Oh, they knew. It had been passed down. They knew things, but they somehow or another, I think, felt that this, whatever they called it, African thing—and I even heard Aaron Douglas say, "Oh, this African thing—" that that was holding them back. The whites who would have perhaps accepted them, that African thing kind of was working against them, so they didn't want to pass that on to us. Here I am later trying to learn as much as I can about it and they're like, "Don't ask me nothing about it. I don't know anything about that." Aunt Good, for example, I'd say, "Aunt Good, why is your name Good?" She'd say, "Because I'm good." Instead of saying, "I'm Good Cloud; he's Sat Cloud, like sat on cloud; she's Sweet Cloud." And of course, Grandma Eugene was Hon, Honey Cloud. And so we called her Grandma Hon.

- 01-00:31:51
Cooks: What was your mother's name?
- 01-00:31:53
Driskell: My mother, by that time—she's the last in the last five—they had pretty much given up. They had nicknames, they had given up. She was Dut, and the sister after her was Dit, and the little sister was Bug, and so they'd given up these kind of names.
- 01-00:32:16
Cooks: Are those the given names or those are the nicknames from the given names?
- 01-00:32:20
Driskell: Nicknames, nicknames. Mary Lou was my mother's name.
- 01-00:32:23
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:32:24
Driskell: So she was Dut. Aunt May, May Ethel, was Dit; and Aunt Annie was Bug. [laughs]
- 01-00:32:47
Cooks: Okay, okay. I want to turn to art a little bit in these early years, thinking about what kind of exposure you had to art, because you were going to school.
- 01-00:33:00
Driskell: In a one-room, segregated school in Rutherford County, North Carolina.
- 01-00:33:02
Cooks: In a one-room, segregated school in North Carolina.
- 01-00:33:04
Driskell: Two miles from home.
- 01-00:33:05
Cooks: Okay. And you were walking to school?
- 01-00:33:08
Driskell: Yes.
- 01-00:33:10
Cooks: Okay. But you had all this creativity in your family. Even the nicknames.
- 01-00:33:15
Driskell: And at school. Ms. Freeman is Edna Freeman.
- 01-00:33:19
Cooks: Okay. Well, did you learn anything about art? Today you think of—
- 01-00:33:25
Driskell: We didn't call it art.

01-00:33:25

Cooks: Okay. Tell me, what did you know?

01-00:33:28

Driskell: My father made most of our furniture.

01-00:33:29

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:33:32

Driskell: My mother made all of the girls, the sisters' dresses and things for the most part, some from those flour sacks that would be decorated, that you'd get if you buy a fifty-pound sack of flour, it would have flowers on it, butterflies and things, so she'd save them and make the girls dresses. You look at the paintings of William H. Johnson, you see all those little decorated [prints on clothing fabrics], those are like from those dresses that the kids wore in those days, and they were made from flour sacks. In many cases all they'd do is cut a hole up there and cut a hole here and then you've got your dress. You see, it was make-do, practical, make-do. You wore your clothes until you wore them out. You'd wash them at night, hang them by the fireplace to get dry, put them right back on the next morning. Back and forth, back and forth. You couldn't go out of that house unless you were clean. Cleanliness! You had to have breakfast, you had to eat. Now, you grew most of your food.

01-00:34:52

Cooks: But you didn't have a garden when you were in Eatonton?

01-00:34:54

Driskell: Not in Eatonton.

01-00:34:55

Cooks: But you had one when you were in North Carolina?

01-00:34:56

Driskell: In North Carolina. From six years old on because everybody had gardens there. You grew all of your vegetables during the regular season, then you learned how to heal your potatoes and put them away for the winter and how to put the turnips and cabbage and things in the cellar, otherwise you would do a heel. I did a drawing for somebody to show them what the heel was, where you'd put the potatoes in with the cornstalks and things and they'd keep all wintertime. You'd just go in and get your potatoes.

01-00:35:56

Cooks: That's all in the cellar? I'm not familiar with that term.

01-00:35:39

Driskell: Yeah. They did some of it in the African tradition, but that really was a Native American thing. But it wasn't limited to African Americans; everybody did it.

01-00:35:57

Cooks: Well so, tell me again now. You didn't call it art in school but what were you making in school?

01-00:36:06

Driskell: Well, our teacher was enterprising in that sense, that she had us making—first we had to copy things. I remember in the fourth grade I copied an entire book.

01-00:36:20

Cooks: What kind of book are you copying?

01-00:36:26

Driskell: This was a children's book on health, *Sleepy Town Wakes Up*. I did all the illustrations, and then the penmanship. We also dug clay from nearby banks and brooks. We made apples, bananas, all of the things—some of the things we didn't get. We seldom saw bananas but we knew what it looked like. We made bananas, we made oranges.

We got oranges for Christmas, only once a year. One or two oranges in our little basket for Christmas and a couple of apples. We could get apples during the year because they'd grow around, but an orange was very special. Raisins were very special; Brazil nuts very special; pecans, pretty ordinary because the trees grew around; black walnuts, ordinary. And we'd sit by the fireplace and this hearth, as they called it, where the rocks would extend out from the fire, with a hammer or with a rock and we'd crack the black walnuts. And that was a treat to sit there and pick the walnut out with a nail. [laughs] We would parch the peanuts. Not roast them but parch. Everybody grew peanuts, had peanuts growing. You'd have bushels of peanuts stored in the storage area and you would bring them in the big pans and put the pan over the fire and that was parching, P-A-R-C-H, parch. Never heard it?

01-00:38:20

Cooks: I have never heard that. I've heard poach, I've heard roast.

01-00:38:25

Driskell: No, but parch, P-A-R-C-H.

01-00:38:28

Cooks: You heat them up, but you still have to crack them open? You peel them open?

01-00:38:35

Driskell: Oh yes. Afterwards you'd open them up and eat them. And we'd play games with them. We had games we'd play. There was a game: so and so and so, how many miles, and you'd have to guess how many peanuts you had in your hand. If you guessed right you'd get the whole thing. If you guessed wrong you had to give up whatever you had.

01-00:39:03

Cooks: Oh no.

- 01-00:39:03
Driskell: Sometimes you'd have a whole pile of peanuts and so forth. Well, there's no television, no radio. It was creative.
- 01-00:39:10
Cooks: That's a good game. No, I like that game.
- 01-00:39:12
Driskell: Yeah, it was very creative.
- 01-00:39:12
Cooks: It's high stakes.
- 01-00:39:15
Driskell: And we'd parch the potato. We'd put the sweet potato in the ashes and covered it and we would put the pon—we'd say a pon, P-O-N—of bread in and covered it with ash and it would bake brown and beautiful. And you'd [blowing sound] blow the ash off and eat it.
- 01-00:39:43
Cooks: That's nice. And is this the whole family or just you and your sisters?
- 01-00:39:48
Driskell: The whole family.
- 01-00:39:49
Cooks: The whole family.
- 01-00:39:50
Driskell: It was tradition because very few people had wooden stoves. They had fireplaces. Usually just one fireplace in what would be the living room; really wasn't the living room. No heat in the bedrooms. And a cook stove, and a cook stove in the kitchen.
- 01-00:40:11
Cooks: Oh, okay. Separate from the fireplace.
- 01-00:40:13
Driskell: Yes.
- 01-00:40:13
Cooks: Okay. I want to hear more about this, but I want us to talk about art because we've got a long way to go.
- 01-00:40:23
Driskell: [laughs] The art was there but we didn't call it art. My mother made baskets from sweet grass and bulrush. She would say, "Save all the boxes," meaning matchboxes and anything else that came in round, and she would work the sweet grass around it. We didn't keep any of it, of course, because we wanted store-bought things.

01-00:40:54

Cooks: Right.

01-00:40:56

Driskell: And, as I said, my father made much of the furniture.

01-00:40:59

Cooks: Did you ever learn any furniture making or help him while he was doing those things?

01-00:41:05

Driskell: I knew how to do it and I've done a little of it, but I have a couple of things around that I made. I have one box that he made out in the hallway.

01-00:41:14

Cooks: Really? And then you have things that you've made?

01-00:41:20

Driskell: No, most of the things that I made are at the residence in Maine.

01-00:41:23

Cooks: Okay. You were copying these books at school, you were making these clay sculptures. Did you—

01-00:41:36

Driskell: We were making the clay sculptures. They were big, thick things. We painted them with enamel paint. We were making airplanes from shingles

At the end of the year—school would end in April, or early May because it was based on when you go to the fields. We had what we called commencement. Had nothing to do with graduating. Commencement was at each school or when combined together. There would be three or four schools coming together, and these are all the little, one-room black schools. In Rutherford County, we only had two brick schools. A three-room brick school with one room that could be called an auditorium. We went there for commencement from all over the county. No school buses; whites had buses but we didn't. We met there once a year at the end of April and had commencement. There, we had our Spelling bee; showing off our art; and recitation, reciting poetry and speaking. We went to Cliffside, which was one of the few Rosenwald schools. I think we had two Rosenwald schools in the county. Cliffside, a brick building was a Rosenwald school. It was down near the South Carolina line. We looked forward to commencement. It was about twenty miles away and we drove all the way over there.

01-00:43:52

Cooks: And so did you do all of those things? You did the recitations and—

01-00:43:57

Driskell: I did all of them. I was never in the spelling bee but I recited poetry: "Cowards die many times before their death. The valiant never taste of death but once.

Of all the wonders I've heard that I have heard it would seem to me most strange that men should fear death; [knowing that it a necessary end will come when it shall come." This is from fourth grade.]

01-00:44:20

Cooks: Okay. Who is this? Who are you reciting?

01-00:44:22

Driskell: This is Shakespeare.

01-00:44:24

Cooks: Oh, see.

01-00:44:26

Driskell: We had good teachers.

01-00:44:27

Cooks: Well, you know that and I don't, so yes.

01-00:44:30

Driskell: The thing that is seldom known or written about is in the South, is black teachers couldn't attend the University of North Carolina or other white colleges and universities.

01-00:44:43

Cooks: Sure.

01-00:44:44

Driskell: They couldn't go to Duke, couldn't go to the major school, such as Wake Forest, etc. But there were eleven black colleges in North Carolina, accredited. We had to learn about the black colleges: where are they, when were they founded. We knew all of that. We had to learn where all of the private high schools were in North Carolina.

01-00:45:25

Cooks: Why was that important?

01-00:45:26

Driskell: Lincoln Academy, was the nearest private boarding school to us. It was a Congregational church school in Kings Mountain, [North Carolina]. If you were affluent enough and bright enough you could go there.

01-00:45:41

Cooks: As a black student you could go to those.

01-00:45:42

Driskell: Yes. It was a black private school.

01-00:45:43

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:45:44

Driskell:

The kids who attended automatically went off to college. But our teachers said, "Go to college." They couldn't go to those schools in North Carolina, but the state would pay them to leave the state. And they'd go to Columbia, to Michigan. I had a teacher in the fourth grade who had a master's degree from Michigan State University.

01-00:46:12

Cooks:

They got Southern funding to go to schools in the North?

01-00:46:16

Driskell:

Yes, so we had excellent teachers. In some cases, our teachers were better prepared than the white teachers because they had gone to the better schools.

01-00:46:25

Cooks:

Now, who was paying them to go to the North?

01-00:46:28

Driskell:

The state had to pay them to do that.

01-00:46:30

Cooks:

Why did they have to pay them?

01-00:46:32

Driskell:

Because they wouldn't allow them to attend the University of North Carolina or other white institutions. They spent more money sending them away when they could have educated them right at home.

01-00:46:42

Cooks:

Oh, okay. That's why I'm having a hard time. The logic of that is just—

01-00:46:46

Driskell:

Well, there is no logic but it was segregation, Jim Crow and racism.

Another little story that relates to all of this is—and I still use this principle of fishing when I go to my place in Maine. I have a brook that runs through the place and there are trout in the brook. I fish with a bamboo pole and my father took me fishing with him on the Second Broad River, which was the nearest river to us. I was seven years old. My Grandma Hon—we'd stop by Aunt Mae's; Grandma Hon lived with Aunt Mae—and Grandma Hon picked me up, put me on her knee, and she looked at my hands. She turned them over and she said, "George,"—my dad's name was George Washington Driskell. He never used that. He always said G.W. He said, "Washington never freed his slaves." He was not going to have that name. [laughs] So everything is Reverend G.W. Driskell. She said, "George," "you send this boy to school because he's not going to be a farmer." She turned my hand back and forth. This was Grandma Hon. He had taken me fishing on the Broad River and we had these bamboo poles and he said, "Now, this is the way you catch a fish." "You put the bait on, the worm, and you let it float around, find out where the fish are and they're going to bite." He said, "Don't try and pull him out."

"When you feel the bite, let it go, let him have it, make him think that he has it, then jerk it right up." That's the way I fish today on my little brook in Maine and I catch ten, twelve-inch trout out in that same way.

01-00:48:59

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:49:00

Driskell: People come [to visit]. They say, "I can't catch anything." My daughters, say that when they come and go fishing, "I can't catch a thing." They say, "They only bite for you." I said, "No, no, no. There's a technique to it."

01-00:49:29

Cooks: Really?

01-00:49:34

Driskell: Go to school. I knew by the time I was seven years old that I wanted to be a teacher, and that was what I was aiming for. He wanted me to be a minister because he was successful, in a way. But I said, "Well, this is my ministry."

01-00:49:58

Tewes: I like the way you phrase that. Did your family support your interest in art?

01-00:50:03

Driskell: Yes, they did. I was the first person, in my family, of all of the children to— Aunt Good, Aunt Sat, Aunt May and all of them, none of them, none attend college.

01-00:50:19

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:50:21

Driskell: I'm the only one. So they would say, "Oh, David's smart."

01-00:50:31

Tewes: Well, I can see how there might be pressure, being the first to go to college, that art might not be serious enough or it might not make a living. So—

01-00:50:39

Driskell: I had an uncle, Aunt Mae's husband, Uncle Roosevelt. I overheard him say to my dad, "That boy's smart." "If he were my child, my son, I'd make a doctor out of him." My daddy said, "No. He's going to be somebody. Don't worry about it."

01-00:51:01

Cooks: Wow. I'm wondering a number of things. When did art come into focus for you? I wonder if it's because in high school or was it later, going to college, that something happened that made you want to be an artist? Do you remember going to a museum for the first time—was that much later? Or did you meet an artist and go to the studio?

- 01-00:51:30
Driskell: Well, when the word got around amongst the teachers that I could draw, that was it. "Oh, he can draw." I had to draw everything at school.
- 01-00:51:40
Cooks: Is this in elementary school or high school?
- 01-00:51:43
Driskell: Both, elementary and high school. We had no junior high. We were bused thirty-five miles a day past about five white schools to go to this little, four-room black school.
- 01-00:51:59
Cooks: Is this Grahamtown?
- 01-00:51:59
Driskell: That was Grahamtown. Actually, I lived in Cleveland County but I was bused those thirty-five miles into Rutherford County. I had to get up at four o'clock in the morning, walk a mile to get to the bus, and then ride thirty-five miles there and thirty-five miles back daily to the four-room segregated school for black kids.
- 01-00:52:23
Cooks: This is five days a week?
- 01-00:52:25
Driskell: Yes. Five days a week, through the twelfth grade.
- 01-00:52:28
Cooks: Oh, right.
- 01-00:52:33
Driskell: And that was Grahamtown High School in Forest City, North Carolina.
- 01-00:52:41
Cooks: Did you take art classes there?
- 01-00:52:42
Driskell: There were no art classes.
- 01-00:52:45
Cooks: How did you become who you are? That's what this is all ultimately about. You had so many choices. People believed in you.
- 01-00:52:56
Driskell: Well, the word got around that I could draw. That was the catch phrase.
- 01-00:53:00
Cooks: Did you do this—
- 01-00:53:01
Driskell: David can draw.

01-00:53:01

Cooks: —on your own at home since you didn't have classes?

01-00:53:06

Driskell: Over there is a little drawing my father did. He used to draw. Everybody did a little drawing of some sort but we didn't call it art. The word got around: David can draw. There were only two other fellows—no girl that they said that about—but two other fellows in the high school. Lee Lynch, who was Cherokee. But they had to come to our school to get an education because they went through seventh grade. He married a very good friend of mine who lives here in Maryland now.

01-00:53:47

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:53:49

Driskell: And Billy, Billy Thompson could draw. We were a little jealous of each other. Because Billy drew cartoons and characters. I didn't like cartoons, didn't draw them well. [laughs] Lee drew almost anything, he was so talented. He never admitted that he was Cherokee because it would have been a conflict, this Indian boy at this black school.

01-00:54:28

Cooks: Was he passing for black?

01-00:54:29

Driskell: Yes, that was common in those days.

01-00:54:30

Cooks: Oh, he was passing for black.

01-00:54:32

Driskell: He had to. He had a sister. His sister was in my class but he was a year ahead of us. You would see him and you would know, there's just no question. He didn't look like me. Cool Spring High School, less than a mile from the four-room school I attended, was for white students. They had more than 100 rooms at Cool Springs High School for whites across town, we couldn't go over there.

01-00:55:11

Cooks: Right.

01-00:55:12

Driskell: The word got around at Grahamtown High School that I could draw, so I would have to draw things for the plays and backgrounds and I'd have to draw something for the newspaper. But I wasn't going to be an artist. My father had taken us as a family to the home of one of his deacons. By then he's a Baptist minister. White Oak Springs Missionary Baptist Church. Deacon Eddie Roberts. He painted watercolors.

01-00:56:00

Cooks: Really?

01-00:56:01

Driskell: I had never seen anybody doing watercolors. We went to his home for dinner one Sunday in 1946 or '47, and I saw all these landscapes. "Oh, this is beautiful. Who did this?" His daughter was a grade ahead of me at high school, Leatrice. She said, "Oh, these are my dad's. See. He paints." He always wanted to be a lawyer but he was a farmer. He owned about fifty acres of land in Ellenboro, North Carolina and he had about five children.

01-00:56:44

Cooks: And he was a deacon.

01-00:56:47

Driskell: The people would go to him for advice about law, and he wasn't a lawyer but he studied on his own. He had these beautiful watercolors. I wonder what happened to them.

01-00:57:04

Tewes: Would we like to pause?

01-00:57:04

Cooks: A break, yeah.

01-00:57:04

Driskell: Oh, great.

01-00:57:05

Tewes: Let's pause. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from break. We were just talking about your father's deacon and him being a watercolorist.

01-00:57:21

Cooks: So was that the first time that you met an artist, someone that you would think—and maybe he thought of himself as an artist.

01-00:57:30

Driskell: First time I'd seen some art that I could identify with a person. I was in high school. My mother quilted. She did strip quilting— I was just telling somebody it is a—there are a couple of pieces in the show at New York [*David Driskell: Resonance, Paintings 1965-2002*] dedicated to her, my mother. I Search of My Mother's Art. Big wall hanging canvases, no frame. I was explaining to someone about that work. I said when I was a little boy she quilted. I would want to quilt. She said, "No, boys don't quilt." As soon as I became an adult, I started quilting.

01-00:58:24

Cooks: Really? I didn't know that.

01-00:58:24

Driskell:

In Julie [McGee]'s book you'll see a quilt of masks, one of my first quilts. I think it was the first quilt, wall hanging I made that I was satisfied with, around 1963. We wanted things from Woolworth and Kress and places like that.

01-00:59:05

Cooks:

I want to talk about transitioning from high school to Howard University. I want you to tell the story about going to Howard, but also a little bit before that, why you decided to go to Howard. You at that time were still planning to become a teacher and you were going to major in history.

01-00:59:30

Driskell:

Yes.

01-00:59:32

Cooks:

Okay. How did you know about Howard? Was that one of the schools that you learned about for commencement and recitation, and was it part of that education in high school?

01-00:59:45

Driskell:

We weren't required to learn about schools, colleges outside of the state, however, there were a couple of students ahead of me at Grahamtown who came to Howard University and they came home—the one student that I knew came to Freedmen's Hospital to study nursing, which was a part of Howard at the time. She came back talking about Howard University. She said that was the best Negro college in the world, and so I said, "Well, I got to go to the best." But I don't have that kind of money. I applied to Shaw University in Raleigh, and got accepted. One of my buddies from another school in the other county was going, Isaac Hunt got accepted. I was very proud I was accepted and I got a ninety-dollar-a-semester scholarship. I was going to work in the art lab.

01-01:00:53

Cooks:

How did that happen?

01-01:00:55

Driskell:

I must have put down history and art.

01-01:00:59

Cooks:

Oh, okay. Now, how far would ninety dollars take you? What would that—

01-01:01:05

Driskell:

That amount would have paid for half of my tuition the first semester. When I arrived at Howard, my tuition for the first quarter was thirty-three dollars. I had gone to Asheville that spring to see my younger sister, Georgia, who was working as a domestic as a live-in domestic. She gave me fifty dollars—

01-01:01:43

Cooks:

Wow.

01-01:01:43

Driskell:

It was toward my college education. I came back and I plowed the fields all summer and chopped cotton. I made an additional forty-five dollars. I bought a few little clothing and a trunk about so big, ready to go to Shaw. And Aunt Mae Ethel Hill—rest her soul in peace—she loved me dearly and thought I was the brightest child around. She and Aunt Annie would say, "Oh, he's so smart. I'm just so afraid his head's going to burst open. He's just got so much knowledge in it." My mother never thought so. Aunt Mae organized a little party, a going away party. "David's going to Shaw. You all come, we had our little games, throw the rubber band onto the bottle, etc." No television. We had a great time. She was an excellent cook. We had potato salad, banana pudding, and many other things. Several friends came. It was written up in the little local newspaper, *The Shelby Daily Star*, local news of the colored folks. Mrs. Gleeves, "David Driskell is heading off to Howard University," At the party I announced, "I'm not going to Shaw. I'm going to Howard."

01-01:03:21

Cooks:

Oh no. [laughs]

01-01:03:23

Driskell:

I didn't have any money but I announced, "I'm going to Howard." My mother and father came and they brought my little bag and trunk to Aunt Mae's. Aunt Mae was the entrepreneur of the family. She pushed everybody out and said, "Do it." We hugged and kissed goodbye and my parents went back, ten miles up in the mountains to our little place. The next morning I announced to Aunt Mae, "I'm going to Washington." Because I had two sisters in Washington. "I'm going to Howard. I'm not going to Shaw." She said, "You are leaving here. You are getting out of here. You're going somewhere. You're not going to stay here." She went up the road and they too were sharecroppers—she went up the road to George Jones' house, the landowner from where they lived, and said, "I want you to take my nephew to Kings Mountain. Here's three dollars." It is about twenty-five miles. That was the nearest train station to where we lived. My aunt lived on Jesse's property. But Mr. George had an old Model A with two seats, sedan type. I put my trunk in the back and I climb up in the front seat and we clacked down the road to Kings Mountain and got there around 4:00 in the afternoon. The train came around 6:30. I purchased my ticket to Washington, which took \$11.45 of my earnings. I arrived the next morning at my sister Jean's home. She lived at 309 A Street North East, two blocks east of the Supreme Court building. She lived right across the street from the Frederick Douglass house. But we didn't know it was Frederick Douglass's house.

01-01:06:10

Cooks:

Really?

01-01:06:10

Driskell:

Few people knew the history of those areas. I arrived, knocked on the door. My brother-in-law said, "Oh, you came to get a job." I said, "No, I came to go

to college." Of course, another mouth to feed, the extended family, but they were so generous and kind. Another brother-in-law came and took me down to the Hecht Company and said, "You got to get a job." He was working there. I got a job filling the clothes hamper and then they sent them over to the store at 7th and F streets NW.

01-01:07:01

Cooks: Go ahead.

01-01:07:02

Driskell: After that, two days I'm there and they took me to their church, a little fundamentalist church. They pray over me and we come back home. The next day I got on the trolley and went up to Howard University.

01-01:07:34

Cooks: And they did not know you were coming?

01-01:70373

Driskell: Pardon?

01-01:07:36

Cooks: No one at Howard knew you were coming?

01-01:07:38

Driskell: Oh no, no. School had been in session for three weeks as it was mid-September.

01-01:07:42

Cooks: Okay. I just want to clarify. At this party for Brother David goes to Shaw, you announced, "I'm not going to Shaw, I'm going to Howard."

01-01:07:53

Driskell: "I'm going to Howard."

01-01:07:55

Cooks: Now, what possessed you to just—I mean, you didn't have a plan. You hadn't applied, you had not been accepted.

01-01:08:05

Driskell: No. I knew Howard was the best school and I wanted to go to the best. And Howard's calendar was ahead of the Shaw calendar. When I arrived in Washington the school had been in session for more than two weeks of classes.

01-01:08:35

Cooks: Is this 1949 or 1950?

01-01:08:38

Driskell: Nineteen forty-nine. The next day after I arrive in DC, I'm not worried about job or anything like that, I'm going to Howard. My report card in my hand, I went to the Howard Campus. I asked, "Where do I go to sign up?" I didn't

know I had to register for classes. I said, "I'm here to sign up for classes." They said, "You have to go to the registrar's office and find out." Registrar, okay. I went to the registrar's office. Dr. F.D. Wilkerson was the Registrar and his office was across the campus in an old building. I came into this larger office and the ladies were in charge. There was a lady, I don't remember her first name, but her last name was Fox, F-O-X. She realized I was unaware of the process. I had my report card. "I was class salutatorian and I'm here to go to school, go to Howard." They were like, "Well, you don't just come to Howard. You don't just come to school, young man. You make an application." I said, "I'm here giving one." By that time Dr. Wilkerson came out and he said, "Young man, where are you from?" And I told him, I said I was from Appalachia. He said, "No, nobody comes from there." It was like nobody ever leaves there, which was almost true. They said, "You have to make an application." I said, "Well, I'm here. Give me one." They said, "There's a process. You do this. And what about money? Payment?" I said, "I don't have any money." "My teacher said go to college and I'm here." Ms. Fox, had the students' interest at heart. She said, "Young man, come. Let me tell you." She said, "School has been in session for three weeks. You can't just come and go to school." "Now, listen. If you listen to me, I'll help you." She looked at my report card. She said, "Well, we've got to have the whole record." "But I reminded her that I was class salutatorian." She said, "We are on the quarter system." I didn't know what that meant. She said, "We end studies in December and we start up again in January." She said, "If you will take this application, fill it out, send it back to me, I'll make sure that it's received and reviewed and you can come in January." I said, "No," that didn't satisfy me. I then went over to Douglass Hall and began sitting in on different history classes. I planned to major in history.

01-01:11:59

Cooks:

Oh no.

01-01:11:59

Driskell:

I wanted to enroll in college immediately. I took the application but I wouldn't fill it out. I continued going to classes. I found out where history was and I went and started sitting in in this history class. Marie V. Wood. And Ms. Wood must have known that I wasn't enrolled in that class because she wouldn't allow me to take the exam, but she never asked me to leave. When I'm telling the story in brief form, I say, "You know, I love Howard. It's my school in so many ways. But then I get angry because so many of potentials at Howard and they just seemed to pass them up." I say to non-Howard graduates, I say, "I can talk about them. But don't you talk negatively about Howard. If you do, you're going to inherit my wrath." They didn't call security on me. They must have seen something in me. I was that persistent.

01-01:13:05

Cooks:

You were confident. You probably acted like you belonged there.

- 01-01:13:10
Driskell: Yes. I had already bought my wardrobe. I was ready.
- 01-01:13:15
Cooks: But you had no money. You were late, three weeks late.
- 01-01:13:21
Driskell: Three weeks late.
- 01-01:13:23
Cooks: So did you go for the rest of that quarter and did you eventually apply?
- 01-01:13:27
Driskell: Oh yes. I sat in on different classes and wrote home and told my parents, "I'm in college," [laughs] and they believed me. They were so proud of me.
- 01-01:13:42
Cooks: [laughs] And you were telling the truth.
- 01-01:13:44
Driskell: I think of my dad getting up in the pulpit and saying, "David's in college."
- 01-01:13:50
Cooks: You were physically in college, you just were not enrolled. So—
- 01-01:13:58
Driskell: So the second quarter, which was around March, I did enroll. That was the beginning. I was going to be a history major. I didn't pay the advisors any attention. I started taking advanced courses in history at the very beginning.
- 01-01:14:18
Cooks: Did you know anything about history from high school and your family or—
- 01-01:14:22
Driskell: No. Just had this great desire to want to be a social science and history teacher, and minor in art. But the art thing didn't come about until later. I didn't even decide to go over and take an art course until a year-and-a-half later.
- 01-01:14:38
Cooks: How did that happen? How did you transition from history to art? Did you double major or you switched entirely to art?
- 01-01:14:50
Driskell: I had enrolled in history courses, was doing well, at least getting Cs. I was taking the other courses that I should have taken from day one. Freshman orientation. I was terrible when it came to English. We had to pass the English Comprehension Examination. I had to take English I three times before I passed. I had a teacher, Ms. Coleman, who was from the old school. You'd see Ms. Coleman in the hall—we'd wear our hats all day in those days—and I remember seeing Ms. Coleman in the hall. You'd say, "Good morning, Ms.

Coleman." Ms. Coleman would turn her head a little bit. She said, "I don't speak to gentlemen with hats on."

01-01:15:49

Cooks: What? [laughs]

01-01:15:48

Driskell: You had to take your hat off. [laughs] But English. I took English from her, I took it three times, the same course.

01-01:15:57

Cooks: Three times with the same person?

01-01:16:00

Driskell: Three times with the same person. Because my vocabulary was so limited, and that's what a lot of it was about. Then I had another friend from Georgia. He died last year. We enrolled at the same time and kept up with each other while at Howard. He was brilliant. He went right on in, took the course, and kept going. And there I was still taking English 1 over and over again. They wouldn't give you a grade like A, B, C. They'd give you a U for unsatisfactory or S. Our thing was, "Are you still in the US?" [both laugh]

01-01:16:50

But to make a long story short, I started taking history courses. I decided in my second year, 1951, that I would enroll in an art class. I went over to Thirkield Hall, where the Art Department was located on the third floor, and took a drawing course from Prof. James [Lesesne] Wells. And yes, I guess I was doing pretty good. One day in walks a gentleman, very well-dressed. He looked over my shoulders and said, "What is your name? I don't know you." I said, "David Driskell." He said, "I haven't seen you here before. Is art your major?" I said, "No, history." He said, "You don't belong in history. You belong here." It was James A. Porter. I said, "Okay." I went and changed my major and he became my mentor.

01-01:18:10

Cooks: Immediately?

01-01:18:12

Driskell: Immediately.

01-01:18:13

Cooks: Really?

01-01:18:14

Driskell: Next semester.

01-01:18:16

Cooks: But what was it? Was it something about him? Was it something about a potential for mentorship?

01-01:18:23

Driskell: Well, he impressed me so, the way he looked and carried himself. He was dressed like an Englishman, cufflinks and etc.

01-01:18:33

Cooks: Wow.

01-01:18:35

Driskell: And he spoke with such precision. I thought, "Hmm, I would like to be like him." In contrast to the chairman of the Department, who would come in, had seen me drawing and I was using some color. Prof. [James] Herring. He stood and looked at what I was doing painting a portrait. She had on a blue sweater. He stood there and he looked at it, then he pointed to the arm. He said, "You'll never paint a better seascape in your whole life than this." And then he walked away. I was like, "Who is that old man?"

01-01:19:032

Cooks: Okay. The nerve.

01-01:19:34

Driskell: That was Prof. Herring, and that's the way he talked. He would embarrass you and say things you didn't wish to hear.

01-01:19:42

Cooks: That never improved? He was just—

01-01:19:45

Driskell: Never. But he became one of our best friends. He loved my wife Thelma [Driskell], he loved the girls. Every time we came to Washington he would give us something. But he never praised anybody. He was Prof. Porter's teacher and everybody said, "Don't take a class with Herring," but we had to take his Art Appreciation class as it was required.

01-01:20:15

Cooks: What kind of art did he appreciate? What did he think was good art?

01-01:20:20

Driskell: He was a pretty decent painter. He had gone to Syracuse University and had founded the Art Department at Howard in 1921. He came there to teach architecture and drawing and founded the Department. Alma Thomas was his first student.

01-01:20:41

Cooks: Yes, and the first graduate.

01-01:20:43

Driskell: Yes. He was good but you had to have patience and know him because he would say things that scare you off. He would say, "Well, if you get intimidated by this you don't need to be in art because it's a hard field."

- 01-01:21:05
Cooks: For art appreciation was it European masters of all kinds?
- 01-01:21:07
Driskell: Yes, it was all of Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*.
- 01-01:21:11
Cooks: Yes, okay. They're still using that book.
- 01-01:21:14
Driskell: No black art, no African. Pardon?
- 01-01:21:15
Cooks: They're still using that book. Editions go on but—
- 01-01:21:19
Driskell: Oh yes. We would go to class. The chapel was right next door, Rankin Chapel— Professor Herring taught the classroom in Founders Library where he would teach, because his office was a room in Founders Library. Just anecdotally, occasionally when somebody passed, they would have the funeral in the chapel, and we wanted to get out of class to go. We didn't know the person, of course, but we wanted to get out of class. Mr. Herring would say, "Let the dead bury the dead." We would see Dr. [Alain LeRoy] Locke maybe the next day and he would say, "You weren't at Dr. So and So's funeral. He was a very great man. Why weren't you there?" We'd say, "Well, Prof. Herring wouldn't let us come." Dr. Locke would say like, "Well, too bad it wasn't Herring," or something like. I think they were not the best of friends.
- 01-01:22:20
Cooks: Did anyone like Locke?
- 01-01:22:23
Driskell: I'm not sure but perhaps; Very few.
- 01-01:22:24
Cooks: Yeah. [laughs]
- 01-01:22:29
Driskell: But it was equally bad on Herring's side. Herring didn't like Locke, because Locke said that he founded the Art Department—
- 01-01:22:36
Cooks: Oh, I see.
- 01-01:22:37
Driskell: —and Professor Herring never forgave him.
- 01-01:22:39
Cooks: But Locke was in Philosophy, I thought.

- 01-01:22:40
Driskell: He was in Philosophy but he wrote about Negro artists, much more than Herring.
- 01-01:22:47
Cooks: I see.
- 01-01:22:47
Driskell: He published books on Negro art. Herring never published a book. He wrote and published many fine cataloges at Howard.
- 01-01:22:49
Cooks: Did he teach classes on art? What kind of classes did Locke teach if he feels—
- 01-01:22:58
Driskell: He taught philosophy.
- 01-01:22:59
Cooks: He taught philosophy.
- 01-01:22:59
Driskell: But Locke lectured in the humanities and it would include some aspects of art.
- 01-01:23:04
Cooks: Okay. Did you take a class with him?
- 01-01:23:07
Driskell: No class, but I had to go to Rankin Chapel every Friday when he lectured in the humanities.
- 01-01:23:14
Cooks: Oh, okay. What was that like? Did you like him?
- 01-01:23:17
Driskell: Well, not weird. These people were brilliant. They were, I say, landlocked at Howard. They couldn't go any other place, so they were at each other's throats half of the time. This one didn't like that one, this one didn't like that one. I thought I was going to get into history because of John Hope Franklin and people like that, but my advisor was not Dr. Franklin. He was getting ready to leave or had just left, gone to Brooklyn College. My advisor was Dr. Harold Lewis, who had no great publishing record, but most of the people did. He would let me skip around and take whatever I wanted, so I was happy over there. When I got in Art I had to go by the book, and that's how I got into art. I remember when Dr. Locke died in 1954, Prof. Herring would not sit with the faculty. He dressed up in a white suit and came in after the faculty had been seated and went up and viewed him and walked out. I won't say what he was heard to have said as he walked out.
- 01-01:24:55
Cooks: Oh no.

- 01-01:24:58
Driskell: "I told the so and so and so I would bury him."
- 01-01:24:59
Cooks: Oooh.
- 01-01:25:02
Driskell: They were landlocked. They were there. They couldn't go any other place. They were brilliant people. They fought amongst themselves.
- 01-01:25:12
Cooks: Why was it weird taking a class with him? What kind of lecturer?
- 01-01:25:16
Driskell: Well, he would never teach from the book. You didn't know what he was going to be talking about the next day. He would say, "Read the first hundred pages of so and so's book," and you'd think the test is going to be on that. The test was not on that. He would come up with something like, "What's the most important thing you've read about locally about art?" Well, nobody was keeping up with local art. We thought he was going to come from the assigned readings. He came from another angle.
- 01-01:25:48
Cooks: Okay. Did he seem disorganized or preoccupied?
- 01-01:25:54
Driskell: Oh, he was well organized. He knew his stuff, but he didn't ever want you anticipating him about anything. "It's in the book." He said, "Read it so you'll know it, but don't expect me to go back over it with you."
- 01-01:26:14
Cooks: Tell us, what were your biggest, most helpful lessons of your time at Howard? Or I could be more specific if that's too big but—
- 01-01:26:28
Driskell: I think I learned the lesson of competency, that you had to almost be first-rate in everything to succeed, that you were still living in a segregated world. It's like what my mother would say to me—my closest neighbor, Jimmy, who was white, Jimmy Latimore. He lives in St. Louis now. Now he still stays in touch with me occasionally.
- 01-01:27:06
Cooks: Oh, wow.
- 01-01:27:09
Driskell: Jimmy's parents were teachers. They had gone to Appalachia State College, and some of my teachers had gone to Michigan State, Columbia, etc. So I'm sure I knew some things that Jimmy didn't know. [laughs] I would say, "Jimmy got a C." [My mother would] say, "You can't get a C. You have to get an A." She said, "Jimmy can get a C and go out here and do whatever he wants, but you can't. You've got to be better than Jimmy." She would preach

that to me. I think Howard reinforced it. You have to be good or the best if you want to succeed in this field because it's too competitive. There are too many good people out there. One of my aims was to get on the good side of the teachers so they would help push me, and so there were a lot of ways of doing that.

I drove a taxi part time.

01-01:28:17

Cooks:

I was just going to ask you: how did you pay tuition? Did you live with your sister still or did you move out?

01-01:28:23

Driskell:

I drove a taxi and I worked part-time in the evening at an art store until I got married and then moved out. By that time I had cultivated an aura of respect around what I was doing as a painter. I had won the first prize in the regional exhibition for local colleges. The regional exhibition was integrated and I had won the first prize in painting in 1952.

01-01:29:17

Cooks:

So let me ask you this. I want to talk about a couple of things and then I know we're going to take a break. When you became an art major, what happened next? Did you have an idea that you were going to be a painter or you were going to keep drawing? Did Porter give you real guidance and take you under his wing? Because now you're talking about winning prizes. So you were a history major getting Cs, two years later you're winning an art prize. Can you talk a little bit about how that happened?

01-01:29:55

Driskell:

In those days I guess I was what they called the teacher's pets. Lois [Mailou] Jones would declare openly, "David's my pet," and irritate the rest of the students; she didn't care. I guess I worked so hard to be good, to do, to absorb what I saw going [on]. I was so grateful. I felt that I was so blessed to be there and to have that kind of chance and that opportunity. I savored the moment. I loved every moment of it and I took a chance to absorb everything.

We were driving past the library downtown recently. It's not a library any longer. I think it's the Historical Society building at Seventh and K Street Northwest. Thelma and I had a little one room studio apartment nearby.

01-01:31:05

Cooks:

A studio apartment, okay.

01-01:31:07

Driskell:

Yes. I literally lived in that library when I wasn't driving the taxi and in school. Mr. Wilson, took time with me. I would go in there and I wasn't supposed to be able to take these plates out, take out these plates of Cézanne, Renoir. They weren't supposed to leave the library. He would let me take them home, because he knew I was going to bring them back.

01-01:31:45

Cooks: So Mr. Wilson was a librarian.

01-01:31:47

Driskell: Librarian.

01-01:31:49

Cooks: You had access to these art books and he let you check them out but they were supposed to stay in the building.

01-01:31:54

Driskell: Right. Wasn't supposed to take them out.

01-01:31:56

Cooks: Was he black or white?

01-01:31:57

Driskell: He was white. He knew I was serious. He would say, "Wait until they leave," and he'd say, "You can take these. Bring them back when you're finished." There were so many people who were like rooting for me like Mr. Wilson.

One day I walked into the art store, I was looking for a job. I didn't know how to drive at that time. There was a gentleman standing outside of the door. I'm looking in the window at the paintings and so he finally said to me, he said, "You've been standing there looking at that painting for a long time. Do you paint?" I hadn't changed my major to art at that time. I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, what do you paint? What medium?" I didn't know anything about medium. I said, "Medium?" He said, "What do you use? What do you paint with?" I said, "Crayon." He looked at me like, this grown man, he paints with crayon? He said, "You don't know about oil paints?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, come in the store, I'm going to give you a sample." Little Italian man. His name was Luigi Sabatino. Gave me a little set of oils. But he was kind to me and he invited me in. He gave me this little set of oil paints. He said, "These are oils and you can paint a picture like that with them." He said, "When you paint that picture, you bring it back to me." I took those oils and there was a light [on the] entrance to my sister's house, glass shaped like that, you go in at 309A Street. I painted something on the light panel, instead of on a board.

01-01:34:13

Cooks: You did?

01-01:34:15

Driskell: I did not paint a landscape or anything like that. I often wonder: how long did it stay there in oil? I did go back. He said, "Did you paint a picture?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Did you bring it back?" I said, "No." He didn't say, "Well, bring it," or anything like that. I said, "I'm looking for a job." He said, "Oh, you're looking for a job." He said, "You said you were in school." I said, "Yeah." He wanted to know was I studying art. I said, "No, no." He said, "Well, I have a very good friend who teaches art there, Lois Jones."

01-01:34:59

Cooks: Oh, wow.

01-01:35:00

Driskell: I hadn't heard anything about Lois Jones. I didn't know anything about any of the Howard art teachers.

01-01:35:03

Cooks: You were, what, twenty, twenty-one?

01-01:35:05

Driskell: I was twenty. He told me about Lois, and he said, "Well, we're just getting set up here and everything." He said, "But we're going to need a porter." He said, "Can you do porter work?" I said, "Yes." I didn't know what a porter did. When I finally came in he said, "Well, a porter scrubs the floors and mops and cleans the bathrooms." I said, "I can do that. Yes, I can do that." He introduced me to Mr. Ellerin, Mr. Albert Ellerin, who was the store owner. Mr. Ellerin said, "Can you drive?" He said, "We're going to need somebody to help with delivery." I said, "No, I can't drive."

01-01:36:03

Cooks: I'm glad you said no, because you've been saying yes to everything. That becomes quite dangerous if you say yes to driving.

01-01:36:09

Driskell: Yes. Driving I said no. He said, "Well, I'll teach you to drive if we hire you." And he did. Mr. Ellerin taught me to drive in the alleys in back of the store, up and down, the back of his store at 934 New York Avenue. I drove from that end to this end, from Ninth Street to Tenth Street, back and forth until I learned how to drive. Then he took me to get my driver's license.

01-01:36:34

Cooks: What was the name of this art store?

01-01:36:37

Driskell: Arts and Crafts Supply Company.

01-01:36:42

Tewes: Were they selling to professional artists or to craftspeople?

01-01:36:43

Driskell: They were selling to craftspeople and professional artists. This was the beginning of my knowledge of paint-by-the-numbers and things like that, gimp and all the stuff that they worked with [in] summer camps. When I learned to drive I had to deliver these materials to different places around town.

I'll tell you about delivering to a school, the only place in Washington in 1951, '52 that had black kids in the classes. There was a woman who ran an art school—we thought she was Russian because of the name but she wasn't—

Mrs. Cornelia Uditsky. She had a school over near Nineteenth and I Street Northwest. We were at Tenth Street Northwest, at New York Avenue. I went there to deliver supplies after I learned to drive and I saw this black kid in class, which was most unusual for Washington at that time. It looked like the kid was finger-painting. I'm twenty, twenty-one years old. I'm like, Well, who is he? Why is he here? And I learned later on that it was young Martin Puryear.

01-01:38:04

Cooks:

No, you are kidding. Okay. I think we need to take a break. We did not make it through. We'll just take a break and then start back.

01-01:38:20

Driskell:

Yes.

01-01:38:22

Cooks:

But I do want to know more about that.

01-01:38:24

Tewes:

Okay. All right, we'll see you back in a minute.

Interview 2: April 13, 2019

02-00:00:00

Tewes:

This is a second interview with David Driskell for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview's being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Driskell's home in Hyattsville, Maryland, on April 12, 2019. We all had a nice break and we're back in the saddle. Bridget, why don't you take us—

02-00:00:27

Cooks:

Okay. We were talking about life at Howard [University] and your job at the Arts and Crafts Supply Company and learning how to drive and then doing deliveries. One of the other important things that you did while you were at Howard was you met Thelma, your wife. How did you meet, and tell us a little bit about that.

02-00:00:51

Driskell:

I was still working at Arts and Crafts in 1951. I was by that time a pretty good student at Howard. I had taken my first art courses, had made good grades, and had transitioned to become a scholarship student. Thereafter, I paid no tuition. I had a full scholarship, progressively. I had settled down in my work ethic. I was driving the station wagon for Arts and Crafts. I had moved out of the family circuit, that is living with relatives. I had my first roommate; not on campus, but I had moved out northeast.

One of the students whom I had met was a young man named Jasper Woody. He was in my ROTC class. All male students were required to take ROTC, either Air Force or Army. I chose Army infantry. He did choose Air Force but there were certain classes we took together. We started talking and it turns out we had family connections. We weren't family but some of his family was from the next county. He was living with his aunt from Gaston County, North Carolina. I was from Cleveland County, the next county over. So we set up this relationship. Then he got nosy and wanted to know about my social life. I told him I was dating a young lady from home. Not steady but, someone I had known—was a member of one of my father's churches. He said, "Well, I'm dating so and so, and she has several sisters and I'd like to introduce you to one of them." I said, "Tell me about them." He told me about this family. He was dating the second sister. Thelma's the oldest. There were seven sisters.

02-00:03:44

Cooks:

Wow.

02-00:03:46

Driskell:

Not all were of a dating age but Thelma and Effie were. He said, "I'd like to introduce you to her." She lived like two blocks from where we lived northeast, out Benning Road. He said, "I'd like to take you over and introduce you." I said, "Okay, all right." It was in October. I had gone home, visited

with my parents, gone to the revival meeting and actually stayed overnight with my friend's family when I was at the revival meeting, then came back to Washington. Jasper introduces me Thelma.

02-00:04:48

Cooks: And this is 1951?

02-00:04:51

Driskell: Nineteen fifty-one. The fall of 1951. We gradually started dating. She was enrolled at a clerical school: Cortez Peter's on U Street, one of the biggest in the country at that time. Cortez Peter's had the title of being the fastest typist in the United States. Typing was big back then, and especially for black women who would go into government. She was not enrolled in college. As a matter of fact, she had only gone through the eleventh grade, so she had to do that twelfth grade before she could consider college. She did it here at Roosevelt High School in Washington [DC] after we got married.

02-00:05:52

Cooks: Really?

02-00:05:55

Driskell: Yes.

02-00:05:56

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:05:57

Driskell: She completed high school after the children were born.

02-00:05:59

Cooks: Good for her.

02-00:06:01

Driskell: Yeah. She didn't go to college until we went to Tennessee. She enrolled at Tennessee State University while I was teaching at Fisk [University].

Anyway, backtrack. Woody introduced me to Thelma. We kind of hit it off. This is like October, September, October. Then about December we started talking about marriage.

02-00:06:29

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:06:30

Driskell: Now, I'm a sophomore and ain't got nothing, she ain't got nothing, but here we are talking about marriage. Thelma had an aunt, Fanny Johnson, who was like the entrepreneur in the family. I think one of her great desires in life was to make sure that all seven of those girls were married off before she left this world. And she accomplished that.

02-00:07:04

Cooks: Really?

02-00:07:06

Driskell: She had these ideals about marriage. You marry somebody who's on the way up, and you do this and do that. They were from North Carolina. They were all—I call them gentry, landowners in the Lake Gaston area. They all had big parcels of land down there. Very valuable land now. We all looked up to Aunt Fanny because she was the mastermind for the family. She was very religious. She took us on our very first official date to Richmond, Virginia. We had been dating, I'd go by the house. In December she took us to Richmond, Virginia, to what they called the mosque. She said, "We're going to a concert." I thought she meant jazz. It was a gospel concert. But it was the only time I had ever seen Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

02-00:08:33

Cooks: Oh, you did. Wow.

02-00:08:33

Driskell: Madame Marie Knight and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. I've always had great fondness for gospel music because of my tradition in the fundamentalist church, my father being a Baptist minister.

This has nothing to do with my upbringing and I shouldn't be claiming it did, but my father's third church was over in Polk, P-O-L-K, Polk County, North Carolina, which was a fairly different atmosphere from the farming community where I grew up. It was more like a resort community. A lot of northerners came down there for the winter. There were vineyards and little cotton grown. A lot of the African Americans over there worked for these wealthy people and had their own homes. My father would always point to them and say, "This is the way you should be living." There were teachers and so forth and so on. One of the fourth-grade teachers who had a master's degree from Michigan State University lived in that county.

Over in the town of Tryon, they were a little more progressive than we were. They had a Rosenwald school. I was always so jealous because I didn't attend a Rosenwald school. They had better schools. Julius Rosenwald had put money into these black schools. At my father's church, what we called the singing conventions every fifth Sunday were held. We would all compete. I was director of the junior gospel choir. However, I didn't know one [note] of music, but I'd get up and direct them and we'd out-sing this group and we'd out-sing that group. One of the groups that would come and out-sing everybody else was from Tryon. And guess who the pianist was?

02-00:10:47

Cooks: I don't know.

- 02-00:10:49
Driskell: Well, you wouldn't know her by that name anyway. Her name was Eunice Waymon.
- 02-00:10:55
Cooks: Oh, I do know this name. Yeah. This is going to be recorded that I can't come up with the name. I know her name.
- 02-00:11:08
Driskell: I know you do, yeah.
- 02-00:11:09
Cooks: She's a civil rights, *Mississippi Goddamn*—
- 02-00:11:15
Driskell: Yes, indeed.
- 02-00:11:16
Cooks: I just can't call her name right now.
- 02-00:11:17
Driskell: Nina Simone.
- 02-00:11:19
Cooks: Nina Simone. Thank you, right. North Carolina. Because her birthday was recently—
- 02-00:11:23
Driskell: Tryon, North Carolina.
- 02-00:11:24
Cooks: That is right.
- 02-00:11:25
Driskell: Her family was Methodist, my family was Baptist, but they would exchange churches. They'd come to Green Creek, my father's church. We would go over to their church. We tried to out-sing them, they tried to out-sing us.
- 02-00:11:38
Cooks: And she's a piano player for one of these groups.
- 02-00:11:40
Driskell: Yes, she grew up playing piano. There was a white lady who saw her talent early on and gave her piano lessons.
- 02-00:11:47
Cooks: Yes, I do know this story. Yes.
- 02-00:11:45
Driskell: Gave her music lessons and then encouraged her to go north. But she used to play for the gospel group. The last time I saw her was 1968 at Fisk. She came to perform in the Fisk University Chapel.

- 02-00:12:01
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:12:02
Driskell: At HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities] you have to do everything. I was over the Lyceum Committee, booking all the people to come in and entertain, the jazz singers, etc.
- 02-00:12:14
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:12:15
Driskell: —whomever.
- 02-00:12:16
Cooks: That's exciting.
- 02-00:12:17
Driskell: At her concert she sang *Mississippi Goddamn* in the chapel.
- 02-00:12:22
Cooks: She did?
- 02-00:12:24
Driskell: Oh yes, she did.
- 02-00:12:25
Cooks: How was that received at Fisk at that time?
- 02-00:12:28
Driskell: Well, in 1968—well, because prior to that Grace Bumbry had come to sing music. There was this air about and I remember she did Menotti's *The Telephone*, and the students in the balcony, they were bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. They just drowned her out.
- 02-00:12:54
Cooks: Oh no.
- 02-00:12:55
Driskell: It was very, very unkind of them. But that was the atmosphere at that time.
- 02-00:12:57
Cooks: Sure, in '68.
- 02-00:13:02
Driskell: If you didn't integrate some of the black experience you were in trouble. Grace obviously didn't know that. I remember she said something, "How does one say that in English?" and they yelled at her and called her some names. It was not very nice. She had been in Europe and she said she'd said she'd forgotten how to—they told her how to say it.

02-00:13:28

Cooks: She grew up in the US.

02-00:13:31

Driskell: Oh, of course.

02-00:13:32

Cooks: All right. Now, David, let me look at the script and see where I want us to go. Now, you went on this first date, the official date.

02-00:13:40

Driskell: Yes. And we liked each other. We kind of hit it off and we started dating and became real serious. And eventually, I guess with the help of Aunt Fannie and a few others, they started talking about, you know, "What are your intentions?" Because she had gotten one of them married off to a dentist. Not in this family but the other family.

02-00:14:05

Cooks: You were twenty-one?

02-00:14:07

Driskell: I was twenty. I had to go home to get my parents' approval because we were going to get married in January, but in DC you had to be twenty-one to marry on your own. I went home Christmas and got their approval. I had to go through the thing of who is she and what kind of family does she come from? At that time, [laughs] Thelma was very fair skinned with long hair. My mother, I remember her saying, "You sure that girl's not white?"

02-00:14:46

Cooks: Really?

02-00:14:47

Driskell: Yes. There was this thing about, you don't leave the race. Because my mother's brother, Uncle Sat, after World War I, he went north to Long Island and eventually to Far Rockaway Beach; he married a Caucasian woman. He never came home again. When Grandma Hon died in December, 1938, I was seven years old; I remember they sent him a telegram and he responded. Grandma Hon was still living with Aunt May in that same house where I had the party to go off to school later. Uncle Sat responded by saying, "You know I can never come home so I can't come to Hon's funeral."

02-00:14:58

Tewes: Was he passing as white?

02-00:15:51

Driskell: I don't see how Uncle Sat could have passed. On the other hand, he may have said Indian or something like that. Because of course, he was much fairer than I am. He didn't have what you'd call straight hair but it wasn't like mine. [laughs] He had keener features. He was very fair; he was like Thelma's color. We never knew whether he was passing or whether it was pure love. The last I

heard, Aunt Mae was going with me to Maine in 1968. We went the long way, out Long Island. She went over to visit her stepdaughter, who was living on Montauk. She was a farmer out there. Aunt Mae said, "I'm going to look at the telephone book and see if I can find Sat." This is 1968 and I suspect he was still alive. She found a William Cloud. I'm sorry, a William Clyde, C-L-Y-D-E. Because the boys, after all this rigmarole and the taking the land and all that, they changed their name to Clyde. I wanted to be like them. I changed my name from my mother's C-L-O-U-D to C-L-Y-D-E because I wanted to be like Uncle Sat. I tried to straighten my hair, make it look like Uncle Sat. I literally changed mine to C-L-Y-D-E and that's the way it is now on my birth certificate.

02-00:17:47

Cooks: I didn't know that.

02-00:17:51

Driskell: I regretted it later because Cloud was the real name, but the boys all changed their name to C-L-Y-D-E. No more Cloud, no more Cloud. She found William Cloud, Far Rockaway Beach, New York. You know, we didn't have all these tracing elements then. No Google. It had to be the same person.

02-00:18:15

Cooks: Sure. Did she call?

02-00:18:17

Driskell: She called and evidently one of the children answered the phone. Aunt Mae said afterwards, she just said, "Is William Cloud, who was then one-time in the Army—" she didn't tell them who she was or anything—"who was in the Army, is this the William Cloud who came from Georgia and settled on Far Rockaway Beach in New York?" or something. He was in the Army. She gave him a little history. The man who answered the phone said, "Yes, yes." But she didn't go into any other details. Said he wasn't there. When she got off the phone she said, "David, I talked to one of Sat's sons." She said, "That man is white." She said, "He didn't sound like us." [laughs] She was like, "I wasn't going to tell him who I was."

02-00:19:33

Cooks: Right. And break the secret.

02-00:19:35

Driskell: Yeah. That was the last connection other than my sister Georgia, the younger sister who died nine years ago, used to write to him, and he'd write back. They had this correspondence going while she was in grade school until she was in the sixth grade. Then she wrote and told him that she was going to come up there to see him and she never heard from him again.

02-00:20:07

Cooks: Oh no, that's too bad.

- 02-00:20:11
Driskell: So we knew that there was the race thing. He may have been passing for white but to me—I never saw him but to look at his picture, I just couldn't see him as white, but maybe some did. But anyway, that's a long story.
- 02-00:20:28
Cooks: All right.
- 02-00:20:30
Driskell: That's how I get Clyde in my name instead of Cloud.
- 02-00:20:33
Cooks: I didn't know that at all.
- 02-00:20:35
Tewes: That is interesting.
- 02-00:20:36
Cooks: Okay, I'm going to bring us back. You were given permission to marry Thelma, and where did you get married?
- 02-00:20:45
Driskell: In Washington.
- 02-00:20:46
Cooks: In Washington.
- 02-00:20:46
Driskell: At 554 Twenty-Fourth Street Northeast, Washington, DC.
- 02-00:20:52
Cooks: Was that a house?
- 02-00:20:53
Driskell: At a house, Aunt Fanny Johnson's house.
- 02-00:20:55
Cooks: Oh, okay.
- 02-00:20:55
Driskell: Aunt Fanny's house on January 9, 1952.
- 02-00:21:02
Cooks: Okay. I wanted to also talk about other things you were doing around that time. So you started working in art galleries?
- 02-00:21:14
Driskell: I was still driving the taxi.
- 02-00:21:22
Cooks: Whose taxi was this? Did you have to rent the taxi or—

- 02-00:21:25
Driskell: I had to rent the taxi from my brother-in-law. Imperial Taxi. I rented the taxi weekly from my brother-in-law, and made just enough to pay the taxi rental and enough for food.
- 02-00:21:41
Cooks: Is this why you remember addresses so well, because you were a taxi driver?
- 02-00:21:48
Driskell: I don't think so.
- 02-00:21:49
Cooks: No? Okay.
- 02-00:21:51
Driskell: Yeah. It was only so many places that I lived. I remember streets and things.
- 02-00:22:00
Cooks: GPS.
- 02-00:22:05
Driskell: GPS and I say, "Oh, that's not the easiest way to get there," and all that. "Shut up."
- 02-00:22:12
Cooks: Okay. You were working as a taxi driver, but you had a scholarship at that point.
- 02-00:22:16
Driskell: I had a scholarship.
- 02-00:22:17
Cooks: But you were working as a taxi driver. I have noted that you worked at the Howard University Gallery of Art.
- 02-00:22:23
Driskell: Yes, the Gallery of Art. And part-time I had gone down to the Barnett Aden Gallery to work in between, mainly for food because Mr. [James] Herring and Mr. [Alonzo] Aden were very good cooks.
- 02-00:22:32
Cooks: Oh, really?
- 02-00:22:34
Driskell: Mr. Aden was excellent at making crab salad and things like that. You know, I didn't grow up eating any crab salad.
- 02-00:22:43
Cooks: Where was he from?
- 02-00:22:44
Driskell: He was from Charleston, South Carolina.

02-00:22:46

Cooks: Really?

02-00:22:48

Driskell: Mr. Aden was a very strange character in the sense that he always felt he was superior to everybody else. He'd tell you in a minute, "We were never slaves," and he'd go into all of that. His mother came to live with him in the fifties. I would come in to work downstairs in the gallery and she would be sitting there in the living room with her black dress on and white collar. Very much like Georgia O'Keeffe in her photo. She would say to me when I came in, "David, fetch me the paper." I had to go onto the porch and get the paper for her. The paper had been there all day. My attitude was she just had to have somebody black waiting on her, but they'd tell you in a hurry, "No, we were never slaves. And we were upper-class."

02-00:23:47

Cooks: But what was the focus of the gallery? Because I associate that gallery with one of the first or maybe the only integrated—

02-00:23:58

Driskell: It was the first black and integrated gallery in the nation's capital.

02-00:24:04

Cooks: Amazing.

02-00:24:05

Driskell: Nineteen forty-three when it was founded. Mr. Herring was helping establish that relationship through the Howard University Gallery since 1928.

02-00:24:05

Cooks: Now, why do you think, given the high attitude of Mr. Aden, he was interested in black artists?

02-00:24:23

Driskell: Well, he never denied his heritage or anything like that; he just felt there were certain classes of people. When I was at Catholic University doing my MFA, I stayed there one summer and I was taking a course in the sociology of class. My graduate minor—because you had to do a graduate minor outside of your field—my graduate minor was psychological counseling.

02-00:25:08

Cooks: Trying to see where this is going, going back to Mr. Aden.

02-00:25:12

Driskell: Yes. He would ask me questions. "Are we upper class, middle class? What are we?" I said, "Well, let me tell you what the prerequisites are for being upper class." I said, "You have to have money." I said, "Nine times out of ten you have to have been born with money." He was like almost sweating, "Well, we aren't upper class?" I was like, "No, you are not." I don't think he ever forgave me for breaking down that notion of his being upper class.

But Mr. Herring was just down to earth. He was born in Clio, South Carolina, of a black servant woman and a Jewish father. You'd see Mr. Herring on the streets, you just assumed he was white. The same with Mr. Aden. Except Mr. Herring would tell the tale about Mr. Herring never learned to drive. They would go south driving. Mr. Herring never trusted the notion that people would think he was white, he would never pass. But Mr. Aden would pass in a minute. Mr. Aden would drive up to the restaurant, get out, go in and go and sit in the window where he could sit and wave at Mr. Herring. Mr. Aden said, "Bring me some food. I'm not going in there and getting lynched." Oftentimes with the Green Book, one knew where to stay.

02-00:27:10

Cooks:

Well, it's interesting because they are part of the art world but they're navigating all kinds of social restrictions.

02-00:27:15

Driskell:

They had to go through all of these gaps and at the same time they had great respect in the arts community. I met Duncan Phillips at the Barnett Aden Gallery.

02-00:27:32

Cooks:

Wow.

02-00:27:32

Driskell:

I'm on the Board of Trustees at the Phillips Collection now, and one of my first meetings the director said, "There's someone here who met Duncan Phillips. Nobody else did." It was I.

02-00:27:48

Cooks:

Wow.

02-00:27:50

Driskell:

None of the other trustees had ever met him. I met Langston Hughes at the Barnett Aden Gallery. I met Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden.

02-00:27:58

Cooks:

And they became friends of the family.

02-00:28:00

Driskell:

Oh yes. It was major. But he also exhibited European American artists. Theodore Stamos, I. Rice Pereira and artists like that.

02-00:28:14

Cooks:

What kind of things did you learn working at the gallery? What kinds of things did you do? What were your responsibilities? Because you weren't a porter again, were you?

02-00:28:23

Driskell:

I was there to help with the hanging of the shows. I was to put things away, paintings in the stacks. I'll tell you a story about that time, 1953. I had gone to Skowhegan and come back.

02-00:28:42

Cooks:

Well, we want to talk about that. Do you want to talk about Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture] now or you want to tell the story and we'll come back to it?

02-00:28:48

Driskell:

Well, I'll tell the story because Skowhegan's a little later that I'm going to—but I'm working at the Barnett Aden Gallery, and Morris Louis has his first job teaching at Howard. That's the only place he ever taught. You don't see that in his biography. Did you know he taught at Howard?

02-00:29:09

Cooks:

I did from your biography but not his, yeah.

02-00:29:10

Driskell:

Okay. Well, nobody else believes he taught at Howard because it's seldom in print. Morris couldn't get a job teaching any other place. Nobody believed in abstraction in Washington at that time. [Critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg helped put the Washington Color School on the map.] Had Harold Rosenberg and [Clement] Greenberg said, "It ain't New York by itself, it's Washington," nobody would've believed it. So Ken Nolan, Morris Louis, Jean Davis and others, they were beginning to experiment. I [delivered] art supplies to a man at Georgetown named Leon [Berkowitz]. He was never considered a part of the [Washington] Color School, but he was one of the first abstractionists to do that kind of painting. I went there to deliver [art supplies] and he sat down and talked with me about what he was doing. He was one of the first to use synthetic paints.

02-00:30:30

Cooks:

Really?

02-00:30:30

Driskell:

There were very few synthetic paints at that time. Leonard Bocour had brought out a paint he called Magna, M-A-G-N-A, but one used turpentine with it, not water. Later they all got involved in the synthetics, in which water was used as thinner. But they said the Magna was not good for you. They said it may have had something to do with the lungs.

02-00:31:01

Cooks:

Toxic in some ways.

02-00:31:02

Driskell:

Yes. Anyway, Morris came to the gallery one day. I'm there at Barnett Aden, and he had this painting about this tall, long on his head. Mr. Aden stopped him at the door and he said, "Where are you doing with that painting?" Morris

said, "I'm bringing it to you because I want to be in your collection." That's how important it was to be in the Barnett Aden Gallery. Mr. Aden said, "But I don't like your work. I don't want you in my collection."

02-00:31:39

Cooks: Oh.

02-00:31:41

Driskell: Mr. Herring said to me, "Driskell, come and get the painting and take it downstairs." I came. I was probably in the kitchen eating or doing something. I came and brought the painting down through the basement door, and there was a hot water pipe here and a cold water pipe there. I placed that painting on those two pipes and it stayed there until after Mr. Aden died. It was never shown in the gallery.

02-00:32:14

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:32:16

Driskell: I wish I had it now, but it stayed there until after Mr. Aden's death. Mr. Aden died in 1961. Mr. Herring died in '69. It stayed there for another five or six years and Mr. Herring sold it to an art dealer and framer down on Seventh Street by the name of Harry Cohen. Okay, Skowhegan. But anyway, that was pre-Skowhegan.

02-00:32:55

Cooks: I was going to ask were there things at these galleries that you weren't learning when you were at Howard, but it also seems that it's connected to Howard because Herring was—

02-00:33:08

Driskell: Oh yes, Herring had just retired. Herring retired from teaching at Howard in '54, so I'm overlapping by two years. Mr. Herring, was standing outside of Founders Library where his office and the gallery were, waiting for me to come and drive him home. When I got out of class he would be standing there with his cape on and his hat pulled over his eyes. You know how Langston [Hughes] used to wear his hat.

02-00:33:51

Cooks: Was he paying you and this was just part of your responsibilities?

02-00:33:51

Driskell: No, he paid me.

02-00:33:55

Cooks: He did pay you? Okay.

02-00:33:55

Driskell: Yes, he paid me fifty cents an hour or something like that. He didn't pay me much, but it all helped. It was hard to get a job in between classes so I drove a

taxi. He always had his cuff links and his tie. I have all these stick pins that I wear now. I guess I'm imitating him. They were gentlemen, they were people of culture. You don't see much of that anymore. That's why I was so impressed when I saw Prof. Porter standing teaching a painting course with a necktie on and an English suit.

02-00:34:55

Cooks:

So you do well in school. You go from being a C student in history to an A student in art. You're winning prizes. Let's talk about Skowhegan then. So 1953 you're still a student at Howard but you receive a fellowship to attend the Art Program at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

02-00:35:19

Driskell:

Right.

02-00:35:20

Cooks:

How did that come about? I have a whole series of questions about that. What did you expect from your experience there? Did Thelma go with you? I wanted to hear you talk about the kind of work that you were making. I think you were making both social realist works and also natural landscapes.

02-00:35:46

Driskell:

Yes. I was told later that normally they often sent graduate students to Skowhegan. Howard was the only black school represented at Skowhegan. There [were] black students, but they didn't come from Howard. In the very first class at Skowhegan there was a black student. He is ninety-five now. He lives in Maine, the painter Ashley Bryan. There's a film about him. But they wanted to make sure that any student that they sent was ready and well prepared to compete because, with students from the school and the Art Institute of Chicago, Art Students League, the Brooklyn Museum School, and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. It was high cotton. Howard was the only black school represented.

02-00:36:46

Cooks:

But you weren't a graduate student, right? You were—

02-00:36:48

Driskell:

No, I was a junior and it wasn't supposed to be happening. Prof. Porter spoke to me and said, "I would like you to consider going to Skowhegan this summer." I said, "No, I can't go because I have to work. I have a family."

02-00:37:05

Cooks:

Right. So you had one daughter or two? You had Deviryne—

02-00:37:11

Driskell:

I had one daughter and one on the way.

02-00:37:13

Cooks:

Okay. He's saying, "I'm sending you to—"

02-00:37:16

Driskell:

The subject came up in the faculty meeting. The faculty voted on who goes, I learned this twenty years later from Lois. "We're going to send so and so and so," whoever's in graduate. Lois speaks up, says, "I would like for David Driskell to go."

02-00:37:45

Cooks:

Really?

02-00:37:46

Driskell:

Because I'm Lois's pet, remember? [laughs] I had taken Lois's watercolor class and she was very impressed with what I did with watercolor, she wanted me to go to Skowhegan. They allowed Lois to teach oil painting; she could only teach design and watercolor. The men taught the oil painting. But Lois was a better painter than most. Lois said, "No, I want David." Porter speaks up and says, "He can't go. He has to work." Lois says, "Well, we'll work that out. We'll take care of it." So she does persuade them, and I think I may have been the first undergraduate from Howard to go to Skowhegan.

02-00:38:32

Cooks:

Amazing.

02-00:38:33

Driskell:

I hadn't heard anything about Skowhegan, didn't know anything about it. I had never traveled north of Baltimore. They said, "You got to get on the train, go all the way to Maine." I said, "Where is that?" I had to change trains in Boston. Lois was going to arrange for me to stay overnight with her brother, who lived in Boston at the time. He had a daughter about my age and I think he decided, "Oh, I don't want him coming here." So I had to rearrange my plans and get a hotel in Boston. I had never stayed in a hotel in my life.

02-00:39:18

Cooks:

What was that like?

02-00:39:18

Driskell:

Nineteen fifty-three I'm twenty-two years old, and so I had my first hotel experience, living in a hotel in Boston overnight, getting up the next morning, eating baked beans, and then continuing on to Maine.

02-00:39:36

Cooks:

To Maine, right.

02-00:39:39

Driskell:

They meet me in Waterville, and drove me the next twelve miles to Skowhegan. Everybody had to have a studio assignment, so I became in charge of the painting studio where Leonard Bocour made and ground the paints. He taught a course called Methods and Materials of Painting; I was his assistant. I learned to hand grind the paints, to grind paints like the old masters did through Leonard. We established a relationship that lasted for the rest of his life. As I said, I was working at the Arts and Crafts [Supply Company] and

they were selling a brand of paints—really inferior at that time—Sargent. Mr. Bocour said to me, "If you go back and convince your boss, Mr. Ellerin, to throw those Sargents out and take on Bocour and Bellini," he said, "you'll never have to worry about paints as long as I am around."

02-00:40:52

Cooks: Oh, that's a good deal.

02-00:40:53

Driskell: And he kept his promise.

02-00:40:55

Cooks: Really?

02-00:40:55

Driskell: I did just that. I went back and sold that notion of Bocour paints to Mr. Ellerin. He got rid of the Sargent paint and took on Bocour and Bellini. There were only two art stores in Washington at that time: Muths, M-U-T-H-S; and Arts and Crafts. Muths sold Winsor Newton and high-class Rembrandt. Bocour was just as good because it was handmade. After I graduated from Howard, he sent me all these paints to Talladega [College]. When I come to Howard he sent paints. He came to Howard, and gave a painting demonstration. When I went to Fisk he sent me paints. When I came to Maryland he sent paints. I think he may have died in the mid-eighties or so, but I still have paints in my studios that he gave me.

02-00:41:55

Cooks: That's incredible.

02-00:41:57

Driskell: He sold his business to Golden Paints.

02-00:42:04

Cooks: Oh, wow.

02-00:42:05

Driskell: Who was his brother-in-law.

02-00:42:07

Cooks: Oh, you're kidding.

02-00:42:07

Driskell: I didn't know that connection. I went to Sam Gilliam's studio maybe ten years ago and said, "Wow. All these paints in big jars. Where do you get them?" He said, "Write to Sam Golden. Tell him I told you to write him." I wrote to Sam Golden. Sam was dead, so his son Mark answered. He said, "Dad is no longer here. We bought Bocour, my uncle out." I then told him the story of my relationship to Bocour and I had ordered maybe \$3,000 worth of paints. He said, "You're like third generation in this lineage of our business—" We said, "Everything is free for you."

- 02-00:42:55
Cooks: Because Sam's studio is just packed with Golden. I remember going there and I—
- 02-00:43:02
Driskell: It still is.
- 02-00:43:02
Cooks: It's all the different textures. It's like he's working for them with all the stuff he has.
- 02-00:43:10
Driskell: I didn't know the relationship until Mark told me. He said, "You're like third generation Bocour/Golden," he said, "so these are free." I haven't had to order any paints lately.
- 02-00:43:30
Cooks: Okay. I want to ask about the kind of art that you were making at Skowhegan. I'm thinking about works like *City Quartet*, social realist works, and the natural landscapes that you were making at the time. I know that you were starting to make around this time, maybe a little bit later, like *Pine Trees* and *Young Pines Growing*. That's later. But thinking about the natural landscape and figurative work, did—
- 02-00:44:06
Driskell: At first it was this insatiable desire to create social commentary art.
- 02-00:44:10
Cooks: Really?
- 02-00:44:11
Driskell: I was studying painting with Jack Levine. I wanted to learn the old master's method of glazing, chiaroscuro painting, etc. I did. Out of that comes *Behold Thy Son*.
- 02-00:44:25
Cooks: Okay, 1956.
- 02-00:44:26
Driskell: In nineteen fifty-six, I was commenting on Emmett Till's death. Yet at the same time, I began doing paintings like *City Quartet* and *Boy with Bird*. I am using some of Levine's methods but I am not being that serious about the social aspect of it. Four boys in the street smoking a cigarette, that's not a crime. Back then, kids didn't smoke. And I did see kids smoking, so to comment on that. But I also was creating abstractions at the same time.
- 02-00:45:14
Cooks: Did you feel like you were exploring all kinds of different styles or subject matters, or did you feel pressure to do one kind of thing over another?

- 02-00:45:25
Driskell: I never felt pressured. I felt like I should be doing all kinds of things, and I was.
- 02-00:45:30
Cooks: And you were working in oil.
- 02-00:45:34
Driskell: Oil.
- 02-00:45:35
Cooks: You were doing printmaking.
- 02-00:45:37
Driskell: Yes, printmaking with Professor Wells.
- 02-00:45:40
Cooks: Were you doing sketching?
- 02-00:45:40
Driskell: Yes, I was sketching.
- 02-00:45:49
Cooks: The residency show that's up now? [*David Driskell: Resonance, Paintings 1965-2002*]. Okay.
- 02-00:45:50
Driskell: Yes, a little self-portrait and I'm standing there attempting to look like an artist.
- 02-00:45:53
Cooks: From this time period?
- 02-00:45:57
Driskell: Yes. Well, '56, I don't remember. They found it in the midst of all these things. They had two other self-portraits, more recent ones. But that little one, someone from the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] kept saying, "Oh my God, this is so sensitive." I hadn't seen it for like fifty years.
- 02-00:46:22
Cooks: But where did it come from? You think they had it all this time?
- 02-00:46:26
Driskell: They went through the drawings in the studio and found it. There were layers and layers of things that I haven't seen for years.
- 02-00:46:32
Cooks: The drawings out there in Maine?
- 02-00:46:35
Driskell: No, in the studio here in Hyattsville.

02-00:46:35

Cooks: Oh, right here? So you have layers of stuff you haven't even looked at in a while.

02-00:46:42

Driskell: Yes. Rodney [Moore] and Daphne [Driskell-Coles] are cataloging all the works.

02-00:46:47

Cooks: Oh, okay, that's great.

02-00:46:50

Driskell: There are the landscapes. I was so impressed with the landscape in Maine, the beauty of the trees, etc. I came back and told Thelma, "All famous artists go to Maine in the summer and they have a studio. And someday we have to have a home in Maine, a studio." We, of course, were living with her mother.

02-00:47:17

Cooks: But you came, but it did happen.

02-00:47:18

Driskell: It came. As they say in the Bible, "And it came to pass." [laughs]

02-00:47:27

Cooks: Thinking about Skowhegan, the influence of it on your work, so you're saying certainly the environment had a big influence.

02-00:47:37

Driskell: Oh, definitely.

02-00:47:37

Cooks: You're working with Jack Levine there, you're working with Bocour there. Did you start to focus in terms of thinking about a particular style of artist? Did you start to think of yourself as a particular kind of artist or you were still—

02-00:47:57

Driskell: I was still exploring and I became interested in abstraction. I think I was pretty good at abstraction but I still wanted to make a statement, and I guess *Behold Thy Son* cured me of that.

02-00:48:16

Cooks: Well, let's talk about that because this is still one of the paintings that has the most—one of them that has a great deal of resonance over the decades. I mean it's over sixty years old now. Is that right? It's from 1956.

02-00:48:34

Driskell: Fifty-six, yes.

02-00:48:36

Cooks: So you were inspired by the Emmett Till—

02-00:48:40

Driskell:

Murder. I was teaching at Talladega [College] and I was fed up with the morass of that situation, and hate. The incidents on campus, people who came, that come through. [Ku Klux] Klan come through shooting on the campus.

02-00:49:59

Cooks:

In Alabama, in Talladega?

02-00:49:01

Driskell:

In Alabama, you know, George Wallace was governor and all the crazy things that were happening. Our marching downtown, trying to integrate the little town of Talladega. I was so tired of people and how unkind and how nasty they were. I said, "Well, I'm going to paint trees, pine trees, because they are so loving and giving and they don't hate you." I started doing these pines. I started thinking about the pines at night, the pines this time of day, the pines in the moonlight, and so forth. Every way you could think of the pines I think I thought of. What happens when the tree is swaying and flowing? What is the tree thinking about? What am I thinking about? There's a symbiotic relationship: I'm giving and that tree is giving to me. These trees engrossed me.

02-00:50:23

Then by the time I was ready to do my thesis at Catholic U I said to my advisor, "I want to take the pine tree and say a little about it from the point—" we had to write a little about it, what made the images, about the history of the evergreen, tracing the use of the evergreen on the sarcophagus, a symbol of everlasting. Then the tree, even in winter, the pine, the spruce, the cedar, and all of those, they don't give up everything, they hold on throughout, so the concept of eternity they remain green. I did my thesis with that theme in mind. What does the pine tree look like in the fall with all the red colors and things around? What does it look like in the spring when there's the pastel? Michael Ellerin, who lives in San Francisco, has one of the four paintings from my thesis series.

02-00:51:31

Cooks:

One of your paintings?

02-00:51:32

Driskell:

Yes, one of the thesis paintings. Ellerin's son, Michael Ellerin.

02-00:51:43

Cooks:

Oh, wow.

02-00:51:43

Driskell:

And then there was summer and winter. I don't know where the other two are. One was kept by the Catholic University Art Department.

02-00:51:57

Cooks:

Talladega.

02-00:51:59

Driskell:

Yes, but when I inquired about the painting nobody seemed to know anything about it at Catholic University.

02-00:52:08

Cooks:

So you're at Talladega and you're teaching. I want you to talk about, yeah, *Behold Thy Son*. You made that while you were teaching. And then I want us to talk about how you got that position. You were inspired by Emmett Till's murder.

02-00:52:28

Driskell:

Yes, the murder of Till. By comparable concern there was, of course, the social issue: how black men were treated, the lynching and all of that. But this becomes for me not necessarily a religious subject, even though it was inspired by that portion of the scripture where Jesus turns to his mother and says, "Woman, behold thy son." This is the last aspect of his life on earth, and his arms are outstretched like a cross. Tuliza Fleming said to me, "I never saw the other woman in that picture." I said, "Yes. The two Marys are there." And then the embellishment of the sarcophagus, the casket. So for me it was cathartic in certain ways because I cleansed myself of wanting to be a social commentary artist. I got it out of my system. Now I don't have to solve any more problems, I can just be happy with my art.

02-00:54:08

Cooks:

You said what you wanted to say.

02-00:54:10

Driskell:

Yes.

02-00:54:12

Cooks:

How do you feel about that painting today? Meaning you're explaining how you felt at the time, you wanted to make artwork that made a commentary, you were able to really be satisfied with that painting. Because now it's part of the African American Museum of History and Culture. How do you think about the significance of that painting for you? Certainly for thousands and thousands and thousands of other people who see this painting every day, it means something, that there's something unfortunately perpetual about it that makes it relevant, yeah. What do you even think about having your work in that building and to be part of this moment right now?

02-00:55:06

Driskell:

Well, first of all, I'm proud that it's at the Smithsonian. I think it is dated and tied to a time and period, but the fight goes on. It's also showing you that time hasn't changed that much. [Eric Garner and] "I can't breathe."

02-00:55:46

Cooks:

Right. Well, Emmett Till, the case keeps getting reopened.

02-00:55:52

Driskell:

Indeed. So it's forever. It's like the *Open Casket*, it's forever.

02-00:55:57

Cooks: That's right. People are still painting Emmett Till.

02-00:56:00

Driskell: Yes, it's forever. I never thought of it in that sense. When I moved away from Talladega in 1962, I left it in a closet in the old art building along with many other things there. It stayed there for the next forty years. Finally one of my former students called me and said, "Do you realize you left one of your paintings here that was in your 1957 exhibition?" I said, "What?" He said, "It says *Behold Thy Son*." I said, "Oh my, that's where that painting is."

02-00:56:47

Cooks: David, did you leave it on purpose?

02-00:56:50

Driskell: I was moving to Washington and I didn't have room for it. I must have left twenty other works there, watercolors. I did a whole series of watercolors the summer of 1961 out in Colorado Springs, *The Garden of the Gods*. My watercolors at that time were very much influenced by John Marin. I left them all in Talladega. I think little by little people may have just gone into the closet and taken some of them home. I saw one at auction four years ago.

02-00:57:40

Tewes: [laughs] Was it credited to you?

02-00:57:42

Driskell: It said David Driskell. "Oh, by now, David Driskell, so and so and so," at the auction. Had come from supposedly somebody in Atlanta.

02-00:57:56

Cooks: It was there for forty years. Was it a locker you had full of things that you left?

02-00:58:03

Driskell: Just left these things in this closet. They didn't catalog the collection. There was a Hale Woodruff, and a number of paintings by Claude Clark.

02-00:58:11

Cooks: But you left it to the museum there, to the gallery?

02-00:58:15

Driskell: To the gallery.

02-00:58:16

Cooks: Okay, I got that. I wasn't sure if they were just in the closet in the art studios or—

02-00:58:21

Driskell: I left them to the gallery. When [Dr. Art Bacon] saw what was going on, he said, "We have no deed of gift. We have no papers [of ownership]."

02-00:58:35

Cooks: Did you have them shipped back to you?

02-00:58:37

Driskell: I had [*Behold Thy Son* only shipped back to me].

02-00:58:41

Cooks: Were gone.

02-00:58:42

Driskell: Most are gone, scattered around, who knows. We saw one at auction.

02-00:58:45

Cooks: Oh, now I understand. Well, how did you get the job at Talladega? You were at Skowhegan in 1953. From there did you go back to Howard?

02-00:58:57

Driskell: I finished my studies at Howard in '55. I was trying to recreate this picture in my mind in New York the other day, now being represented by one of the finest galleries in New York, DC Moore Gallery.

02-00:59:17

Cooks: At DC Moore [Gallery] this weekend.

02-00:59:17

Driskell: DC Moore. And thinking back the lineage of that travel, getting there, and all the way back to that first job of how happy and delighted I was to be a college teacher. This is what I'd wanted all of my life. I'd never been to Alabama before but I'm going to Alabama. I've heard of Talladega. Aunt Millie, you know, the other sage in the family, I said [to her], "I'm getting a job at Talladega." She says, "Oh, David, that's one of our best schools." She said, "Talladega, Fisk, Tuskegee, Howard, Hampton," she named them like that. I was going to earn \$300 a month plus I had free housing.

02-01:00:18

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:00:18

Driskell: She said, "I want you to put aside fifty dollars every month. Put it in the bank and act like you don't have it. Just act like it's not there." I wrote and told her I put my first fifty [in the bank]. She says, "All right, I want to hear from you again such and such a year from now and I want to know how much." I did what Aunt Millie said.

02-01:00:45

And then in 1961, I came back to DC, finishing up at Catholic University and I'm trying to pass my French exam for graduation. At that time at Catholic University, the master's students took a little two-page examination in a foreign language. The MFA, because it's a terminal degree, had to take the same exam the PhD students took. Twelve pages of idiomatic expressions, modern translation, you name it.

02-01:01:25

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:01:26

Driskell: And like, oh, I failed French in college in my senior year.

02-01:01:33

Cooks: Oh no.

02-01:01:34

Driskell: So had to get a tutor. Anyway, I was doing so well in grad school, and then there was this thing facing me: got to pass your French. I had one of those big, old recorders, a Wollensak, they called it, reel-to-reel. I'd sit and listen to "*Je suis* [imitates French]. *Je suis* not smart." And then I got a tutor; it didn't seem to help very much. I was a subscriber to the *Christian Science Monitor*. Did I ever tell you that story?

02-01:02:23

Cooks: No.

02-01:02:24

Driskell: I'm reading the *Monitor* with the notion that I'm going to have that house in Maine one day, reading the ads. But also I'm reading Mary Baker Eddy's sermons here in English on the home forum page. A critic by the name of Dorothy Ablow, who, to my knowledge, in the 1950s was one of the few mainstream critics who would write about black artists. I had read about [Henry Ossawa] Tanner. I knew about him but I read Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden on the Home Forum Page.

02-01:03:00

Cooks: *Christian Science Monitor*.

02-01:03:02

Driskell: *Christian Science Monitor*. Big format newspaper, big as the *New York Times*.

02-01:03:21

Cooks: Is it Ab? Ab something?

02-01:03:24

Driskell: Baker Eddy.

02-01:03:24

Tewes: Ablow?

02-01:03:24

Driskell: The founder of Christian Science.

02-01:03:29

Cooks: Oh, I'm not sure.

02-01:03:29

Driskell:

Eddy, Reverend Eddy, her sermon. Mary Baker Eddy or something like that. Anyway, be her sermon were here in English, down below it'd be in French. The next day English/German. So I'm waiting weekly for this French to come out and that's how I passed my French exam, by reading. I knew the Bible fairly well and I'd just make comparisons. But on that same page sometimes there would be the write-up on Bearden, on Lawrence, on Tanner.

And then I thumbed through the paper and there were the classified ads, homes for sale: Maine, New Hampshire, et cetera. One ad read, "Two-room cottage, electricity, running water, six acres of land, trout brook, and pine trees." Oh, that sold me. I said to Thelma, "Oh, I think we can afford this. This is the nest egg that Aunt Millie had us saving for." We had \$4,000 in the bank, and the cost for this property was \$6,500.

02-01:04:55

Cooks:

Six?

02-01:04:56

Driskell:

Six thousand five hundred dollars. I write to Mr. Gooch in Maine and told him we're interested. He says, "Well, you should come and look at it." This is 1961. I said, "We've got to let this man know we are Negroes." [We don't want to] go driving up there and then he says no. I wrote to Mr. Gooch, Mr. Raymond Gooch. He responded, he said, "I could care less what color you are. You could be red, green, whatever you want to be." He said, "All I want to do is deal with an honest man."

02-01:05:37

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:05:38

Driskell:

With Aunt Millie, we got into the car and went to Falmouth, Maine. Earlier in August, 1961, I had to go to the bank to get the money, Talladega National Bank. The old man sits there at the bank, [imitates Southern accent] "Boy, what you going to do with all this money?" I said, "I'm going to buy some land." "You got a nice little nest egg here now. Don't you go on out there throwing this away." I said, "I am going to buy some land." "Where are you going to buy land?"

02-01:06:06

Cooks:

Oh!

02-01:06:08

Driskell:

I'm like, Oh no. I said, "Maine." "Maine! That's Yankee land." Then he gives me this long look. He sits there. It must've been another thirty minutes before he wrote my check. He wrote the check. We then drove to Washington. Aunt Millie drove us to Maine and Mr. Gooch took us to Freeport, across the street from L.L. Bean, and negotiated the loan. I had never done a business transaction. He said, "I'll take back the loan." I didn't know what that meant.

He said, "You pay me \$66 a month until you're finished paying." So even after I left Talladega and I was teaching at Howard, I sent him \$66. Finally he sent a batch of checks back. He said, "You paid for it. Here's the deed. Don't send any more money."

02-01:07:04

Cooks:

Oh, wow.

02-01:07:08

Driskell:

That's how we got there. The two room cottage was really a garage. They converted it into two little rooms. It had electricity and running water. When we arrived there, I tried to get Aunt Millie to decide whether or not [we should buy it], she said, "No, no, no. You're supposed to be the visionary. If you are buying it for what it is, you don't have very much." "But if you are buying it for what it can be," she said, "you may have a gold mine. Who knows?"

02-01:07:38

Cooks:

This woman. How inspiring.

02-01:07:43

Driskell:

She was really quite inspiring. She had been a schoolteacher in Savannah, Georgia. She came up to DC and married. She and her husband never had children but they adopted a brown baby in 1962, a little girl from Germany. I stayed with her the final part of my graduate study at Catholic University. I remember Aunt Millie being stern but encouraging. She would say to little Helga, who is a minister, well, you can imagine, five years old coming to this country, speaking no English, torn away from an orphanage, torn away from her culture and being placed with this black family. She didn't look very black. How is she supposed to know what's going on? They placed her in a Catholic school. Helga would come home, I remember, she'd tell us you are all going to hell because you are not Catholics.

02-01:08:57

Cooks:

No.

02-01:08:57

Driskell:

Said, "Sisters say you're going to hell if you're not Catholic." Aunt Millie said, "Just be patient with her." She said, "I'm going to make something out of that child if it's the last thing I do." And she did it. [laughs]

02-01:09:08

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:09:10

Driskell:

Helga may be one of the speakers at the church tomorrow because she's a minister. She got a degree in pharmacy. I mean, it was amazing really.

02-01:09:21

Cooks:

Okay. So looking back at the timeline, you're at Talladega. You started in '55.

02-01:09:28

Driskell: Yes.

02-01:09:29

Cooks: You leave in '62, you buy the house in Maine in '61.

02-01:09:34

Driskell: Right.

02-01:09:35

Cooks: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about how you got this position? You graduated. Did someone recommend you? Was Hale Woodruff there? What was the—

02-01:09:49

Driskell: Yes, the murals, *The [Mutiny on the] Amistad* murals by Hale Woodruff are at Talladega College.

02-01:09:50

Cooks: Yes.

02-01:09:53

Driskell: I graduated in 1955. Prof. [James] A. Porter considered me one of his best students. He said, "You can't just be a painter. You have to do art history. We have to have people to carry on the tradition." So I felt like he was passing the mantle to me. I was vain enough to think nobody else had that kind of relationship with him, and I guess to a certain extent that's true. I don't think he trusted the others with the art history part. He had good students. He was always encouraging. When I told him I wanted to teach he said, "Well, we have to get a series of letters together and send them to the HBCUs—"He had his secretary sit down—Mrs. Scott—and write. He dictated what should be in the letter. We sent letters out to the black schools, mainly in the South. They didn't check the envelope and maybe, as well, I didn't either. And I wrote Talladega College, Talladega, Florida.

02-01:11:38

Cooks: Oh no.

02-01:11:42

Driskell: So in addition to Florida A&M, Tallahassee, Florida, I sent letters all over. One letter, I was told, was crossed out—no zip codes then—it said, "Try Alabama." Obviously they knew there was no Talladega in Florida, so they sent it to Alabama. Dr. Arthur D. Gray, President of Talladega College, received the letter and responded to me. He said, "Regrettably we have no opening but we'll put your letter on file." Now, I have a bachelor's degree. I'm ten days out of [laughs] a bachelor's degree, but I'm confident, I'm ready.

02-01:12:35

Cooks: You seem to be confident in every scenario.

02-01:12:38

Driskell:

Yes, I'm ready. I had the best teachers. A month later I continue driving my taxi, I'm still maneuvering, and I get this letter from Dr. Arthur D. Gray, President, Talladega College. He says—I'm paraphrasing but—"Our art teacher, Mr. Claude Clark, has decided to go back to graduate school. He's leaving to go to California. We will have an opening in September. Would you be interested in applying? If so, fill out this application." I filled out the application. They asked for references. A month later I get a letter saying, "We have decided to offer you a position as Assistant Professor." Of course, it was the only art position there. And I was in heaven. Like, "Wow, I'm going to be an art professor."

We were still living with Aunt Fannie, at 954 Twenty-Fourth Street Northeast, [Washington, DC, with] Thelma and the two little girls. Thelma says, "We'll stay here with Aunt Fannie until you go down and get setup. They stayed for most of the time there with Aunt Fannie. Of course, her mother was also in Washington. They came down in September, three weeks after school started. By that time I had a house on campus. I had made our bed, a bookcase bed; and had twin beds for the girls. We had scouted around and got used furniture. Clarks had left their dining room set. I bought it for \$35. Six chairs, beautiful oak that Mr. Clark had stained. We still have the set in Maine.

02-01:15:11

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:15:12

Driskell:

A beautiful table. I have those at the guest house in Maine. We were ready. Before my family came, I stayed in the teachers dorm, until I got the house setup. They came down the end of September. They had an elementary school on campus; Sessions School. It was the private school on campus. We enrolled the girls in the little private school on campus and we stayed there seven years—

02-01:15:59

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:16:00

Driskell:

We stayed at Talladega College until Howard [University] came calling.

02-01:16:01

Cooks:

You took a semester off while you were at Talladega to go to Catholic University.

02-01:16:07

Driskell:

Yes, I'd been attending during the summer since 1958, three years after arriving, doing graduate work.

I was a Danforth Associate at Talladega College. In those days the Danforth Foundation had liaison people on all of the HBCU campuses. That is where I

met so many of the prominent people, like Dr. Benjamin Mays, President of Morehouse College.

02-01:16:44

Cooks:

Well, what was the purpose of the Danforth organization?

02-01:16:49

Driskell:

The Danforth people are out of St. Louis was not necessarily a Northern foundation but they had a Northern spirit in the sense of philanthropy. They saw the need to do uplift and outreach at HBCUs. But it wasn't all the black colleges alone, it was integrated. That was the first integrated setting that I had in the South. We would meet at Atlanta University in the fifties because the hotels weren't open to blacks in Atlanta at that time. We'd meet at Ware Hall, the graduate school, Graduate at Atlanta U—whites could stay there. If we met in the north, no problem; but when we met in the South we had to meet on the black campus. Their aim was to bring about the best in education through this kind of coordinated services: a liaison from Emory, a liaison from Talladega, a liaison from AU, etc. It was like what we envisioned the world to be and knowing that it wasn't. I met people from all over. We went to Camp Miniwanca in Michigan in the summer. We'd had two weeks. It was kind of semi-religious in a way, but you'd have the greatest of speakers: George Buttrick from Harvard, Paul Tillich from Harvard, folk like that that we read about. And inspiring topics beyond art: existentialism, etc. They gave us teachers a \$200 budget a year to buy professional books.

02-01:19:11

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:19:12

Driskell:

That is how I started having such a nice library. One could buy any books wanted. And then they gave you another \$200 a year to entertain the students, to have them come in at least once or twice a semester in one's home. When I came to Howard, I was not a Danforth Associate but I kept inviting students over. Mary Lovelace then—became Mary O'Neal—she still talks about coming to our home for dinner with other students such as Sylvia Snowden, Stokely Carmichael, Jessye Norman, etc.

02-01:19:47

Cooks:

Wow.

02-01:19:48

Driskell:

Harold Wheeler, the composer. All of them were in my classes. Thelma cooked for them.

02-01:19:57

Cooks:

That's amazing.

02-01:19:59

Driskell:

I said, "Mary, you're living in a dream world. People don't do that anymore."

- 02-01:20:17
Cooks: Long ago.
- 02-01:20:19
Driskell: Right.
- 02-01:20:19
Cooks: Well, let's talk about your exhibitions. You had your first art exhibition when you were at Talladega at the Savery Art Gallery.
- 02-01:20:28
Driskell: Nineteen fifty-six.
- 02-01:20:30
Cooks: What was in that show?
- 02-01:20:31
Driskell: In that show there were a number of still life paintings. It was a mixed bag. A few landscapes, cityscapes. I don't know if there's a catalog in the Driskell archives of that show, but I know there's one for the Barnett Aden Gallery show in '57.
- 02-01:21:09
Cooks: Okay, yes. Savery is your first solo exhibition in '56. I haven't seen a catalog for that.
- 02-01:21:16
Driskell: Yes. There may have been a catalog but when I went to Europe in 1964 for the first time. Thelma had somebody cleaning and they threw out the files that had everything prior to that time.
- 02-01:21:32
Cooks: What?
- 02-01:21:33
Driskell: They didn't ask any questions. So those things would have been there. I wrote to Edward G. Robinson and I told him that I wanted him to donate original works of art to Talladega College.
- 02-01:21:49
Cooks: Really?
- 02-01:21:51
Driskell: I knew he was engaged in a divorce case and he was giving works away. I said, "Give some to Talladega, this black school. He wrote back and he said, "I would love to but because of the situation with my wife I can't give any art away."
- 02-01:22:09
Cooks: Wow.

02-01:22:10

Driskell:

I had letters there from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. She wrote to me when Mr. Aden died, the year I took over the gallery. She came in 1943 for the opening of the Barnett Aden Gallery. I had my first letters of contract in the materials that were thrown out.

02-01:22:29

Cooks:

And they all disappeared?

02-01:22:30

Driskell:

Yes. I cried when I came back and learned that all of my files were gone.

02-01:22:34

Cooks:

All right. Well, we won't talk about that. But you do have a catalog from 1957.

02-01:22:41

Driskell:

Yes.

02-01:22:42

Cooks:

Okay. And you had another show at Barnett Aden in '62.

02-01:22:44

Driskell:

Which Porter wrote the little introduction to.

02-01:22:47

Cooks:

Wow, what an honor. We talked about some of the awards that you got. We talked about, let's see, the Hope, John Hope Award in Art at Atlanta University.

02-01:23:03

Driskell:

Yes, that was 1959.

02-01:23:04

Cooks:

And they acquired that work.

02-01:23:06

Driskell:

They acquired it, *Young Pines Growing*.

02-01:23:09

Cooks:

Yes. You got the Bocour Progress Award in Art from Skowhegan.

02-01:23:14

Driskell:

Yes, Skowhegan in 1953.

02-01:23:16

Cooks:

Now, what is that award? Is that—

02-01:23:18

Driskell:

They gave [awards] different[ly] in those days; I don't know if they still do. The faculty would get together and say, "This one should be given first place because this is the best painting done this summer. This one should be given

the Bocour Progress Award because this person made more progress than anybody else."

02-01:23:34

Cooks: I see.

02-01:23:35

Driskell: I made more progress according to the faculty. It was a still life painted of tiger lilies, [laughs] the tiger lilies that grew outside of the studio. They still have that work.

02-01:23:50

Cooks: So Skowhegan has a collection, okay. All right.

02-01:23:54

Tewes: Did you feel as though you had grown over that summer?

02-01:23:58

Driskell: Yes, I had grown measurably. I could tell it because I was feeling confident in what I was doing. That summer, Bob Clark, who became Robert Indiana was in the class.

02-01:24:11

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:24:11

Driskell: Alex Katz came over to visit.

02-01:24:16

Cooks: In '53 at Skowhegan?

02-01:24:19

Driskell: Yes. He wasn't enrolled. He was living at Lakewood, which is the Summer where I first saw professional theater. Katharine Cornell was performing. I mean, it was high cotton. But I hadn't been exposed to that before and I was like, "Oh, this is what it's about." You go and you live on a lake and paint. I've got to do this.

02-01:24:48

Cooks: You are at Talladega until '62, in '61 you finish your MFA at Catholic University, and then in '62 you decide to come back to Howard. How did that decision happen?

02-01:25:07

Driskell: I was just getting settled in at Talladega doing some of the things that I really wanted to do. I had studied ceramics for the first time. When they asked me to come to Talladega I had to teach everything. "Can you teach ceramics?" I said, "Yes." Hadn't had a ceramics course. "Oh, of course." I wasn't going to let that job go by; I had to feed my wife and two babies. I learned to the extent that I could go out and dig clay, process it, and make the glazes. I entered shows, won prizes and felt confident.

I had it in the back of my mind Howard is the Mecca; got to get back there. When Prof. Porter called in September, 1962 I had already signed my contract to go back to Talladega. He said, "You must have known when you left that you'd be coming back." [both laugh] He hadn't invited anybody else back. I got this call from him and I said, "Well, I signed a contract. That's a legal obligation." I said, "No, I'm going to Howard." I stopped by on the way back to Talladega and I signed the contract with Howard. President Arthur Gray said, "You know you're legally bound to come back here and we could sue you." He said, "But you have a bright future and I don't want to stand in your way."

02-01:27:13

Cooks: That is unheard of.

02-01:27:16

Driskell: He said, "As much as we hate to see you go, you should go on to Howard." He said, "There are great things ahead of you. But you've got to get somebody immediately to replace you." So I got Mr. [James] V. Herring to come down to Talladega to replace me that year.

02-01:27:31

Cooks: Oh.

02-01:27:33

Driskell: Mr. Herring.

02-01:27:35

Cooks: He had retired.

02-01:27:35

Driskell: Of course, but he was still active. Mr. Herring went down and he spent the year and stayed part of the time with Thelma and the girls, helping get them organized to move. We stayed in his house at the Barnett Aden Gallery at 127 Randolph Place, NW-Washington.

02-01:27:59

Cooks: What a switch. That's amazing.

02-01:28:03

Driskell: Thelma and the girls came up. We didn't have any art of our own at that time, but seeing all the art around. There is a picture of Daphne as a little girl; she was nine years old and Madame Lillian Evanti, was at the party that night and she took Daphne over her knee and she said, "You're nine. It's traditional you get nine spankings." And of course, Daphne never liked Madame Evanti after that.

02-01:28:44

Cooks: Well, who would? What kind of a rule is that?

- 02-01:28:47
Driskell: Well, that was tradition in the black family in the South.
- 02-01:28:53
Cooks: Oh.
- 02-01:28:54
Driskell: You get a spanking for the number of years and that would keep you humble.
- 02-01:29:01
Cooks: Okay. I'm on Daphne's side on this one. So you're teaching at Howard University. You're there for four years and you're acting chair for two years.
- 02-01:29:13
Driskell: For two years [that Professor Porter was on leave in Africa, I chaired the Department of Art].
- 02-01:29:15
Cooks: I see, okay. What did you have to do as chair? Was that like a promotion to you or was that an extra burden?
- 02-01:29:25
Driskell: It was like a promotion but it was not easy. You know.
- 02-01:29:30
Cooks: I do.
- 02-01:29:31
Driskell: All these people had been my teachers and the question of why wouldn't they choose them. The dean called me in and told me, he said, "You may think you're loved, but you're not as loved as you think you are." He said, "But you're the person to do this job." He said, "Regardless of what they say or what they want, you are the one to do this job."
- 02-01:29:56
Cooks: Was Lois [Mailou Jones] still there?
- 02-01:29:58
Driskell: Yes.
- 02-01:29:59
Cooks: And you were her chair?
- 02-01:30:00
Driskell: Yes.
- 02-01:30:01
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-01:30:01
Driskell: Wow.

02-01:30:03

Cooks: Okay. You did that for two years. And then in '66, after four years at Howard, you go to Fisk [University].

02-01:30:15

Driskell: I went to Fisk. I went to Fisk to the fine arts festival on the invitation of Aaron Douglas and Ms. Mary Beattie Brady to lecture in April, 1966.

02-01:30:24

Cooks: Did you know either of them at that point?

02-01:30:26

Driskell: I knew Ms. Brady. I had been in correspondence with Douglas but I don't recall having met him prior to that. I went down for the fine arts festival, 1966. Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier were performing at the Fisk Arts Festival.

02-01:30:44

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:30:43

Driskell: Sidney Poitier is there. John Killens is there as a writer in residence. I'm like, "I ain't going to leave Howard and come to Fisk," you know, at first. But when I got there and saw what was going on, like, Whoa. This place is rocking. Douglas was retiring and he said to me, "Now, you have a large faculty at Howard and you know what it's like to be a chair." He said, "We don't have a large faculty here," he said, "but you can do what you want to here. You've got an administration who wants you here so badly they will do what you want. Ask of them for what you want." He said, "I couldn't get things done here. I was here too long."

02-01:31:31

Cooks: I see.

02-01:31:31

Driskell: He said, "You could come in here and ask for what you want." Well, it's a small school so I couldn't ask for so much. I said, "I have to have at least two additional full-time teachers and one part-time. I have to have a full-time secretary." I couldn't name anything they didn't say, "Yes, yes." I said, "I have to have a building." They said, "Well—"

02-01:31:55

Cooks: A new building?

02-01:31:57

Driskell: Not a new building, but they had old building. I said, "I have to have a building." Dr. James R. Lawson was president. He said, "Give us a little time to think about it." I was associate professor at Howard and he offered me a full professor. I said, "No, no." I said, "I will come here as a first-year and be

an associate professor. If you're satisfied with what I do and the product that I bring you, you promote me the next year." He said, "That's a deal."

And then, of course, I was making \$8,000 at Howard, which was big money. Maybe I was up to 10 by then because I was chairman so I got a little extra for being chairman. They were offering me 12,000 to start. He said, "And next year your salary will be 16,000." That was more than anybody. No scientist at Fisk was making that. And of course, the word got around that I was this artist, this young artist coming in, they're offering all this money, and it wasn't good for me. A few people made snide remarks. But for the most part the community was happy because I came and helped change the culture.

02-01:32:26

Cooks:

So what was the culture like? I'm wondering why they were putting so much of an emphasis on art and bringing you in to develop or build a program?

02-01:33:34

Driskell:

Well, Frisk had been left out of the art scene in Nashville for too long a time. They came over and listened to the Jubilee singers but they wouldn't come to exhibits or anything like that. So the notion was if they boosted the arts the whole community would become more integrated. Fisk was the only place where there was real art in Nashville, the Stieglitz Collection was there.

02-01:34:03

Cooks:

Right, that's right.

02-01:34:04

Driskell:

One other place in Nashville and you could see a blue period Picasso. Ten Marsden Hartleys, two Georgia O'Keeffes.

02-01:34:14

Cooks:

But no one was coming, the community wasn't coming.

02-01:34:17

Driskell:

No one was coming to Fisk to take advantage of this.

02-01:34:17

Cooks:

Interesting.

02-01:34:18

Driskell:

The gallery was dingy and dark. You could see on the linoleum where Ms. O'Keeffe had marked a red dot where she wanted her painting hung, where she wanted the Hartleys hung. They just glossed over it. So I come young, thirty-six years old, vibrant with a new idea of what this is going to be. I have to have a gallery for exhibiting artists. I have to have a program to invite artists. I want a visiting artists program. They give me all of that. So why wouldn't I leave Howard? Howard didn't give that to me. And Aunt Millie gets in the picture again.

02-01:35:04

Cooks: Now what happened? What did she do?

02-01:35:06

Driskell: Aunt Millie says, "Go to Fisk." She said, "You can stay at Howard and be ordinary. They're not going to let you do those things." She said, "You have vision. You want to do such and such a thing. They're not going to let you do that at Howard." She said, "Do it and do things at Fisk so well they'll ask you to come back as dean."

02-01:35:28

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:35:30

Driskell: I went to Fisk. I brought in Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Richard Hunt and Walter Williams from Copenhagen. I am the only one presenting these artists in catalog form. Not big, big, but in 1970, Prof. Porter died and no other school is doing this. Somebody speaks up for me at Rockefeller Foundation. They gave me a grant to do summer work. I was off my first summer and did research. Then I was given another grant.

02-01:36:06

Cooks: So you're raising the profile—

02-01:36:07

Driskell: Yes, raising the profile.

02-01:36:07

Cooks: —altogether at Fisk.

02-01:36:09

Driskell: Later, I got a NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant. Then the Nashville newspapers start competing to review the shows at Fisk; they had never done this before.

02-01:36:23

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:36:26

Driskell: They started doing what Georgia O'Keeffe told me that she wanted them to do: they started coming across the railroad track from Vanderbilt, from Peabody, from all of those other schools. The critics started saying, "The only vibrant thing happening in the arts is happening at Fisk."

02-01:36:48

Cooks: That's a big deal. You had all of these artists coming in.

02-01:36:53

Driskell: I had visiting artists coming in. Also, I had artists coming in as artists in residence.

- 02-01:37:01
Cooks: Okay. Were you showing their work in the galleries?
- 02-01:37:05
Driskell: Not my work but their work.
- 02-01:37:07
Cooks: Yeah, you're showing their work in the galleries. And is it the Carl Van Vechten—
- 02-01:37:13
Driskell: At the Carl Van Vechten. The Stieglitz Collection was still on view. But the house they gave me for the Art Department—1888 house had been the seminary for Fisk. It had about twelve rooms. I had to knock out walls so that the gallery was spacious. I had the two *Toussaint L'Ouverture Series* [by Jacob Lawrence] there, I had the *John Henry Series* by Palmer Hayden, and Richard Hunt sculpture and John Rhoden's sculpture. They had never seen anything like this happen in the art community in Nashville.
- 02-01:37:54
Cooks: Tell us your process as a curator. You're writing letters to different people?
- 02-01:37:59
Driskell: I wrote letters to artists. I would write, "Look, here's what we've done. Don't you want to be a part of this? Who else is doing it? Nobody. Who's doing it?" So there was a psychology to the whole thing, of getting them there. Porter was our first visiting scholar. He came in January 1969. He died the next year.
- 02-01:38:29
Cooks: He died in '70, you said?
- 02-01:38:31
Driskell: Yes, he died in February 1970. We had the ball rolling. And then the word got out and the request comes to come to LA to the *Two Centuries [of Black American Art]* exhibition.
- 02-01:38:50
Cooks: Well yeah, in 1976. But before that you're doing a number of different things. I have here that you went to the Netherlands.
- 02-01:39:05
Driskell: Nineteen sixty-four. I was at Howard then.
- 02-01:39:08
Cooks: Okay. We'll backtrack just for a moment. And so you're getting a certificate in art history.
- 02-01:39:14
Driskell: Yes. My interest in Rembrandt, studying Rembrandt and Dutch art; never with the intention of teaching. But I had a wonderful connection to Fern Shapley, who was at the Kress Foundation at the National Gallery of Art.

02-01:39:37

Cooks: Wow.

02-01:39:39

Driskell: Her husband was teaching one of the art courses at Howard. He had retired from many places: Princeton, Harvard.

02-01:39:59

Cooks: At Howard? Okay.

02-01:40:02

Driskell: I left in the midst of all of that. Not because I was distracted but because Prof. Porter passed on. I had made all the requirements necessary for the Mid-Atlantic Accrediting Association [Middle States Commission on Higher Education] to have the PhD in art history. One had to have at least four PhDs on the faculty. I had them ready to go, but a lot of other things were needed that didn't happen.

02-01:40:41

Cooks: Well, we can talk about Rembrandt and why you were so interested in Rembrandt. You learned about him when you were at Howard.

02-01:40:54

Driskell: I learned about him at Howard.

02-01:40:55

Cooks: Was there something about him in particular that you were interested in or influenced your art?

02-01:41:01

Driskell: It influenced my drawings. You probably haven't seen the drawings.

02-01:41:06

Cooks: I want to.

02-01:41:09

Driskell: [laughs] Well, I became very interested, and with the notion that I would perhaps teach a seminar upon my return with the Dutch and Flemish specialists. That didn't happen. I didn't do any teaching with it. Arthur Wheelock at the National Gallery—I hired him when I became chairman at Maryland to teach Dutch and Flemish, and that's when he saw it.

02-01:41:56

Cooks: It gets?

02-01:41:58

Driskell: My aim was to be conversant in as many areas as possible and not be limited to one area. At that time I was teaching a course called Aesthetics and Modern Art.

02-01:42:15

Cooks: Porter, yeah.

02-01:42:16

Driskell: At the [James A.] Porter Colloquium [at Howard University] I mentioned that I was teaching this course in disguise called Aesthetics and Modern Art. Stokely Carmichael was enrolled, Mary Lovelace [O'Neal] was in the course, Harold Wheeler, Jessye Norman, and a number of Howard students who became stars in their various fields. The word had gotten around campus. They said, "There's this young professor who is teaching about protest art." But I couldn't put that in the *curriculum*. Other some professors came and sat in on the class. I remember Prof. [Victorino] Tejera from Venezuela, who taught philosophy, came and sat in on the class. Prof. William Gardner, who was an English professor, sat in on the class. We were a great forum for ideas.

02-01:43:11

I gave papers for them to write. Stokely and that crew; Ed Brown, both deceased, attended the class. H. Rap Brown was Ed's brother. I wrote something about Ed recently. They were all out helping to integrate Cambridge, Maryland, that all-white area out there with all the black workers, farmers. I remember giving a paper assignment. Stokely wrote a paper—I know he has another name now, but to me he's Stokely—he wrote this paper and I read it. I said, "No, no, no." I said, "You're a philosophy major. I can't accept this from you. You can do better." He always called me Prof. He said, "Well, Prof, I'm in the movement." I said, "We're *all* in the movement." In the end only two people in that class got As, and they worked hard. Stokely Carmichael—

02-01:44:28

Cooks: Really?

02-01:44:28

Driskell: —was one. I think Jessye Norman received an A.

02-01:44:33

Cooks: Really? So what year was this?

02-01:44:39

Driskell: This was '63, '62, '63, I think, around that time.

02-01:44:47

Cooks: Okay. Some other things I wanted to hear you talk about: I want to talk about the art that you were making; and also getting up to 1970, your trip to Nigeria, because that had, what I think is true, a lasting effect on your artwork.

02-01:45:14

Driskell: In nineteen sixty-two, sixty-three, sixty-four, I was moving into abstraction, some of the work from that period is being exhibited at my gallery now.

- 02-01:45:37
Cooks: Which show?
- 02-01:45:40
Driskell: At DC Moore Gallery in New York.
- 02-01:45:41
Cooks: Oh, the one that's up now, yes.
- 02-01:45:43
Driskell: So that's '65 through 2000, select works. I was looking at art in the galleries, in the museums, and I was trying to resolve all the issues that came with Modernism. I was trying to be a social commentary artist. One of the works from that period is called *Soul-X*.
- 02-01:46:07
Cooks: I don't know this one.
- 02-01:46:10
Driskell: It was in the *Soul of the Nation* [exhibit] when it came to Brooklyn. Not at the Tate in London. And it's not traveling out to Los Angeles.
- 02-01:46:20
Cooks: Yeah, because *Soul's* at the Broad [Art Museum] right now but I don't know that one.
- 02-01:46:24
Driskell: Yes. But, my work wasn't originally included, and the curators at Brooklyn felt that it should be. I said, "Okay, why don't we include it at Brooklyn but it won't travel?" The work crossed the line of abstraction, but it was still semi-figural.
- 02-01:46:50
Cooks: Another work that I created was: *Of Thee I Weep* from 1968.
- 02-01:46:56
Driskell: Yeah, yeah, '68. That was the last of the commentary things.
- 02-01:47:03
Cooks: Your focus there was on the Vietnam War in particular.
- 02-01:47:07
Driskell: Vietnam War. If you read the caption in the collage, it could be today, as well. It says, "Our war policy is not working," etc. Colby [College] bought that one.
- 02-01:47:21
Cooks: Oh, good. You mentioned Aaron Douglas. He was reaching out to you to get you to come to Fisk and he had been there and giving you advice on what you could do and how you should ask for it. Did you work with him or did he leave when you got there? I was just trying to think of what kind of influence his work—but also since you had that proximity to him—

02-01:47:52

Driskell:

No, he stayed. He didn't leave but he retired. He let it be known that he was always available if I wanted. We consulted from time to time. He was so happy to see the growth of things. It wasn't a new building but it was a building which had a painting studio, a graphics studio, ceramic studio, a design studio, kitchen area for service, a big room for the kiln. He was so proud and he was very cooperative at all times.

02-01:48:33

Cooks:

Did you talk about making art or just the institutional—

02-01:48:38

Driskell:

We talked about making art. Some wonderful stories that I never told and I probably won't about the Harlem Renaissance, the people, his relationship with people like Charlotte Osgood Mason. She wanted them to call her the godmother, and how she would pit against the other artists, such as Langston [Hughes] against another writer or try to pit him against Zora Neale Hurston, the kind of conflict that was going on. I got an education about the Harlem Renaissance that I couldn't have gotten any other way.

And, of course, Arna Bontemps was still there at that time.

02-01:49:29

Cooks:

Oh, okay. Wow.

02-01:49:31

Driskell:

Bontemps was still head librarian. I was doused with the real thing that most people never got a chance to even be near. And then to bring in people who either touched it or were coming along, like Jake [Jacob Lawrence] and Romy [Romare Bearden. They weren't part of the Harlem Renaissance but they were there as young learners. Of course, Palmer Hayden was there. It was almost like a little renaissance of sorts for that whole ten-year period.

And artists gravitated to us all the way up to AfriCOBRA [African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists]. I didn't have an AfriCOBRA show but I had a show by at least two artist who were AfriCOBRA. Frisk was like the place for artists to be in the late sixties and the early seventies.

02-01:50:38

Cooks:

Were you going to New York? Were you going to galleries there while you were at Fisk? I mean, your house is full of Romare Bearden. When did you meet? How did you meet? Did they see you as an artist and a professor, or what was your reputation with them? How did you meet Romare Bearden?

02-01:51:04

Driskell:

I had met most of those artists as a student at the Barnett Aden and at Howard University, in the 1950s.

02-01:51:09

Cooks:

I see.

02-01:51:11

Driskell: On meeting these artists, I would say, "I'm David Driskell. I'm at such and such a place. I need your help," and they responded.

02-01:51:24

Cooks: Yeah, that's incredible.

02-01:51:26

Driskell: When I went to New York I would call Romare up. Romare loved to eat. He said, "Let's go to a Chinese restaurant." He lived on Canal Street, and after that, we walked up those five flights of steps. If I didn't go Downtown, they would meet me Uptown. He and Nanette often met me for dinner midtown. I was not in the mix with them in the sense of age, but they respected me for what I was doing and they trusted me. They invited me to come to their studio. I started meeting the young artists, Bill Williams, Vince Smith and others. It was there at that very important time when the gate was closing. I was saying that to somebody last week at Howard. I said, "I live with Claude Clarks and Romare Beardens and Jacob Lawrences [and other works]." I said, "You could do that in those days if you had the right kind of relationship."

02-01:52:53

Cooks: Did you trade works with them?

02-01:52:53

Driskell: I traded works with them. I seldom went to Bearden's studio without his giving me a work of art.

02-01:52:58

Cooks: Really?

02-01:52:59

Driskell: He was so kind and appreciative.

02-01:53:02

Cooks: I've only heard wonderful things about him in that way.

02-01:53:07

Driskell: Yes. Nanette didn't always want me to go out there because she knew he was so generous. Jake went almost strictly by the book as dealership went. I never traded anything with him. But Romie, you know, he was too kind in some instances. People took advantage of him. I traded with William T. [Williams], with Vince Smith and others. I'm trying to think of when I first met [Elizabeth] Catlett. The relationship broadened after I arranged for a show of her work at Fisk in 1973.

02-01:54:03

Cooks: A solo show of her work?

02-01:54:04

Driskell: Yes.

- 02-01:54:05
Cooks: Did you go to Cuernavaca?
- 02-01:54:08
Driskell: Pardon?
- 02-01:54:09
Cooks: Did you go to Mexico to her, or you saw her when she came back here?
- 02-01:54:12
Driskell: At the beginning I arranged for her work to come to Fisk, but then I started going to Mexico when I worked for [Bill] Cosby.
- 02-01:54:19
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-01:54:21
Driskell: He sent me down [to request various commissions of work]. He would say, "Have her do such and such a thing," and, "Have her do this." And then he would say, "If she's going to cast it, make sure she casts an extra one for you."
- 02-01:54:38
Cooks: Amazing. Well, let's talk about, since we're talking about traveling, going to Nigeria.
- 02-01:54:48
Driskell: Let me come back to that.
- 02-01:54:51
Tewes: Okay, let's pause. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. Bridget, why don't you pick us up where we left off?
- 02-01:54:58
Cooks: So, David, I wanted you to talk to us about how you got this opportunity to go to the University of Ife in Nigeria in 1969. And what was that experience like teaching abroad?
- 02-01:55:14
Driskell: In 1969 I was at Fisk and had been there for about three years. The whole perspective on the black cultural revolution was changing. It wasn't so local, it was becoming more international in the sense of interest and commitment with—after the first FESTAC [World Festival of Black Artists]. And I didn't go to FESTAC in Dakar, [Senegal]; I had been to Dakar but it wasn't like being there for that event. What was the next big relationship that one wanted to establish?
- I was teaching a course in African art history, as well as African American art. I assume that Fisk and Howard were probably two of the few schools at that time teaching courses in those areas. My influence from Howard, from Porter, was trying to pick up the mantle and carry on as he had kind of commanded me to do. There was a renewal of interest in Africa in certain ways: the people

who had gone and the people who hadn't. For me it was back to "What is Africa to Me?"

02-01:57:11

I found that Fisk had a fine collection of African art that was hidden away in trunks in an old building. Something, said to me, "Get this stuff out of there and start cataloging it." African art had been there since the thirties and had not been seen. In Old Livingston Hall, in the spring of 1970. After I had gone to Ife, I became more interested in African art. Someone burned that building in May of 1970. They said they didn't do it, they said somebody from the outside did it, but I think the student's rhetoric influenced it. So they burned one of the historic buildings.

02-01:58:25

Cooks:

At Fisk?

02-01:58:25

Driskell:

At Fisk in May of 1970. I had gone into Livingston Hall one month earlier and later all of these real treasurers, many from nineteenth-century Africa, to Ballantine Hall. Now, some of the things we didn't get out. Some of the music, the old music from John [W.] Work [III] and others that was still there burned. That was the kind of conflict that was going on at that time. We had students from other parts of the country—I remember Eldridge Cleaver came.

02-01:59:34

Cooks:

I'm not sure. We'll put it in the transcript.

02-01:59:36

Driskell:

Bakari Sellers is the son of Cleveland Sellers. I see him on MSNBC from time to time.

02-01:59:37

Cooks:

Oh, okay.

02-01:59:38

Driskell:

I knew most of them from Howard. I got a chance to have correspondence with Prof. Michael Crowder, an Englishman, who headed the program at Ife [at [Obafemi Awolowo University]]. He came over to visit and he said, "You know, you ought to come and spend some time with us in Ife and lecture on black American art." The British look at those things, quite different from the way we do. So I thought, "Hmm. That sounds interesting." I arranged with the administration to take off some time and I went in December, 1969.

02-02:00:51

I arranged to take off early December and started out in Dakar, Senegal; I spent a little time in Gorée; and then my next stop was Côte d'Ivoire. I stayed in Senegal for almost two weeks. At that time there was a line called Afrique, [an] African Airline. So I was taking Air Afrique, actually going from Dakar to Ghana to Accra. On the plane was Stokely Carmichael and Miriam Makeba. I got up to go to the bathroom and I heard somebody call out, "Prof,

what are you doing?" It was Stokely. He said, "I want you to meet my wife." I had not met Miriam at that time.

02-02:02:03

Cooks: Wow.

02-02:02:04

Driskell: Now, go back to Stokely. In the class he was brilliant. He was thinking way ahead of his time. I remember he came to my office one day after I had gotten on him about this paper, and we were talking about the social situation and Howard. I mean, the woman who was so controversial from Vietnam had come to speak and it was just a hodgepodge of all kinds of things happening. Dr. [Martin Luther] King had been on campus. I said to Stokely, "Don't you think Dr. King ought to concentrate on our situation here and not bring in the Vietnam War?" He hesitated and then he said, "Prof, violence is violence. All over the world there's violence." He said, "These are people of color. Even if they don't admit it, they are." He said, "We are looking upon them with a superior attitude, that we can wipe them out with that napalm," He gave me a lecture that I will never forget. He said, "No, no. King cannot isolate our problem from their problem." For me, it was food for thought; a teaching moment.

02-02:03:27

Cooks: And did he make you change your mind?

02-02:03:29

Driskell: Hmm?

02-02:03:30

Cooks: Did he change your mind?

02-02:03:32

Driskell: Yes, he did. I guess that's why the painting *Of Thee I Weep* was created. I was thinking about how he challenged me. I haven't done any of what I would call protest art since then.

On that plane was Stokely, his mother and Miriam, and he said, "Well, you're going to have a two-hour layover in Guinea." He said, "Get off. I want you to meet my mother." I did. Everything was different on the planes, you didn't have to go with all that nonsense they have now. I got off and I met his mother. I got back on and flew to Accra. No, I flew to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and stayed there over the Christmas holiday. Hotel Ivoire.

02-02:04:45

After the holidays I flew on to Accra. I looked up Vincent Kofi, who was a sculptor whom I had met through Ms. Brady at the Harmon Foundation.

02-02:05:00

Cooks: Wow.

02-02:05:03

Driskell:

I went up to Kumasi. Spent a few days there, and then came back to Accra and flew over to then Nigeria. When I arrived, the Biafran War was going on. The war was in progress, and it was very difficult to get out of Lagos because there were no commercial flights. No public transportation. I checked in at the Khouri Hotel. And I won't go through all of that because some of that was miserable and I don't tell that in polite company. My introduction to Nigeria. I swore I'll never go back there in life again because it was rough.

There was an Englishman who said to me, "You're on your way to Ife and I'm on my way to Ibadan. We're not going to get there by public transportation." He said, "We're going to have to hire a taxi." I said, "Hire a taxi to go?" He said, "Yes." And we did. The soldiers were still occupying all the roads. Obviously some of them couldn't read. They demanded, "*Passaporte*." I gave them my passport, they look at it upside down; they couldn't read. The guns in their hands were pointed at us. A little frightening, but I had been through worse things.

Finally we arrived in Ibadan—and then things quieted down a bit. I said, "I'm trying to get to Ife." No public transportation. The Minister of Education was a woman. She was having a luncheon and she said, "Oh, a visiting professor from America. You must come with us." She was very kind and generous. I had lunch with her and I told her my story. She said, "Well, there's no public transportation. But we're going to get you to Ife." I stayed overnight. The next morning she sent someone over to bring me over to her office and said, "We've worked out how we're going to get you to Ife. You're going together in the mail truck."

02-02:07:29

Cooks:

Excellent.

02-02:07:31

Driskell:

I got into the mail truck and, I can't remember, it's six hours, close to that. When I arrive at Ife [at Obafemi Awolowo University], the campus—have you been there?

02-02:07:48

Cooks:

No, I've never been. Really.

02-02:07:47

Driskell:

Beautiful campus. It was designed by an Israeli architect and the buildings are like a ziggurat that's turned upside down so that it's shade all the way up, and then the big part is at the top. This beautiful campus. It was fairly new at that time.

So I arrived at Prof. Crowder's residence. And everybody has ten servants or more: one to do this, one to do that, etc.

02-02:08:23

Cooks: This is at their house?

02-02:08:25

Driskell: Yes. They said, "Well, everybody's employed." They're not getting any money out of it.

I sat there in the truck waiting for instructions to get out or come in and nobody came out to greet me for a whole hour. Finally somebody came out and I said, "I'm waiting to find out where I'm going." He said, "Oh, you're Prof. Driskell." I said, "Yes." They were like, "Well, a professor doesn't ride in the mail truck. Why?" All these class distinctions. Finally one of the servants for Prof. Crowder came out and invited me in. By then I'm hungry and tired and sleepy. Eventually they said, "Oh, you're going to be staying in the Chairman's Lodge." They took me over to a very nice house with a well-appointed hall, but it's like open housing in the sense that faculty from everywhere live in that particular building. All I can remember is the Dean of the School of Pharmacy, was from Egypt. Big man who ate all of my food when I put it in the refrigerator. If you put something in the refrigerator it's communal. I went out and bought all this food, got up the next morning, didn't have a thing to eat.

02-02:10:00

Cooks: Overnight he ate all your food?

02-02:10:02

Driskell: Yes. When I inquired he said, "Oh, if you put food in the refrigerator it means everybody's welcome." Well, where else was I supposed to put it?

Anyway, long story short: it was a nice stay but I thought I was going to be lecturing to classes.

02-02:10:21

Cooks: About art history.

02-02:10:23

Driskell: About art history. I gave two lectures the whole time. It wasn't a whole semester but it was like two months. Their notion is that a visiting professor just visits, he doesn't teach.

02-02:10:43

Cooks: Were you being paid? Who was paying you?

02-02:10:46

Driskell: I was being paid by the University a certain amount, plus I was being paid by Fisk, I was getting my regular pay. They were paying me a certain amount. It wasn't a bad salary.

02-02:11:00

Cooks: But you were expecting to have to really work.

- 02-02:11:02
Driskell: I was expecting to work for it. But it was educational in many ways. It was mainly visiting other cities and towns. I went to Oshogbo to see all the ironworks of Ogun.
- 02-02:11:32
Cooks: In Nigeria?
- 02-02:11:32
Driskell: Yes. Up at Oshogbo in particular.
- 02-02:11:36
Cooks: I don't know.
- 02-02:11:37
Driskell: Well, it'll come to me.
- 02-02:11:40
Cooks: I was going to say Belgian people, but I don't know.
- 02-02:11:49
Driskell: Anyway, it was a man and a woman, I think of German extraction. Anyway, they were there. They built this big compound and it was really amazing. Then we went to surrounding towns and cities, and went to an archeological dig.
- 02-02:12:01
Cooks: You were by yourself, right?
- 02-02:12:04
Driskell: Thelma and the kids stayed in Nashville.
- 02-02:12:07
Cooks: Did you meet and talk with these African artists that Brady had sent?
- 02-02:12:14
Driskell: Yes, I didn't get to talk with Ben Enwonwu, who was the most important Nigerian artist of the day. He had done that controversial statue of the queen and made her look African. But one of his colleagues—Solomon [Wangboje]. Solomon was our host in Benin City.
- 02-02:12:46
Cooks: Well, we can put it in later.
- 02-02:12:47
Driskell: Yes. Anyway, we went to Benin City. I met the Oba.
- 02-02:12:55
Cooks: Did you have an assistant, somebody that was in—

02-02:12:58

Driskell:

Yes, Femi Ojo was my—they don't call them assistants, they call them informants. Femi Ojo. He was my interpreter when needed. Most of the time everybody spoke English. A few people only spoke Yoruba and they laughed at me. Said, "Oh, he thinks he's English. He's Yoruba," and laugh because I couldn't speak Yoruba. We went to various archeological digs. The most important visit for me was the visit with the Oba. Very astute, erudite man whose grandfather had been deposed by the British in 1897.

02-02:13:54

Cooks:

There's a picture of you two together in Julie [McGee]'s book.

02-02:13:58

Driskell:

Right, in Julie's book, yes. In the palace there. They didn't have as many of the bronzes as one would expect because the British had taken them in the expedition.

02-02:14:09

Cooks:

Took them.

02-02:14:10

Driskell:

—stolen all of them. Anyway, excuse me, British, but that's what you did. We went to the Ekita Kira and places like that, not too far. One of the experiences there was very exciting because the chief gave me a column, beautifully carved column. I kept trying to tell him, "I can't bring it back and this is history and it should remain here." He was very disappointed that I didn't take it with me.

02-02:14:50

Cooks:

Really?

02-02:14:50

Driskell:

But it was that kind of kindness and welcome that I experienced beyond Lagos.

02-02:14:58

Cooks:

Did you make art while you were there or did you bring a portfolio to show them your work?

02-02:15:03

Driskell:

I did drawings and I carried with me, what I call a visual diary. Some of them I had to sell, but I still have some of them. Who is the professor up at Wisconsin? An Ethiopian.

02-02:15:28

Cooks:

I don't know, David.

02-02:15:28

Driskell:

Anyway, she's an Africanist and taught African art at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Anyway, she's coming down to look at the books

because each place I go I do a sketch book or visual diary. I think I have two from the 1969 African trip.

02-02:15:46

Cooks: Now, I know that you have sketchbooks. I don't know how many you have. But when did you start the sketchbook tradition? Did you do this in the Netherlands when your—

02-02:15:57

Driskell: I did but I can't find that one.

02-02:15:58

Cooks: Oh, sorry.

02-02:15:59

Driskell: Nineteen sixty-four. I remember the drawings but can't find the book. I went to Denmark to the [burial] mounds.

But the African sketchbooks, I have most of them. I first went to South Africa in 1972, I have that one. I went back to Côte d'Ivoire in 1989, I have that one. Whenever I go on a trip for some extended period of time I will create a visual diary. The China diary is at the Library of Congress.

02-02:16:49

Cooks: So amazing.

02-02:16:50

Driskell: And the Yaddo book is at the Library of Congress also. At Wisconsin, Freida.

02-02:17:00

Cooks: Oh, Tesfagiorgis?

02-02:17:01

Driskell: Yes.

02-02:17:01

Cooks: That's right.

02-02:17:03

Driskell: Yes.

02-02:17:04

Cooks: When you came back—because I'm wondering, again—you know, you have these important moments in your life at different places—what the takeaways are. And I wonder, because there's so many masks in your work—I mean, that could come from the fact that you worked with so many professors at Howard that were thinking through the Harlem Renaissance and thinking about "What is Africa to Me."

02-02:17:30

Driskell: Lois Jones brought masks into class for us to paint or draw. I have drawings from that period.

02-02:17:37

Cooks: Did your trip to Nigeria—and that was your first trip to Africa?

02-02:17:43

Driskell: That was my first trip to Africa.

02-02:17:45

Cooks: Did that have an impact on your work, on your art?

02-02:17:48

Driskell: Oh, definitely, yes. I started incorporating masks more prominently in my work, statuary and even the collages show that relationship that was developed more thoroughly.

02-02:18:03

Cooks: I was thinking about a work you made in 1970, *Ghetto Wall #2*, that's figurative and abstract with masks and mask-like faces, and wondering if there was that kind of connection. Also, if the connection is just visual or is it about the culture? Is it a spiritual or religious connection?

02-02:18:29

Driskell: It's kind of a mixture of many things. At the same time I was trying not to pretend that I'm African and making African art, but at the same time obviously being influenced greatly by it, especially the iconography of it. I tried so hard to not let it just be design, but in some cases it becomes that because I realize that I'm dealing with it out of context. I have no institutional memory or anything like that so I have to create it. I live with masks and I interact with them on that level, but that is altogether different from seeing them in use in ceremony and being part and parcel of the culture.

02-02:19:30

Cooks: So when you come back, you come back to Fisk. What I have next written for you—I know that you have continued to do many exhibitions. University of Tennessee in '71. The Virginia Davis Laskey Library in Nashville. Bowdoin College in 1973. Then I wanted to hear you talk about the significance of *Amistad II* in 1975, an Afro-American art exhibition that you curated. Could you talk to us about that? I still haven't seen the catalog for that.

02-02:20:17

Driskell: Oh.

02-02:20:18

Cooks: I was looking at the transcripts.

02-02:20:18

Driskell: Remind me to give you one before you leave.

02-02:20:21

Cooks: I was looking at—

02-02:20:22

Driskell: I'll give it to you tomorrow.

02-02:20:22

Cooks: I was looking at my transcripts from my last interview with you and you said, "I'll give you one before you leave." And then I forgot. So now I'm bringing it up again. I forgot and you forgot. I have been wanting to see the catalog but wanting to hear you now just talk about—

02-02:20:40

Driskell: It wasn't an extensive publication but it was—I won't say groundbreaking. It was preliminary to *Two Centuries [of Black American Art]* in that there was a format there that I had in mind that I thought would be good to expand upon. When the chance came to do *Two Centuries*, it seemed like this was it. Now, *Amistad II* was basically what was at Fisk and what we had at hand. I wanted to get some of the other voices in on it, but at the same time I wanted to show the lineage of production from the older artists, from the nineteenth century into twentieth century; all the way from Bannister and Duncanson into contemporary time. Contemporary in the sense of Lawrence and Bearden and those and some of the younger artists as well.

The Amistad exhibition was sponsored by the United Church of Christ, the Congregational church. I was at that time serving as a consultant for them. They had a very active art program called Religious Communities of the Arts, Architecture and the Environment. We were really ahead of time, and we met in different countries other than in the United States.

02-02:22:29

Cooks: That doesn't sound like a church organization, that sounds like more of a social or philanthropic—

02-02:22:36

Driskell: It was a culmination of many things. It was the first time, to my knowledge, that a church of that stature had committed itself to moving outside of the realm of the spiritual. We talked about things that are not normally deal with beyond religious content. We met in different places. I didn't go to the meeting in Montreal. I went to the meeting in Mexico City in 1978. That was the first time that I went to visit Betty Catlett in Cuernavaca. At that conference, Judith Jamison performed.

02-02:23:25

Cooks: Wow.

02-02:23:27

Driskell: The Arthur Mitchell Dance Troupe was performing at the National Dance Theater of Mexico. It was amazing. I went out to Betty's home in Cuernavaca

and visited her many times thereafter. I attended a previous meeting in 1973 in Jerusalem.

02-02:23:54

Cooks: Wow.

02-02:23:56

Driskell: My roommate was the architect—oh, my goodness. He was Italian in origin, but he had this vision of converting architectural space. He was out in New Mexico or Arizona. He had a colony out there. Somewhat in the traditional Frank Lloyd Wright. [Arcosanti by Paolo Soleri.]

02-02:24:36

Cooks: I think I know who you're talking about but I can't call it.

02-02:24:38

Driskell: Arcosanti. He and I were roommates.

02-02:24:51

Cooks: We'll look it up.

02-02:24:51

Driskell: In Jerusalem, we stayed at the St. George Hotel. It was quite an experience. We were visiting the Holy Land and interestingly enough, they didn't stamp our passports because of the Egyptian conflict. They said if you want to go to Egypt afterwards that you wouldn't get in. They put a piece of paper in our passports in Israel. We went all over the country, up to see the mosaics in the floors where the Romans. It was very educational. We were able to visit Haifa and West Jerusalem. I think Religious Communities in the arts folded in the early eighties, but *Amistad* was a product of that relationship with the arts community.

02-02:26:04

Cooks: So was there a purpose that was spiritual? They sponsored your show because it somehow professed certain values or perspectives that the church wanted to make, or no?

02-02:26:19

Driskell: Partly so. One of the directors was the director of Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans—he wasn't at Tulane then. The Amistad Research was located in the Old [United States] Mint at that time. Dr. [Clifton H.] Johnson was instrumental in helping to lend some of the art for the exhibition, like the slavery chains on the cover of the catalog. The Amistad had a huge collection. When I left Fisk, some of the works of art from the Harmon Foundation were on an indefinite loan during my tenure at Fisk. Ms. Brady insisted that: "The works should go to a place where they can be centrally used and not owned by one college, one HBCU." The Amistad was located at Dillard University at that time, Dillard did not own them, the Amistad owned them. Eventually the Amistad Research Center ended up on the Tulane University campus because they gave the Center a building.

02-02:27:45

Cooks: I see.

02-02:27:47

Driskell: But the collection does not belong to Tulane, the United Church of Christ still owns the collection.

02-02:27:53

Cooks: Interesting. So the church bought a number of artworks.

02-02:27:57

Driskell: They bought a number of works by contemporary Black artists. They financed. I had a salary with the college so they didn't have to give me a salary, but they financed my travel and consultant fees. *Amistad* traveled all over the country for a good while.

02-02:28:16

Cooks: You were hired the year before, in 1974 through 1976, is that correct, by LACMA. By the LA County—

02-02:28:30

Driskell: By LACMA.

02-02:28:30

Cooks: —Museum of Art. Can you talk about, please, the relationship—well, I guess we can start with how you were contacted. Who contacted you to do the show, and then I would ask you the relationship between the two shows. That *Amistad II* was preliminary, but then how you explored your vision and expanded it.

02-02:28:55

Driskell: I saw *Amistad II* as the forerunner for *Two Centuries* as a place where I could go to get certain things. We had a lot of art at Fisk. But to make it larger, we were going to have to look in different places. The call to come to LA, was in the summer of 1974. It was to explore the possibility of doing a Bicentennial exhibition.

02-02:29:31

Cooks: We've talked about it. Yes.

02-02:29:32

Driskell: So much of this information you already know. I was naïve enough to assume that this was the beginning of the whole thing. I didn't realize I was the last person they called on. I guess it wasn't the easiest thing for some of my friends to know that I was going to do it when they had already been there.

02-02:29:57

Cooks: So other people had interviewed and they were denied.

02-02:30:01

Driskell: Yes.

02-02:30:01

Cooks: Other people wanted to do it but they were not selected.

02-02:30:05

Driskell: Nobody said anything to me about that. Charlie White kept saying, "Look, if you want it done and done right, get David Driskell." Charlie was on the Black Arts Council, but they didn't pay him any attention. "He's an artist. What does he know?" Charlie knew that I had been involved in research for a long time. It wasn't anything new to me. He was being very cautious about who should be doing such an important show. Few the members of the Black Arts Council, knew anything about me, they hadn't heard of me. Aurelia Brooks knew about my work because we were classmates at Howard University. She occasionally had amnesia and said, "Oh, I don't remember." Just being funny, saying she wasn't as old as I. [laughs]

02-02:31:08

Cooks: Oh, I see. She wasn't there yet.

02-02:31:11

Driskell: Yes.

02-02:31:12

Cooks: Have they planned out exactly what the theme of the show would be? Because so many people were there who had no idea. They didn't believe that there were any black artists worth noting, and so as I understand it and as I've written about it in my book, *Exhibiting Blackness: [African Americans and the American Art Museum]*, it was really up to you to prove that there was this aspect of art history in American history—

02-02:31:45

Driskell: Exactly.

02-02:31:47

Cooks: —skeptical—

02-02:31:48

Driskell: Convince me.

02-02:31:49

Cooks: —and hostile people.

02-02:31:51

Driskell: And hostile to a certain extent. Why would you want to do an exhibition of black American art in 1976? One person, who will remain nameless, said, "I am Jewish but I wouldn't want to do an exhibition of Jewish art in 1976." My response was, "I know you know your culture better than I, but if you do, you would know there's no reason for you to do one because Jewish people have always been at the forefront of American culture, they have led." I said, "My most prominent teachers—" and I named some of them, including Morris

Louis and Jack Levine were Jewish. It was like, "Oh." I said, "I would be regurgitating something that you already know."

02-02:32:51

Cooks: Right, it's not the same.

02-02:32:52

Driskell: I said, "This exhibition is for you to learn beyond what you know." I had to let them know that "I, too, sing America," and they needed to hear my song. At that time there were only two—no, I think only one black person on the board of trustees.

02-02:33:18

Cooks: Robert Wilson.

02-02:33:20

Driskell: Robert Wilson at LACMA. He was an advocate for the exhibition from the beginning. He felt that they needed to listen and learn. I said, "I am sure many of you have degrees in art history. But what do you know about African American artists? You read Helen Gardner. Nobody is represented there. You read Robert Garrison. Nobody is represented there." These are the standard texts. So you do not know the full American story, you know my story.

02-02:34:35

Driskell: John Olbrantz, who had been director of the Bellevue Museum asked me to do a lecture when April Kingsley did *Afro-American Abstraction* there. I said, "I will lecture if you let me do a lecture which brings us up to that period. Abstraction in the African American community didn't just pop up overnight. There is a line that leads you to it." I said, "It starts in the nineteenth century," and I named these artists. He said, "I never heard of them." He said, "I have a PhD in American art history from the University of Washington. But I never heard of these people. I feel cheated." The only artist he had heard of was [Henry Ossawa] Tanner. I said, "Well, there are more." That's how *Hidden Heritage: [Afro-American Art, 1800-1950]* came about. He wanted to have some vivid proof that this important art had been going on.

02-02:35:42

Cooks: *Hidden Heritage*, would you say that it was more focused or less artists than there were in the *Two Centuries* show?

02-02:35:50

Driskell: Yes, I would, because we tried to be inclusive of [many omissions] in *Two Centuries*: the crafts and architecture, among others.

02-02:35:58

Cooks: Yes, baskets and dolls and architecture.

02-02:36:01

Driskell: Yes, indeed. Indeed.

02-02:36:01

Cooks:

Yes. I wanted to ask you a few questions about these shows. I know we've already talked about them but we want to put some things on the record and people can look at the writing that's already been. Were there artists, black artists that didn't want to be in either exhibition? The reason being on this thinking is because they didn't want to be in a show that was only black artists but maybe there were other reasons. Could you talk a bit about that?

02-02:36:39

Driskell:

For some artists it was probably a little painful. They found themselves in no man's land. They knew they were American and yet their friends didn't accept them. They felt that they were doing as good or better than some white artists. They were isolated, "No, I don't want to just be called a black artist." I didn't include them based on their wishes. They have since reconsidered in many cases and said, "Yes, include me," but it was common knowledge as to why they felt that way. I remember when I was making the proposal to LACMA and Dr. Leon Banks said, "Why aren't you including artists like Richard Hunt and [Sam] Gilliam, etc.?" I had to explain, "They were not being left out. If they weren't practicing artists prior to 1950, then they would be included." Now, some of them in the show made art after that, but it's only because they were practicing artists prior. We cut it off at 1950. It's just too many to try and include beyond that date. There was still murmuring about the format of the show.

02-02:38:29

Cooks:

Sure. You can never make everybody happy.

02-02:38:31

Driskell:

No, never.

02-02:38:32

Cooks:

I wanted to ask about two things. The documentation for both of these shows included a catalog but also films. These are really incredible documents and I wanted you to say something about film. You were setting up a film program.

02-02:38:55

Driskell:

At Fisk.

02-02:38:56

Cooks:

At Fisk.

02-02:38:58

Driskell:

In nineteen sixty-eight with a little grant from the American Film Institute, I arranged courses in filmmaking and the history of the discipline. At first they said they would do it in the Drama Department. The Drama people said, "No, we don't want it."

02-02:39:14

Cooks:

At Fisk?

- 02-02:39:16
Driskell: We had a hard time really making the curriculum balanced in that sense. We even had a big conference called "Towards a Black University," in 1966 because we didn't feel that we were black enough.
- 02-02:39:32
Cooks: At Fisk?
- 02-02:39:33
Driskell: At Fisk. And then, they had a big one at Howard in 1968, "Toward a Black University." That was a popular theme back then.
- 02-02:39:44
Cooks: Was that about the tension between the faculty or the administration and the students?
- 02-02:39:49
Driskell: Between faculty who felt there was too much emphasis on this thing about blackness and that somehow or another we were going to lose some of our white foundation support.
- 02-02:40:00
Cooks: Funders.
- 02-02:40:00
Driskell: Yes.
- 02-02:40:02
Cooks: Okay. But you established a film program in sixty—
- 02-02:40:05
Driskell: I established a film program in 1968 and invited Carlton Moss to come and teach the class.
- 02-02:40:10
Cooks: From Irvine.
- 02-02:40:12
Driskell: Yes, he taught at Irvine.
- 02-02:40:10
Cooks: UC Irvine.
- 02-02:40:11
Driskell: He came once a month and stayed like four days for this course. It became one of the most popular courses in the curriculum—it was a little sexist—"Image of the Black Man in American Films." We started off with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and came all the way up to the 1960s. We had to limit the number of students who came from Vanderbilt [University] because they really wanted to be involved with this course.

02-02:40:43

Cooks: Wow.

02-02:40:45

Driskell: Meaning they were mainly white students. All of a sudden, black students at Fisk said, "This is our course." I said, "Whoever wants to learn [can come]." So Carlton came and we operated that program for the remainder of the time that I was at Fisk, another six years. I went out to USC he introduced me to Mel Sloan at USC [University of Southern California]. I remember going out, having dinner at his house, and Mel said, "I don't have any money left." I was trying to get him to take Johnny Simmons on as a young filmmaker in the MFA program. Johnny was graduating from Fisk that year.

02-02:41:46

Cooks: Yeah, I know that name.

02-02:41:47

Driskell: Nineteen seventy-five. He has done a lot of commercial work recently and now teaches filmmaking at UCLA.

02-02:41:58

Cooks: Cinematographer?

02-02:41:59

Driskell: Yes, he is a cinematographer.

02-02:42:00

Cooks: Okay. Yeah, I know that name.

02-02:42:04

Driskell: He graduated from USC but he teaches at UCLA. He has worked with Sam Pollard and Carol Blue and others. Johnny was our primary student in that program. I went out there and literally did what I did at Howard, sat in with Mel Sloan. I wouldn't leave his house until he promised me he was going to give Johnny a scholarship. And so he gave him a scholarship and Johnny went out, I think, in 1975. He became the first African American to get an MFA in cinematography from USC, perhaps in the nation.

02-02:42:41

Cooks: Oh, my gosh. That's amazing. Who helped you with the films for these exhibitions? What was your feeling about wanting to make films to accompany the exhibitions?

02-02:43:00

Driskell: I felt that this was another medium that would help to explain what was going on and would help people absorb the meaning of whatever the art scene offered. People identify with film before they would go to an art exhibition. At Pyramid Films, David Adams, who owned Pyramid Films out of Santa Monica, was a very devout religious man and he wouldn't film anything on

Sunday at his studio. He turned the studio over to us; and he filmed all day on Sunday. He had the best of equipment for everything.

02-02:43:44

Cooks: That's perfect.

02-02:43:44

Driskell: He and Carlton [Moss] were very good friends. Johnny came up in that same tradition. I got money from corporate [sources]. Nobody cared about whether you smoked or not, so I got plenty of money from Philip Morris, entities like that.

02-02:44:11

Cooks: Well, it's interesting because in these films you are showing artists in their studios, but you are also filmed. There you are walking into the museum, working with preparators. The way that the *Hidden Heritage* film starts is with you driving a car. I mean, it looks like an evening TV show from the seventies.

02-02:44:36

Driskell: Yes.

02-02:44:38

Cooks: It's very hip.

02-02:44:41

Driskell: Well, most of that was because Carlton was way ahead of the time in his thinking process and he would say, "Dave, we ought to do so." And I would say, "If you're game, I am." He said, "I think I can talk to so and so and so and get some money for that." That's how we got a lot of that done, through the goodwill of people who really felt a need to see this done.

02-02:45:11

Cooks: So okay. In 1976 the show opens. I wanted to also talk about, for *Two Centuries*, the catalog, which is so important for your essays. Absolutely that it's become part of the curriculum for decades and decades, and thinking about black aesthetics and the history of black artists in all forms, visual forms. But the catalog was printed in such a high number. It was thousands more than most museums published their catalogs, and so it really became a textbook, moving forward from there, that you can still find them. Some people are selling them for hundreds of dollars, but you can find them for less because there still are so many.

02-02:46:05

Driskell: Yes. Because they published more information of this show than they did of any other publication at LACMA, I was told, except *Scythian Gold*. The second highest number of people who saw an exhibition at LACMA. I don't think they said that record has been broken, other than with *Scythian Gold*.

02-02:46:26

Cooks:

Okay. The irony. We're still dealing with those kinds of things today. Even thinking about film in particular, how the market and the critics are skeptical: you can't do this project or that project because people are not going to go see an exhibition that's all black arts, people are not going to go see a film of an all-black cast or with black protagonist. I mean now we're talking about the age of *Black Panther* as a film, right, and thinking about *Two Centuries*. I think about how both of them have broken records. When people are resigning from boards in the case of *Two Centuries* and saying—

02-02:47:14

Driskell:

Yes, two of the curators said, "If you bring this show here, I will resign." I understand one of them stayed on.

02-02:47:27

Cooks:

And one resigned.

02-02:47:28

Driskell:

One resigned. But we haven't moved so far away from that today. We are recreating that same pattern with so much of what we do in our culture. We can't get over the notion that the most important thing in this whole equation is our humanity—the notion that there is this great divide, there is this difference. What is the difference?

02-02:48:08

Cooks:

Right. I know. You must be exhausted trying to explain it at this point.

02-02:48:12

Driskell:

But I can't give up on it because it's a part of my mission. I took it on with the notion that I was going to be able to help and I've got to prove that I can.

02-02:48:25

Cooks:

Yeah. Well, absolutely. No question that you've been a big part of change. So at the end of 1976 you leave Fisk and you start at the University of Maryland College Park in 1977.

02-02:48:45

Driskell:

January 1977. I really didn't want to leave Fisk.

02-02:48:49

Cooks:

So why did you leave? How did that happen?

02-02:48:52

Driskell:

The atmosphere was changing and there was a misunderstanding of what the role of the arts at Fisk were. There was old-timers who said, "Oh, the sciences. We are going to be the greatest." No, you're not going to be the greatest anymore because there are so many other places where you can be greater and you will never be great because you don't have the money, you don't have the facilities, and the bright black kids are going to Harvard and Yale and places like that. So "let down your buckets," in the words of Booker T. Washington,

of "where you are" and do good when you can and stop having this pie in the sky notion about we are the greatest. No, you're not.

I wanted to stay and see this thing through, see the blossoming of the flowers from *Two Centuries*. When I arrived back on campus, I had my classes covered with somebody teaching, the *LA Times*, the *New York Times* applauded the exhibition. The dean called me in and he said, "Young man, we don't have room for superstars around here like you and C. Eric Lincoln." He named a whole host of people. I was astonished, "I don't believe this. I'm not trying to be a superstar." Every time my name was in the paper, Fisk's name was there.

02-02:50:28

Cooks:

That's right.

02-02:50:29

Driskell:

I tried to explain that to him. He didn't understand. He said, "Well, you were away and you couldn't be on this committee." I said, "Two weeks. Do you know the information that's out there about Fisk now because of this exhibition?" He didn't know and he didn't want to know. In the meantime I had already been approached by Dr. Robert Corrigan at the University of Maryland to consider accepting a position in the Art Department at the University of Maryland at College Park. I had lectured there the summer back of '75 I'm at Fisk. I'm getting ready to do *Two Centuries*. I am not about to leave Fisk. I thought that but the dean made me reconsider.

02-02:51:16

Cooks:

I don't get it.

02-02:51:18

Driskell:

The word got around and I spoke to C. Eric Lincoln and Lou Outlaw and Prof. Flournoy Cole and a few others. I said, "Have you gotten this kind of treatment?" They said, "Oh yes. They told us we can't miss a day, we can't miss committee." The dean was laughing about it. "Well, they're not going anywhere. Who wants them? Where do they have to go?" The next day I produced a letter saying I was offered the chance to come to the University of Maryland, and I think I will go. I said, "However, I will not leave until December," because I had gotten a \$50,000 grant from NEA and I knew they would take that money and put it into operational costs.

02-02:52:10

Cooks:

I see.

02-02:52:19

Driskell:

I said, "I want to be responsible and I want to make sure that that money is spent properly. I'll stay until December." So at a board of trustee meeting, the Chairman didn't even know my name, said, "Young man, you're not going to leave this opportunity." I said, "What opportunity? Do you know how I'm being treated?"

02-02:52:29

Cooks: I don't understand.

02-02:52:33

Driskell: So then they became up in arms about my leaving and pretending I was so precious to Fisk, but I was unwelcome. That's one of the reasons why I left. I was promised that I would be treated like a professor at Maryland and I was. Even as chairman at Fisk I taught three courses, and was the director of the gallery of art.

02-02:52:56

Cooks: What was the charge? You were going to go to University of Maryland and was it to teach, was it to chair, was it to build?

02-02:53:08

Driskell: I was asked to establish a curriculum in African American art history. There were no courses in African American art history until I arrived in January 1977. There were two courses in African art history but none in African American.

02-02:53:17

Cooks: Now, where do you think that interest came from? Did it come from the students?

02-02:53:22

Driskell: No, not so much from the students as from an informed provost. Dr. Corrigan, who at that time was engaged to an African American woman by the name of Joyce Mobley in Literature, had invited me to come to Maryland in the summer of 1975 to lecture on the Harlem Renaissance. The chairman of the department of Art History—of Art at that time, forty-six faculty members—Dr. George Levitine, came to the lecture and he validated my scholarship, which wasn't easy for that time, by saying, "Yes, indeed. There was a rebirth," and so forth, "and we ought to be in on this. We ought to know this history." He wanted that information in the curriculum. There was outreach for me to come. I said, "I'm not going to leave Fisk," but when the dean says, "We don't have room for superstars like you." I thought it was time to leave.

02-02:54:27

Cooks: What a surprise to come back to all of that. And your show is touring. It goes to Brooklyn.

02-02:54:44

Driskell: Yes, it hadn't even gotten to New York then. Then at that time, I have my encounter with Hilton Kramer, [art critic for the *New York Times*].

02-02:54:50

Cooks: I know.

- 02-02:54:51
Driskell: I had to end up saying, "Hilton Kramer ought to shut up because all he's doing is making me famous in New York."
- 02-02:54:59
Cooks: And you're on TV with Tom Brokaw. I love that.
- 02-02:55:02
Driskell: Got to meet with Tom Brokaw. I say, "Hilton Kramer? Who's Hilton Kramer? What does he know about black art?"
- 02-02:55:14
Cooks: So the timing worked out. The dean has some problem with your success; and then Maryland, there's a few key people that decides that change needs to happen.
- 02-02:55:27
Driskell: Maryland invited me to come and organize the African American art curriculum and teach two courses. I could still teach studio also.
- 02-02:55:40
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-02:55:40
Driskell: Since I didn't have a PhD, it was worrisome to the old faculty because graduate students are going to work with me. You're going to let them work with him? He doesn't have a PhD. The chairman came to my rescue—God rest his soul in peace—Dr. Levitine said, "If this man were at Harvard with a bachelor's degree you wouldn't question anything he said."
- 02-02:56:08
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-02:56:09
Driskell: He said, "Who amongst you has defined a field?"
- 02-02:56:13
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-02:56:14
Driskell: There was silence. After that nobody ever questioned my having PhD students.
- 02-02:56:25
Cooks: That's a great story.
- 02-02:56:25
Driskell: My first student was Tritobia Benjamin and Guy McElroy, who wrote the first major book on [Robert] Duncanson.

02-02:56:40

Cooks: He has *Facing History*: [*The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940*]. That's right. And then *Facing History* came out. I think he wrote this piece when that came out.

02-02:56:46

Driskell: Right.

02-02:56:48

Cooks: Tell us: what were the classes that you taught and what books did you use? Yeah, you go ahead.

02-02:57:01

Driskell: I started at the ground level of teaching African American art history in seminar form. Undergraduates and graduates could take the course, but I required a little more of my graduate students than I did of the undergraduates. In the first group that I can remember was Renee Ater. They had great desire to learn and they requested courses on the graduate level as well. I expanded the course content and started offering seminars for graduate students on the master's level. Then they wanted courses for PhD students. Beth Johns, who was an Americanist, teamed with me. The notion was, okay, let's take a chance and see what happens. The students started coming from Howard, Spelman, Oberlin and other schools.

02-02:58:43

Cooks: So it was successful.

02-02:58:45

Driskell: Yes, it was very successful.

02-02:58:47

Cooks: Okay. You were chair from '78 to '83. You took on all kinds of things, so that you're chairing but you're mentoring students, you're defining a field. You become distinguished professor in 1995.

I will go back just a moment. Maybe this will be the last thing we talk about before we break until tomorrow. In 1977, the same year when you're starting at College Park, you become the consultant or advisor for the Cosby Collection.

02-02:59:28

Driskell: Yes, in 1977.

02-02:59:31

Cooks: How did that come about?

02-02:59:32

Driskell: I was in my bedroom one evening and I got a call from Bill Cosby. I didn't think it was he. I had a brother-in-law—he's deceased now—but he and I would call each other up and change our voice, pretend we were so and so.

"This is so and so and so calling you about your taxes," and this is funny. So when he called, I said, "Yes, Scott, what do you want?" Bill said, "Scott? Who's Scott?" He sounded a little like my brother-in-law, Scott. He said, "I have your book here and they tell me this is the black Bible on art." When he said, "I have your book," I thought, No, that's not my brother-in-law. He doesn't know I have written a book. I said, "Are you for real?" He said, "Yes, this is Bill Cosby." I said, "Oh. Well, how can I help you?" He said, "My wife and I are trying to expand our collection. We have quite a number of Charles Whites. We have a few works by other American artists." He named Stuart Davis and other artists. He said, "But we want to buy more black artists. They tell us you are the person to call." I then, realizing he was serious, I decided I would play hard to get. I said, "I'm really committed now and have as many clients as I can take on."

02-03:01:28

Cooks: Wow.

02-03:01:27

Driskell: He said, "What do you mean? You mean you can't help us?" I said, "I don't mean that. Why don't you call me back in about two weeks." He said, "I don't wait for anybody for two weeks." [laughs] He said, "Where is your wife?" I said, "What do you want with her?" He said, "Let me speak to her."

02-03:01:46

Cooks: Oh no. He's going to charm her.

02-03:01:50

Driskell: Yes. He said, "We want to invite you to come for Thanksgiving and have dinner with us." This was the second week in November, 1977.

02-03:01:54

Cooks: Wow.

02-03:01:56

Driskell: He said, "we live in Massachusetts." I said, "We are family oriented. We don't go anyplace for Thanksgiving." He said, "Where is your wife? Can you please bring your wife to the phone?" Thelma came to the phone very excited. He said, "I'm trying to get your husband to come and bring you to have dinner, Thanksgiving dinner. He said, you don't go away for Thanksgiving." She said, "We can come." I said, "Okay." He's laughing saying, "Ha, ha, ha." "We're going to send for you." "We're going to treat you nice." And they did, of course. But that was the beginning.

02-03:02:46

Cooks: Was it just you and Thelma or did you take—okay.

02-03:02:51

Driskell: Just the two of us. We took the train to Providence, Rhode Island. They sent a car over to Providence. We stayed overnight with some friends who were collectors. Drivers picked us up and drove us for up another hour to their

home in Massachusetts. That was the beginning. It was a little more than we were accustomed to.

But the one thing that was difficult at first was there was this company of people looking up to him. We asked ourselves, do we want to be in this group?

Anyway, it turned out being a very interesting relationship and we began a long friendship. Bill said to me, "You're the expert in art and I'm the expert in entertainment. There are going to be times when we will disagree." He said, "You will probably know more about art than I, but just remember, it's my money you will be spending." [laughs]

02-03:04:21

Cooks:

So you ended up thinking about a hierarchy, then meeting a whole new circle of people, I imagine. Yeah. But building one of the greatest collections of art by African American artists that exists.

02-03:04:38

Driskell:

Yes. Well, I really didn't have a limit as to where to go and what to seek out for long.

02-03:04:44

Cooks:

Wow, that's a dream.

02-03:04:47

Driskell:

I would never have been able to have that experience on my own. I went to Sotheby's and tried to be inconspicuous. But often I am the only black person there. They know why I'm there. When I purchased the *Thankful Poor* for them I sent Steven Jones there to bid for me up to \$50,000.00.

02-03:05:12

Cooks:

Yes.

02-03:05:12

Driskell:

Did I tell you this story?

02-03:05:14

Cooks:

No, but I know Steven Jones. Philadelphia.

02-03:05:17

Driskell:

Yes. I sent Harold Hart, who was at the Martha Jackson Gallery at the time also to bid along with Steven. I asked Harold to bid up—if it goes to 150 and then I'll take over after that." And so people were watching me and I didn't have a paddle and I wasn't bidding but they kept watching me. I am sure they were wondering, "Who are these guys bidding? I knew that there was a dealer from Rhode Island who was planning to get that painting at all costs.

02-03:06:05

Cooks:

Oh no.

02-03:06:05

Driskell:

He had called me and tried to get me in on a deal. He said, "If you put up \$50,000, I will also put up \$50,000. It's going to go high." I said, "I don't have that kind of money. You're not supposed to be doing this anyway." He said, "Well, you can do what you want with a dealership." I learned a lot as to how this happens. But he was there bidding and so was another, the Jordan Brothers. After it got to 150, I took over from Harold. But I didn't have a paddle so they couldn't recognize me. John Marin, who knew me saw me flip Mr. Herring's scarf, a 1920 paisley, a silk paisley that nobody was paying attention to, I flipped it back. They were trying to figure out what was going on. The auctioneer said, "The gentleman in the middle." Eventually it went to 250,000, and the other person backs out. Camille [Cosby] was out in California—I called her the night before—since Bill wasn't supposed to know anything about it; this painting was to be a gift from Camille for Bill's Christmas gift.

02-03:07:35

Cooks:

Oh.

02-03:07:37

Driskell:

I said, "What is my ceiling?" She said, "I want the painting. Get the painting." So I felt like, "Oh, okay." I have no ceiling.

02-03:07:46

Cooks:

How fun.

02-03:07:49

Driskell:

I thought, I will do this one thing that I'll never get a chance to do again, and people will think it's me. I got the painting. The gentleman who was the lower bidder realized what was going on and got on the phone and called Bill and told him.

02-03:08:20

Cooks:

Oh no.

02-03:08:20

Driskell:

He said to me, "He has to know. No woman can spend that kind of money without her husband's permission."

02-03:08:33

Cooks:

So he thought that—

02-03:08:33

Driskell:

Interestingly, they had been buying paintings from this same dealer.

02-03:08:37

Cooks:

This doesn't make sense.

02-03:08:38

Driskell:

When I told Camille, she said, "That's it. I'll never buy another painting from him."

- 02-03:08:42
Cooks: Did he think that you were buying it for yourself and not for the Cosbys?
- 02-03:08:48
Driskell: No, he knew I was buying it for them.
- 02-03:08:50
Cooks: But why spoil it? He just didn't believe you.
- 02-03:08:53
Driskell: Because he couldn't afford to buy it.
- 02-03:08:55
Cooks: So just out of spite.
- 02-03:08:56
Driskell: Yes.
- 02-03:08:59
Cooks: What is wrong with people?
- 02-03:09:01
Driskell: Well, they haven't changed much.
- 02-03:09:03
Cooks: All right. Now, what year was the *Thankful Poor* bought? What year did you buy it?
- 02-03:09:08
Driskell: The *Thankful Poor* was bought in December 1981.
- 02-03:09:13
Cooks: Okay, interesting. Okay. Well, I think we're going to—
- 02-03:09:17
Driskell: December 1981.
- 02-03:09:20
Cooks: Okay. David, you and those dates. It's just too good, it is too good. We're going to wrap up and so we'll start again tomorrow. I'll figure out where. Thank you for your time and your day.
- 02-03:09:41
Driskell: Sure, sure.
- 02-03:09:42
Tewes: Thank you.

Interview 3: April 14, 2019

03-00:00:02

Tewes:

This is the third interview with David Driskell for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes at Mr. Driskell's home in Hyattsville, Maryland, on April 14, 2019. So thank you both of you for a good second day. Bridget, why don't you start us off?

03-00:00:27

Cooks:

So, David, thinking about your life as a teacher, you taught for over thirty years. We've talked about your work at Talladega [College], [at Howard University], at Fisk [University], and also thinking about your tenure at [University of Maryland] College Park. Could you talk about the significance of mentorship in the work that you did with students over this time?

03-00:00:50

Driskell:

Yes. I think the whole thing about mentoring is so important, mentoring students. I taught for forty-three years.

First let me say I was well mentored. I was mentored by James A. Porter, who founded the field of African American art history; by Lois [Mailou] Jones, who was a painter of distinction; and by James [Lesesne] Wells, who was referred to as the dean of African American printmakers; and others, but those in particular. The stamp that they placed on me as an artist, as a person, was the model that I tried to use as a teacher to encourage young people who were interested in the profession of art. It was one first of commitment to the discipline, of dedication to the subject, and one of concern for the welfare of those with whom you are interacting. That has been what I have tried to practice over the period of time I taught.

I had a great experience teaching. First of all, I think it's very important to love what you do, and I loved teaching. I always enjoyed the interaction, the feedback. I was very fortunate wherever I taught, beginning at Talladega. Didn't have an art major at Talladega, but students came to me from other disciplines. I remember in particular a young man from Pakistan by the name of Hans Bhalla, who was an economics major. He took many courses in art from me. He applied to Cranbrook Academy [of Art] in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan—not to the undergrad program but to the graduate program—and was accepted. He became a very fine printmaker, collage artist, and ceramist. After his graduation, he returned to teach at Talladega, where he had been a student. And then he became Chairman of the Art Department at Spelman College.

03-00:03:51

Cooks:

Wow.

03-00:03:52

Driskell:

This is as an example of the kind of mentoring that I have seen. I have seen other aspects of it over the years and I could name a number of students. At Howard University, Mary Lovelace O'Neal. Leaving Howard, going on to Columbia, getting her master's, and then going out to California and teaching at the [San Francisco Art] Institute, and then eventually at Berkeley and becoming chairman of the Art Department at Berkeley. These are no ordinary feats. These are people who have stamped themselves in the field. So the whole notion of mentoring for me has been a very important aspect of the teaching process.

Just recently, this past week had an opening of mine at the DC Moore Gallery in New York. Several students came up to me and said, "I hope you remember me, you were my teacher." And of course, obviously I was glad that I did. There are times that I don't; approaching eighty-eight, I don't always remember everything. But teaching, mentoring, and guidance, all go hand-in-hand with the process of learning.

03-00:05:28

Cooks:

Are there things that you've learned about your own work by teaching students? What kind of things have they taught you?

03-00:05:38

Driskell:

Yes. It's interesting you mention that. I was on the phone with Julie McGee last night just briefly, and I told her you were here—she sends her regards. She was asking me questions about art; she is going to be the lead curator for my retrospective exhibition.

03-00:05:58

Cooks:

She told me that.

03-00:05:59

Driskell:

Oh, okay.

03-00:05:59

Cooks:

Yeah. Last time I talked to her, which is—

03-00:06:00

Driskell:

Right.

03-00:06:01

Cooks:

—yeah, fantastic.

03-00:06:04

Driskell:

I guess it was conversational assurance or maybe reassurance from her side. I think she detected in my voice some reservation about mixing all these things at DC Moore, a period of four decades. Because there was the art which dealt principally with the narrative dealing with the Civil Rights movement; and then there was total abstraction. She was saying, "I detect in your voice that you really have some hesitancy about committing yourself to abstraction, that

you still feel like you've got to get in there and tell the story." That is true to a certain extent. And only when I have allowed myself to go blank and say I'm not going to deal with the social scene, have I freed myself up to a form of abstraction and push forward with color, design, and the elements. I think back to what you worked on with the publication on Alma Thomas. Alma used to say, "Oh, boy, thinking will kill you. Stop thinking and paint." Sometimes I think about that. Don't get so carried away with narrating the thing, let art lead. So for me, I think even at my age I need to learn more. I'm still learning.

03-00:08:07

Cooks:

Okay. Do you learn things about yourself or your sense of your work [communicates] when you see your exhibitions? Thinking about, well, the show that you have up, but there's been many shows. Or thinking about maybe what you hope to see in the retrospective, the bigger one that Julie's doing.

03-00:08:26

Driskell:

A number of people have said to me, on seeing that exhibition—and there are like four decades of work there— "Is this a mini retrospective?" We didn't think of it in that regard. I don't think it'll be the pattern for the retrospective, but I suspect it will duplicate some elements of it. This particular show, interestingly enough, does lean, I think, a little more towards abstraction but the works from the eighties onward were more abstract.

03-00:09:03

Cooks:

Okay. So in addition to being an artist, you've been a teacher, but you've taught technique and form and how to make art, of things to think about. You've also taught art history. We talked about that a little bit, part of your charge of founding a space for African American art history at the University of Maryland. That's not common. That's not something that's expected for artists, to also write scholarship.

03-00:09:42

Driskell:

That is true.

03-00:09:45

Cooks:

I wanted to hear you speak a bit about why writing art history has become part of your life, and why perhaps did you see it as an important element of what you could offer as an artist as well as a scholar.

03-00:10:01

Driskell:

I come out of the HBCU tradition, the historically black college tradition, where one didn't have the luxury of being able to specialize. You really had to be able to teach almost everything. I think I mentioned earlier, when I finally arrived at Talladega College without a formal interview, of saying, "This is what you will be teaching." "Can you teach ceramics?" I said, "Oh yes." I hadn't had a ceramics course. "Can you teach printmaking?" "Yes, of course I can." Printmaking and so forth. I think that still was embedded in my psyche in some way or another, that I have to be able to do everything.

03-00:10:54

Interestingly enough, I don't think it's still the case at—I'm not even sure that they offer an MFA at Catholic University any longer. But at that time, they had this notion that a master's of fine arts meant that you had to master more than one discipline. I wasn't that proficient in ceramics, but I had to pass the same course that people who were doing their thesis in ceramics had to pass; I had to do the same thing in theory; I had to do the same thing in history; and the same thing in painting. It was a very comprehensive program at that time. We didn't do that at Maryland. We concentrated in painting and you wrote a thesis on what you did. So I came out of that tradition rather old-fashioned, I guess, of being able to put your hands in so many areas and come out competently.

I never considered myself a printmaker. And then around 2005, Dr. [Robert] Steele, who at that time was director of the Driskell Center, said to me, "You know, all of the prints you've done, we really ought to have a print show." I said, "But I'm not a printmaker." He said, "You are a printmaker."

03-00:12:26

Cooks:

Yes, right.

03-00:12:27

Driskell:

He called Adrienne Childs, and asked her if she would curate the exhibition. I was somewhat surprised that she was able to go back and find all of these media, all of these subjects, all of these things I had done as a printmaker.

I never saw myself as an art historian, I never saw myself as a painter, I thought I was a well-rounded teacher, I never saw myself as a curator. I have said on numerous occasions I would prefer to have been in the studio painting, but I knew that the charge was larger than that. There were the omissions. There was the positive literature here and there. My mentor, Prof. Porter, said to me even as an undergraduate, he said, "You're a good painter—" and he didn't always say that—"But you can't afford the luxury of just being a painter. You need to study art history. We need people to help expand the field." I took that as an assignment, of inheriting the mantle, so to speak. I tried to model my life after his because he was curator, he was the painter, he was an art historian and he taught, he lectured. So to me it came with the territory.

In 1986, I invited a professional counselor to come and sit with me in Maine and go over what I was doing. He ended by saying, "Well, first of all, you're doing eight jobs." I said, "Eight?" He said, "Well, I'll leave the farming off—" he called the garden farming. He said, "If I leave that off, there's still seven." He went through all these things: lecturing, curating, directing, chairing, teaching and so forth. He said, "Some people just do one of these things. Here you are doing all of them." He said I was doing them well. I said, "Well, time will tell." But I never thought of it as anything extra. I never tired of it. I really enjoyed having my hands in all of these areas.

03-00:15:08

Cooks:

Well, are there any particular texts that you've written that you feel are especially important? I was going to say that you feel especially proud of. And that's one way, certainly, that you're welcome to answer it. But in terms of—I'm thinking about *Two Centuries of Black Art* or the *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*—are there particular works that you've written that you see as really helping to define a discourse or make a particular intervention? Or even the Hilton Kramer [reviews and letters], going back and forth in 1970s in the *New York Times*.

03-00:15:53

Driskell:

Yes. I guess the closest thing to a text would be the *Two Centuries of Black American Art, 1750 to 1950*. I didn't see it as a seminal work, I didn't see it as a text. I didn't see it in that context. I saw it as one of those things that would help to fill the gap because there was such a vast gap out there. I was cognizant of the fact that there was very little literature out there, and so I was looking to enhance what was there. Of course, I had the best model in front of me, which was *Modern Negro Art* by my mentor, James A. Porter. I wanted to supplement that, I wanted to go beyond that, so I was still using that as the model to a certain extent. Some people questioned why I included architecture and crafts in *Two Centuries*. I felt that it was part and parcel of the whole defining the black experience in the visual arts, and I felt it very important to do that. Others felt that that was a very important decision, that they could see it in relation to other things. I guess *Two Centuries* would be close to that.

And then the compilation of ideas that come by way of the writings that others have done, supplementing what I've done, in modern art and visual aesthetics, added to the field.

03-00:17:49

Cooks:

Okay. I want to turn to artwork and collecting. We have been fortunate enough, even in your home, to see a whole array of artworks from the 1950s until much more recent years, until now. I wanted to hear you talk a bit about—and I'll put it in these terms—the persistence of certain themes since the 1950s. I'm thinking about the natural environment and even I think biblical themes that appear throughout the decades. You also have work that engages with jazz, music, even more broadly perhaps, dance. I'm wondering if you could talk about the persistence of things, but then how other themes—when they become and why they become important to you in your work as an artist.

03-00:19:00

Driskell:

Here again, I began studying art in a traditional manner, painting, drawing, printmaking, et cetera, but with an emphasis on form, mainly on traditional form. It took me a little while to move that away from just the narrative. I thought I started doing that early on with self-portraits and things like that, of trying to move it away from making a comparison between a photograph of myself. I never looked in the mirror to see what I looked like. I always tried to

make it thought process. Yet it was important for me to try and incorporate all these things into one formula.

But I think in spite of all of that, in spite of the concern I had for nature, for what was going on in the social scene, my teaching and all of that studying of art history, wanting to look at other artists, the most significant aspect of it all was nature, my relationship to the world in which I lived, the environment. There was a time when I did not want to deal with people as subjects, I mentioned that earlier. Nature was more inviting to me. To a certain extent it still is. When I draw I very often incorporate aspects of nature, even if I am doing something that has to do with an abstract subject, so nature is the source. That's the world as far as I am concerned.

I have always felt that art for me was a very special gift. I used to say it is a priestly. If one isn't serious one shouldn't be involved in it; should say it's a hobby and just go on and do it that way. For me it has always been very serious business. I had the good fortune of being respected as a teacher, and so I had a license of sorts to move around and do all kinds of things with my art. I didn't go with a gallery consistently until 1993, so I didn't have to paint to be in the gallery.

03-00:22:40

Cooks:

Right, I see.

03-00:22:42

Driskell:

I waited until I was invited to become an artist in a major gallery in New York before having a dealer. There were co-ops I could have joined. When I got an invitation at a gallery where I felt comfortable and felt I could trust, then that relationship became very much one where we had trust. I have never signed a contract with a dealer in my life. In New York; that's always been a gentleman's agreement.

03-00:23:46

Cooks:

Right, from DC Moore.

03-00:23:47

Driskell:

I don't do exclusives. At this stage of my life, I don't make my living selling my art so I'm not going to do any exclusives.

I learned that from people like [Romare] Bearden, who was a mentor to me. Romare was a great mentor in so many ways. My understanding of what the notion of how art informs the world is that you—the painter—has to have a very special vision, otherwise he will do what everybody else does. Now, every artist looks at somebody else and perhaps you might say, "Oh, that color. I'd like to be able to use that color. I'd like to be able to use that form." But if you take everything, you're copying, so that is not original, that is not real. You've got to find a way to learn from that experience and at the same

time make it applicable to what you're doing so that it fits within your range. That's what I tried to do with my art.

There was one period when I was very, very much influenced by Romare Bearden. I had a little show in New York—and I don't even list it in my CV—in 1980. This was the very first experience I had with a NY gallery, and it turned out being a very unfortunate one. Half of the paintings were sold; I never got one penny from the sale.

03-00:25:36

Cooks:

What?

03-00:25:39

Driskell:

I was very naive; they saw me coming. Romare came to that show. There were at least seventeen African American artists who came to that exhibition. This was in May 1980. William T. Williams, Vincent Smith, Mel Edwards and others. I wish I had a photograph of them, but I didn't think of it at the time. Tritobia Benjamin told me that she may have taken a photograph of us at that exhibit. We do have her papers at the Driskell Center.

03-00:26:19

Cooks:

Oh, good. Okay.

03-00:26:21

Driskell:

Someday I'll take the time to go through them and see.

Anyway, to make a long story short, I had a work in the show called *Homage to Bearden*. I think it may be in Julie's book. It was a bit Beardenesque in its makeup, the iconography of it: masks and hands and things, and it was collage. I also had several other collages where I had started tearing the paper. No photographs, but my color then tearing. Romare came up to me and he said, "I don't want to embarrass you. I'm really flattered that you think enough of me to say this work is an homage to Bearden." "But it's not as much your voice as it should be." He took me over to the collage where the work was torn. He said, "This is your voice." I've often said when I tell that story, I said, "Only a friend would do that, a mentor."

03-00:27:38

Cooks:

Right. In that way.

03-00:27:41

Driskell:

Yes. He said, "I'm going to buy this one."

03-00:27:45

Cooks:

What an amazing person.

03-00:47:47

Driskell:

So that was a lesson to me. I didn't stop doing works with photographs. But he also said, "Be careful about the photographs you use because you could use another artist's work, a photographer, and he would say, 'You didn't get

permission from me to use this.' " I then started doing my own photographs and incorporating them. I learned so much. That's another aspect of mentorship.

03-00:28:17

Cooks:

No, that's really helpful. And it is that gentle manner and the ability to communicate effectively so that you didn't get defensive or angry, that you heard it in the spirit in which it was delivered.

03-00:28:33

Driskell:

Yes. In the final analysis I have moved away from a number of the things that incorporated the social aspect of my interaction with the world to a more romantic one of looking at nature in many recent compositions.

03-00:28:51

Cooks:

Do you have a sense of who your collectors are?

03-00:28:58

Driskell:

Yes. It's interesting. If I had to talk about the collectors along the line of race, it would be evenly divided, I think. Interestingly enough, I don't think African American collectors have collected works that have black subjects only. And vice versa: I don't think white collectors have collected only works of nature. I think it's been balanced on both sides. I could point out two or three people that I would say have been constant collectors over the years; they continue to be. But there are those who have collected, say, three or four of my works and I'd like to honor them. People come up to me and surprisingly say, "I have two of your works. I've got to get something else," and so forth and so on. I often say, "I have curated everybody's work except my own." I don't always know where the work is. We're trying to find out.

03-00:30:20

Cooks:

Locate, yeah.

03-00:30:22

Driskell:

And do an inventory. I have bought back a few things.

03-00:30:28

Cooks:

Have you?

03-00:30:28

Driskell:

Yes.

03-00:30:29

Cooks:

So you signed with a gallery, with DC Moore in 1993. Did you keep records or you just have to really remember what you did in the past?

03-00:31:28

Driskell:

I don't keep good records, and that's why Rodney [Moore] and my daughter, Daphne [Driskell-Coles], are doing that now. For example, the first *Pine Trees* there. That had been in Prof. Porter's collection. I had forgotten where it was.

And Julie [McGee], doing the research, she found it. Connie Porter was still alive then and I said, "Oh, I'd love to buy it back." She said, "Okay." So I bought it back from her. I've done that with a couple of things. I bought a piece back from the auction house recently, a little piece of a mask, a figure called *The Sentinel*. I don't know if you saw it. I think it was Treadway or one of those auction houses.

03-00:31:31

Cooks: The one that's up now?

03-00:31:32

Driskell: Yes.

03-00:31:34

Cooks: I just don't know about buying your own work back. Is that a funny feeling or—

03-00:31:38

Driskell: Often, artists of means do it. I'm not an artist of means. Those who can afford to do it very often do it. Some of them do it to reclaim it because they don't want certain things out there.

03-00:31:53

Cooks: Sure, I see.

03-00:31:57

Driskell: Faith Ringgold told me that she is beginning to buy back some of her works.

03-00:32:01

Cooks: Wow, that's fascinating.

03-00:32:02

Driskell: I'm not really sure that there's any early work out there that I would buy back for the sake of wanting to destroy it.

03-00:32:10

Cooks: But people do that with their work?

03-00:32:12

Driskell: Yes, some people do it.

03-00:32:13

Cooks: Wow.

03-00:32:14

Driskell: I would buy back for the record, to be able to see it, but not to destroy it. Like Brueghel would burn half of what he created, or somebody had it to give back to me or something. Some artists have that.

03-00:32:37

Cooks: That's interesting.

03-00:32:38

Driskell: Yes.

03-00:32:38

Tewes: Is there also a sentimental connection for you, to perhaps pass along your early works to your family?

03-00:32:44

Driskell: Some of that I've had in mind. We're doing a trust and we do have some things as part of the trust. But here again, family doesn't always want everything. Family sometimes thinks everything is a masterpiece. That could be very dangerous, especially people who haven't paid attention to what the artist is doing and you are no longer on the scene. If something sells for a decent price at auction, they think everything's going to sell for that. I've seen situations like that.

03-00:33:42

Cooks: The viewers who are watching this through the Getty's archive, of course, do not have the benefit of sitting where we're sitting now, being surrounded by this amazing collection of artwork—yours and others. I wanted to know if you consider yourself a collector, and if you would say something about your collection.

03-00:34:14

Driskell: Well, I never thought of myself as a collector until we did *Narratives of African American Art and Identity*. "Yes, I am a collector. I have been collecting." I started out imitating my teachers. I went go to their homes and I saw works by this artist. I remember Lois Jones used to say, "If you want people to buy your work, you need to buy theirs." When I saw art in other people's homes, I started thinking, I want to be able to say I have a work by Catlett, by Bearden, by Lawrence, by Meta Warrick Fuller.

03-00:35:26

Cooks: Don Gibson, Bannister. It goes on and on.

03-00:35:31

Driskell: Yes. I never thought of it in the sense of being a great collector. I have been blessed to have some of the relationships I had with people. I exchanged art with them. But most importantly, I thank the Great Creator because I think I have a good eye. That has been more important to me than anything else. I always said to my students, I said, "If you don't think you have a good eye, then work at it and try and cultivate whatever it is that makes you good. Read Joshua Taylor's book, *Learning to Look*." Learn to Look. Not that you are going to look and go out tomorrow and find a masterpiece. No. But you will be better prepared to see.

03-00:36:30

When I was teaching drawing, the first day of class, "Everybody got their materials out?" "Yes." "Okay, put them away. Now, let's take a walk two blocks across campus and back." Oh, and they're busy talking, they're having

fun. We get back and I said, "Now, write down fifty things you saw." "Fifty things? I didn't see anything but buildings." I said, "Are you sure you belong here? Artists see and they visualize beyond seeing. Think about that now. If you're going to go out in the world and you're not going to see anything, all you're going to do is copy, so start looking. There's something there that you've never seen before." That was my approach to teaching. Learn something new every day, make it applicable to your work, startle the world, give them something they weren't expecting.

It doesn't always happen that way, but I think I was pretty lucky in having some students under my tutelage who did that. They said, "That's what I'm doing." Like Sylvia Snowden got the painting award at the Porter Colloquium. And Mary [Lovelace] O'Neal had got it the year before last. It's interesting that both of them said, "Mr. Driskell always demanded that we see more than what we thought we saw." Test yourself to make sure that you're seeing everything.

03-00:38:44

Otherwise you are ordinary. Ordinary people don't produce art. The people who produce art are extraordinary and they see more than anybody else. That's why Plato didn't want them in his utopia, his republic, because he said they were false believers. They pretended that things were there that weren't. That's the visionary. The person sees beyond the contour of time, beyond the context of the ordinary. That's who the artist is. Artists are the very first ones to be imprisoned by a regime that is considered autocratic, because they threaten the security of free thinking and free seeing. They disrupt the rhetoric of seeing to the extent that they intervene and challenge old things. So if you're going to be an artist, don't be ordinary. [laughs]

03-00:40:13

Cooks:

Oh, that's so helpful. It's fun to think about that. I think for everyone to think about that it's helpful, but also particularly looking at your work and the way that you've seen the world and the record that you bring to it.

03-00:40:30

Driskell:

I want to see other people. You will notice that the only piece of my work hanging here is the first pine tree painting I did in 1954.

03-00:40:38

Cooks:

Oh, okay.

03-00:40:39

Driskell:

There is the little ceramic piece over there. I don't normally show my work. I want to look at what others have done. I want to be inspired and informed by others. I can always go and see what I did. That's what collecting to me is about.

03-00:41:03

Cooks: Okay. I want to talk about making art for you, the fact that you have, as far as I know, two studios, but I wouldn't be surprised if you have more.

03-00:41:19

Driskell: No, two.

03-00:41:19

Cooks: Two, okay. You have one in Hyattsville and then one in Maine. And we talked about the—

03-00:41:27

Driskell: I do draw occasionally when I go to New York to the apartment, but that's not a studio.

03-00:41:32

Cooks: Okay. Well, thinking about the fact that you have these two spaces, but also the bigger picture of the role of place in your life, in your work. Thinking about geography and your identity in your practice as an artist. So wondering if you could speak about the impact of place in your work. Where you make work, but also where you've traveled. You've gone around the world I don't know how many times. Do you feel at home in multiple places or do you have to be in a space that you feel like, This is my studio or my apartment and I can make work here? What kind of impact has place and location had on your work?

03-00:42:25

Driskell: Place for me is very important. It means stability, it means ownership, it means connoisseurship. But the most important thing in all of this is it is my space, my little part of the world that has been assigned to me. I want to feel at home, I want to enjoy it, I want to decorate it, I want to celebrate it. Luckily I was able to design both of my studios. I thought I was designing them with a lot of space and then, I ran out of space very quickly. I added on a little here and there. It gets to be a little ghetto after a while. But place is so important, but also—physically—it is also important psychologically because that's where you belong. If you feel at home there, if you belong, you feel like you belong there, then there's an ease when you create. This is my space, this is my place, this is my time, and so you go at it from the point of view that this is your little personal world. I sometimes do more sleeping in my studio than I do painting.

03-00:44:33

Cooks: Really? Do you have a couch? You've got a space just for that?

03-00:44:37

Driskell: I have a couch. In each studio I have a little couch. Normally, at my age, I take a nap at noon every day, fifteen, twenty minutes or so. Usually if I'm working, I get on my couch and I feel absorbed and surrounded by the art. I could make art at other places, but I never feel at home making art in other places the way I do in my studio, let's say it. So it's very special in that sense.

03-00:45:26

Cooks:

I mentioned this earlier about your sketchbooks. I saw you give a little lecture at a recent Porter Colloquium where you showed just pages from your—and the whole audience was just delighted because most of us haven't been to all of the places that you've been and we felt this kind of enchantment of being able to travel, but also it was as if we were traveling with you or we had been there with you. I would love to hear you say more about how you maybe process different places or part of the delight for you of traveling through making art. So it's not your studio where you have this.

03-00:46:14

Driskell:

Right.

03-00:46:15

Cooks:

But somehow you're kind of taking part of the studio with you or at least part of the—

03-00:46:18

Driskell:

It's like taking a part of it with me but it's also like [having] the good fortune of being able to be there. I think back as a child, growing up in a very impoverished community, it was rich in the sense that there was nature, I had a family who had all of the traditions that I was absorbing even when I didn't know I was absorbing them.

I use a lot of colors now in my art. When I was teaching a course, each place I went—except Talladega—it was Methods and Materials of Painting, I went out with my students and we found materials with which to paint, with which to dye, with which to do—that was a part of the course. We found umbers and ochers [in the local clays]. I always look when I am riding. If there's an embankment where the road's been cut through, I want to see: what color is the clay? Is it yellow, is it white, is it black, is it brown, is it umber? I at times took my students, four miles away from the campus, to dig the clay, bring it back, process it, make an umber, make a sienna. We ground it the way I did at the Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture] in 1953. I often limited the number of students in the courses, usually ten, twelve. My colleagues would say, "Are you still teaching that luxury course?" Well, I have had students come to me thirty years later and say, "I'm so glad I took that course. Not that I'm isolated and can't buy paints, but I still experiment with paint and dry pigment"

03-00:48:26

Cooks:

Really?

03-00:48:27

Driskell:

I brought some of that information with me from my childhood. My mother was an herbalist. I'd help her pick the pokeberries and she made a dye for her quilts or that red clay—she made a red dye for the quilt. She'd knew what to add to the green leaves to make it stable, salt etc. She came up with all these colors. I have put a lot of that into my own teaching. The resin that you get

from a pine tree for making Damar varnish, etc. All of that was part and parcel of my teaching process.

That is the part I miss about teaching. I can't get anybody in the family to become that interested. I'm walking through the woods. "Oh, there's a so and so." They're like, "What is that?" Like, "Don't take up my time with that."

For example, when Thelma and I were in Peru in 1985 and we were going on the regular tourist train, going to Machu Picchu, the train had to go up the mountains and then back up and then front down to get up. We stopped at one place and there was this plant that I knew immediately. I saw it and I got out and started smelling it. Our tour guide happened to have been an herbalist. He said, "Do you know that plant?" I said, "Yes, it grows on our farm in North Carolina." He said, "What do you call it?" I said, "We call it horse mint." He says, "Well, we call it *mentha* in Spanish. But it's medicine for us." I said, "It's medicine for us." I told him what we use it [for]. He said, "We use it for the same thing."

03-00:50:40

So when I see a plant, it's not just, oh, it's so beautiful, there it is. It may be universal medicine for me because my mother taught me to look at it and see its use. You see foliage and leaves in my art, and very often they are homage to my mother, recreating that contact with her; it becomes spiritual now that she's no longer with us. Yes, I remember. She taught me this, she taught me that. To a lot of people, it doesn't make any sense but to me, it is a part of an important heritable tradition.

03-00:51:26

Cooks:

Well, it's wonderful, too, because so much of what you're talking about now just comes full circle and helps us see the continuous threads and the persistence of ideas.

So you retired from University of Maryland in 1998.

03-00:51:43

Driskell:

Supposedly.

03-00:51:46

Cooks:

Well, that's what I'm getting at. Because was your plan to spend more time painting and traveling? Did you have a plan or something specific for your development as an artist with this time? One of the things that I want us to talk about is the establishment of the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora.

03-00:52:17

Driskell:

A mouthful.

03-00:52:19

Cooks:

It's two full lines on my paper. At the University of Maryland College Park. I would think that that certainly has taken up a lot of your time. So I'm guessing I'm asking two things: do you feel like you have more time to be an artist since you retired, and then could you also talk about the formation of the Center?

03-00:52:41

Driskell:

I have more time, and the luxury of it has become not my salvation but my imprisonment.

03-00:52:54

Cooks:

Really?

03-00:52:55

Driskell:

When I had less time I savored it, I valued it. I went go in the studio for three hours. Now I have a whole day. Oh, I'll get to it. Other things very often will pop up, and I'll do that. When I retired, I had the notion that I was going to spend much more time in the studio. What happens then? People start asking, "Would you come and lecture? Would you be a consultant?" Sometimes it's hard to say no. So I haven't been as faithful about it as I should have been, I haven't been as disciplined about it as I should have been. When I'm traveling I do take my sketchbook with me. If I'm going to a foreign country, I create my foreign travel journals.

03-00:54:07

Cooks:

And the journals, that's you writing, like a diary.

03-00:54:10

Driskell:

I'm writing and drawing and making notations in them.

03-00:54:14

Cooks:

Wow. You have those from places all over the world, as well.

03-00:54:19

Driskell:

Yes.

03-00:54:21

Cooks:

So some are purely sketchbooks and the journals are—

03-00:54:26

Driskell:

Some are purely sketchbooks, but most of them do have writing. Only one has the drawings and the writing typed. That was in the seventies when I came back from South Africa. I had my assistant type up my notes and I'll never do that again, because I lose something from the flavor of writing about it.

03-00:54:55

Cooks:

You usually write in longhand?

03-00:54:59

Driskell:

Yes. Everything else is longhand in those journals and I still write. I'm a dinosaur when it comes to writing. People say, "Oh, you still write." I say, "Yes."

03-00:55:14

Cooks:

Something you said just made me think about—in terms of traveling made me think about asking you about your reputation internationally. You've gone to so many places. Have you exhibited internationally—or when you go to give talks, they're all over the world.

03-00:55:40

Driskell:

I have exhibited my art internationally but not as much as I have lectured. I have been invited more often to give keynote addresses, or to give talks in general. But I keep saying, "Oh, I'm going to slow down. I'm not going to do this." Well, time is making me slow down but I'm still doing more than I should in that regard.

03-00:56:17

Cooks:

Okay. So let's talk about the establishment of the [David Driskell] Center. So the Center was formed in 2001 and its mission is clear: to focus on the visual art and culture of African Americans and the African diaspora. Could you talk about the idea for the Center? Is this something that you came up with on your own, or was it a culmination of a career and was it a much bigger conversation with other people who wanted to be supportive?

03-00:56:55

Driskell:

It was a conversation with other people, two people sitting here in this room. The interim dean at that time at the University of Maryland was Dr. Ira Berlin. He died last year. He was considered the leading American scholar on slavery. He taught at the University of Maryland. He was a dear colleague. He was one of the people who said from day one I wasn't getting enough credit in my field. I felt I was getting plenty of credit. When I retired, the acting dean came to visit me. They said, "But you're just sixty-seven years old, you're still young. Why wouldn't you teach longer?" I gave the excuse of what I wanted to do. They said, "[now] that you're leaving, what is it that you would like for us to do? You have established courses in your field." I said, "Grow the field. If you think I have done something that is important to the progress of education and the mission of the university, in particular as it relates to the African American experience, grow the field." They took that as their challenge, as their motto, that I wasn't so much interested in classes as in an instrument whereby people could benefit from whatever it is it was that we started doing beyond the curriculum offerings.

03-00:59:08

Several heads got together and they decided: what about a program in which we would feature exhibitions and lecturers? I said, "I don't have no money to give. But we will share our collection, we'll give you the archive." I could have sold the archive, but I said, "No. If you're going to do this and do it right,

I will give you a number of things." So we have given over 200 works by African American artists. Maybe 50 of them are my own; mainly drawings. And then when other people learned what was happening they started pitching in. After Benny Andrews died, his wife gave 157 works from their collection; mainly African American art. A major collector in Atlanta was Lloyd and Sandra Baccus. Lloyd died ahead of Sandra. And she was on the board of trustees of the High Museum. I'm sure they were looking forward to getting her Beardens and Lawrences. She called me up one day, she said, " "Would the Driskell Center be interested in our collection?" She had over 280 works by—

03-01:01:10

Cooks: Oh, my goodness.

03-01:01:12

Driskell: —prominent African American artists. I said, "Yes, but you're an Atlantean. You are on the board of trustees at the High Museum." She was one of the major sponsors of The Driskell Prize. She said, "Yes, but we want the works where they can be used and not just cataloged and put in the basement."

03-01:01:38

Cooks: Wow.

03-01:01:40

Driskell: No one expected her to leave us so soon. She just sixty-six years old when she died in 2012. Now, Lloyd had been ill. Her husband was a medical doctor, but they were people of means. She willed the entire collection to the Driskell Center.

We have had that kind of thing happening. Artist Faith Ringgold has given her papers, Dr. Tritobia Benjamin, gave the papers. 50,000 items came from me and my wife for the Driskell Archives.

03-01:02:22

Cooks: Really?

03-01:02:23

Driskell: Yes. We are still adding to it. There are others who are committed to giving their papers. I said, "Are you sure you don't want to give this to the—"

03-01:02:40

Cooks: The Archives of American Art.

03-01:02:40

Driskell: —Archives of American Art or to the Schomburg or to Spingarn [Moorland-Spingarn Research Center] at Howard? Most people say, "No, I want them here, they say." Because they have seen them in use and that makes a difference.

03-01:02:55

Cooks: Right. Your name is on it but that also ensures, through your relationships, a quality of care.

03-01:03:07

Driskell: Hopefully. And since it's a state institution—we know states can do whatever they want, but you hope they will honor their commitment to do this in perpetuity and make sure that it's there for people in the years to come.

03-01:03:26

Cooks: What kinds of things do they ask you to do, does the staff ask you to do? What's your involvement with the Center?

03-01:03:34

Driskell: I'm like *ex officio*. I can go to meetings, but I don't. I participate in programs. I will occasionally write a forward to a catalog. Each year for the annual lecture and book award I come to preside over it. Yeah.

03-01:03:58

Cooks: Okay. There's the Collectors School.

03-01:04:00

Driskell: There's the Collectors School.

03-01:04:01

Cooks: Do you speak?

03-01:04:01

Driskell: I always give the introduction. I show some of what I have collected and say, "Look, with meager means this is what I did, so you can do better."

03-01:04:14

Cooks: Okay. Do you see the future of the Center as just increasing? You're talking about artists leaving their papers, so there's room for growth.

03-01:04:30

Driskell: Oh, definitely. I think we will eventually have to move to another space because of our growth.

03-01:04:33

Cooks: Really?

03-01:04:33

Driskell: Yes, already. We don't have space for the collection on site. We have to rent space off campus for the collection.

03-01:04:42

Cooks: Oh, my goodness.

03-01:04:43

Driskell: We started out with a vault of medium size. It's totally filled. One of the things I demanded, I said, "At least as long as I'm here, this has to be a hands-on

facility. I want people to go to the vault. I want them to go to the archives. You may give them white gloves but I want them to see it." We are supposed to be developing a relationship with the Phillips Collection, whereby they are going to build a facility on campus. I don't know how far that has gone.

03-01:05:29

Cooks:

Okay. So the Center is part of your impact on the field of African American art; it's also part of your legacy, and I wanted to talk more about that. You have received thirteen honorary doctoral degrees. That's a lot. [laughs]

03-01:05:58

Driskell:

Yes.

03-01:05:58

Cooks:

Thirteen. Three is a lot, three is a lot.

03-01:06:01

Driskell:

Well, yes, but if you compare it to Dr. Johnnetta Cole, she has about almost sixty.

03-01:06:09

Cooks:

But I think you're of the same stature. I mean, she is a peer for you.

03-01:06:16

Driskell:

Normally artists don't get that kind of recognition. If you get one, that's it.

03-01:06:22

Cooks:

Well, but you are more than an artist. In fact, we wanted to know who plays this piano? Do you play any instruments?

03-01:06:32

Driskell:

Well, I don't say I play it. It plays me. [laughs]

03-01:06:39

Cooks:

It's here for you though.

03-01:06:43

Driskell:

Yes.

03-01:06:43

Cooks:

Were you trained?

03-01:06:44

Driskell:

—I told you [that as a teenager], I was directing the [junior] choir [in my church in Appalachia]. I didn't know one note of music. I think I could have been a musician.

03-01:06:55

Cooks:

Really?

03-01:06:56

Driskell:

Because I hear sounds and I can sit down and imitate them.

- 03-01:07:00
Cooks: Were you trained in any instrument?
- 03-01:07:02
Driskell: No.
- 03-01:07:03
Cooks: No, okay.
- 03-01:07:05
Driskell: No. One of my luxury desires was: someday I'll have a piano and I'll sit there. Occasionally when we have family meetings we sing a little, old songs that are passing and I'll try and bring them out to pass them on to the family members. Have you seen the film *In Search of the Creative Spirit* [*David Driskell: In Search of the Creative Truth*]?
- 03-01:07:38
Cooks: No.
- 03-01:07:38
Driskell: Oh, okay.
- 03-01:07:39
Cooks: Is that about you?
- 03-01:07:41
Driskell: Yes. Maine visual artist. It's a half-hour long.
- 03-01:07:46
Cooks: When was that produced?
- 03-01:07:46
Driskell: Two thousand eleven.
- 03-01:07:48
Cooks: No, I definitely have not seen that.
- 03-01:07:51
Driskell: Well, I'm not playing the piano in that but there's the smaller piano in Maine when I strike up a tune. I like to have a piano wherever I go to—
- 03-01:08:05
Cooks: But it plays you, you don't play it.
- 03-01:08:08
Driskell: It plays me.
- 03-01:08:09
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:08:09
Driskell: It was having fun and I was standing there while somebody else was singing. People said, "You play?" I said, "No, no, no, I don't play." Artist Woody Cole

said, "You play." I said, "No, no, no." He said, "You're a musician." I'm [saying], "No, no, no."

03-01:08:32

Cooks: But that seems like in keeping with the HBCU tradition of doing more than one thing.

03-01:08:36

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:08:38

Cooks: Or Bearden being a composer.

03-01:08:40

Driskell: Bearden was a composer.

03-01:08:42

Cooks: So I wouldn't have been surprised. If you have to have two pianos, though, I think it's beyond you not being able to play.

03-01:08:51

Driskell: Brandywine gave me an award one year and they have a little video, in which I played the background music for it.

03-01:09:07

Cooks: You did? Wow.

03-01:09:10

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:09:14

Cooks: That seems fantastic.

03-01:09:16

Driskell: Terry Adkins was a wonderful musician. He was one of my former students. His wife was at the opening of my show the other night, Merele.

03-01:09:25

Cooks: Oh, wow. I didn't realize he was one of your students.

03-01:09:29

Driskell: Terry didn't talk about it. He would say, "Oh, I studied with Martin Puryear and I studied with Earl Hooks." He didn't always say, "I studied with David." That's the way Terry was.

03-01:09:41

Cooks: Which school? Was he—

03-01:09:43

Driskell: Fisk.

- 03-01:09:44
Cooks: I did not know that.
- 03-01:09:46
Driskell: That head behind the—
- 03-01:09:49
Cooks: Oh, okay.
- 03-01:09:50
Driskell: Yes. That's one of his ceramic pieces. I have probably fifteen or twenty of Terry's works or more—not out. I have one hanging in the apartment in New York and I have given one picture to the High Museum. I told Thelma Golden I would give a piece to the Studio [Museum]. Anyway, I have several of his works. They were here a long time ago when their kids were little then. Now Titus is graduating from college and the daughter is a senior art history and art major at Dartmouth.
- 03-01:10:33
Cooks: One of your granddaughters?
- 03-01:10:34
Driskell: No, Terry's children.
- 03-01:10:35
Cooks: Sorry. One of Terry's. Oh, wow.
- 03-01:10:39
Driskell: Yes. We were talking about Terry's work. Merele, his wife, said, "Terry? He has more of your work than you do."
- 03-01:10:51
Cooks: No.
- 03-01:10:51
Driskell: I said, "Tell him why—" because Terry often came and borrowed money from me; I always said, "Bring me some art, and when you bring the money back you get the art back." Terry never paid me. We laughed about it. She said, "You and Terry's relationship!"
- 03-01:11:18
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:11:19
Driskell: I don't know. Why am I telling you about Terry?
- 03-01:11:22
Cooks: Well, we were talking about being a musician, piano—
- 03-01:11:26
Driskell: Yes, Terry was a fabulous musician. He was here once. He never went anywhere without his instrument, one of his instruments because he played

more than one. I think he had the tenor saxophone. We began playing. I sat at the piano and I picked it up playing along. He said, "All these years I didn't know you played the piano." I said, "I don't play." He said, "Come on, man. You were playing."

03-01:11:59

Cooks: [laughs] Right.

03-01:11:59

Driskell: I said, "No, no." I did say to him, I said, "Terry, we should do something for posterity and maybe in the future use it at my exhibit or your exhibit." He said, "Yes, great, great." We never got around to doing it. So sad and tragic. He was just sixty years old [when he died in 2014].

03-01:12:21

Cooks: Such a surprise.

03-01:12:22

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:12:23

Cooks: How did the Brandywine film come about? Somebody was convinced.

03-01:12:27

Driskell: When they introduced me, they wanted a little film. If one gets an award, they like to show a little three- or four-minute film ahead of the presentation of the award.

03-01:12:39

Cooks: Did you volunteer? You said, "Oh, I'll put some music with it."

03-01:12:46

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:12:46

Cooks: Maybe? Okay.

03-01:12:47

Driskell: I don't know where the film is. I don't think they have it. It may be in the Archive at the Driskell Center.

03-01:12:50

Cooks: Really?

03-01:12:52

Driskell: Yes. A video.

03-01:12:55

Cooks: Yeah. So I want to go through some of these other awards and honors because they're significant. Thirteen honorary doctoral degrees. University of Maryland Presidents Medal in 1997. The National Humanities Medal you were given by President Bill Clinton in 2000.

- 03-01:13:18
Driskell: In December 2000.
- 03-01:13:21
Cooks: Would you say something about that moment? When you found out about it, or the moment where he puts this ribbon around your neck with the medal on it. Who did you bring with you?
- 03-01:13:33
Driskell: I was allowed to write to ten people. I invited my family plus our lawyer, Attorney Larry Frazier. My sister Jean was alive then. I think Mr. Frazier was the only person outside of the family invited.
- 03-01:14:03
Cooks: But he's a friend.
- 03-01:14:05
Driskell: Yes, he is a friend. Each recipient was allowed to bring at least ten people free. That was my little entourage. At that time, Daphne, my youngest daughter who works with me, brought her youngest child perhaps six or eight years old. We have a picture of her with Mrs. Clinton hugging her, Gabriell.
- It was an interesting moment standing there having the President hang that medal around my neck. It was at Constitution Hall. The day before we had been at the White House for a ceremony. It was an interesting group that year.
- 03-01:15:03
Cooks: Who was it?
- 03-01:15:06
Driskell: Quincy Jones.
- 03-01:15:06
Cooks: Oh. Did you know him already?
- 03-01:15:08
Driskell: Oh yeah, of course I knew him from the 1970s.
- 03-01:15:09
Cooks: See? How did I know?
- 03-01:15:10
Driskell: I have a record cover I did with Quincy. What was it called? It was the Fisk student jazz ensemble in the seventies, and Terry Adkins is playing in the Orchestrated Crowd.
- 03-01:15:27
Cooks: No, I have to get this. Okay.
- 03-01:15:29
Driskell: I did the cover and I did the lyrics for one of the songs called "Eye of the Storm."

- 03-01:15:34
Cooks: David.
- 03-01:15:35
Driskell: Well, I shouldn't be telling all of this.
- 03-01:15:37
Cooks: Come on! No, I want to hear everything. So the Fisk singers? Or was a jazz ensemble?
- 03-01:15:44
Driskell: The jazz ensemble. I have known Quincy from way back. I occasionally saw him at concerts when I was working with Bill Cosby.
- 03-01:16:07
Cooks: We were talking about the other people that were getting the medal.
- 03-01:16:10
Driskell: Oh yes, other people, yes. Quincy. Maya Angelou. Tony Morrison.
- 03-01:16:14
Cooks: Oh. Who you knew, of course.
- 03-01:16:16
Driskell: Yes. I didn't know Barbra Streisand, but she was a recipient.
- 03-01:16:23
Cooks: And you got to talk with her and meet with—yeah.
- 03-01:16:24
Driskell: Yes. So her family was next to ours at the White House in the viewing area.
- 03-01:16:34
Cooks: That's a good group. Those are the people you remember.
- 03-01:16:39
Driskell: People that I didn't even know, like Chet Atkins [also got an award, Chuck Close, the artist, etcetera].
- 03-01:16:43
Cooks: Really?
- 03-01:16:43
Driskell: Country music and so forth. The violinist.
- 03-01:16:55
Tewes: Yo-Yo Ma?
- 03-01:16:57
Cooks: He played the cello.
- 03-01:16:59
Cooks: Cello. You were using this? You mean violin?

- 03-01:17:01
Driskell: Yes. He has an arm, one of the arms slightly—
- 03-01:17:12
Cooks: Okay. We'll look it up.
- 03-01:17:14
Driskell: Itzhak Perlman.
- 03-01:17:15
Cooks: Oh, Itzhak Perlman.
- 03-01:17:18
Driskell: Toni Morrison.
- 03-01:17:19
Cooks: Right. So Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison and you and Barbra Streisand and Quincy Jones?
- 03-01:17:28
Driskell: Mm-hmm.
- 03-01:17:28
Cooks: All in one room, okay.
- 03-01:17:32
Driskell: It was an interesting group that year.
- 03-01:17:37
Cooks: That's amazing. So that was an interesting moment.
- 03-01:17:41
Driskell: Yes. It was an interesting moment and a very, very interesting moment. They chose for the local musicians, which I thought was really interesting, the trombone band of the [United] House of Prayer [for All People], Daddy Grace's group.
- 03-01:18:07
Cooks: What?
- 03-01:18:07
Driskell: There's about sixteen of these trombone people. It was amazing, it was fabulous.
- 03-01:18:15
Cooks: Wow. I didn't know there was any continuance of Daddy Grace's.
- 03-01:18:20
Driskell: Oh yes. There's a great tradition there, and community people don't always know about it. It's more visual and more audible than the Father Divine group, you know, which you hear a lot about. But it was quite a celebration.

- 03-01:18:45
Cooks: Wow, okay. Lifetime Legacy Award from Skowhegan in 2016.
- 03-01:18:54
Driskell: That one was unexpected. I was told that no other individual in the history of the institution had been a participant student, lecturer, faculty, governor, trustee, and advisor, as I. They created that award especially for me and they said they would never give it again.
- 03-01:19:26
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:19:26
Driskell: Because no one had been in that capacity.
- 03-01:19:30
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:19:28
Driskell: So this year, for example, I am presenting an award to one of the highest patrons they've ever had at the Skowhegan School.
- 03-01:19:42
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:19:43
Driskell: —at the gala on the twenty-third of April. And then I'm going to leave there and the next day we head out down to Atlanta for the Driskell Prize.
- 03-01:19:51
Cooks: Yes. We want to talk about that, too. What I want to ask you before that is about being elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences just last year, 2018. Tell us about that. What do these mean?
- 03-01:20:06
Driskell: Well, that's supposedly the crème-de-la-crème, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- 03-01:20:07
Cooks: It is. That's what I've been told.
- 03-01:20:11
Driskell: I am busy telling everybody President Obama was in the class of 2018 with me. Thelma Golden, Rick Powell, President Obama. [laughs] All members of my class.
- 03-01:20:24
Cooks: Was it another situation where there was an event where you were all in the same room?

- 03-01:20:28
Driskell: At Harvard they have this ceremony every year where those who already are a members of the Academy come. Presiding at that event was the actor—I'm pronouncing his name incorrectly—John Lithgow.
- 03-01:20:49
Cooks: Lithgow.
- 03-01:20:50
Driskell: Lithgow.
- 03-01:20:50
Cooks: John Lithgow.
- 03-01:20:50
Driskell: Yes. He was the presenter.
- 03-01:20:54
Cooks: Yeah. He's an alumni, I think.
- 03-01:20:55
Driskell: Oh, perhaps so.
- 03-01:20:56
Cooks: Maybe.
- 03-01:20:57
Driskell: Okay.
- 03-01:20:58
Cooks: Okay, wow.
- 03-01:20:58
Driskell: Well, prior to that, however, I was elected a fellow of the National Academy of Art in 2007.
- 03-01:21:11
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:21:11
Driskell: But the American Academy of Arts and Sciences oldest such honorary society in the United States, founded in 1780 by John Quincy Adams and others. I don't think they envisioned my being inducted.
- 03-01:21:34
Cooks: [laughs] That whole crowd. Yeah. Probably rolled over.
- 03-01:21:38
Driskell: Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and all of them were members.
- 03-01:21:41
Cooks: Yeah, okay.

03-01:21:42

Driskell: I think about it. My dad said, "No, I refuse to be George Washington Driskell because he didn't free his slaves." [laughs] He was Rev. G.W. Driskell.

03-01:21:50

Cooks: Right, right. Well, yeah. Tides have turned.

03-01:21:55

Driskell: James Bowdoin, who was the founder of Bowdoin College, was the first president of the Academy.

03-01:22:01

Cooks: Oh.

03-01:22:02

Driskell: Bowdoin is one of the institutions that gave me an honorary degree.

03-01:22:07

Cooks: Wow.

03-01:22:08

Driskell: I taught at Bowdoin one semester in 1973. That was an interesting experience, mainly because they had never had a course in African American art history. In the course that year, were young men who became major collectors of African American art, Alvin Hall and Kenneth Chenault, who is kind enough to say, "I wouldn't be a collector today had I not taken your class." Jeffrey Canada, who founded that big school in Harlem, Harlem Zone, took the class.

03-01:23:00

Cooks: I see. Wow.

03-01:23:03

Driskell: But I have the relationship with Maine that's very interesting.

03-01:23:06

Cooks: Right. That was one of—

03-01:23:07

Driskell: Colby and Bowdoin. They all claim me. [laughs]

03-01:23:13

Cooks: North Carolina claims you as the prodigal son, also. Yeah.

03-01:23:19

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:23:21

Cooks: So let's talk about two of the prizes that you've established. I will say that I was the first person to receive the James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award in African American Art History.

03-01:23:39

Driskell: Yes, you were.

03-01:23:39

Cooks: So thank you very much for that. I make sure that people read that whenever I'm introduced at different events, so that was very meaningful for me.

03-01:23:50

Driskell: We had the fifth this year. We don't give it every year, and it's really based on what we consider the very, very top scholarship. This year Wil Haygood was given the award.

03-01:24:05

Cooks: Yes. I got an email about that, that Wil Haygood was—

03-01:24:08

Driskell: Yes. But his book, *I, Too, Sing America: [The Harlem Renaissance at 100]* and so forth on the Harlem Renaissance has made a major contribution to the field.

03-01:24:14

Cooks: Top notch.

03-01:24:15

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:24:16

Cooks: Okay. I think even establishing that award helps to bring attention to field so that it's about, of course, art history and American art history, but that there are scholars that are really trying to follow the lead of many people—of course including yourself—who have been writing to establish a particular kind of focus that needs to be on people's minds, right, as we look forward. There's also the Driskell Prize at the High Museum of Art established in 2005.

03-01:24:59

Driskell: Right.

03-01:25:00

Cooks: We wanted you to talk about why this was important for you to establish, and also what's the connection between you and the High and thinking about Atlanta as part of your geography.

03-01:25:15

Driskell: I had to search for it at first, but after they convinced me I said, "Oh, that makes sense." I was born in Georgia. The High Museum, being a Southern museum had a record of—its past history was not glorious in the sense of race relations.

03-01:25:38

Cooks: Sure.

03-01:25:40

Driskell:

Artist Hale Woodruff did a lot to help move things forward, but that wasn't enough. I think it was interesting to know that when *Two Centuries* came along two Southern museums showed *Two Centuries*, as well as LA and the Brooklyn Museum: the High Museum, 1977, and the Dallas Museum [of Art]. There was, let's say, an element of interest there from the point of view of moving upwards and out from that old definition of *the South*, I think, in many ways. And so, by the year 2000 there were several African Americans on the board of trustees at the High Museum, one of whom was one of my former students: a gentleman by the name of Ed Brown. Ed Brown was an activist in the Civil Rights movement, he was one of my students at Howard. He was in that class with Jessye Norman and Howard Wheeler.

03-01:26:55

Cooks:

Stokely [Carmichael].

03-01:26:55

Driskell:

—Stokely and Mary O'Neal and Mary Lovelace and Lou Stovall were in the class, Sylvia Snowden also. Ed kept his hands in the art as an African art dealer. He had a joint dealership with a gentleman in New Orleans at one time. But when he moved to Atlanta he let go, but he still had this great interest in the arts. His brother was H. Rap Brown.

03-01:27:29

Cooks:

Right. H. Rap Brown.

03-01:27:31

Driskell:

H. Rap Brown. Two totally different personalities in the sense of their cultural aspirations. Let's leave it at that.

So, Ed, being on the board of trustees, remembered our cordial and interesting relationship. Hadn't been in touch with me for a long time. I had been to Atlanta to lecture and he and his wife came. He said to me, "You know, we ought to be doing something to celebrate you and all you have done." I said, "Oh, well, celebrate." He said, "Well, you were born in Georgia, Eatonton, Georgia." Usually people don't know about Eatonton, "Why do I know about Eatonton?" I always say, "Well, you know about Eatonton because Alice Walker was born there."

03-01:28:30

Cooks:

Yes.

03-01:28:31

Driskell:

I usually say, "But I was born there before Alice Walker was." Also, there was Dr. Richard Long, who had always been an advocate for the arts. He and Ed Brown got together just as Michael Shapiro was becoming the new director. Michael listened, and said, "Who's this guy? I've never heard of him. He's great I want to meet him."

03-01:29:06

Cooks: Okay, good attitude.

03-01:29:07

Driskell: Yes. Ed brought Michael up to meet me, sitting right over there pretty much where you're sitting now. Michael was like, "Wow, you did this? You did that?" And he looked around and he saw art. At that time I had another Bearden up. I had up the *Morning*, the one that's in the Driskell Collection. I think it's on the cover of *Narratives [of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection]*.

03-01:29:35

Cooks: Yes.

03-01:29:36

Driskell: Yes, on the cover of *Narratives*. Of course, Michael was very impressed by the Catletts. He said, "Wow, you're a collector." I said, "No, I'm not a collector. I just happen to have some things." They had heard about the Driskell Center being in the making. There was talk out there about it. This was 2000 at that time. We'd had the first celebration for the Center in 1998 but it wasn't operating per se, so they wanted to know about that and what aims were. Ed said, "Well, I think we ought to think about something that nobody else is doing, and what about a prize in African American art?" Michael, I think, was a little leery of that because it was like, "Oh, we're going to have a prize in black art?"

03-01:30:45

Cooks: I see.

03-01:30:47

Driskell: Okay. But then I think Ed said, "No, it's not a prize in black art. It's a prize in American art, but we're going to honor those people who have been champions of the field, especially the young artists and scholars." He said, "We won't tie it to race. Whoever's defining the field, whoever's doing something, let's—" It turns out that many of the young scholars have been African American. [laughs]

03-01:31:24

Cooks: But it's about the subject matter; it's not about the identity of the recipient, right?

03-01:31:29

Driskell: Right, right. Ed was the one who said, "No, we don't want to try and redo the thing for established artists. Let's do emerging artists." Probably the only one that's beyond emerging that's got an award would be your friend in California.

03-01:31:57

Cooks: Well, there's Naima [Keith]. Is that—no, she's still—an artist?

- 03-01:32:00
Driskell: An artist.
- 03-01:32:03
Cooks: A man or a woman?
- 03-01:32:04
Driskell: A man.
- 03-01:32:05
Cooks: Who are we thinking about? I don't want to call any names and get it wrong.
- 03-01:32:11
Driskell: Okay. You'll know.
- 03-01:32:12
Cooks: We'll figure it out. Okay.
- 03-01:32:14
Driskell: Big, big, big. When I went to the Tate I saw a painting this size.
- 03-01:32:19
Cooks: Kehinde?
- 03-01:32:20
Driskell: Huh?
- 03-01:32:21
Cooks: Were you thinking of Kehinde Wiley?
- 03-01:32:24
Driskell: No.
- 03-01:32:24
Cooks: No, all right. I don't want to say.
- 03-01:32:28
Driskell: I think Kehinde would be beyond that category of emerging.
- 03-01:32:33
Cooks: Well, at this point, yeah.
- 03-01:32:34
Driskell: And this individual—you will find him—but has an emerging spirit still because his talk was just fabulous.
- 03-01:32:42
Cooks: Mark Bradford. I got it? Okay.
- 03-01:32:47
Driskell: They had a brunch after the dinner the next morning. Somebody said to him, "All the money you make, you would take a \$25,000 prize?" He said, "No, no. You don't understand. I'm here because I'm standing on the shoulders of

people like David Driskell." He said, "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the David Driskells of the world." He gave a lecture on that subject. You know, he's so great with his talking.

03-01:33:20

Cooks: He is.

03-01:33:21

Driskell: I don't want to say articulate because—

03-01:32:23

Cooks: Right, it's a loaded word. But he is very—

03-01:32:25

Driskell: It's very loaded.

03-01:32:26

Cooks: —clear.

03-01:32:27

Driskell: He's very clear.

03-01:32:28

Cooks: And thoughtful.

03-01:32:28

Driskell: And thoughtful and concise.

03-01:32:28

Cooks: And precise. Yes, good, okay.

03-01:33:30

Driskell: And so when he finished explaining to her, "Oh, oh, okay."

03-01:33:35

Cooks: Right, it's also not about the money.

03-01:33:38

Driskell: No, it wasn't about the money.

03-01:33:39

Cooks: This isn't money for people to live on.

03-01:33:42

Driskell: Lyle Ashton Harris said, "I will be able to do such and such a thing with this because this is big money for me."

03-01:33:50

Cooks: Yes, it is.

03-01:33:41

Driskell: Now, to Mark it wasn't big money.

- 03-01:33:53
Cooks: But he will do something with that money to help.
- 03-01:33:54
Driskell: He will do something with it.
- 03-01:33:56
Cooks: He has Art in Practice.
- 03-01:33:55
Driskell: He'll put it back into those kids he brings along in L.A.
- 03-01:33:59
Cooks: That's right.
- 03-01:34:01
Driskell: —into his program. I had no problem with it, but I don't have anything to do with who gets the prize. They don't consult me. They call me up and say, "We've given the prize to so and so." "That's fine." Because I don't want anybody to come to me saying, "Oh, I could have, should have." Of course, they do that anyway. "When am I going to get the prize?" I want to say, "Never." [laughs]
- 03-01:34:25
Cooks: [laughs] And then all you have to do is show up with Thelma.
- 03-01:34:29
Driskell: Yeah.
- 03-01:34:32
Cooks: And have a glass of champagne and enjoy the event. Yeah, that's nice.
- 03-01:34:37
Driskell: We've been very pleased to be a part of that and to see people's careers take off even more having had that experience.
- 03-01:34:54
Cooks: So we're coming to the end of our time together, so I have a few more questions. We talked about some of this. I was thinking the most current show, the one that just opened two days ago. I think you've talked a little bit about that already and then looking forward to the bigger retrospective.
- 03-01:35:20
Driskell: About what now?
- 03-01:35:22
Cooks: The *Resonance Show* at DC Moore [*Resonance: Paintings, 1965-2002*].
- 03-01:35:24
Driskell: Oh yeah, mm-hmm.

03-01:35:27

Cooks: Recently you contributed to the catalog for *Soul of a Nation*.

03-01:35:33

Driskell: Yes.

03-01:35:33

Cooks: And you had work included in one of the iterations of the exhibition in Brooklyn. So you're still making work, of course, and then your art is still being shown in different contexts and you're still writing. Again, we're talking about aging and the evolution, but you haven't slowed down so this doesn't really—it's hard to apply some of these questions to you because you seem to be consistently busy in one way or another—but are there new directions in your work or are there maybe even things that are inspiring you? It doesn't have to be something new but something that is inspiring to you.

03-01:36:27

Driskell: I'm still searching, I'm trying to find new ways of expression. Not necessarily new approaches but new ways of expressing myself. It isn't easy when you're eighty-eight years old because you've gone through a lot, so sometimes one has to look back and try and reconnect and say, "Did I exhaust this form? Do I need to return to it? How can I build on something that I just barely touched upon thirty years ago?"

03-01:37:01

Cooks: So is there something that you've come up with for yourself?

03-01:37:05

Driskell: I am beginning to see something. It's still in the mind's eye. I have to translate it through causation. One of my students said, "What's that?" [laughs] I said, "That's the rationale, the *raison d'être*. That's how you take it from idea to object, and you've got to take it through all those stages to make it believable." I said, "If you don't take it through all those stages—formal cause, the material cause, the efficient cause, the final cause—that's why critics can't say it ain't no good, because they can look at it and say, 'Don't fit that. Doesn't fit that. Doesn't fit that. What is it?' " So I'm trying to be aware of the fact that just because somebody has celebrated me doesn't mean that I'm there. I've got to keep searching. I've got to keep trying to find that part of me that hasn't been explored and seen yet. Sometimes it may mean going back to something you've done and trying to incorporate the new ideas into the old. I think that's where I am now.

03-01:48:48

Cooks: Okay, that sounds exciting.

03-01:39:54

Driskell: I don't know where I'll be in the next six months in that regard, but I'll be climbing. What does Langston say in *Notes on Commercial Theater*? "Boy, don't you get up," you know. Simply because there's splinters in the floor and so forth and so on. Keep climbing. You know, life ain't been no crystal stair

and it ain't promise to be one. I think we should celebrate life joyously in all its aspects. I think of what else is out there that could have been. [laughs] You could have been a rock, a stone on the beach. And we don't know what the power of that stone is, other than perhaps in building, something like that, but who knows? That stone has been there throughout time. It has seen the earth develop. It has done this and that and so forth and so on. It's been there. So don't play it lightly. But I don't think I would have wanted to be a stone.

03-01:40:34

Cooks:

You've done things that are so demonstrative that we can see that there are still many mysteries to you, but you have been able to meet change in multiple ways that we benefit from.

03-01:40:54

Driskell:

I don't try and celebrate myself, but I try and think about the word legacy—but I try and think about looking back from whence I came and what the road was, why it was this way for me. I have a spiritual fit every time I think of the dreams I had as a kid. Limited books, couldn't go to a library because of my color. I could hear my white friend talking about, "Oh, I read this book and I sailed the world." I couldn't go and get that book and read it. Not because of something I did, but because I was born who I am. Now I have been able to get that book, I have read it, I've benefitted from it. I've traveled the world, and I'm looking back from whence I came. I picked cotton. I was a sharecropper. But importantly, I was a part of the human equation that said there's no limit to what you can be or what you can do. That's what I hope my life will be to others in that regard, that they will say, "Well, if he could do it, look at all of what I have. I can do even better."

03-01:43:05

Cooks:

Thank you, David. I think that's a good place to end.

03-01:43:09

Tewes:

Well, if you don't mind I have a question that I think brings us full circle to what you were just discussing. We've talked a little bit here and there about your gardening efforts.

03-01:43:20

Driskell:

Oh yeah, yeah.

03-01:43:21

Tewes:

I'm interested in how you—you were, quote, a farmer [both laugh]—how you see yourself as a gardener and how that relates to your art.

03-01:43:33

Driskell:

Well, to be gardening is the rudiment of life's sustainability is what gives us our get up and go. Somebody gardens for us if we don't do it ourselves. So ever since we stopped being gatherers and hunters, we gardened. We settled down and said, "This is my plot, and on this plot I will plant my seeds," which incidentally, I had to order my garden seeds because I go to Maine next month

to put the vegetable garden in. So gardening for me is creative; but it's useful, it's functional. It has all of those things which contribute to the good life and that's what we all are in search of. How? Well, one has to have an interest and be inquisitive. How that little mustard seed is going to come up through the ground and become this big flourishing beautiful leaf that you're going to want to consume. What is my role in all of this? My role is to recognize those things out there that I should be consuming and those things that I should not be consuming. If I can do some of it myself, then I am in the process of cleansing my body, helping with all of the diseases that I have—and I have quite a few. What is the song that—is it Yolanda Adams who sings it?

03-01:45:46

Cooks: What's the lyrics? What are the lyrics?

03-01:45:53

Driskell: "I've come through many hard trials, tribulations on every hand?"

03-01:45:56

Cooks: Yeah. That sounds like Yolanda Adams. I'm not sure.

03-01:45:01

Driskell: Maybe Hawkins. I don't know, but it's one of them. It's a gospel song, of course. The test that I think everybody has in life, the living, sustaining one's health, et cetera, and I've tried to look at illness, disease, et cetera, as a part of the test, not something to pull you down. I've had to deal with two forms of cancer at the same time. And I'll tell you a funny story. Well, we probably don't have time for that.

03-01:46:49

Cooks: We have time for a funny story.

03-01:46:51

Tewes: There's always time for a funny story.

03-01:46:52

Driskell: Well, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Obama and the Bushes were there. Then there was a reception at the White House. Some of us went over and we were standing in line and the line was fairly long. Dr. Cole and her husband came by and I said, "Come, get in front." She said, "No, Brother David, you can't do that." I said, "Get in front of me. You're going to be late" so she and J.D. got in front of me. This was February 22, 2012. There had been marvelous performances at the groundbreaking. We were all lined up to get through the check to get into the White House. Dr. Cole is poetic and dramatic and there's so many wonderful things about her you can't describe; she's not one-dimensional in any way. But we're talking about our problems health-wise and she describes what she had been through and I said, "Yes, but I had to deal with two forms of cancer at the same time." She said, "Brother David, do you think the Good Lord would give you something ordinary like the rest of us?"

You are not an ordinary person. Why shouldn't you have two forms of it?" When she finished lectures to me I was like, "Oh, I'm so happy I have two forms of cancer." [laughs]

03-01:48:40

Cooks: [laughs] Wow.

03-01:48:47

Driskell: She said, "You are here and look at you. Who knows it?" I said, "Well, you know it now." [laughs] She said, "No, the Good Lord is not going to put more on you than you can bear." I told my doctor over in Georgetown. He did say to me the last time I was there, he said, "You're approaching eighty-eight years old. We've never had anybody who didn't have to have medication for this particular form of cancer," "Maybe you're going to have to have it. Who knows." I was kind of joking. I called his name and I said, "But I have another doctor." He said, "You do?" I said, "Yes." He was like, "Well, you didn't tell me." He didn't say that but I—I said, "Yes, Dr. Jesus." He looked at me like, "Okay."

03-01:49:55

Cooks: Here we go.

03-01:49:55

Driskell: "Oh, here we go." Anyway—

03-01:50:01

Cooks: That's a good story. Those are both good stories.

03-01:50:05

Driskell: Yeah. But I didn't answer your question. [laughs]

03-01:50:11

Cooks: Well, it was about gardening.

03-01:50:13

Tewes: [laughs] Thinking about gardening and your connection to nature through your art and your childhood.

03-01:50:16

Driskell: It's essential to me. The first thing I do when I go to Maine is I get my hands in the dirt. From dust and dirt thou came, and so dust to dirt thou goest. I've got to be part of that process. I grow all of these lush vegetables and leaves and fruits. And my nephew, Rodney, will come out to the garden. He's afraid of a bee. He'll run down to Whole Foods and spend whole paycheck when he could get—I said, "But this is real organic." He says, "It's not USDA inspected." I said, "Oh, go home, please."

03-01:50:59

Cooks: Oh, that's hilarious. You're a master gardener, right? So a master gardener you have to feed how many people from seed? What's the—

03-01:51:08

Driskell:

They have a formula. I never go by it, but people tell me I am special at gardening. I grow fruits. Most people in Maine don't realize that you can grow peaches in Maine. So I have six peach trees, I have two pear trees, I have apple trees, plum trees. Then we can a lot of our products and bring them back here and eat them for the rest of the year.

So gardening is to me like painting, in a way. It's a part of the process of this creative spirit that I feel so close to. Can't wait to get there and I often go to the garden before I go to the studio.

03-01:52:00

Cooks:

Really?

03-01:52:01

Driskell:

Yeah.

03-01:52:02

Cooks:

And all of those trees have been planted since you bought that land in '61?

03-01:52:07

Driskell:

Yes. I planted those trees and I cultivated the space for the garden. Because the pine trees and other trees are there on their own. The house is surrounded by pine trees

03-01:52:23

Tewes:

Well, that's interesting. Yesterday you mentioned that people were interested in having you become a minister like your father and you said, "Teaching is my ministry." But it sounds like gardening might be, as well.

03-01:52:32

Driskell:

Gardening is a part of my life. It's a part of that kind of spiritual regeneration that comes with the natural process. It isn't for me so much the biblical reference. Like the minister this morning was talking about Palm Sunday and then he said, "Yes, we've got to give out the palms." He said, "I want to preach about the donkey." He talked about the donkey being so absolute and not letting people push it around and stubborn, as we would say, in its orientation. But it has its own will. So then when they passed out the palms he said, "No, no. You can still call it Palm Sunday." He said, "But I hope you want to consider calling it donkey Sunday, too." [laughs]

03-01:53:34

Cooks:

That's cute.

03-01:53:27

Tewes:

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered in all our time together?

03-01:53:40

Driskell:

No. Well, maybe the final say is none of this I could be doing without family. My wife Thelma and I have been married for sixty-seven-plus years. As they say, it hasn't been easy. It's never easy to assume that two becomes one. I had a minister who once said to me—as I was counseling with him about family situations. He said, "Now, let me understand you. You're not thinking that you have to agree on everything all of the time, are you?" I said, "No, but I think there are times when I think there ought to be disagreement." He said, "Well, if by chance you're thinking that you've got to agree on everything all of the time, together at the same time, one of you isn't necessary." [laughs]

03-01:54:59

Cooks:

Wow.

03-01:55:00

Driskell:

That kind of shook me up. Like, Oh. He is no longer with us, but I still think about that. I had a friend also who once said, "You've been married fifty years. Wow. What's it like to be married fifty years?" I said, "Well, I never think of it in those terms." And then I said, jokingly I said, "Well, if we ever agreed on any one thing we'd probably get a divorce." So there's got to be that room for the elastic movement back and forth.

But family for me has been the sustaining power because I haven't had anybody say, "No, don't do that," from my parents to my wife to my children. They've all been very encouraging. Like when I said to Thelma, 1953, "Oh, famous art school in Maine. Have this home studio or something. We'll have to go to Maine. We'll have to have this." There we are living with her mother's home at the time, but thank God there's the dream.

03-01:56:23

Cooks:

Did Thelma agree with you or did she raise an eyebrow?

03-01:56:28

Driskell:

She would raise an eyebrow. She didn't always agree with me, but she'd go along with me most of the time, she didn't fight it. That has been more important than what it's probably been made out to be. "Okay. We'll just go ahead and see." You know, with all these members of the family, "I wouldn't let my husband go out there by himself all the time doing this, doing that." Well, that's narrow thinking because if it's for a good cause one day you'll be able to do it and join in the chorus, so to speak, and those people who are being critical are going to be still sitting where they were years ago.

03-01:57:25

Tewes:

That's a lovely way to think of it.

03-01:57:26

Driskell:

Being critical, that's all.

03-01:57:29

Tewes:

Anything else?

03-01:57:31

Cooks: All right. No, I don't have anything else to ask. Thank you so much.

03-01:57:35

Cooks: Thank you.

03-01:57:35

Driskell: One thing—

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Images



David C. Driskell, *Behold Thy Son*, 1956, oil on canvas
Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Copyright David C. Driskell



David C. Driskell, *Pine Trees at Night*, 2005, collage and mixed media on paper
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery



David C. Driskell, *Mask Watch*, 2005, collage and oil on paper
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery



David C. Driskell, *The Organ #2*, 2005, gouache on paper
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery