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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID C. DRISKELL

by Xavier Nicholas

David C. Driskell was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1931. In 1953, he studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. He received his Bachelor's degree in art from Howard University in 1955 and a Master of Fine Arts from Catholic University of America in 1962. In 1964, he received a fellowship to study at The Netherlands Institute for the History of Art in The Hague. He has taught at a number of historically black colleges and universities, including Talladega College, Fisk University, and Howard University. In 1977, he accepted an appointment at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he taught for twenty-two years. He retired from the University of Maryland in 1998, and he is presently the Distinguished University Professor of Art, Emeritus. In 2001, the University of Maryland established the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora in his honor. His works are in major collections of art museums in the United States and throughout the world. He is the author of several books on African American art, including *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, *William H. Johnson: An American Modern*, and *The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby, Jr.* Professor Driskell is one of the foremost authorities on African American art in the United States and in the world.

This interview was conducted on January 22, 2010, at the Mobile Museum of Art at the exhibition *Successions: Prints by African American Artists from the Collection of Jean and Robert Steele*.

NICHOLAS: It is rare to find a major artist who is also a major art collector. When did you begin to collect art?

DRISKELL: I actually began to collect art when I was a student at Howard University. I won't say all of our teachers were collectors, but certainly Professor James V. Herring, who founded the Howard University Department of Art in 1921, was a collector. His first art graduate was a woman named Alma Thomas, who graduated in 1924. Then Professor Herring later founded the Howard University Art Gallery and the Barnett-Aden Gallery. Professor James A. Porter, a student of Herring who later picked up the mantle from his professor, was certainly a collector. Their philosophy was: "Someday, you're going to be a major artist, and you should start collecting. You buy other artists' work and they will buy yours." I bought a print from Professor James L. Wells when I was a student. I didn't really see myself as a collector as a student, but I amassed quite a few things. Then we were told to collect books, and so I remember buying Lois Mailou Jones's very first book

called *Peintures 1937-1951*, which was published in 1952. It cost thirty dollars, and that was a lot of money to put out at that time. But I bought it, and, of course, Professor Porter's book *Modern Negro Art*, which was published in 1943. I would buy anything I could get my hands on that had any images of black artists in it.

NICHOLAS: When did you attend Howard University?

DRISKELL: I went to Howard in 1949-1950 as a history major, and a year and a half later I just kind of decided that I wanted to have a minor in art. So I went over to the art department to take a course in art. I was in Professor Wells's class one day, and Professor Porter came and looked over my shoulders at my drawings and said, "What is your name?" and I told him. He said, "You're not in art?" and I said, "No." He said, "What is your major?" and I said, "History." He said, "Well, you don't belong over there; you belong here." So I went and changed my major. That's really how I came into art.

NICHOLAS: I've read where you said that Professor Porter was your mentor.

DRISKELL: Indeed. I took a course with Professor Porter in 1952, the year after I came into art. He called the course "Negro Art," and he used his textbook *Modern Negro Art*. I guess I was probably the only student in the United States, maybe in the world, taking a legitimate course in Negro art at that time because it was only taught at Howard. I mean, they would mix a little in here and there in courses. I was his only student that semester. Now he had more students at other times, but you really couldn't get many students to take a course in Negro art; they took Western art. At Professor Porter's memorial in February of 1970, I was asked to speak by his wife, Dorothy, and I mentioned that course. I said, "He taught that course as though he had a hundred students there, and I was the only one." I was so enamored of his scholarship that I almost committed to memory the lineage of history in his book *Modern Negro Art*.

NICHOLAS: What did you do after graduating from Howard University?

DRISKELL: As I mentioned earlier, I changed my major to art at Howard in 1952, and then I was given a scholarship at the Skowhagen School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in the summer of 1953. That was only for summer work, and so I came back to Howard pretty much with the notion that I was going to continue working as a painter. But what happened is that, after I finished my work at Howard in 1955, I went immediately into teaching on the college level at Talladega College, where I helped to develop the curriculum after Professor Claude Clark retired in 1955. I taught at Talladega for seven years, and then I decided to go back to school to get my Master of Fine Arts at Catholic University of America. After I finished the MFA in 1962, I returned to Howard and served as Acting Head of the Department of Art and Director of the Gallery of Art two of the four years I was there. In 1966, I left Howard to go to Fisk University, where I immediately put Professor Porter's course in the curriculum and I taught it. In 1967, I became Chairperson of the Department of Art and Director of the University Art Galleries at Fisk. I left Fisk

in December of 1976 and started teaching at the University of Maryland, College Park, in January of 1977. I taught for a year and a half, and then, in the fall of 1978, I became Chairperson of the Department of Art from 1978 to 1983. They really recruited me with the purpose in mind that I would establish an African American art history component to the curriculum because they had none in the art history program. So I established that first on the bachelor's level and then on the master's level. Then students started saying that they wanted to do a PhD in that area, and so we expanded it. Since the 1980s, we have offered courses and probably produced more scholars in that area than any other school. I retired from teaching at the University of Maryland in 1998.

NICHOLAS: Would you say that, at Howard University, you were trained to collect art?

DRISKELL: Yes, I was trained to collect. My teachers at Howard said, "You must collect," and some of us did. I guess I took it more seriously because I continued collecting. Every place I went, I would look up young artists. I collected not only African American artists, but I collected worldwide. I have, for example, a fairly large collection of nineteenth-century Japanese prints, including artists like Hiroshige and others.

NICHOLAS: In one of Vincent van Gogh's letters to his brother, Theo, he talks about how he has all these Japanese prints pinned on the wall of his studio. You can clearly see the influence of Japanese art in his painting *Bridge in the Rain*, which is actually a copy of one of Hiroshige's woodcut prints. What was it that attracted European artists to Japanese art?

DRISKELL: They were very much taken with the flatness of style and yet the projection. You can see the Japanese influence very much in Matisse, too, and other European modernists.

NICHOLAS: Why did you collect Japanese prints?

DRISKELL: I collected them because I was interested in the difference between Eastern painting and Western painting, Eastern printmaking and Western printmaking. But then I started concentrating on African American art, and I collected people like Bannister. By the time I really understood what was going on, I couldn't afford to collect Tanner. I did collect a print by Tanner. But I was friends of Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, and so I collected their work. With a number of artists, you could exchange works. Romy was such a kind-hearted man that he would give you a work. I would go to his studio in Astoria, Long Island, and he would never let me leave without giving me a gift. He was just like that. I also bought his work from the ACA Galleries in New York. Jake didn't do that. You would always have to go through his dealers. I bought Jake's work from the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in New York that he was associated with for a number of years. I helped the printmaker Lou Stovall and the Workshop people in Washington, DC, make the deal between Jake and the Workshop in printing a silkscreen series based on the *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series, which is now located at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans. I also had a friend in New York, Mary Beatie Brady, who was head of the Harmon Foundation in New York. She helped me collect, and she emphasized the impor-

tance of collecting. She was the first and only director of the Harmon Foundation, which preserved all of those works at the Smithsonian by William H. Johnson and so many other artists. There is a segment of William H. Johnson's works at Tuskegee University that she also donated from the Harmon Foundation. She was like a sponsor in certain ways, even though one didn't have sponsors like the old-time sponsorships. She sent me to Europe for the very first time in 1964.

NICHOLAS: Where did you go in Europe?

DRISKELL: I went first to Greece, and then came all around the panhandle, all the way up to Copenhagen and back down to England. That same summer, I did art history studies in the Netherlands. I was always interested in Rembrandt, and I had gotten a fellowship from the Dutch government in the Netherlands to study at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorisches Documentatie den Haag. The English interpretation is the Netherlands Institute for the Study of the History of Art in The Hague. I spent six weeks there studying Rembrandt's etchings and drawings. I would go to classes during the day, and in the evenings I would get on the train with my Eurail pass and go to Amsterdam to the Rijksbureau where Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and other famous paintings are and stay there until they closed, and then I would go to the Gemeente Museum next door.

NICHOLAS: What, in particular, attracted you to Rembrandt's work?

DRISKELL: Well, I was very much interested in drawing and draftsmanship. I tried to go every place that I knew Rembrandt had gone. I would draw the same scenes that he had drawn. I kept a visual diary. I would draw and write what I was doing. I turned out a lot of drawings, and a number of the drawings are now at the Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park. I would even draw in sepia ink, very much the way Rembrandt did. I studied Rembrandt religiously. I was just fascinated with the proficiency with which he was able to sketch so quickly and get the essence of something. So that was my interest, and that is why I went to Rijksbureau to study because of the Rembrandt specialist and the Vermeer specialist.

NICHOLAS: Speaking of Vermeer, did the Vermeer specialist discuss the controversy surrounding the number of Vermeer paintings that are still in existence, since there have been a number of fakes?

DRISKELL: Yes. I remember the Vermeer class. We were from all over the Western world, but there were a couple of us from the United States. I couldn't speak Dutch, but they all spoke English. The professor said that there weren't any more than twenty to twenty-five paintings by Vermeer in existence. Somebody in the class said, "We have more than that in the United States," and the professor said, "Well, you have fakes." Then somebody asked him, "Who was the person that identified all those Vermeers after the Second World War that turned out to be fakes?" The professor hesitated for a moment, and then he said, "It was I." He told us that when they found this man who had done all these works, they

learned about the process that he had gone through to create these works. The professor told us about how this man would paint them and then put them in the oven and bake the paint so that it would crack a little and look old. It was a perfect formula. So the professor said it took them years before they were able through radiocarbon-14 to figure out that these works were fakes.

NICHOLAS: Were you able to collect any art while you were in Europe?

DRISKELL: I did a little. I collected drawings and prints. No paintings. In 1964, you could still buy wonderful prints in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and London. I still have portfolios of woodcuts by Albert Durer that I collected. I also collected woodcuts from the Nuremberg Chronicle. I had a friend that was the curator of prints and drawings at the Statens Museum in Copenhagen, and I kept saying to her, "Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to find a Rembrandt drawing," and she said, "Oh, forget it. You won't." I went to Copenhagen, and I was walking down a street with some antique shops. It was Kierkegaard—"Kierk" means church in both Dutch and Danish and "gaard" means street. There was a philosopher by that name, Soren Kierkegaard. That name simply means Church Street. So as I was walking down Kierkegaard, I saw this little antique shop and I walked in. There was a little print in the window that I thought was a reproduction. It was a self-portrait of Rembrandt on a windowsill. It was framed and under glass, but I could tell that the ink was raised. I thought to myself, "It couldn't be. It's too good to be true." So I asked the gentleman in the shop if I could take it outside and look at it, and he said, "Sure, sure." I looked at it and I knew it was an etching and I took it back in. I said, "Is it a Rembrandt restrike?" and he said, "No, it's a facsimile." In those days, we used the word facsimile for a very fine reproduction; very often, people would exhibit them. I said, "How much is it?" and he said, "Ten dollars." So, you know, I put on my act and said, "Ten dollars for a reproduction?" and he said, "Well, it's a good facsimile, and I can't let it go for less." So I said, "Okay," and I bought it. I was confident that it was an original, but I went to the museum where my friend was working and I told her, "Well, I found a Rembrandt," and she said, "Oh, no, no, no. But bring it back anyway." So I took it over to her and she took her glass out and she looked at it and said, "My God, this is a better impression than the one that we own." It was further explained to me by the curator of the Dutch and Flemish Painting at the National Gallery that it was a very good impression of Rembrandt's original. I also took it by the British Museum when I was there, and you know how hoity-toity the British people are, and they were like, "We don't do this kind of thing, but if you want to sell it, I'll tell you where to go." Well, I knew it was an original. I had already ascertained that.

NICHOLAS: Have you ever come across a find like that here in the United States?

DRISKELL: Yes. When I was teaching at Howard University in 1962, I went one Saturday to the flea market in Alexandria, Virginia. It was called the Thieves Market. This was before I found the Rembrandt in Copenhagen. I saw this black and white piece, and I thought, "Hmm, that looks like a Matisse." I knew the image. It's called "Nina." I asked the lady how much she wanted for it, and she said, "Two dollars and ninety-eight cents." So I

bought it. It was an original linocut by Henri Matisse. I still have it. So the Rembrandt and the Matisse were my two aces in the hole.

NICHOLAS: As an art collector, would you say that you look at works of art with a different set of eyes than someone who is not an artist?

DRISKELL: Well, I suppose I do only because I have been trained as a visual artist. Now it doesn't mean that my eyes are better than someone who is not a visual artist. I also read, and I still read and praise a book called *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts* by the late Joshua Taylor, who was the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art. In that book, you get help—it's not a formula—along the way. How do you visualize? But I do think that, as an artist, you have maybe a little extrasensory understanding of what it means to visualize things, what it means to interpret them, and what it means to see them in another kind of light.

NICHOLAS: What is your focus as an art collector?

DRISKELL: I like all kinds of art, and I collect all kinds. I collect realism. I collect abstraction. I collect, as I said earlier, Eastern art, African art, and Western art. But my focus is African American art, and part of that is because of the paucity of literature on African American art and the paucity of these works in museums. It is my hope that I can add to the understanding of these forms. I also think you become a guardian or a steward of the culture when you understand the necessity of collecting, when you understand the importance of doing it.