Loïs Mailou Jones, Diasporic Art Practice, and Africa in the 20th Century

by

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Kristine Stiles

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies
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2013
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation, *Loís Mailou Jones, Diasporic Art Practice, and Africa in the 20th Century*, investigates the evolving dialogue between twentieth-century African American artists and Africa—its objects, peoples, diasporas, and topography. The four chapters follow the career of artist Loís Mailou Jones (1905-1998) and focus on periods when ideas about blackness in an African-American context and its connection to Africa were at the forefront of artistic and cultural discourses. Chapter 1 traces African-American artists’ contact with African art during the first decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 examines Jones’s use of Africa in her art produced at the start of her career (1920s-1940s) and repositions her in relation to the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude movements. Chapter 3 considers Jones’s engagements with the African Diaspora via travels to France, the Caribbean, and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, voyages that I argue result in the creation of a Black Diasporic art practice predicated upon the act of viewing. Chapter 4 critiques the signifying grasp of Africa in African American art. By looking at Jones’s turn to pastiche as an aesthetic choice and cultural commentary, the chapter argues that that the possibility of a seamless reconciliation of Africa with African American art is impossible. Where the limited scholarly discourse on the subject has emphasized a heritage-based relationship between Black artists and Africa, this project’s cross-cultural approach is one of the first to consider the relationship between Africa and black artists that goes beyond looking for African retentions in African American culture. In doing so the project also suggests an alternative to the
internationalization of American artists in African, rather than European terms. Moreover, though Jones is broadly cited within African American art history beyond monographic considerations her work has yet to be critically examined particularly in regards to larger debates concerning blackness and the African Diaspora.
Dedication

To Bryce and our ballparks.
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On Defining “Negro Art”: a Note on Terminology

As with any work that deals with race, an explanation of terminology is essential. Part of my intellectual agenda is to demonstrate that the concept of black art, like definitions of Africa and African art, is and has been amorphous. Definitions of African American, black, Afro-Diasporic, and African art shifted throughout the twentieth century and arguably continue to do so in the twenty-first. For the purposes of this study, the term black is applied to all persons of African descent. African American refers to those of African descent residing in North America, whereas Afro-Diasporic refers to those individuals of African descent living elsewhere in the Diaspora (the Caribbean or Europe). I use the term African to delineate those persons who were born and who lived for a time on the African continent. Moreover, I have made every effort to utilize the terms employed by the theorists and artists working at the moments under discussion.
Introduction

In 1991, the Swedish alcohol company Absolut Vodka and the publishers of Black Enterprise magazine commissioned work from sixteen African American artists. These works, which together formed the “Heritage” series, sought to increase appreciation of emerging and established African American artists. The “Heritage” ads followed the convention of the brand’s popular advertising campaign, which is predicated upon the clever pairing of word and image. The now widely collected advertisements include an artistic manipulation of the brand’s bottle, beneath which “ABSOLUT” is paired with a noun or adjective that results in word play.

For the brand’s artist-themed campaigns, which began in 1985 with Andy Warhol and continue to this day, commissioned artists are tasked with recreating the Absolut advertisements using their signature aesthetic. In lieu of a noun following “ABSOLUT,” one finds the artist’s last name. David Philpot’s (b. 1940) “Heritage” series contribution, for example, featured the alcohol bottle on the top of a decoratively carved wooden staff, his medium of choice. At the bottom in large black font one finds ABSOLUT PHILPOT (fig.1). The advertisement sells not only Absolut Vodka, but also Philpot and his identifiable aesthetic.

“ABSOLUT” signifies not only the brand name, but also testifies to the veracity
of the image as being absolutely of the named artist’s hand. All of the
advertisements in the “Heritage” series followed this titling convention with one
notable exception: Loïs Mailou Jones’s (1905-1998) contribution was titled
ABSOLUT HERITAGE (fig. 2).

ABSOLUT HERITAGE is a meditation on the traditional arts of Africa
through the lens of the Diaspora. A Punu mask from Gabon with a stylized
hairstyle and keloid scarification marks appears in profile on the left side. To the
right, the clear glass vodka bottle sits on a Congolese prestige stool with a
caryatid figure. The brand name, in red, is suspended along the side of the
bottle. “Vodka” appears in large black font atop the stool’s seat. A second non-
culturally specific African mask with an elaborate headdress is found in the
background, partially obscured by the glass bottle.

The use of heritage in the title of Jones’s piece has multiple interpretations.
As a noun, heritage refers to notions of inheritance, material property or cultural
traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. As an adjective,
heritage can be used to describe something that is old-fashioned or remains pure

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2 Jones’s contribution was also used in window advertisements with the new caption, ABSOLUT PRIDE.
3 The Punu cultural group live in Gabon. Masks such as the one in ABSLOUT HERITAGE were used to celebrate female beauty. For more on the history of Punu masquerade traditions see: Alisa LaGamma, “The Art of the Punu Mukudji Masquerade: Portrait of an Equatorial Society” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996).
4 Made by cultural groups (Luba, Songye, Hemba) who reside in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, prestige stools are metaphorical seats of power. Many of these cultural groups are matrilineal and lines of succession are traced through maternal lineage. The female caryatids that support the seat reference this tradition and symbolically speak to the role women play both in physically supporting the male king, but also the bonds and allegiances these women create through their marriage and children. See: Sandro Bocola and Ezio Bassani, eds., African Seats (New York: Prestel, 1995)
and not hybridized. Heritage can also be something that belongs to a certain group of people, a birthright or destiny.

Jones’s placement of the contemporary Vodka brand amongst the traditional arts of Africa is an attempt to illustrate that the brand, like these traditional African arts, has stood the test of time and remains “untouched,” or tainted by external influences. Produced for a campaign designed to foster appreciation of African American art, it is noteworthy that ABSOLUT HERITAGE celebrates African art rather than a distinctly African American aesthetic. While on one hand, the work conveys the pride with which many in the African American community viewed their African artistic heritage, on the other the advertisement serves as a commentary on the role of Africa within an African American artistic legacy. In ABSOLUT HERITAGE, Jones posits African art as the inheritance of the twentieth century African American artist.

ABSOLUT HERITAGE elucidates the driving question of this dissertation: namely, what role Africa and conceptions of an African heritage played in the construction of modern African American artistic identity in the twentieth century. Produced near the end of Jones’s lengthy career, the piece also raises questions related to how African-inspired art became Jones’s signature. Why did the company elect to title the work ABSOLUT HERITAGE instead of ABSOLUT JONES? Because the mask in the background of ABSOLUT HERITAGE also appears in the foreground of Jones’s canonical 1938 painting Les Fétiches (fig. 3), this dissertation considers how Jones’s engagement with Africa and the African Diaspora evolved over the course of her career. It also explores what an understanding of Jones’s involvement with Africa and the Diaspora can tell us
about African American artistic mediations of Africa and changing African Diasporic artistic identities.

Born in 1905 into a middle class African American family in Boston, Jones graduated from the Museum School at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1927. After brief stints as a textile designer in Boston and an art instructor in Sedalia, North Carolina, Jones joined the faculty at Howard University in 1930. She remained at Howard for close to forty years until her 1977 retirement. In 1953, Jones married Haitian graphic designer Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël and established a studio in Haiti that she maintained for over twenty years. In addition to her ongoing art practice and career as an art instructor, Jones lectured widely on the African influence in Afro-American artistic production and spent the 1970s engaged in a series of research projects that focused on constructions of the black visual artist in Caribbean, North American, and African contexts.

Jones’s other notable achievements include: a 1973 retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (the first solo show given to an African American female artist at an American museum), a 1980 Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts from President Jimmy Carter, and several honorary degrees from Howard University, Suffolk University, and Massachusetts College of Fine Art, Boston.

This dissertation reveals that Africa took a myriad of forms in Jones’s work—African masks and statuary, meditations on the African Diaspora in the

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5 Jones’s father was the first African American graduate of Suffolk Law School and her mother was a milliner. Tritobia Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1994), 4.
6 For detailed chronology of Jones’s life see: Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones*, 125-129.
Caribbean and United States, abstract design motifs, and portraiture. Moreover, Jones’s many Atlantic crossings from the United States to France, to Haiti and the Caribbean, and to Africa combined to implicate her as a participant in the Black Atlantic. It is Jones’s diverse engagements with ideas about, objects and people from, and actual travels throughout the continent of Africa that enable her and her work to function as a vehicle through which one can study the evolving nexus of Africa, the Diaspora, African American art, and modernism.

Methods and Theoretical Foundations

This study is inherently interdisciplinary and engages with scholarship from art history as well as the fields of Diaspora and Cultural Studies, literature, and anthropology to explore theories of black identity and Africa in twentieth century art. In what follows I am less concerned with demonstrating a cultural link between Africa and African Americans as such research has already been done by the likes of anthropologist Melville Herskovits, art historian Robert Farris Thompson, and others. Scholarship on the relationship of Africa to

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Western art practice tends to deal with the legacy of European “primitivism” and the use of African art by white artists working at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus of use for this study is work by the likes of Patricia Leighten, Mark Antliff, and Marianna Torgovnick who have worked to expand the discourse of “primitivism” beyond the appropriation of non-Western “primitive” objects by those in “civilized” societies and who have discussed how “primitivism” must be considered alongside other binaries related to gender, class, time, and geography.⁹ Within an African American art historical context, scholars have asked questions related to the African presence in and influence on African American art. However, a review of this previous scholarship exposes the dominant trend to consider the African American artist’s use of African aesthetics as part of a call and response between the artist and their perceived ancestral past.¹⁰ Instead, this dissertation focuses on the willful utilization of and search for an African ethos by Jones, which in its various forms and circumstances, takes the shape of African objects, African motifs, African

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¹⁰ See n. 8
peoples, African geographies, and their Diasporic counterparts as part and parcel of her search for an artistic identity.

In the chapters that follow I posit that African American artistic engagements with Africa began with de-contextualized African objects in the first decades of the century, and continued with encounters with Africans and Afro-Diasporic peoples in Europe and the Caribbean during the 1940s and 1950s. Revealingly, these initial engagements and encounters precede any physical contact with the African continent. By the 1960s and 1970s with the wave of colonial independence in Africa, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the United States, and the widespread promotion of Pan-Africanism, Africa takes on yet another powerful form for African American artists during this era linked to demonstrations of political engagement and activism. This dissertation’s focused examination of Jones’s oeuvre elucidates how Jones’s visions of Africa evolved as her knowledge of and experiences with Africa shifted over the course of her career. Importantly, this study considers Jones’s work alongside, and at times reads her work through, the varying cultural and political discourses of black identity that emerge during the twentieth century: among them the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, the Négritude Movement of the 1940s, and the above-mentioned Black Power and Pan-Africanist ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s.

Paul Gilroy’s model of the “Black Atlantic” provides a basic theoretical model for my project. For Gilroy, the African Diaspora is envisioned as a series of interchanges between Africa, the United States, and Europe. These exchanges function as a vehicle through which modernist cultural production can be
analyzed. Brent Hayes Edward’s work on the rise of black internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s as linked to acts of cultural and literary translation provides another theoretical avenue to pursue Jones’s work. Jones not only engages in acts of intercultural exchange, but also of cultural translation with her artistic interpretations of and art historical research on African art. Thus, Jones is not only a figure of the Black Atlantic in Gilroy’s terms, but also a visual interlocutor who, as seen in ABSOLUT HERITAGE and throughout her career, translates Africa into artistic form for American audiences.

The organizing schema of James Clifford’s work on travel and translation in the twentieth century, in which he tries to “make some sense, or senses of people going places,” echoes my own scholarly motivations. I came to Jones’s work after seeing her African themed paintings cited in major art historical texts, yet there was little information given about how she came to “Africa,” why she was best known for her African-themed works, or on the correlation between Africa and modernism. This dissertation aims to “makes sense” of Jones’s artistic, psychic, and physical travels throughout Africa and the African Diaspora in order to more appropriately position (and at times reposition) Jones within the larger canon of American art history and to modernism. In doing so, I argue that


Jones develops a Diasporic art practice that is predicated upon the exploration of
the multifaceted nature of blackness via a compositional trope I term blackness in
triplicate.\(^{14}\)

I am indebted to prior scholarship on Jones by Tritobia Benjamin, Chris
Chapman, Betty LaDuke, and others.\(^{15}\) As with these scholars, I am committed to
a full recovery of Jones’s artistic contributions in the monographic sense, but I
am also interested in incorporating her into larger critical debates concerning
blackness, the African Diaspora, and modernism throughout the twentieth
century. Recent work on African American female artists Edmonia Lewis (1844-
1907) and Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968) by Kristen Pai Buick and Renee Ater,
respectively, are but two examples of how sustained investigations of a singular
artist’s career can illuminate larger theoretical and aesthetic issues.\(^{16}\) Moreover as
studies devoted to African American female artists, Ater and Buick’s projects
articulate the importance of considering not only race, but also questions related
to gender, politics, and class position.

\(^{14}\) Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Multiple Viewpoint: Diaspora and Visual Culture,” in The Visual

\(^{15}\) Benjamin studied with Jones at Howard in late 1960s and early 1970s. She has published the
only extant monograph on Jones’s career. Benjamin, The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones; Chris
Chapman, Loïs Mailou Jones: A Life in Color (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007); Betty LaDuke, Africa
Through the Eyes of Women Artists (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991) and “Loïs Mailou Jones:
the catalogue for Jones’s retrospective organized by the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North
Carolina brought together a series of essays on Jones by Cheryl Finley, Edmund Barry Gaither,
Lowery Stokes Sims, and Tritobia Benjamin. Lois Mailou Jones, Carla M. Hanzal, and Edmund
Barry Gaither, Loïs Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color (Charlotte, NC: Mint Museum of Art,
2009).

\(^{16}\) Kristen Pai Buick, Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History’s Black and
Indian Subject (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Renee Ater, Remaking Race and History:
the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
Jones was born at the start of the twentieth century, the very moment that
determinations of “racial art” were being formulated. As Jacqueline Francis
notes, “The modern origins of racial art emerged from nineteenth-century
Europe and European demands for pure painting and original and individual
expression.”\textsuperscript{17} Definitions of racial art were based upon the perception, as
Francis contends, “that minority artists had atavistic access to such visual
expression...racial art was welcomed as the translation of exotic heritage.”\textsuperscript{18}
Jones died in 1998, three years before Thelma Golden deployed the term “post-
black” to describe the late twentieth century state of black cultural production.
For Golden, “‘post-black’ meaning post the moment of [artists] having to
acknowledge Black as a concept that had to be reacted to.”\textsuperscript{19} Then invoking the
language of heritage and legacy found in Jones’s \textit{ABSOLUT HERITAGE}, Golden
writes “[post-black is] an attitude...It’s a way to understand how a generation
navigated through the history that was their cultural and aesthetic inheritance.”\textsuperscript{20}
These two articulations of “black art,” from the beginning and end of the
twentieth century raise larger questions related to where and when the
discourses of modernism, “authenticity,” Africa, and African American artistic
identity intersect over the course of the twentieth century that are addressed in
the dissertation’s four chapters.

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\textsuperscript{17} Jacqueline Francis, \textit{Making Race: Modernism and “Racial Art in America”} (Seattle: University of
\textsuperscript{18} Francis, \textit{Making Race}, 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 15.
\end{flushright}
Dissertation Structure

The dissertation begins in the years immediately following Jones’s birth, when discussions of Africa enter both art historical and philosophical discourses. With the increased urbanization and use of technology in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, many European avant-garde artists saw the simple lives in societies outside of modernity’s grasp as exemplars of what they viewed as “authentic” living. In their search for pure forms of existence, several of these artists spent time in rural regions of France and Germany. After exhausting unindustrialized European locales, these artists turned to non-Western cultures in Africa and Oceania, which appeared untouched by Western modernity, as paragons of a “primitive” or most natural state of existence. The subsequent appropriation of African art by the European avant-garde, fueled by their search for “authentic” forms of expression, resulted in a radical shift in twentieth century image making in both form and content. Africa and African art, therefore, were responsible for opening up new avenues for authentic artistic expression.

At the very moment that European artists took up African art as the paradigm of “authentic” expression, African American philosopher W. E. B. DuBois (1868-1963) contemplated the role of Africa in constructions of African American identity. DuBois (in his seminal Souls of Black Folk) advanced his theory of double-consciousness, which articulated the plight of the African American

whose identity was irreparably split—she was at the same time both African and American. According to DuBois, African Americans exist in a perpetual state of conflict due to these warring mind-sets and worldviews.\textsuperscript{22} If “authenticity,” in philosophical thought, is the state of living authentically as one’s true self, then DuBois’s theory of double-consciousness suggests that the African American might never be whole and thus able to reveal his or her true self.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, at


the turn of the century Africa and Africanness is both a route to the “authentic” (in the European context) and a potential obstacle to authentic or whole living (in the African American context).

The legacy of primitivism and DuBois’s articulations of African American identity operate as the historical and philosophical precursors of the dissertation’s first chapter, “Points of Contact: African Americans and African Art in America, 1911-1935.” The chapter traces when and where American audiences came in contact with African art at the start of the twentieth century and how African art gets incorporated into discussions of African American artistic identity. The chapter begins by charting how African art went from ethnographic curiosity to art object in American avant-garde gallery exhibitions at the start of the 1910s. With the institutionalization of African art in the 1920s, I elucidate how the exhibition of African art in more widely accessible venues not only increased African American access to African art, but also engendered a nascent art criticism. The chapter concludes with an investigation of Alain Locke’s evolving theories related to African art and its potential influence on African American modernism. By raising questions about how African American artists could have made contact with African art at the start of the twentieth century and Africa’s role in the construction of African American modernism during the interwar period, the chapter serves as a historical foundation for the

second chapter’s exploration of Loïs Mailou Jones’s engagement with African art that began in the early 1920s.

Chapter Two “Loïs Mailou Jones and Africa, 1920-1950” argues that Jones’s engagement with African art began early on in her artistic career, and her understanding of Africa continued to evolve while on the faculty at Howard University in the 1930s and 1940s. Via a close scrutiny of her art and activities during this early phase of her career, the chapter repositions Jones in relation to the Harlem Renaissance and examines her incorporation of the era’s aesthetic sensibilities. After dissecting how Africa manifests itself in Jones’s early works, the chapter’s focus turns to Jones’s portraiture practice and assesses how by the end of the 1930s Jones’s engagement with Africa evolved from depictions of African objects to peoples of African descent. The chapter concludes with a consideration of how Jones’s late 1940s art practice might be read through the emergent discourse of the Négritude movement, which sought to embrace black culture on a global scale and highlight its African roots.

Chapter Three, “Routes to Roots: Loïs Mailou Jones, Travel, and Diasporic Artistic Traditions, 1950-1973,” considers the influence of Jones’s many Diasporic experiences on her understanding of Africa. During this period Jones married Haitian graphic designer Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël and established a studio in Haiti, began research on the black visual artist, which included an investigation of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African artists, and travelled throughout the United States and Europe. Chapter Three asks what form Africa took for African American artists like Jones before they set foot on
the continent and questions how her varied Afro-Diasporic experiences and encounters influenced her artistic production.

Ultimately drawing from James Clifford, I ponder: what were Jones’s routes to her roots? An analysis of the paintings Jones produced in the 1950-1970 period reveals not only the marriage of African and African Diasporic themes on her canvases, but also her preoccupation with picturing the various faces of the African Diaspora. The chapter’s investigation into her pedagogy and research agenda underscores how Jones can be viewed as an interlocutor committed to the visualization of the black Diaspora—its objects, peoples, and traditions. Lastly, I suggest that Jones’s turn to collage during this period speaks to the larger cultural debates concerning the multi-faceted nature of blackness and Africa’s role within its construction at mid-century.

The final chapter, “From Pairs to Pastiche: Black Faces and Black Objects in Loïs Mailou Jones’s Art from 1971-1988,” considers the art Jones produced towards the end of her career. In particular, this chapter explores Jones’s visual responses and aesthetic resolution to her multi-layered African and Afro-Diasporic experiences. The chapter begins by examining Jones’s response to the 1984 “’Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and how the show omitted a discussion of the African influence on modern African American artistic production.24 The chapter then returns to the 1970s and follows Jones as

she travels to Africa in 1972, 1976, and 1977, noting how her growing knowledge of Africa as a continent of individual nation states and aesthetic traditions results in the use of a collage aesthetic. I argue that Jones’s turn to collage during this last period of her career can be read against the larger cultural and political debates concerning the multi-faceted and Afro-centric nature of blackness from the 1970s and 1980s. Ultimately, I claim that Jones’s adaption of pastiche as an aesthetic choice and commentary is connected to her desire to convey the impossibility of a seamless reconciliation of Africa in African American art.

This dissertation’s chronological study of Jones’s life and work is both timely and necessary. When Jones died in 1998 a large number of her art works remained in her personal collection. In the last decade, the trustees of the Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust have donated over sixty pieces of her work to a host of American arts institutions and actively encouraged the continued scholarly engagement with her work. As a result, a new generation of audiences has access to Jones’s art and her legacy. In 2009, the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina organized a retrospective of her work: *Loïs Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color* that continues to travel through the summer of 2013. Most recently

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26 The exhibition opened at the Mint Museum in November of 2009 before traveling to the Polk Museum of Art in Lakeland, Florida, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the Women’s Museum in Dallas, Texas, the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in Laurel, Mississippi, the Mitchell Gallery at St. Johns College in Annapolis, Maryland, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama, the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, California, the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens in Jacksonville, Florida, the Huntsville Museum of Art in
in 2013, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston began its new series of American artist mini-retrospectives with an exhibit of Jones’s work from their collection. This dissertation incorporates many of the newly publicized works and vis-à-vis a combination of formal analysis, archival research, and considerations of historical and social context, I offer a new way of thinking about Jones’s work that enables a repositioning of her work not only in regards to the canon of African American art history, but to twentieth century Western art. Moreover, what begins as an investigation into the aesthetic and artistic elements that make Jones’s work absolutely hers, leads to a more full-scale re-evaluation of how cultural identity has been ascribed to African American artists in the twentieth-century.

Huntsville, Alabama, and lastly the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library.

27 The mini-retrospective was on view in the Bernard and Barbara Stern Shapiro Gallery (Gallery 231) at the Museum Fine Arts, Boston from January 19, 2013 until October 14, 2013.
1. Points of Contact: African Art in America, 1911–1935

Introduction

In May 1929, *Vanity Fair* published a black-and-white cartoon (fig. 4) by Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957). The illustration showed a well-dressed black couple looking at an African female figurine displayed on a labeled plinth.1 “To Hold, as t’were the Mirror Up to Nature” appears in large font at the bottom of the illustration. The caption beneath the couple’s feet reads: “GENTLEMAN, for the first time viewing a work of African sculpture: ‘What sort of a woman is that?’” The cartoon captures a point of contact, namely the moment when a young black man and his female companion first encounter a piece of African art. The man’s quizzical response, wide eyes, and open mouth signal his unfamiliarity with the African object. While his female companion is silent, her physical features suggest a biological connection to the figurine. Her pronounced forehead augmented by her cloche cap, along with her elongated lips and her angular chin resemble the carved features of the African female statue that stands in front of her.

The large-font quotation along the bottom comes from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when Hamlet urges his actors to perform authentically as if they are

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“holding a mirror up to nature.”² The caption’s mirror metaphor is rife with interpretation. For Hamlet, the theatrical stage is where audience members see the reflection of their morals. The stage is a mirror to real-life. In the Covarrubias illustration, the museum gallery becomes Hamlet’s stage and the African American couple and the African sculpture are the actors. Following Shakespeare, the shock of the couple reflects the reality that at the end of the 1920s African Americans were unfamiliar with and unsure as to what to make of African art, despite any perceived biological connection between the two cultural groups. Conversely, one can interpret the quote literally and read the African figurine as a mirrored reflection of the African American woman and, by extension, the larger African American community of which she is part. In this reading, African art becomes an extension of the black body (African, Afro-Diasporic, or African American).

Closer examination of the image reveals that the African figurine is not completely inanimate—Covarrubias accented its eye socket with white and punctuated it with an iris. With its “eyes,” the statuette’s pose takes on new meaning. Its jutting chin, hands on hips, and squared shoulders seem to respond to its African American viewer, “What do you think you are looking at?” Thus, two sets of black bodies—separated by geographic, temporal, material, and cultural boundaries—engage in an act of looking in which both seem unsure of what to make of the other. The cartoon raises critical questions related to American and specifically African American knowledge of African art in the first

² Shakespeare, Hamlet, 3.2.17-24.
decades of the twentieth century that this chapter seeks to answer.

In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford addresses the manner in which exhibition spaces, such as the one depicted in the Covarrubias image, function as contact zones. He borrows this concept from Mary Louise Pratt, who defines a contact zone as a “space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations.” Whereas Pratt’s contact zones are theorized in terms of European expansion, Clifford suggests that the contact zone be “extended to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city . . . [where the] distances at issue are more social than geographic.” I expand Clifford’s concept to include race, both in its biological and cultural constructions. The contact zone is the physical, psychic, or printed space in which African Americans are put into direct contact with cultural objects produced by others of African descent. For my purposes, contact zones are spaces in which people who are of the same race, but different cultures, meet. The *Vanity Fair* cartoon is one example of this scenario.

In this chapter, I explore the points of contact between African Americans and African art in four ways. First, I analyze the small number of exhibitions of African art (i.e., where the objects were displayed as art rather than ethnographic objects) that were accessible both to black and white American audiences in the

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3 Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
5 Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” 204.
first three decades of the twentieth century. Second, whereas recent scholarship (e.g., Christa Clarke and Kathleen Berzock’s edited volume, Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display) considers collections found in designated art museums, I enlarge the scope of this discussion to other public spaces or spheres in which African Americans would have had access to African art—at galleries, libraries, and universities, and in print. Third, I build on museum studies literature in which the display site is treated as a “lens for understanding the shifting visions of African art.” My analysis reveals that in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, evolving perceptions of African art transformed these objects from ethnographic curiosities to foundational pieces of African American cultural heritage and modernism. Fourth, I consider cultural theorist and Howard University professor Alain Locke’s nascent critical discourse about African and African American art. Because much has been written elsewhere on Locke’s critical writing, I pay particular attention to the way he invokes the language of authenticity in his prescriptions for African and African American art. In doing so, I question the role exhibitions of African art

7 Berzock and Clarke, 3.
8 Locke was a prolific writer who at times contradicted himself, which makes it difficult to locate him intellectually. His work has been the subject of many books and articles. For Locke’s biography see: Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For a discussion of Locke’s contributions to art criticism see: Mary Ann Calo, Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-1940 (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007); Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of his Works on Art and Culture (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998); and Leonard Harris, ed., The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race, and Education (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). On Locke’s philosophical thought see: Russell J. Linneman, ed., Alain Locke: Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,
played for African American visual artists, specifically painters and sculptors, in their embrace of Locke’s call to incorporate African motifs into their work. I argue that, within this period, African aesthetics worked to distinguish and differentiate African American visual production from mainstream American art at a time when distinctiveness and uniqueness were actively being cultivated in service of both racialist and nationalist agendas. Thus, it is during the start of the twentieth century that African art, African American art, and Locke’s African American art criticism become inextricably linked, as part of a larger process to visualize blackness as well as to establish the modernism of African American artists.

Enter the New Negro

The dandified African American couple in the Covarrubias cartoon embodied the “New Negro” figure that emerged in the 1920s.² Howard University professor Alain Locke articulated this nascent “type” in the first essay

² The onset of World War I in 1914 (1917 for the United States) and the substantial need for unskilled labor in U.S. factories that were producing war materials served as a catalyst for this transformation. Southern blacks abandoned the racism and poverty of the South for Northern industrial cities where they significantly increased the black middle class populations. Recent scholarship has begun to tease out the subtle differences between the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance, both in terms of expanding the geographic and temporal scope of the Harlem Renaissance and black modernism and by suggesting that the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance are not synonymous. In fact, the Harlem Renaissance as a movement was not unique to Manhattan or even the United States; in expanded geographic terms it can be viewed as having included activities in France, Mexico, and elsewhere. See: Davarian Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jeffrey Ogbar, The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); and Martha Nadell, Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
of his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.\(^{10}\) The “New Negro” replaced the trope of the “Old Negro.” The “Old Negro” was uncultured and uncouth—embodied by the “uncles, mammaies, and chillun’ [who] dressed, talked, behaved, and thought in ways that lacked the kind of sophistication and refinement generally attributed to Anglo America.”\(^{11}\) In comparison, the “New Negro” was urban, sophisticated, smooth, and sleek.

Locke’s foundational essay on the “New Negro” was followed by a series of treatises on “Negro” art and culture that began with “Negro Art and America,” by the white Philadelphia-based art collector Albert C. Barnes.\(^{12}\) Locke later expanded Barnes’ thoughts the “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in which Locke called upon African American artists to explore their African heritage in pursuit of a truly African American artistic tradition.\(^{13}\) Locke’s argument that African art was the key to African American artistic success was linked to the acclaim European modernists received for their appropriations of African art at the turn of the century. In Locke’s eyes, because Africa was part of the African American’s cultural heritage, African American appropriation of African aesthetics was appropriate.

Although much attention has been paid to African American artistic production from the 1920s and 1930s, few efforts have been made to document or

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trace where the African American population, and particularly the African
American visual artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance, made contact
with African art.  

The Hampton Institute Museum

It is noteworthy that the first contact zone for African Americans and
African art was at a Southern university before the start of the twentieth century.
Founded in 1868 in Hampton, Virginia, Hampton University is one of the oldest
historically black colleges and universities in the United States. General Samuel
Chapman Armstrong, the school’s founder, established the school’s museum in
its inaugural year. In 1873, the school initiated an African Studies program that
saw the accession of a few African cultural objects into the museum collection.

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14 The exception is the unpublished yet widely cited dissertation by Helen Shannon, who looked
at early displays of African art and their relationship to African American modernism. See: Helen
Shannon, “From “African Savages” to “Ancestral Legacy”: Race and Cultural Nationalism in the
American Modernist Reception of African Art” (PhD diss. Columbia University, 1999). Berzock
and Clarke’s edited volume on African art in American art museums focuses on the art museum
to the exclusion of other venues or exhibition spaces; neither do the editors include information
about possible engagement between the African American communities and the collections they
discuss. Bridget R. Cooks’s recent work on African Americans and the American art museum
hones in only on the art museum space. Although Cooks is interested in charting when and how
African American art entered the American art museum, she does not discuss African art
collections and omits the Harlem Renaissance. See: Bickford Berzock and Clarke, Representing
Africa in American Art Museums and Bridget R. Cooks, Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and
the American Art Museum (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).
15 Its original name was Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. For more on the history of
the Hampton Institute see: B.N. Puryear, Hampton Institute: a Pictorial Review of its First Century,
1868-1968 (Hampton, VA: Prestige Press) and Robert Francis Engs, Educating the Disenfranchised
and Disinherited: Samuel Chapman Armstrong and the Hampton Institute: 1839-1893 (Knoxville:
University of Tennessee, 1999)
16 General Samuel Chapman Armstrong seeded the museum collection with objects sent to him
from Hawai’i by his mother and quickly expanded it to areas beyond the Pacific. Jeanne Zeidler,
“Hampton University Museum,” in To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black
Colleges and Universities, ed. Richard Powell and Jock Reynolds (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery
of American Art, 1999), 22.
17 Mary Lou Hultgren, “Roots and Limbs: The African Art Collection at Hampton University
Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 44.
Although these African objects were first housed in a “Curiosity Room” rather than in an art gallery, the museum’s collection of non-Western objects formed a critical piece of Hampton’s pedagogy.\(^{18}\)

In 1911, the school’s African collection was substantially increased by the acquisition of the William H. Sheppard Collection, which included approximately 500 objects. Sheppard, a Hampton alumnus, collected the pieces between 1890 and 1910 when he was a missionary in the Kuba kingdom (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).\(^{19}\) Not only was this the first documented collection of African objects organized by an African American,\(^{20}\) the pieces Sheppard collected were of tremendous significance because Sheppard was the first reported Westerner (of any race) to enter the kingdom and gain an audience with its ruler, Kot aMbweeky.\(^{21}\)

Located in the segregated South, the Hampton Museum was, according to museum curator Cora Mae Folsom, the only Southern museum open to African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1920, Folsom described Hampton’s African collection as “inspiring—helpful not only at Hampton, but to students of African ethno-logy in other places, and to artists in search of the new

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See also: Mary Lou Hultgren and Jeanne Zeidler, *A Taste for the Beautiful: Zairian Art from the Hampton University Museum* (Hampton, VA: Hampton University Museum, 1993).

\(^{18}\) Chapman’s mother was originally responsible for housing this collection of non-Western objects.

\(^{19}\) Zeidler, 22.

\(^{20}\) Hultgren, 45.

\(^{21}\) Sheppard was able to gain access to the Kuba kingdom in part due to his fluency in the Kuba language, which caused the ruler to view him not as an outsider but as a “reincarnation of a member of the royal family.” Hultgren, 46.
designs and suggestions.” Thus, the Hampton Museum was one of the first contact zones in which African Americans engaged with African art for both instructional and aesthetic purposes.

When the African objects at Hampton were first accessioned they were displayed as ethnographic specimens. However, Folsom’s comments indicate that by 1920 these African objects were also appreciated aesthetically (possibly even as art). In 1920, the classification of African objects as art was a relatively new development. It was only in 1914, three years after Hampton’s purchase of the Sheppard collection, that African objects were first put on view as art, rather than ethnographic objects in New York City.

291: African Art as Art

In November 1914, art dealer and photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) mounted the exhibit Statuary in Wood by African Savages—The Root of Modern Art with the help of the Mexican artist and writer Marius de Zayas (1880–1961). Although the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan

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displayed African art in its African ethnology hall, the Stieglitz show held at 291, his downtown Fifth Avenue gallery, was the first exhibit of African objects in a designated art space in the United States. Art historians have placed additional significance on this show because it was mounted at a time when American art museums were not actively collecting African art. While the African creators were referred to pejoratively as “savages,” the exhibit’s subtitle “the root of Modern art” conveyed that African art was the root system from which modern art had sprouted.

Stieglitz’s curatorial vision was crucial in facilitating the public’s acceptance of African objects as art. The spatial organization of the 291 exhibition, evinced by an installation photograph (fig. 5) published in the October 1916 issue of Stieglitz’s journal Camera Work, illustrates how Stieglitz did not crowd the gallery space, which enabled visitors to appreciate each work on an individual basis. This display strategy stood in contrast to the approach taken by ethnographic museums that operated under the premise of quantity over quality and often displayed objects in crowded vitrines. In these situations,


the objects were celebrated for their type or supposed function rather than their aesthetic value.  

At 291, Stieglitz and his colleague Edward Steichen (1879–1973) displayed some of the African objects on sculptural plinths that encouraged their individual consideration. On the walls a mix of overlapping and multi-colored geometric squares framed the hanging masks. This shift in display tactic allowed visitors to the 291 show to see African art displayed in the same manner as Modern art, thus encouraging viewers to look at African art with the same eye that they used when evaluating Western painting and sculpture.

In the catalogue for the exhibition, de Zayas spoke of the relationship between African art and vision or new ways of seeing when he wrote: “Negro art has had thus a direct influence on our comprehension of form, teaching us to see and feel its purely expressive side and opening our eyes to a new world of plastic sensations.” Implicit within de Zayas’s argument was the need for contact with African art.

The 291 show came several years after the European modernists had begun to appropriate African and Oceanic art as part of a “primitivist” aesthetic

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28. Shannon notes that the ubiquitous installation photograph of the 291 exhibit does not depict the exhibition on its opening day, but rather the redesign of the exhibit done by Steichen a week later. Shannon cites reviews of the show that appeared in the *New York Sun* the week of November 8 and a column in the *New York Evening Post* on November 14 that document a shift in wall color from grey to colorful. Shannon, “From “African Savages” to “Ancestral Legacy,”” 34.

that sought to uncover natural or pure artistic expression untouched by Western modernity. The largely mythologized account of the modernist appropriation of African art has Pablo Picasso stumbling upon African masks at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro during the spring of 1907, when he confused the ethnographic museum’s entrance with that of the Musée de Sculpture Comparée. The masks he supposedly saw in the Trocadéro are thought to have influenced his seminal work, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. In fact, Picasso was one of several European artists among them Henri Matisse and André Derain who,


around 1906-1907, began to re-evaluate African art.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, as Patricia Leighten has asserted members of the Parisian avant-garde came into contact with African art in a range of locales—curio shops, bars, and fellow artist studios.\textsuperscript{34} The modernist avant-garde's appropriation of African art coincided with their radical reconceptualization of form and representation that moved away from naturalism towards the abstract.

Thus in America, the introduction of African art began as it had in Europe: among members of the modernist avant-garde. Visitors to the 291 show were most likely members of the Stieglitz circle and there is no record of African American visitors to \textit{Statuary in Wood}.\textsuperscript{35} However, despite the lack of a documented African American audience, the 291 exhibit remains the first point of contact between Americans and African art displayed as art rather than as ethnographic objects in America.

Between 1914 and 1920, African art continued to be shown in private art galleries frequented by members of the New York avant-garde.\textsuperscript{36} de Zayas, who


\textsuperscript{36} In November 2012, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition entitled \textit{African Art: New York and the Avant-Garde} curated by Yaëlle Biro, which highlighted the specific objects
was affiliated with the 291 Statuary in Wood show, exhibited African art with some regularity at his Modern Art Gallery.\textsuperscript{37} Between 1916 and 1920, his gallery held ten separate shows featuring African art.\textsuperscript{38} In 1918, the American Museum of Natural History installed an exhibit of “African Ivory Carvings by the Mangbetu from the Lang-Chapin Expeditions” in the Gems hall that called attention to the carvings as aesthetic rather than cultural objects.\textsuperscript{39}

At the end of the 1910s one finds evidence of African art exhibited in spaces frequented by African American audiences. In the summer of 1918, de Zayas’s Modern Gallery lent a selection of African sculpture to the newly opened Carleton Avenue Branch of the YMCA in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{40} In 1921 and 1922, there are also reports that African art was included in “Negro Art” exhibits held at the 135\textsuperscript{th} Street Branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, while African art first appeared on the New York scene in a downtown gallery, by the

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\textsuperscript{39} The exhibition was mentioned in a variety of newspapers: “New York Notes” \textit{The Jewelers’ Circular-Weekly}, January 30, 1918, 81.
\textsuperscript{40} Shannon, 366. Founded in 1852, the United States branches of the Young Man’s Christian Association (YMCA) provided a safe space for young men and focused on improving their spiritual and cultural lives. African Americans have had a long association with the organization. The first “colored branch” was founded in 1853 by a freed slave Anthony Bowen in Washington, D.C. In 1910 Julius Rosenwald, founder of Sears Roebuck issued a challenge grant which funded the opening of twenty five “colored” YMCAs in a host of US cities. In addition to providing housing and other forms of assistance, colored branches such as the Carleton Avenue Branch were venues for exhibitions, lectures, and other forms of cultural programming. For more on the early history of the YMCA see: “History” (YMCA), accessed February 28, 2013, http://www.ymca.net/history/1800-1860s.html.
\textsuperscript{41} Shannon, 366.
end of the 1910s it was slowly making its way uptown and reaching a wider racial audience.

Brooklyn, Barnes, and Blondiau: African Art’s Institutionalization

In the spring of 1923, New Yorkers could see African art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibition *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo*, which was comprised of approximately 1,450 objects. The cover of the exhibition pamphlet features a female Kongo *mpemba* figurine (fig. 6). The title of the Brooklyn show indicated that perceptions of African art had evolved, at least linguistically, since the 1914 show at 291. For example, the objects were no longer considered the work of “African Savages,” but were renamed “Primitive Negro Art.” A reviewer for the *New York Times* commented that the Brooklyn Museum “[plods] on untrodden ways and gives an exhibition that must excite a wide variety of reactions among those who visit it.” The intentions of the show’s curator, Stewart Culin (1858–1929), were clearly expressed in the exhibition catalogue: “The entire collection, whatever may have been its original uses, is shown under the classification of art, as representing a creative impulse, and not for the purpose of illustrating the customs of the African peoples.”

42 To date, this is still one of the largest exhibitions of African art ever shown. The Brooklyn Museum has digitized some of Culin’s archives as “African Art Exhibition of 1923” (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art), accessed July 8, 2012, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/pna1923/. The exhibit received mention in the *New York Times* on September 2, 1923, X16, in an article entitled “Wide Vogue Gained by Art of Africa” and again on April 15, 1924, SM12, in “The World of Art: Two Museum Exhibitions.”
Despite such statements, it seems that considering the various tools, spears, and carved figurines as “art” proved difficult for the average American viewer. According to the New York Times reviewer:

To America, especially, art means the refinement of elemental ideas to a point where they can be tolerated by a taste trained to appreciation of delicacies, abhorrent of concentrated flavors and unmodified impulses. Thus, to receive what the collection has to give as art, it is quite necessary to put the subject matter out of your mind as you easily do when you are looking at a slaughtered bull painted by Rembrandt or a bullfight by Goya. Otherwise, entering the long gallery with its handsome row of headsmen’s knives along one wall, its sharp spears of metal, its figurines and masks emphatic in their suggestion of primal man, you let flow into your mind and fill it the strange impressions of life concerned only with living.  

Installation photographs of the exhibit (fig. 7) reveal that Culin’s display techniques may have contributed to this difficulty. The majority of the displayed objects were exhibited according to typology or function, an approach that reinforced the trope of the ethnographic museum.

Although it is impossible to estimate the number of African American visitors to the Brooklyn Museum show we do know that African Americans were aware of the exhibition. In a short piece titled “Brooklyn Jottings,” The Chicago Defender reported that the daughter of an unidentified African chieftain had visited the exhibition. The daughter commented that the exhibition “proved of more than unusual interest” and that a number of visitors were coming to the


46 According to Shannon, the walls of the exhibit were painted green; this coloration does not come across in the black-and-white photographs of the installation. Shannon also alludes to Culin’s predisposition for ethnographic display techniques (127).
Brooklyn Museum “solely to see the exhibition.” Further evidence of African American and/or black knowledge of the show, is a more formal review of the exhibition, written by NAACP Press Secretary Herbert J. Seligmann (1891–1984), that was published in The Amsterdam News as well as mentioned in both the New York Times and The Chicago Defender.

Seligmann’s review ended with an analogy between “the vogue for African carving in New York” and the “success of Negroes in the theatre.” With his nod to African American theatre, Seligmann was probably referring to Shuffle Along, the black Broadway musical by Sissle and Blake that debuted to rave reviews in 1921. On its surface, Seligmann’s comparison speaks to the growing popularity of African art in New York at the start of the 1920s. However, the analogy also points to an assumption that African art equals a form of black performativity. The idea that African art might be read as a performance of

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47 The Chicago Defender, May 19, 1923.
48 Seligmann, “Primitive Negro Sculpture on View in Brooklyn, N.Y. Museum” (New York: Press Service of the NAACP, May 16, 1923). Seligmann, an author and advocate for civil rights, was publicity director for the NAACP from 1919 until 1932 and had a special interest in the visual arts. After beginning a correspondence with Alfred Stieglitz in the 1920s he eventually authored Alfred Stieglitz Talking: Notes on Some of His Conversations, 1925-1931 (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1966). In her dissertation, Shannon refers to coverage in the black press, but does not provide examples. Nor is the show mentioned in James Johnson Sweeney’s chronology of African Art exhibits in the 1935 African Negro Art show, despite its sheer size and the amount of press coverage it was receiving. Shannon offers a possible explanation when she mentions New Yorkers’ reluctance to travel between the two boroughs, which had been incorporated only recently; Brooklyn had been independent until 1898 (Shannon 122, 129).
blackness suggests that the later incorporation of African aesthetics and objects into African American visual production—particularly painting and sculpture—might also be considered within this black performativity paradigm. The 1923 Brooklyn Museum exhibition is significant because it represented the physical movement of African art from the purview of the avant-garde and spaces like 291, to a publicly accessible, city-funded art museum that catered to a wide range of audiences.


The 1911–1914 period marked the beginning of Guillaume’s interest in African art and his initiation into the Parisian avant-garde art scene. Through his friend, avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), Guillaume was introduced to key members of the European modernist avant-garde including Picasso, Brancusi, and Modigliani (Clarke, 20).
John Dewey (1859–1952). After completing the course, Barnes felt compelled to find a way to provide the public access to art and art education. His eponymous foundation was part of his attempt to showcase and provide public access to his superb collection of European modern Art and his growing collection of African art. When the Barnes Foundation opened its doors in 1924, it became the first permanent display of African art as fine art in the United States. Along with the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, the Barnes Foundation exemplified the institutionalization of African art within American art museums that would continue throughout the following decades.

One important, but overlooked element of the Barnes Foundation is its artist and art instructor fellowships; these included access to the foundation’s collection, enrollment in the courses offered by Barnes, and, in certain cases, travel abroad. Artist/art historian David C. Driskell writes that it was through such fellowships that Barnes “quietly permitted a select number of black artists to study his collection of African art.” African American artist Aaron Douglas (1898–1979), who received a fellowship in 1927, had access to the African

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52 In recent years, there has been much controversy over the Barnes Foundation and its location in the residential suburb of Merion, Pennsylvania. In 2002, due in part to having outgrown its residential setting and increasing financial concerns over the impending financial crisis, discussions were initiated that involved moving the collection, worth an estimated $25 billion, into downtown Philadelphia. Because moving the collection out of the original buildings would have violated the terms of Barnes’ will and trust, the discussions caused considerable controversy in the art world. See: John Anderson, Art Held Hostage: The Story of the Barnes Collection (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003) and The Art of the Steal (2009, dir. Don Argott), a documentary on the Barnes and its current situation.


54 Clarke and Berzock, 7.

collection\textsuperscript{55} and he commuted to Merion from New York City once a week to attend a seminar on picture analysis.\textsuperscript{56} When The New York Amsterdam News reported Douglas’s fellowship, the article mentioned that his and fellow African American artist Gwendolyn Bennett’s participation marked the first time that African American students had been allowed to enroll in the course.\textsuperscript{57}

Determining the exact number of African American artists and art instructors who benefited from the Barnes Foundation fellowships remains difficult. However, it is clear that contact with African collections such that of the Barnes Foundation played a critical role in enabling African American artists, such as Aaron Douglas, “to engage with African forms in service to an authentic African American visual tradition.”\textsuperscript{58} With its opening in 1924 the Barnes Foundation represents a critical permanent contact zone where African Americans could encounter African art.

\textsuperscript{56} “Art Scholarship Winners.” The New York Amsterdam News, October 26, 1927, 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Douglas received a $1,200 annual stipend to participate. The stipend was necessary because the course enrollees had to be available at noon each day. As a result, most of the attendees were college students, housewives, and self-employed individuals. Jubilee, 43. Susan Earle noted that Barnes wanted Douglas to write an article that criticized Alain Locke for “taking Barnes’s ideas and calling them his own.” Douglas’s refusal to do so brought a halt to his relationship with Barnes. Earle, 49n8.
\textsuperscript{58} Just as the Barnes Foundation opened in the suburbs of Philadelphia, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago announced its acquisition of the German Kelykamp collection. Comprised of 1,900 objects from the Cameroon region of West and Central Africa. The acquisition coincided with the museum’s decision to construct a dedicated African hall. German ethnologists had assembled the collection during the German colonial occupation and then collector Jan Kleykamp purchased the collection. The Field Museum’s purchase of these objects from Kleykamp, who had acquired them from the officers, brought a significant number of African art objects to the mid-Midwest and, illustrates the spread of African art across the country at the quarter-century. “Buys African art Objects: Field Museum Announces Purchase of Famous Kleykamp Collection,” The New York Times, August 19, 1925.
In 1927, Douglas would also have seen African art locally in mid-town Manhattan as the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive Art (fig. 8) was put on view at the New Art Circle Gallery on West 57th Street.⁶⁰ These works, owned by Belgian collector Raoul Blondiau, had been brought to the United States through the efforts of Alain Locke. The collection and its exhibition at the New Art Circle Gallery were part of Locke’s grand plan to establish a museum of African art in Harlem. Correspondence between Theatre Arts Monthly director Edith Isaacs and Locke reveals that Isaacs wanted to purchase the Blondiau collection under the auspices of Theatre Arts Monthly and then sell it to the Harlem Museum of African Art, which Locke was in the process of founding. Despite Locke’s concerted efforts to build a collection and secure funding, his museum was never realized. The pieces Locke was able to acquire were absorbed into the Schomburg Center for Black Culture at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library or remained in Locke’s personal collection; after his death, in 1954, his collection of African art was donated to Howard University. Locke’s plan for the Harlem Museum of African Art was part of a larger intellectual agenda that can be explored through an examination of his critical writings on African art from the 1920s and 1930s.

**Locke’s Legacy: African and African American Art Criticism**

Much like the European modernists he so admired, Locke’s first experiences with African art were mediated through Paris—specifically, through gallerist and dealer Paul Guillaume, who introduced Locke to Barnes in the

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⁶⁰ The exhibition was on view from February 7th until March 5th, 1927.
spring of 1923. The encounter led to an extended correspondence on African art and a tumultuous friendship. At Barnes’s suggestion, he and Locke collaborated on the May 1924 issue of *Opportunity* magazine, which was devoted to African art and contained Locke’s first published critical essay on the subject. “A Note on African Art” was the start of Locke’s theoretical and critical engagement and heralded the views he would hold through the next decade.

Locke’s prolific contributions to the fields of art theory and criticism have been well documented by Jeffrey C. Stewart and Mary Ann Calo among others. Calo notes that one of the major difficulties in studying Locke lies in attempting to position him intellectually, as his work appeared in a wide range of venues and he wore many hats—philosopher, cultural advocate, expert on African art, and New Negro spokesman. Because he wrote for a range of audiences and with differing agendas, Locke’s writings are at times contradictory, but nonetheless revealing as they illustrate how he attempted to make sense of African art and its potential for African American art. While it might be tempting to pit Locke’s writings on African art against one another, a more productive approach is to consider each of his writings as representing one part of his evolving philosophy.

I do not attempt to engage with the entire corpus of Locke’s writings here.

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64 Calo, *Distinction and Denial*, 23–24.
Instead, I highlight those that were particularly influential or that emphasize the visual arts of Africa and their relationship to the African American (in his terms, the “Negro” artist). Specifically, I focus on Locke’s 1924 “A Note on African Art”; his 1924 comments on the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb; the 1925 essay “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” (published in Survey Graphic: Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro and The New Negro: An Interpretation); his 1927 “A Collection of Congo Art,” written about the Blondiau Collection; and, from the 1930s, his essay “African Art Classic Style,” published in American Magazine of Art in 1935. These writings reveal Locke’s varying and often conflicting views on African art. Locke’s writings function as another contact zone through which African Americans were exposed to diverse ideas about African art and photographic reproductions of African art objects.

In 1924, one year before the publication of The New Negro anthology, Locke’s essay “A Note on African Art” appeared in the special African art themed issue of Opportunity that Locke guest edited with Albert Barnes. The piece, in which Locke effectively introduces African art to African American readers, begins with the statement that “the significance of African art is

66 Opportunity was a magazine published by the National Urban League. It began circulation in 1923. Headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League is a civil rights organization that was founded in 1910 with a mission devoted to raising the living standards of underserved urban communities. For more on the National Urban League see: Nancy J. Weiss, The National Urban League, 1910-1940 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and Jesse Thomas Moore, A Search for Equality: the National Urban League (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981).
incontestable; at this stage it needs no *apologia.*”

Having passed, however, through a period of neglect and disesteem during which it was regarded as crude, bizarre, and primitive, African art is now in the danger of another sort of misconstruction, that of being taken up as an exotic fad and a fashionable amateurish interest. Its chief need is to be allowed to speak for itself, to be studied and interpreted rather than to be praised or exploited.

Having spent considerable time in Paris during the early years of the 1920s, Locke witnessed firsthand the veritable fad of all things black that swept France and the rest of Europe during the decade. Read against the threat of “Negrophilia,” Locke’s insistence that African art be studied seriously stemmed from his desire to protect African art from becoming passé and to maintain its integrity as art. To combat the exploitation of African art, Locke refers to it as “classic” and places it on par with other classical art traditions (e.g. Greek and Roman).

Locke then advocates the evaluation of African art as “a pure form of art and in terms of the marked influences upon modern art” before considering “its cultural meaning and derivation.” The distinction Locke makes between aesthetic and cultural value is critical to understanding the function he envisioned African art serving in the construction of an African American artistic tradition. Others have tied the distinction between the aesthetic and the cultural to the lack of accurate and objective information surrounding the cultural context.

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70 Locke, “A Note on African Art,” 134.
of the objects in question, but Locke’s desire to separate the aesthetic or formal (coded as modern) from the cultural (coded as past) allowed him to maintain that African art in 1924 was still aesthetically relevant for contemporary artists.

After a brief detailing of how African art was transformed from ethnographic curiosity to modern art object, Locke describes how African art provided an answer to modern European artists grappling with questions of form and representation. For these artists African art was a “fresh revelation.” When Locke lists the European artists whose practices were influenced by African art he highlights the importance of these artists’ “direct contact with Negro art.” His statement reveals his awareness that contact with African art is needed for it to have an impact on artistic production. The desire to facilitate African American contact with African art no doubt fueled Locke’s later desire to found a museum of African art in Harlem at the end of the decade.

It is in the last paragraph of the essay that Locke speculates on how African art might influence African Americans. He writes: “Since African art has had such a vitalizing influence on modern European [art]...it becomes finally a natural and important question as to what artistic and cultural effect it can or will have upon the life of the American Negro.” While he acknowledges African art might have no influence, Locke argues that the “proper understanding” of African art will come first through “an appreciation of its influence upon contemporary French art.” Locke quickly follows this with the

71 Calo, Distinction and Denial, 35.
72 Alain Locke, “A Note on African Art,” 135.
73 Ibid.
74 Alain Locke, “A Note on African Art,” 138.
hope that, “there still slumbers in the blood something which once stirred will react with peculiar emotional intensity toward it.” With this statement, Locke hints at an innate or biological connection between African Americans and African art that simply needs to be stimulated via contact.

In a May 1924 piece for *The Howard Alumnus*, Locke elaborated on the African American’s innate attraction to African art. Earlier that year, as part of his 1923 research sabbatical, Locke had traveled with the French Oriental Archeological Society of Cairo to the Sudan and Egypt, where he was present at the re-opening of Tutankhamen’s tomb. In December of 1922, Howard Carter (1874–1939) made archeological history with his discovery of the intact tomb of Tutankhamen, pharaoh of Egypt’s eighteenth dynasty, in Luxor. For the next two years, cable news wires reporting the latest finds were published in the United States as well as in Western Europe and the United Kingdom. African Americans were quick to identify with the Egyptian treasures being unearthed; new knowledge about an ancient culture belonging to “dark-skinned” peoples on par with Greek and Roman culture made it difficult to deny that African

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75 Ibid.
76 The influence of Carter’s discovery on the African American public was undeniable, with far-reaching implications. Unlike Ethiopia, which remained a mythical locale in the African American imaginary, Egypt was now a physical site at which African Americans could locate the birth of “black” culture. The discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb coincided with the advent of anthropologist Franz Boas’s (1858–1942) new theories that attributed human differences to variations in history and culture. These theories were consumed alongside the work of German archeologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), whose late-nineteenth-century and twentieth century publications also emphasized the presence of African civilization. This shift in discourse gave African Americans a way into the discussion because they could now claim an ancient culture and history, which gave them credence. Many of Frobenius’s publications were illustrated with photographs and drawings. See: Eike Haberland, ed., *Leo Frobenius 1873-1973: An Anthology*, trans. Patricia Crampton (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1973). For an example of a heavily illustrated text see: Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910-1912* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1913).
Americans possessed a sophisticated history and a culture of their own.

When Locke reported on Carter’s discovery in the May 1924 issue of The Howard Alumnus he wrote, “There is . . . a special interest, a peculiar sympathy under closer cultural kinship which should specially draw us with greater than average interest and appeal to things Egyptian, both ancient and modern.” Locke’s word choice indicate the genesis his theories of African and African American art that he would promote later in the decade and demonstrate his subtle invocation of the language of authenticity.

His use of “special” and “peculiar,” for example, call and respond to their synonyms “unique” and “distinct.” Locke explained that the “peculiar sympathy” (or unique understanding) should attract “us” (African Americans), with “greater than average” interest (read white interest), to Egypt and metonymically the African continent. This sentiment is in line with Locke’s unwritten supposition that an increased appreciation for the formal qualities of African art would lead to the desire for knowledge about the cultures that had produced the objects.

In June of 1924, only one month after “A Note on African Art” and his Howard Alumnus piece were published, Locke delivered a lecture on African art to an African American audience at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. With the lecture and his 1924 publications, Locke continued to

77 Alain Locke, “Impressions of Luxor,” The Howard Alumnus 2 (May 1924): 78. Locke traveled through Africa visiting Sudan and Egypt with his friend Seme. Georges Foucart a member of the French archeological team facilitated Locke’s presence at the opening of the tomb. Harris and Molesworth, 145-146.
cement his position as the preeminent African American critic of African art. At the time of his lecture, Locke was already at work securing a larger audience for both his theories on African art and on the recent developments in the African American cultural sphere.

On March 21, 1924 Opportunity editor Charles Johnson hosted a dinner at the Civic Club on 12th Street in New York to celebrate the publication of There is No Confusion by Jessie Redmon Fauset and as a “coming out” party for African American writers. The dinner party turned into one of the decade’s most important literary and cultural events with a “who’s who” of black intelligentsia and prominent white patrons in attendance, including Paul Kellogg, editor of the social-work-oriented journal The Survey and its monthly supplement, Survey Graphic. Kellogg later approached Locke about guest-editing a special issue of Survey Graphic because he felt that the scholarly, literary, and cultural work

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78 The details of the lecture are unknown but it is likely that he expressed the ideas he had proposed in “A Note on African Art.” Culin had been invited to speak at the 135th Street Branch in February of 1924, according to a letter from New York Public Library librarian Ernestine Rose (Culin Archival Collection, African Art Exhibition of 1923, Correspondence Item No. 276, Brooklyn Museum of Art). Mentions of the objects traveling to the 135th Street Branch are in a series of letters between Culin and Louise R. Latimer of the Tri-Arts Club from June 1924 (Culin Archival Collection, African Art Exhibition of 1923, Correspondence Items no. 324, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, Brooklyn Museum of Art).


80 Survey Graphic was launched in 1921 as a supplement to The Survey and ceased publication in 1952. It covered a variety of sociological and political issues as well as areas of national and international concern, including poverty, education, race, anti-Semitism, and fascism. For more on the history and development of Survey Graphic see: Cara Finnegan, “Social Welfare and Visual Politics: The Story of Survey Graphic,” The New Deal Network. Accessed September 19, 2010, http://newdeal.feri.org/sg/essay01.htm
presented during the dinner deserved a wider audience.\textsuperscript{81}

The special issue of \textit{Survey Graphic}, “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro,” was published in March of 1925. Its three sections, “The Greatest Negro Community in the World,” “The Negro Expresses Himself,” and “Black and White – Studies in Race Contexts,” tackled a wide range of topics. Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage,” with its query, “What is Africa to me?” served as the capstone to four pieces on Negro art; the other three were Albert Barnes’ “Negro Art and America,” Arthur Schomburg’s “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” and Locke’s “The Art of the Ancestors.”\textsuperscript{82} Inasmuch as the Harlem issue of \textit{Survey Graphic} predates the November publication of Locke’s anthology \textit{The New Negro}, the journal issue served as a venue for Locke to experiment with ideas he expanded in the latter publication. The pages of the \textit{Survey Graphic} special issue contained a compelling intersection of the sociological and the artistic—poetic, photographic, visual, and literal—which would characterize the era now known as the Harlem Renaissance.\textsuperscript{83}

Locke deemed the issues broached in \textit{Survey Graphic} worthy of additional consideration. Seven months after the publication of \textit{Survey Graphic: Harlem,}

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Mecca of the New Negro Locke published his anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which included several pieces published in the March 1925 *Survey Graphic*. The longer anthology was divided into three sections. The first, “The Negro Renaissance,” covered art, literature, and music. The second, “The New Negro in the New World,” situated the newly expressive urban black within the context of America and society at large in discussions of Howard University; the city of Durham, North Carolina; and Negro womanhood. The third section consisted of a references section, compiled by Locke and Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Alphonso Schomburg (1847–1938), of biographic information on the contributors and extended bibliographies of the subjects covered, including a section on African art and culture.84

Of particular interest to the present study is Locke’s essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” which appeared in the first section of *The New Negro*. The essay was an expansion of his “Art of the Ancestors” in *Survey Graphic*. An analysis of the essay reveals the underpinnings of Locke’s theories of both African art and African American art during the Harlem Renaissance. “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” was as a call to African American artists to explore their African heritage in the pursuit of a truly African American artistic tradition.

In the essay, Locke continued to highlight the success of the European modernist’s appropriations of African art as one of the main reasons why African American artists should look at African art. He even went so far as to suggest that without European artists’ successful use of African motifs, African art might

not appeal to African American artists.\textsuperscript{85} However, Locke was forced to acknowledge that the African American audience was not readily familiar with African aesthetics and that African art was just as foreign to African Americans as it was to white Europeans. Locke writes, “Except then in his remarkable carry-over of the rhythmic gift, there is little evidence of any direct connection of the American Negro with his ancestral arts.”\textsuperscript{86} The solution to this problem required continued African American exposure to African art.

To aid his cause, Locke was committed to securing and exhibiting African art. These points of contact took physical as well as photographic and illustrated form. “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” was illustrated with photographs of objects in the Barnes Foundation collection. In The New Negro anthology, Locke also furnished readers with images by Aaron Douglas and his German-American mentor Winold Reiss (1886-1953) as examples of how artists might incorporate African aesthetics into their production.

Born in Topeka, Kansas, Douglas arrived in New York in June 1925 shortly after Locke’s Survey Graphic issue was published.\textsuperscript{87} Douglas came to New York at the urging of Opportunity editor Charles S. Johnson, who introduced him to Dorothy Barnes (wife of Albert Barnes). It was Locke who introduced Douglas to Reiss, an artist he heralded as “a path breaker in the inevitable direction of a

\textsuperscript{86} Locke, “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” 254.
\textsuperscript{87} Susan Earle notes that some sources list Douglas’s arrival in New York as 1924, however, her research revealed that Douglas was listed in the 1924-1925 yearbook of Lincoln High School as a teacher. Therefore, it is more likely that he moved to New York at the end of the school year. Earle, 49.
racially representative type of art.” Reiss, along with Locke, encouraged Douglas to look at African art and to develop a style that derived from African motifs and design elements.

Eleven of Douglas’s illustrations were included in The New Negro anthology. Where Reiss provided decorative elements for the book—African inflected headers that appeared above each essay title, Douglas’s images were printed on individual pages with identifying captions. The illustrations function as pseudo-frontispieces for the essays they precede, but the images are also texts themselves that were no doubt scrutinized and studied by the reader. Douglas’s art included in The New Negro, such as Rebirth (fig. 9), elucidated his style, which was characterized by its flat two-dimensional and geometric aesthetic. Solidly colored, angular figures are posed in silhouette in frieze-like compositions. Because he drew artistic inspiration from Egyptian and other forms of African art, Douglas was the perfect candidate to demonstrate Locke’s theory proposed in “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts.” Douglas was the paradigm of an African American artist who translated African art to create a new African American modernist aesthetic. Douglas’s work demonstrated what could happen when

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88 Alain Locke, “To Certain of Our Philistines,” Opportunity 3 (May 1925), 155-156. Locke had drawn criticism when Reiss’s illustrations appeared in the March 1925 issue of Survey Graphic: Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro. In 1924, Opportunity hosted an art contest for the best original painting, sculpture, or work of art by a “Negro artist that interpreted Negro life in Harlem.” The winner’s work was to be published in the special issue of Survey Graphic. When the issue was published only Reiss’s images appeared. A copy of the contest announcement can be found in Alain Locke Papers Box 164-115, Folder 11: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. For more on Reiss’s selection for the Survey Graphic issue see: Gary Reynolds and Beryl Wright, Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation (Newark: Newark Museum, 1989), 14.

89 Reiss immigrated to the United States in 1913 from Germany where he was familiar with the European modernist use of African art. Jeffery Stewart, To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 57 and Earle, 27.
modernist African American artists made contact with African art.

In addition to photographic reproductions and African inspired artwork, at the end of The New Negro Locke provided an extensive bibliography so that the readers of The New Negro could see what sources Locke used and perhaps pursue independent research. The works cited in the bibliography are another important source of information in regards to Locke’s theories of African art. In “Notes to the Bibliography,” Locke mentions that Arthur A. Schomburg and Arthur H. Fauset, respectively, had compiled the sections on “Negro-Americana” and “Negro Folk Lore.” (Locke also clearly indicates that he himself had assembled the other sections, including “African Culture.”)90 The bibliography on “African Art and Culture,” which is less than two single-spaced pages, is shorter than the sections on “Negro Folk Lore” (four pages) and “Negro Race Problems” (five pages). In any case, the inclusion of an “African Art and Culture” section, even a short one, speaks to the growing scholarly interest in the subject.

Locke’s list included a mix of travelogues, texts about African culture and language, and a few specifically about African Art.91 It is this collection of texts that reveals who was influencing Locke’s theories: H. Clouzot and A. Level’s L’Art Nègre et Art Océanien (1920); Carl Einstein’s Negerplastik (1920; 1923); Leo Frobenius’s Hádschra Maktuba, urzeitliche Felsbilder Kleinafrikas (1925) Roger Fry’s “Negro Sculpture and Bushman Paintings” in Visions and Design (1920); Victor Golubew’s L’Art Nègre (Paris, n.d.); Paul Guillaume and T. Munro’s Primitive Negro Sculpture (1926); P. C. Lepage’s La Décoration Primitive Afrique (Paris, n.d.);

90 Locke, The New Negro, 420.
91 Locke, The New Negro, 446-448.
Locke’s own African Art issue of *Opportunity*; the three-volume *Antiquities of Benin* by von Luschan (Berlin, 1919); the Pitt-Rivers Museum’s *Antique Works of Art from Benin* (London, 1900); M. Helen Tongue’s *Bushman Paintings* (Berlin, 1909); Arthur E. Weigall’s *A Report of the Antiquities of Lower Nubia* (Oxford, 1907); and de Zayas’s *African Negro Art; its Influence on Modern Art* (1916). Several of the cited works included photographic reproductions of African art. Of particular note is Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (Munich: K. Wolff, 1915 and 1920), which broke new ground with its publication of multiple-view photographs of African objects. Einstein’s photographs sought to capture the three-dimensionality of African art. Locke’s *The New Negro* functioned as a textual point of contact between African Americans and African art. By providing a bibliography, Locke encouraged his readers to pursue their own research and perhaps formulate their own ideas.

With the exception of “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Locke’s major critical contributions to the subject of African art coincided with exhibitions, which of course meant contact with African objects. One example is his 1927 essay “A Collection of Congo Art,” which discussed the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection that he had helped bring from Belgium to the United States. In the article, Locke argues that what is most needed is a collection of African art that is

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92 Einstein’s *Negerplastik* circulated within artistic circles as well. African American artist Hale Woodruff received a copy of Einstein’s *Negerplastik* from a German art dealer while living in the mid-West. Of the book Woodruff said, “I had never heard of the significance of the impact of African art…Yet published with beautiful photographs and treated with great seriousness and respect! Plainly sculptures of black people, my people, they were considered very beautiful by the German art experts!” Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists, 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 123.

“sufficiently extensive to present a representative unit yet selective enough to make an exclusive appeal as art.”

From Locke’s perspective, the Blondiau Collection achieved the perfect balance of an artistic and scientific approach to African art. After detailing the strengths of the collection and highlighting the various styles of the objects, Locke concludes by stating:

The importation of representative collections will have a vital effect on our own art apart even from the general modernist trend, if as may reasonably be expected, African art should once more exert a new influence in quickening the artistic development of the American Negro.

Locke’s motivation for bringing the Blondiau Collection to New York was due in part to his desire to found the Harlem Museum of African Art. The Blondiau Collection was to be the kernel of the museum’s holdings. Importantly, Locke’s Harlem Museum of African Art was to serve the African American population and function as a point of contact for African American artists and African art.

In an undated statement on the goals and objectives of the museum, Locke summarized:

The nucleus of both the travelling and the permanent exhibits of the Harlem Museum of African Art was the Blondiau Collection of African Art from the Belgian Congo, which was acquired by Theatre Arts Monthly and exhibited as the Theatre arts Collection at the New Art Circle, New York City, February and March, 1927. Part of this collection was purchased by public subscription for the Harlem Museum of African Art, which was organized and incorporated to preserve and interpret the ancestral arts and crafts of the Negro and make them effective as fresh

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cultural inspiration for Negro art and culture in America.\textsuperscript{112}

The statement reveals the connection Locke sought to forge between the display of African art in Harlem and African American art and culture. He intended for the “ancestral arts and crafts” to function as “fresh cultural inspiration” for African American artists and the general public. If reading about African art was not enough, the act of viewing African art would serve as creative kindling.

The inaugural meeting of the Harlem Museum of African Art committee was held at the New Art Circle Gallery, where members were able to examine the works in the collection.\textsuperscript{113} The interracial museum board included chairman John E. Nail, a wealthy black real estate investor and brother-in-law to James Weldon Johnson; treasurer L. Hollingsworth Wood, the white lawyer and president of the National Urban League; and vice-chairwoman Mrs. Charlotte Mason, a patroness and the white “God-Mother” of the Harlem Renaissance.\textsuperscript{114}

After this meeting, the 135th Street Branch of the NYPL began to exhibit the collection with which Locke was seeding the Harlem Museum of African Art collection in its special collections rooms. Part of this arrangement included an agreement that the Harlem museum objects could be borrowed along with items from the Schomburg Collection of African Americana.\textsuperscript{115} Despite the lack of a permanent display space for his growing collection, Locke continued to scout the art market for suitable pieces to augment his planned museum’s holdings. In

\textsuperscript{112} Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-179, Folder 23; Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\textsuperscript{113} Minutes from the First Meeting of the Committee on African Art, Alain Locke Papers, Box 154-179, Folder 23; Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\textsuperscript{114} Shannon, 270.

\textsuperscript{115} Memorandum: The Harlem Citizens Committee for Promoting African Art and Culture, Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-179, Folder 23; Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
April of 1928 he corresponded with a Parisian collector, J. Laporte, about Laporte’s collection of over 200 objects from the Ivory Coast and the Congo and their eventual purchase for the Harlem museum.116

Locke’s decision to pursue a New York museum due in part to his connections to the black intelligentsia of Harlem and his relationship with Harlem Renaissance patroness Charlotte Mason, but also with his ongoing discord with Howard University that led to his dismissal in the spring of 1925.117 His Harlem Museum of African Art never took up residence outside of the 135th Street NYPL, but by building a collection for it and by making sure that collection was exhibited, Locke did succeed in exposing growing numbers of African Americans to African art.

Despite not having a permanent location, the Harlem Museum of African Art organized a travelling exhibit comprised of 105 objects. The collection was displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago during the Negro in Art Week held in Chicago at the end of November 1927.118 The Negro Art Week pamphlet included a page long description of the Harlem Museum of African Art and its collection. It was also noted that the collection was “available for limited periods on application to the Harlem Museum...as an educational exhibit of folk art of

116 Information about Laporte’s collection and Locke’s interest in purchasing it in the uncatalogued papers of James Porter at Emory University’s Manuscript and Rare Book Library.
117 According to Locke’s biographers, Locke and Howard University administrators continually locked horns on issues related to salary, classes, and the future of African studies at the university. He was on unpaid academic leave from 1925-1926 and took a visiting professorship at Fisk University for the 1926-1927 academic year. Harris and Molesworth, 175-176, 220.
African peoples and the artistic value of its characteristic designs and forms both for modern art appreciation and contemporary creative inspiration."^{119}

In the summer of 1928, pieces of Locke’s collection traveled to Richmond, Virginia and to Howard University, where the exhibition was “designed to arouse interest and respect in the younger generation for their African origin.”^{120}

Evidently the show had an impact; in 1930 the *Afro-American* reported upon the possibility of establishing an African art museum on Howard’s campus.^{121}

Accordingly, the exhibition schedule of the Howard University Art Gallery for fall 1933 was filled with African-themed shows. Paintings of West Africa by Erik Berry were on view for ten days at the start of October, and African bushman paintings from the Carnegie Corporation were hung in December.^{122}

Although plans for neither Locke’s Harlem Museum of African art nor the Howard University African art museum ever came to fruition, some of the objects intended for the Harlem museum remained in the personal collection that Locke’s estate donated to Howard after his death in 1953. Other pieces became part of the Schomburg Collection at the NYPL. The inability to realize this portion of Locke’s vision is regrettable. His idea of establishing a museum of African art in the heart of Harlem would have made African art accessible to the black population and provided a conduit through which African American artists could capitalize on the African aesthetics while reclaiming this aspect of

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^{121} “Howard seeks Art Works from Ethiopia,” *Afro-American*, November 8, 1930.

their cultural heritage.

In March 1935, African art moved from Harlem to midtown Manhattan with the opening of the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) exhibition *African Negro Art*. The exhibit caught Locke’s critical gaze; a copy of MoMA’s news bulletin focused on the exhibition can be found in his collected papers and in May, *American Magazine of Art* published his review of the exhibition, “African Art: Classic Style.” Locke praises curator James Johnson Sweeney as the “presiding genius who has gleaned this vast territory. . . giving America not only its greatest show of African art. . . but a master lesson in the classic idioms of at least fourteen of the great regional art styles of the African continent.” Locke is thrilled that finally an exhibit does justice to African art.

*African Negro Art* played a pivotal role in bringing African art to the mainstream American public on a large scale. MoMA officials made it clear that attracting a large African American audience was important. A statement on the exhibit attendance in the March-April issue of the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* notes “the museum felt that the exhibition would be of great interest to the Negroes of New York and has made efforts to bring it to their attention.” Thus, by 1935 African art moved from the small avant-garde galleries visited predominately by white artists to a major American art institution that was going

123 Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-167, Folder 9; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
126 A total of 30,330 visitors (black and white) visited the exhibit during the first month it was on view. *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 6–7, no. 2 (March-April 1935).
out of its way to ensure that African Americans had contact with the objects.

Cognizant of the exhibit’s importance and with money from the General Education Board, MoMA hired Walker Evans (1903–1975) to create a photographic portfolio of the objects on view.127 For the portfolio, which included 477 prints, Walker photographed the objects from multiple viewpoints in an effort to accurately document the three-dimensional objects in a two-dimensional medium. The finished portfolio was sold to libraries and given at no cost to seven historically black colleges and universities. MoMA also organized a traveling exhibition comprised of seventy photographs that traveled to sixteen venues from October 1935 to December 1936. Stops included Hampton Institute, Shaw University, Atlanta University, Tuskegee Institute, Talladega College, and Fisk University. Wendy Grossman, who has written on the modernist reception of African art in the United States, notes that the distribution of the Evans portfolio and the venues selected for the travelling exhibition aimed to cultivate an interest in African art among African American audiences.128 That Hampton University was a stop on the MoMA itinerary is not insignificant as the exhibition was most likely displayed in the Hampton Museum, one of the first points of contact between African Americans and African art objects.


Conclusion

A cartoon by E. Simms Campbell referring to the MoMA Negro Art exhibition was published in the June 1, 1935 edition of the New York Amsterdam News (fig. 10). In the illustration, a stylishly dressed African American man leans toward a Congolese wooden figurine whose visage almost mirrors his own. A sign, “African Art Exhibit,” hangs from the ceiling; in the background, a series of display plinths and vitrines holding African inspired sculptures are visible; and a trio of Kirchneresque white women converses in furs around a life-sized male sculpture. Returning to the foreground, in one hand the man clutches his hat and cane, while in the other he grips an open copy of the exhibition catalogue, which directly refers to the MoMA show with the title “African Negro Art.”

The image is similar to the Covarrubias cartoon with which this chapter began. Both images illustrate a point of contact between African Americans and African art in which a gallery space functions as contact zone. The two images also speak to the evolution in the display and reception of African art during the early decades of the twentieth century that this chapter traced.

The chapter began with an examination of how African art was transformed from ethnographic curiosity to modern art. Although Hampton University, a historically black university, was the first American institution to actively collect African art, it was the white Modernist avant-garde in New York that exhibited African art as objects worthy of aesthetic study. In the Covarrubias cartoon, the well-dressed young couple stands in an unidentified setting and looks at an African statuette on a labeled plinth. Covarrubias does not provide any details that enable the viewer to identify the locale. In the 1910s, exhibits of
African art were few and far between. They were organized at a range of venues—private galleries, college art museums, libraries, and service organization halls.

Reclassified as fine art, the new categorization of African art was institutionalized in the form of dedicated exhibits at major art museums, namely the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and lastly MoMA. As mentioned, the Simms cartoon directly refers to the 1935 MoMA exhibition. Where the Covarrubias illustration contained only one African art object, the gallery in the Simms cartoon is filled with a wide selection of works for the public’s evaluation. Where the African figurine in the Covarrubias image elicited shock from the young couple, in the Simms cartoon the young man looks questioningly at the object in front of him, yet in his hands holds an open pamphlet. The man may not be familiar with the African sculpture, but as the chapter discussed, by the 1930s there was a nascent critical discourse on African art being developed by Alain Locke that sought to generate African American appreciation for the subject. The presence of the pamphlet suggests that the young man was in the process of learning the value of African art, an education that took visual and textual form. The historical groundwork laid by this chapter sets the stage for the following chapter’s investigation into what happened when Loïs Mailou Jones made contact with African art in this same period.
2. Loïs Mailou Jones and Africa, 1920–1950

Introduction

The cover page of the April 1939 issue of *The Negro History Bulletin* featured an illustration by Loïs Mailou Jones entitled *Under the Influence of the Masters* (fig. 11). 1 The illustration appeared beneath the article “Distinguished Painters Inspire Those of African Blood.” 2 At the center of the image, an androgynous artist with short hair and high-waisted paints stands in an artist’s smock, sleeves pushed up past the elbows, paintbrush and pallet in hand. Floating above the artist’s head are the last names and faces of several major European and American artists—Picasso, Velásquez, Cézanne, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Hogarth, Homer, Sargent, Ryder, Copley, Innes, Cassatt, and Tanner. Beneath this who’s who of art history are references to Egyptian art and hieroglyphics (on the right) and ancient South African cave paintings (on the left). 3 Flanking the composition are four frieze panels, each with six surnames of important nineteenth and twentieth century African American artists (e.g. E.M. Bannister, Robert Duncanson, Henry O. Tanner, Archibald Motley, Palmer C. Hayden, Aaron Douglas, and James Porter). Jones’s own name is found on the

1 Loïs Mailou Jones served on the advisory board for *The Negro History Bulletin*, a monthly publication targeted to secondary school teachers and the general public, published by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.


third panel. The artist in *Under the Influence of the Masters* is effectively sandwiched between four artistic traditions: one European, one American, one African, and one African American.

A year later, Jones stood behind an easel in her Washington, D.C. studio and painted her own image. The resultant *Self-Portrait* (fig. 12), completed ten years after Jones started teaching in the Department of Art at Howard University, is the only official self-portrait from her prolific career. In the painting, Jones looks out at the viewer from behind an easel, paintbrushes in hand. With her short pressed hair, pierced earlobe with gold hoop, and amulet necklace, Jones presents herself as a modern black woman. She also bears a striking resemblance to the artist pictured in *Under the Influence of the Masters*. As in the 1939 illustration, in her *Self-Portrait* Jones surrounds herself with references to European and African artistic traditions. Her 1937 still life *Les Pommes Vertes*, which was exhibited at the Société des Artistes Indépendants and the Société des Artistes Français in Paris, hangs on the wall behind her; just over her right shoulder are two wooden African figurines. In *Self-Portrait*, Jones’s inclusion of African art and her European-vetted painting encodes her as a modern artist.

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4 The Société des Artistes Indépendants [Society of Independent Artists] was founded in 1884 by a group of French Symbolists that included Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. Its first group show took place in 1886. The society provided a venue for contemporary artists to exhibit their works away from the state-sponsored annual salons and their increasingly exclusive admission criteria. Any artist could submit work for these unjuried shows. Jones also exhibited *Les Pommes Vertes* in the official salon, the Société des Artistes Français. For more on French Salons see: Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The African art objects in her personal collection—including a variety of wooden sculptures, a Dogon granary door, and painted masks from Dahomey—were identified by the executors of her estate although the acquisition dates remain unknown. I viewed the list of African objects in Jones’s collection in the David C. Driskell archives (before their accession into the Driskell Center at the University of Maryland).
The multiplicity of paintings and African objects within Jones’s *Self-Portrait* is reminiscent of Malvin Gray Johnson’s 1934 *Self-Portrait* (fig. 13) in which Johnson (1896–1934) also in his studio, positions himself in front of a rendition of his 1932 painting *Negro Masks* (fig. 14). By placing himself along the same register as the African masks depicted in his painting, Johnson creates a visual link between Africa and his own African American visage. Johnson’s *Self-Portrait* offers another way of reading Jones’s 1940 *Self-Portrait*, in which the inclusion of Africa functions not only as a sign of modernity, but also of self-referential blackness.

The artistic genre of portraiture is concerned with capturing the physical likeness of an individual. However, as both collaboration and contract between artist and sitter, portraiture grants the sitter an opportunity to choose how to present him or herself to the wider public, as a result portraits often include illustrations of social class and cultural identity. In short, portraiture is an act of making that goes beyond the creation of an object (the likeness of the sitter) and portraiture plays a pivotal role in the making of a subject. In Jones’ and

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Johnson’s self-portraits, the artists are situated in a trajectory in which Africa is in the background, where it operates as artistic inspiration as well as a critical marker of the artist’s racial identity.

Jones’s 1940 Self-Portrait and her 1939 Under the Influence of the Masters serve as entry points into this chapter’s discussion of the role Africa played in the first thirty years of her career. Via an examination of Jones’s work from 1928 to 1950, I offer several key assertions. First is that Jones’s initial explorations of African themes, people, and objects began much earlier than has been suggested in previous art historical scholarship. Secondly, during Jones’s 1937 sabbatical in Paris, her artistic development was furthered not only by her art instruction at the Académie Julian but also by her relationship with the African Diasporic, proto-Négritude circle of Afro-Caribbean and African American intellectuals in the city. Last is that this kind of engagement with African themes provided African American artists, such as Jones, a crucial way to position themselves as modern artists within the artistic and cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s (i.e., the Harlem Renaissance).

The background placement of the African objects in both Jones’s and Johnson’s self-portraits has dual implications. On the one hand, the placement alludes to an ancestral relationship between African Americans and Africa. On the other, the artists are pictured in their studio spaces and the presence of African art within these creative spaces denotes the aesthetic inspiration African
American artists were expected to glean from the arts of Africa. Johnson’s inclusion of his 1932 *Negro Masks* in *Self-Portrait* is one example of how he dealt with Africa in his own work. As Jones’s easel is not visible, viewers of her *Self-Portrait* do not know how Africa plays out on her canvas.

These two self-portraits speak to the theories Howard University professor and cultural theorist Alain Locke advanced in his seminal treatise on African Art and the African American artist, “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” that appeared in his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation.* In the anthology, which became the manifesto of sorts for the New Negro Movement, Locke stated his hope that “an appreciation for African art [would] serve as a stimulus for the discontinued and lagging channels of sculpture, painting, and the decorative arts.” Locke believed that African American artists, like the European modernists before them, should turn to African art as a project of cultural heritage reclamation as well as a source of artistic inspiration in their efforts to produce a distinct “Negro” (i.e., African American) artistic tradition.

**Boston Beginnings**

Jones was an art student at the Museum School affiliated with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston when Locke published “Legacy of the Ancestral

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7 Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (see ch. 1, n. 8).
Arts.” While it is unclear if she read the first version of essay in the March special issue of *Survey Graphic: Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* or discovered it a few months later in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, she was definitely aware of Locke. Jones recounted that she heard Locke speak during the early 1920s. Her introduction to African art was not facilitated by Locke, however, but had occurred several years earlier when she was a student at the High School of the Practical Arts in Roxbury. Jones later said that the High School of the Practical Arts offered her the “unusual opportunity to do special study in art” and that although there were a number of black students at the school, they had tended to focus on home economics.

Of her high school years, Jones recalled that she didn’t have “a feeling of any particular direction of ‘blackness’ . . . I was an ‘American child’ and worked right along with my white classmates.” During an internship for costume designer Grace Ripley, Jones helped design a series of masks for the New York-based Ted Shawn Dance Company. Jones cited the Ripley Studios internship as one of her first encounters with non-Western art, specifically African masking.

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10 Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (see chap. 1, n. 8).
13 Jones interviews with Danley, in Hill, ed., 275.
14 Ibid.
After graduating from high school, Jones enrolled as a design student at the Museum School. The school’s curriculum was modeled on its European counterparts and emphasized training in life drawing and perspective. As a Museum School student, Jones had easy access to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston where a sizable Egyptian collection was housed in the Art of the Ancient World division. However, the museum’s holdings of African art were limited to a few textiles and assorted small objects. One wonders if Jones’s instructors at the Museum School, a predominantly white institution, were actively encouraging her to explore African American or African themes in her work.

After graduating from the Museum School in 1927, Jones decided to pursue a career in what she perceived to be a color-blind industry: textile design. She achieved some measure of success—her designs were purchased and manufactured by the likes of F. A. Foster and Schumacher Company—but she commented on the manufacturers’ surprise when they learned that a “colored girl” had produced the designs. Several of her textiles include African and other non-Western motifs, which suggests that Jones was interested in exploring what

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18 Christaud Geary to author, February 7, 2011.

19 One of Jones’s white classmates included some of Jones’s designs in her own portfolio to help deflect manufacturers’ racism (Danley in Hill, ed., 281).
these cultures offered from a design perspective. Thus at the same moment that Locke advocates an African American turn to African art, Jones began to incorporate non-Western visual imagery into her own praxis.

One example of this is Jones’s colorful 1928 textile design Totem Poles (fig. 15), which makes direct reference to Northwest Coast American Indian cultures. In an untitled textile design ca. 1932 (fig. 16), Jones includes a patent quotation of an African source. The overall patterning of the textile bears an affinity to cloth produced by Kuba peoples and hidden among the antelopes, palm fronds, and geometric patterning is an African Ci Wara crest.

Whereas Africa was woven into the background of Jones’s 1940 Self-Portrait, in this textile African art is in both the foreground (the Ci Wara mask) and background (in the form of the abstracted Kuba cloth design). These textile designs supply the strongest evidence that Jones had access to Locke’s New Negro


21 Made by the Bamana peoples of Mali, Ci Wara masks were used in rituals and performances related to agriculture. When used in Bamana masquerades, a dancer shrouded in raffia affixes the Ci Wara mask to a basket worn on top of the dancer’s head. As African art at the time was appreciated for its formal rather than cultural significance, Jones follows Western convention by including only the wooden elements of the Ci Wara mask. My investigation of the holdings of the Museum School, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Peabody Museum at Howard revealed that none of the museums had a Ci Wara mask during this time; therefore, it is most likely that Jones saw a photograph of the mask in a book. Neither the Boston Public Library nor the library at the Museum School were able to discern when texts on African art made it into their collections, however. Perhaps Jones saw a photograph containing a Ci Wara mask among Paul Guillame’s photographs of African art. Guillaume, Sculptures Nègres: 24 photographies précédées d’un avertissement de Guillaume Apollinaire et d’un exposé de Paul Guillaume (Paris: Frazier-Soye, 1917).
anthology and other African art texts. It is more likely that she saw photographs of Kuba cloth and Ci Wara masks in books than such objects themselves in a Boston art museum. According to Dr. Christaud Geary, current curator of the Museum of Fine Arts African collection, the Kuba cloth in the museum’s collection would not have been on display.\textsuperscript{22} This information suggests that objects were not readily available and Jones would have had to seek out the objects in person and in print in order to study them. Thus, Africa was something for which Jones actively searched. Despite her early success as a textile designer, Jones became discouraged by the anonymity of the profession and, desiring to have “her name go down in the history books,” elected to begin painting and drawing full-time.\textsuperscript{23} Jones was tired of contributing to others’ success and committed herself to making her own mark on the art world. Her continued use of African themes became one way that she achieved this goal.

**Entering the Harlem Renaissance**

One of Jones’s watercolors appeared on the cover of the August 1928 issue of *Opportunity*. Although it is cited in bibliographies of Jones’s work, this watercolor has not been critically examined. The painting (fig. 17) depicts three African figures from various angles, set against a palm-frond-filled background. The center of the composition is dominated by a female figure whose wavy, stylized hair is cut off at the eyebrow. Her angular face with schematic eyes, high cheekbones, and dramatically arched eyebrows is reminiscent of formal elements

\textsuperscript{22} Christaud Geary to Author, February 7, 2011.

\textsuperscript{23} Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones*, 7.
associated with several types of African masks and figurative sculpture. Elaborate earrings dangle from her ears drawing the viewer’s eye downward to a light-colored necklace. While the woman’s facial features are clearly feminine, her lower half is decidedly more androgynous with clearly outlined pectoral muscles. She sports bulky shoulder pads and a circular chest plate. The second figure, to the right, is shown in profile with a bald head, slit eyes, and arched eyebrows. A third figure, to the left, enters the composition with four metal rings encircling her neck. In addition, the elongation of the figures is noteworthy. Elongation or distortion of figures was a hallmark of figural modernism in the 1920s, thus Jones’s stretching and distortion of the figures in the Opportunity watercolor demonstrates that she was conversant in current Euro/American modernist trends. In addition to the mask-like faces of three figures, Jones’s treatment of their skin is also notable for its high-gloss or shiny appearance is similar to the patina of ebonized African figurines. With this watercolor, Jones blurs the lines between human being and inanimate object; the “primitive” and the modern.

The Opportunity cover is notable for several reasons in addition to its content. First is Jones’s submission of her work to Opportunity, which indicates her awareness of the publication, its contents, and its readership. Opportunity was one of two Harlem Renaissance-era journals that covered issues related to black culture (the other was The Crisis). Second is the visibility such a cover would have afforded Jones, a young artist fresh out of art school: in 1928 the
journal was at the height of its popularity with a circulation of around 11,000. Because the issue of Opportunity was published soon after Jones’s graduation from art school, this watercolor provides further evidence of her early interest in African subjects.

Charting this early interest in Africa is significant because art historical constructions of Jones’s career tend to date her interest in Africa to 1937 and onward. This is in part because it was during her 1937-1938 year on sabbatical in Paris when she completed her African mask inspired painting Les Fétiches (fig. 3). When she returned to Howard’s campus in the fall of 1938, she supposedly had a conversation with Alain Locke during which he encouraged her to pursue themes related to the black experience in lieu of the impressionistic landscapes she produced previously.

In fact, Jones’s entrance into the black arts scene can be dated to the summer of 1928, ten years before her fabled encounter with Locke and her Parisian sabbatical. That summer began with an exhibit of Jones’s work at the popular Hobby Horse Bookstore on 135th Street, which was said to have drawn more than two hundred visitors. As the season progressed, the society sections of several black newspapers listed Jones as an attendee of a range of cultural

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28 Benjamin, The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones, 50.
29 “Display Art Works,” Afro-American, June 30, 1928. The Hobby Horse Bookstore, located at 205 West 135th Street and owned by Douglas Howe, is thought to have opened in 1928. The bookstore became popular for its Sunday evening literary events at which poets and writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston would share their work. See: Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, vol 1: A-J, ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York: Routledge, 2004), 567. It is also reported that Jones took summer session courses at Harvard in 1928, so she probably commuted between Boston and New York. Benjamin, The World of Lois Mailou Jones, 4.
events in celebration of artist Aaron Douglas and writer Claude McKay. The season ended with the publication of her work on the cover of *Opportunity*. This widespread attention caused Jones to briefly consider moving to New York, but instead she took a teaching position as head of the Art Department at the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina (outside of Greensboro). As the inclusion of African aesthetics was a critical marker of the modernist artistic identity promoted during the Harlem Renaissance, Jones’s late 1920s experiments with Africa in textile and painting support the claim that she was a more active participant in the movement.

In 1930, after a brief two-year position at the Palmer Memorial Institute, Jones joined the faculty of Howard University, where she remained until her retirement in 1977. Art historian and Howard alumnus David C. Driskell noted the importance of Howard and its faculty when he wrote, “the place to examine African American art theories in the 1930s [was] the Department of Art at Howard University, not the ivory towers of the Ivy League schools of the East.”

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With her faculty appointment, Jones becomes a participant in these theoretical and artistic debates.

**Ascent of Ethiopia: Africa, Jones, and the 1930s**

One of Jones’s first experiments in the medium of oil paint was *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (fig. 18), completed in 1932. The painting’s title refers to her mentor Meta Warrick Fuller’s well-known sculpture from 1921, *The Awakening of Ethiopia* (fig. 19) and its allusion to the new awareness of African heritage within the African American community.\(^{34}\) The evocation of Ethiopia clearly plays with the literary-religious tradition of Ethiopianism; nonetheless, a reading of Jones’s painting as a commentary on the Harlem Renaissance is possible.\(^{35}\) The graphic canvas shows the “head” of Ethiopia in profile at the bottom, emitting a group of silhouetted figures that are climbing a flight of stairs to a skyscraper-filled city that rests symbolically atop Ethiopia.

The “head” is balanced compositionally by the yellow sunburst that occupies the top left corner. The sun’s center holds a five-pointed black star, perhaps an allusion to Marcus Garvey’s 1920s Back to Africa campaign and Black

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\(^{34}\) In her recently published, much-anticipated, book-length study of Fuller’s sculpture, art historian Renée Ater considers the details surrounding the commissioning and display of *The Awakening of Ethiopia*. See: Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: the Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Ater argues that Ethiopia signified contradictory concepts in Fuller’s work. These were racial pride, the literary-religious tradition known as Ethiopianism that enabled African Americans to forge an identity based upon ancient Egyptian history, and contemporary Ethiopia as a site of black liberation. Twentieth-century African Americans heralded Ethiopia because the country had maintained its independence since ancient times until the invasion of Italy in 1935; eventually for African Americans the country became the metonym for the entire African continent. Ethiopia was an idea of Africa that African Americans could be proud of, with its established cultural history, avoidance of colonial domination, architectural sophistication, and political stability (Ater, 109-15).

\(^{35}\) Several connotations were assigned to “Ethiopia” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term was synonymous with the entire African continent; it referenced the actual country of Ethiopia; and it referred to Kush, the ancient Ethiopian culture. Ater, “Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller’s Ethiopia,” *American Art* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2003).
Star Shipping Line. The rising figures are shown in supplicant positions as they walk toward a stream of yellow rays. Notably, after stepping through the yellow shower the figures’ positions become erect and confident. Newly reborn, a pair of figures walks hand in hand past a set of pyramids toward the towering cityscape. Jones illustrates the pull of the city with a series of orbital spheres in which the words “Art,” “Drama,” and “Music” appear in the sky next to depictions of individuals playing instruments, acting out scripted scenes, and painting at an easel. Ascent of Ethiopia not only recognizes, but also pays explicit tribute to the foundational nature of Africa in African American culture. Ethiopia anchors the composition; it is from this African root system that the figures evolve and rise up into American urban culture.

Jones submitted The Ascent of Ethiopia for the 1933 Harmon Foundation exhibition, where it would have been shown alongside Palmer C. Hayden’s (1889–1973) painting Fétique et Fleur (fig. 20). A self-taught artist, Hayden had garnered fame (as well as critique) within African American artistic circles when

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he won the first Harmon Foundation award in 1926.\textsuperscript{38} Depicting a residential interior, the center of \textit{Fétiche et Fleur} is filled with a wooden table topped with a Fang reliquary statue next to a blue vase of tiger lilies.\textsuperscript{39} The vase and statue sit on patterned raffia Kuba cloth draped diagonally over a wooden table. An ashtray is placed toward the front of the table, with a lit cigarette resting in its bowl. The combination of the African objects, the tropical flowers, and cigarette in the foreground speak to the formation of a modern identity in Paris during the 1920s and to the roles the exotic and African art played in signifying modernity.\textsuperscript{40}

Though exhibited together, the two paintings offered two contrasting perspectives on the role of Africa and African art in African American art in the early 1930s. Hayden’s \textit{Fétiche et Fleur} is his only known work to feature African art explicitly. Rather than use African art as a link to African American identity, Hayden’s composition is a commentary on the fashionable nature of African art in the 1920s and 1930s. The African elements in the painting are decorative home accessories, additive elements that are easily removed or substituted with other chic items of the period. Conversely, Africa in Jones’s \textit{Ascent of Ethiopia} is foundational, its connection to African American culture undeniable.

\textsuperscript{38} Founded by former nurseryman-turned-land-developer William Elmer Harmon in 1921, the Harmon Foundation was originally designed to support the poor and disabled. In 1926 the foundation began giving out cash awards in the fields of visual arts, literature, and music, as well as education, science, race relations, and industry. Because Harmon was not known to be a collector or a connoisseur of art, the awards were judged by a jury of five “experts,” one of whom was black. The awards’ popularity led to the creation of a travelling exhibition of the winning works. By 1931 these exhibitions were touring the country, exposing the American public to contemporary African American artistic production (Reynolds, \textit{Against the Odds}, 30).

\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps further evidence of Jones’s awareness of Hayden’s \textit{Fétiche et Fleur} is the presence of a tiger lily bouquet in a blue vase found in her 1944 painting \textit{Two Faiths} now in the collection of the Museum Fine Arts, Boston.

\textsuperscript{40} Art historian Petrine Archer-Straw has elucidated how \textit{les fétiches}—African sculptures, masks, textiles, and more—functioned as fashionable accessories for the Parisian avant-garde in the 1920s. Archer-Straw, \textit{Negrophilia}, 51–60.
Jones spent the summer of 1934 taking classes at Columbia Teachers College. Of note is an education course she took, which was taught by famed anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942). Her final project, a paper entitled “Mask Making,” included a lesson plan for teaching young children about different masking traditions. The teaching folio included a number of sketches, rendered on index cards, of masks from Africa, New Guinea, Aztec, and medieval European cultures. Jones listed K. Macgowan and H. Ross’ *Masks and Demons* (1924) as source material for the masks. It was also during the summer of 1934 that Jones made the acquaintance of Asadata Dafora (1890–1965), the musician/dancer from Sierra Leone credited with introducing African drumming to American audiences in the 1930s. Dafora invited Jones to design masks and costumes for his productions, further exposing Jones to African artistic and musical traditions.

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42 Due in large part to Boas, known as the father of American anthropology, Columbia University was an important center for the study of ethnography and anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s. Boas became a professor of anthropology at Columbia in 1899, where he started the first doctoral program in anthropology in the United States. From early in his career Boas was involved with various ethnological and ethnographic museums at which he championed contextual rather than evolutionary display. His four-pronged approach to anthropology (physical, cultural, archeological, and linguistic) included the study of history through materials other than written sources. He published several important texts, including *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Primitive Art* (1927). Boas trained several key figures in American anthropology, including Melville Herskovits (1895–1963) and Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960). For more on Boas and his work see: Douglas Cole, *Franz Boas: the Early Years, 1859-1906* (Vancouver and Seattle: Douglas & McIntyre, University of Seattle Press, 1999) and Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1998).

43 Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-18, Folder 58; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

44 Jones attended rehearsals in order to match the costumes she was designing with the dancers’ movements (Benjamin, *The World of Lois Mailou Jones*, 4). Although there is speculation that Jones designed the costumes for Dafora’s production *Kykunkor* [*The Witch Woman*] the play’s opening month of May 1934 would have conflicted with Jones’s teaching schedule at Howard. I did find a slide of the playbill for *Kykunkor* in her papers at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, but was unable to locate a physical copy to discern the date she might have attended. For a detailed description of the plot and staging see: Maureen Needham, “*Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman*: An African Opera in America, 1934,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, 76.
Jones was not in New York when MoMA mounted the *African Negro Art* show in 1935. However, MoMA created a travelling exhibition that toured a range of historically black colleges and universities from October 1935 to December 1936, which enabled Jones to view the pieces from the exhibition without leaving Washington, D.C. She would have had numerous opportunities to do so, because Howard doubled student and faculty access to the show by hosting the exhibit twice during its twenty-one-month tour: first in October 1935 and then in June 1936.45

As mentioned in chap. 1, the traveling exhibition consisted of twenty-five 16” x 20” photographs taken by Walker Evans, who had been commissioned by MoMA to create a large photographic portfolio of the objects displayed in the original exhibition. In addition to hosting the travelling exhibition, Howard and other historically black colleges and universities received complimentary copies of Evan’s portfolio.46 Students of Jones’s, including the aforementioned David C. Driskell, have recounted that Jones utilized the Evans portfolio in her studio classes.47 Clearly, in addition to exploring African art in her painting, Jones brought Africa into her classroom. Eighteen months after seeing Evans’s

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46 Webb, 40.

47 Driskell interview with author, August 11, 2010.
photographs at Howard, Jones would be able to see African art in Paris, the city in which modern artists’s love affair with African art began. In September of 1937, she set sail for France on the S. S. Normandie le Havre for a year long sojourn in the city of light.

**Paris, the City of Light**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Paris was a beacon for the African American artistic and literary communities. In the century’s first decades, numerous African American artists crossed the Atlantic to study in the city, whose cultural capital as the birthplace of modern art was uncontested. Paris represented a rite of passage for American artists regardless of race. The success of many African American artists (e.g., Henry Ossawa Tanner, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer C. Hayden, and Hale Woodruff) who traveled to Paris before her, helped cement the city as a necessary rung on the ladder for artistic success. Moreover, for many African American cultural producers, France was mythologized as being free from the racial prejudice that haunted African Americans in the United States. Jones herself is reported as describing her time in Paris as “shackle free.”

Paris, of course, had been the site of Pablo Picasso and others embrace of African art, a move that as discussed in chapt. 1, shifted the trajectory of

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“primitivism” and the utility of Africa to modern art.⁵⁰ At the time of Jones’s arrival in Paris, the city’s galleries overflowed with African objects and fetishes. In addition to facilitating contact with African art and masterpieces of European art, Paris afforded African Americans the opportunity to interact with peoples of African descent from all over the world. As Brent Hayes Edwards reports, “Metropolitan France was one of the key places where African Americans, Antilleans, and Africans could ‘link up.’”⁵¹ As such, Paris functioned (and arguably continues to serve) not only as a contact zone for artists and African art, but also as a Diasporic space.⁵²

Though she had long dreamed of going to Paris, Jones could not break away from her duties at Howard until her sabbatical in 1937–1938 and a fellowship from the General Education Board allowed her to make the journey. She had hoped to study with Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), the “grandfather” of African American art, but Tanner passed away three months before her arrival. Although unable to receive his mentorship, Jones was able to follow in his artistic footsteps by enrolling at the Académie Julian, where he had

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⁵⁰ A large body of literature has examined the development of primitivism and modern art. For a compilation of primary sources and secondary sources that document the engagements among writers, artists, and non-Western art related to primitivism and modern art during various periods, see the works cited in chapter 1, n. 30.
⁵¹ Brent Hayes Edwards, Practice of Diaspora, 3.
⁵² I borrow the concept of Diasporic space from James Clifford’s understanding of Avtar Brah’s work, which is based on Brah’s unpublished manuscript, “Diasporas and Borders” (n.d.), written while Brah was at the University of California, Santa Cruz. See: James Clifford, “Diasporas,” in special issue, “Further Inflections Towards Ethnographics of the Future,” Cultural Anthropology 9, no. 3 (August 1994).
studied in 1891. Jones would spend the academic year in Paris and the next summer in Rome before returning to Washington in the fall of 1938. Jones arrived in Paris in the fall of 1937 as a classically trained artist, but her time at the Académie Julian initiated a change in her painting style “from the tight brushstrokes of academic painting to the freer and looser stroke of the Impressionist movement.” A photograph of Jones in her Parisian studio (fig. 21) shows her seated among more than twenty of the forty canvases she painted over the course of her year in the city. The works are a mix of street scenes, many completed en plein air, a variety of still-lives, and a handful of portraits. At the far right, leaning against the floor-to-ceiling window that faced the Eiffel Tower, is the oil painting Les Fétiches (fig. 3). With its somber palette of grays, purples, and browns; its Cubist aesthetic; and African subject matter, Les Fétiches marks a dramatic break in Jones’s painting style.

On the subject of Les Fétiches Jones said: “I had to remind [her French professors]. . . of all the French artists using the inspiration of Africa, and that if anybody had the right to use it, I had it, it was my heritage.” With the statement, Jones claims African art both as a part of her ancestral legacy and as

54 Jones was unsuccessful in her petitioning of James Herring, head of the Department of Art at Howard, to allow her to stay in Europe for an additional year. Benjamin, Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones, 31.
56 Ibid., 30.
the domain of Cubism and European modernism. Given its date and subject matter, *Les Fétiches* is often read as exemplifying Howard University Professor Alain Locke’s 1925 call to African American artists to capitalize on the success of the European modernists and to explore African art as a way to establish an identifiable African American artistic tradition. In such readings, *Les Fétiches* is hailed as the culmination of Jones’s Parisian experience. It was her time in Paris that gave her full access to her “African” roots as manifested in African art objects.

However, understanding when *Les Fétiches* was completed during Jones’s Parisian tenure helps scholars understand that Paris was not only an opportunity for her to view the African art objects that filled the many museums and galleries Jones visited, but also for expanding Jones’s understanding of Africa to include not only African objects, but Afro-Diasporic bodies. According to letters exchanged between Jones and her mother, Carolyn, *Les Fétiches* was painted within the first four months of her Parisian tenure.\(^{61}\) At the end of February, Jones reported that “I’ve been up to my neck in work . . . I’m also exhibiting in the Independent Exposition which opens next Friday. I have two oils in it, I think I told you—one a creative painting—‘Fetiche’ (Afrique) and a very large nature morte with fruit.”\(^ {62}\) Thus, rather than interpreting *Les Fétiches* as the culmination of Jones’s Parisian experiences, the painting represents her engagement with African art mid-way through her Parisian tenure.

\(^{61}\) Loïs Mailou Jones to Carolyn Jones, February 27, 1938. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-15, Folder 8; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
When she arrived in Paris “African art was just the thing,” Jones wrote. “All the galleries, the museums were featuring African sculptures, African designs, and I sketched, I sketched everything.” In some narratives, Jones says that she painted Les Fétiches after a particularly inspiring trip to the African art galleries along the Boulevard Raspail. Recently, Wendy Grossman exhibited Les Fétiches alongside photographs from Walker Evans’ 1935 MoMA portfolio. The juxtaposition offered a compelling visual argument that Jones took inspiration for Les Fétiches from the 1935 photographs. Regardless of its original inspiration, Les Fétiches enabled Jones to speak to current trends both in African American art and to Modern art in general.

When Richard J. Powell writes of Les Fétiches in his essay “Re/Birth of a Nation” he posits that Jones was in fact reclaiming “Africa” for “blacks”:

Like the poetry produced under the African and Caribbean literary movement known as Negritude, Les Fétiches emphasized Africa’s rhythmic and mythic dimensions . . . but also attributed a deeper meaning to the continent, a process of reclamation where artifacts, atmosphere, and heightened consciousness created a new sense of what it meant to be ‘African’ or (‘black’) in the twentieth century.

In his reading of Les Fétiches, Powell delineates three elements “artifacts, atmosphere, and heightened consciousness” that combined to create a new form of blackness. Les Fétiches contains African artifacts (the five masks), however its

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64 Ibid.
65 Grossman, 46.
murky, mythic “atmosphere” can be read as both related to the myth of the shadowy nature of the dark African continent and to the tenets of Surrealism. Jones positioned herself in a way that allowed Les Fétiches to be considered a success in both the European and American art worlds of the 1930s by highlighting the work’s relationship to the legacy of European modernism as well as to the current state of African American art, in which racial heritage was being widely celebrated.

Returning to the studio photograph of Jones in Paris, one notes that Les Fétiches is surrounded by several other Africa-themed pieces that include both African objects and bodies. In the photograph, Jones’s African Bathers (fig. 22) is displayed on an easel. Its depiction of a group of faceless African men bathing in a river has art-historical antecedents in the bathing scenes produced by Cézanne, Matisse, and others. It appears, however, that African Bathers is Jones’s interpretation of a set of images found in a serial French travelogue titled “A Travers L’Afrique”: Lieutenant-Colonel Baratier illustré d’après les dessins de Gaston de Burggraff (Paris: Les Inédits de Modern-Bibliothèque, 1910). Despite the classical academicism of Jones’s rendition and colonial era source, the fluidity of the image with its extended brushstrokes, multi-tonal brown skin, and unidentified tropical locale, suggests that it be can be read as a New Negro provocation and a diasporic image rolled into one.

72 The travelogue was published in serial form. An unbound copy of the text exists in the Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-1, Folder 35; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Jones As Illustrator

That Jones would have combed colonial-era sources for African imagery during her time in Paris is not surprising. Although on sabbatical from Howard University, Jones continued to work as an illustrator for Associated Publishers, Inc., a publishing house associated with Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Washington, D.C. While in Paris she worked on illustrations for Woodson’s *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939) (fig. 23). Although produced for a juvenile audience and in printed rather than painted form, these illustrations represent yet another venue in which Jones pursued her interest in African subjects and mark a movement from African objects to African bodies.

Caroline Goeser recently proposed that the print culture of the 1920s and 1930s, specifically the graphic arts, represent a “modernist medium that connected art and commercial culture,” which is worthy of study in its own right. As evinced in *Under the Influence of the Masters* and *Self Portrait* with

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which the chapter began, the formal qualities and themes of Jones’s illustrations often made their way into her paintings. Her work for *African Heroes and Heroines* is no exception and several illustrations demonstrate that Jones’s painting and illustration practice are intertwined.

For example, Jones’s treatment of black skin and black figures in *The Musicians* (fig. 24) prepared for *African Heroes and Heroines* is reminiscent of her 1928 watercolor cover of *Opportunity*. As in the 1928 watercolor, the faces in *The Musicians* are mask-like and possess angular features. Jones uses white accents to add dimension to her figures. Jones’s use of white as a highlighting agent in *The Musicians* is noteworthy. The highlighting imparts a high-gloss or shiny quality to the black skin. *The Musicians* is both a documentation of African musicians at work, but also is perhaps an example of Jones’s experimentations with visualizing black skin when working in black and white.

In the preface to *African Heroes and Heroines*, Woodson explained that the text was not a history of Africa per se, but a “a biographical treatment of heroes and heroines.” Woodson’s illustrations (done in pen and watercolor) were for the large part portraits of the various African leaders. Some show the various African leaders in action and others might be termed “quintessential” portraiture, as in her rendition of *Benhazin* (fig. 25). In this portrait, the nineteenth century ruler of Dahomey is pictured against a solid muted background. His body comprises the bulk of the composition. His torso is draped in a striped fabric that leaves his muscled chest exposed; a long wooden pipe

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extends from his lips to his hands. When Woodson mentioned Jones’s work in the “Preface” to *African Heroes and Heroines* he said, “illustrations have been worked out from source materials.”\(^{76}\) The source for Jones’s Benhazin appears to be an image from the 1895 *La France au Dahomey* by Alexandre d’Albéca (fig. 26).\(^{77}\) Where Albéca’s portrait of Benhazin is crisp and possesses photographic clarity, Jones’s use of watercolor imparts a softness and sensitivity to the portrait.

Jones’s 1938 oil painting *La Tête d’un Nègre* (fig. 27) utilizes the same compositional aesthetic as many of Jones’s *African Heroes and Heroines* illustrations. The composition is cropped so that the bust of the young man fills the entire canvas. The top of his natural hairstyle and shoulders bound the painting’s edges. Rather than situating her sitter in an identifiable environment, Jones has taken his countenance as her only subject. The young man is seated against a muted backdrop. He seems uncomfortable under Jones’s scrutiny: his brow is slightly furrowed and his gaze is averted, pointing slightly to the left.

In *African Bathers*, most likely completed only a few weeks before *La Tête*, Jones’s figures are faceless and without identity. Jones’s title reveals nothing more than the painting’s basic subject. Although Jones’s choice of title with *La Tête d’un Nègre* suggests a similar motive, the portrait is far from just a painting of the head of a black man. The title is a play on anthropological or ethnographic categories, specifically the discipline of phrenology, which used head-size

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\(^{76}\) *Ibid.*

measurements to make determinations about psychological and moral traits.\textsuperscript{78} Jones, however, has painted a portrait rather than a type or stock painting of a black man.\textsuperscript{79} Returning to the idea that the portrait plays a role in identity creation, \textit{La Tête d’un Nègre} signals the beginning of a portraiture practice in which Jones paints, and in doing so, engenders a nascent black Diasporic identity. With \textit{La Tête d’un Nègre}, Jones moves away from an object-centered relationship with Africa and images that directly refer to Africa in their titles (i.e., \textit{African Bathers}) toward one that incorporates peoples of African descent and begins to capture a sense of Diasporic subjecthood that would characterize her works from the 1950s onward.

Although Jones does not name her sitter, she seems intent on uncovering his psyche by literally getting into his head. Jones’s model for \textit{La Tète} is not characteristically or stereotypically “African” (he lacks a dark complexion and broad features), but is instead more racially hybrid. The hybridity of the figure problematizes Jones’s use of the term “nègre” by exposing its global connotations and fluidity. With the portrait, Jones participates in the picturing of blackness—an action facilitated not only vis-à-vis the Diasporic nature of Paris, but also a shift from interrogating African art objects to black bodies (here African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American). With this artistic actualization, Jones joins

\textsuperscript{78} For more on the use of science to determine racial differences, in particular the relationship between the type and the portrait, see: Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” \textit{American Art} 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995); and Stephen Jay Gould, \textit{The Mismeasure of Man} (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981).

\textsuperscript{79} Brent Hayes Edwards makes an excellent point when he notes that some elements and nuances of the French language can truly be lost in translation. He draws particular attention to the “heterological slippages among vocabularies such as nègre and noir” \textit{(Practice of Diaspora}, 20).
forces with a group of Francophone black writers who were in the process of reclaiming a positive identity for the term “nègre” and blackness in general.

**A Portrait of Négritude: Jones and the Nardal Sisters**

During the 1920s and 1930s, Paris became the meeting place for like-minded Afro-Caribbean students and intellectuals. Jones’s arrival in Paris coincided with a rising black internationalism. The informal conversations about blackness that took place in cafés and salons across Paris during the 1930s, took a more institutionalized form in the 1940s with the birth of Négritude, a literary and ideological movement that sought to celebrate a racial heritage shared by all members of the African Diaspora, embodied in the writings of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas, and Aime Césaire.80

Much has been written about Jones’s training at the Académie Julian, but little attention has been paid to how she spent her time in Paris or her possible interactions with members of the Négritude movement. Her knowledge of and acquaintance with critical figures associated with the movement began as soon as she set foot in France. When Jones disembarked in Le Havre in September of

1937, fellow Howard University professor Louis T. Achille was there to greet her. Jones would spend her first few weeks in Paris living with his parents.\textsuperscript{81}

Achille, born in Martinique, is one of several “overlooked . . . early Francophone Antillean” intellectuals in Paris.\textsuperscript{82} Classes at the Académie Julian did not begin until October so Jones had just under a month to absorb French culture through the eyes of her Caribbean hosts. In a 1977 interview, Jones relayed how her time with the Achille family sped up her acquisition of the French language.\textsuperscript{83} Even after she moved into a place of her own, Jones’s association with Achille no doubt facilitated access to a constellation of Afro-Caribbean and African intellectuals who were living, studying, and writing in Paris. Moreover, Jones had arrived just in time to visit the International Exposition that attracted millions of visitors and preoccupied the city for six solid months.\textsuperscript{84} Although Jones missed the opportunity to hear Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor speak at one of the exposition’s congresses, she was able to

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\textsuperscript{81} The Achille family was decidedly bourgeois. Louis T. Achille was born in 1909 in Martinique, and educated in France. He joined Howard’s Department of Romance Languages in 1932 (Benjamin, \textit{Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones}, 27). Achille’s father was the first Antillean to receive the French equivalent of a PhD and he taught English in Martinique until 1939 so most likely Jones lived with Achille’s mother Marguerite.

\textsuperscript{82} Edwards, \textit{Practice of Diaspora}, 4. By and large, Achille’s biography remains incomplete. In a forthcoming dissertation by historian Celeste Day Moore (University of Chicago) on post-war mediations of African American music in the French Empire, Moore situates Achille more explicitly within the proto-Nègritude cohort of the late 1930s. Moore’s work adds credence to my claims surrounding Jones’s potential awareness and interactions with this circle.

\textsuperscript{83} Danley in Hill, ed., 283.

\textsuperscript{84} The exposition, which had the theme “Art and Technology as Applied to Modern Life,” ran from May 25 to November 25. During this time, approximately 31 million visitors viewed installations by more than 11,000 exhibitors. For more on the exhibition see: James D. Herbert, \textit{Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
view Picasso’s *Guernica*, which hung in the Spanish Pavilion, and to partake in many other activities.\(^{85}\)

In an undated letter to her mother, Jones described an evening out during which she had attended a production of *La Mère* starring the famed African American contralto, Marian Anderson (1897–1993). The letter bears Jones’s studio address, which indicates that it was written after she moved from the Achille family home in October 1937. In addition to mentioning Anderson, Jones told her mother that the famous African American expat performer Josephine Baker had married a “wealthy Frenchman this week.” Baker married French industrialist Jean Lion on November 30, 1937.\(^{86}\) Thus Jones’s letter most likely dates to the end November or beginning of December.\(^{87}\) Jones told her mother that she, along with her companions, had sent Anderson a “petite box of roses” and had been invited backstage. She also casually noted that “We went with two girls from Martinique. One is a graduate of The Sorbonne, Jeanne Zamea (now married to a doctor in Guadeloupe) who is visiting her sister, Mademoiselle Nardelle who is to see the minister of the colonies. I am doing a portrait of Jeanne.”\(^{88}\) A comparison of Jones’s 1938 painting *Jeanne, A Martiniquaise* (fig. 28) with a 1928 photograph of Jane Nardal (fig. 29) gives credence to my contention

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\(^{85}\) In her final report to the General Education Board, Jones mentions visiting the exposition and the contemporary art exhibits put on by the countries in their respective pavilions. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 27; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. \(^{86}\) “Jo Baker to Retire: Famed Dancer, Paris Broker Wed in France,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, December 4, 1937. \(^{87}\) Anderson performed at l’Opéra de Paris on December 14, 1937; Jones may have seen an earlier performance or her dates may have been off by a week or two. \(^{88}\) Loïs Mailou Jones to Caroline Jones (n.d.), Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-8, Folder 7, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
that the sitter in Jeanne is Jane Nardal, who along with her sister Paulette played an instrumental role in early phases of the Négritude movement.

It was Louis T. Achille, a cousin of the Nardals’, who most likely facilitated Jones’s introduction to the sisters. In the 1930s, the Nardal sisters—Paulette and Jane—hosted a weekly Sunday literary salon in their home in the Parisian suburb of Clamart. These three women were instrumental in introducing the Parisian black intelligentsia to African American members of the Harlem Renaissance who visited Paris. The sisters were also behind the publishing of the bilingual La Revue du Monde Noir, a publication that was influential in theorizing rise of black internationalism. The identification of Jane Nardal as Jones’s sitter is significant as it not only demonstrates that from early on during her time in Paris she was encountering Afro-Diasporic individuals, but

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89 My thought has been clarified through discussions with University of Delaware graduate student Sarah Filik, who reached the same conclusion. Personal email, February 11, 2011. Edwards reported that Jane left Paris and returned to Guadeloupe, where she lived with her doctor husband, to teach high school Latin (Practice of Diaspora, 153).
90 Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora, 119.
91 There were four Nardal sisters in total: Jane, Alice, Lucie, and Paulette. For more on the Nardal sisters and their salon activities see: T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Négritude Women (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52–68 and Jennifer Ann Boittin, Colonial Metropolis: The Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2010).
92 Among the African American guests to the salon were writers Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Claude McKay, as well as sculptor Augusta Savage. Paulette Nardal and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Beyond Négritude: Essays From Woman in the City (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 2.
93 Jones’s connection to Howard University, her relationship with Achille, and (perhaps) her proximity to Locke, would have been deeply appealing to the Nardal sisters. Jane had first made contact with Locke in 1927, when she wrote to him about the possibility of translating The New Negro for a francophone audience. Moreover, it was Jane’s 1928 article “L’Internationalisme noir,” published in the inaugural issue of La Dépêche Africaine, that laid the conceptual foundation of black internationalism that would gird the Négritude movement in the coming decades. There were only six issues of La Revue du Monde Noir Jennifer Boittin, “In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations, and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris,” French Colonial History, vol. 6 (2005), 121.
also suggests that she was aware of the larger concerns which pre-occupied the Nardal sisters. Namely, questions related to the global nature of black identity.

In the horizontal portrait, Jane sits against a wall of flesh colored stripes that range from light caramel to dark chocolate. Her oval face has a sculptural mask like quality to it, yet Jones is careful to render Jane’s features with a roundness and fullness that indicates human flesh. Her dress signals her Diasporic roots and is Jones’s interrogation of Africa in sartorial terms—a red-and-green head scarf matches a wrap pinned loosely around her shoulders—the folds of which are heavy with impasto evidence of Jones’s adoption of the palette knife; on her wrist is a bangle of shell or quill; and (as in Jones’s later Self-Portrait) one ear bears a single gold hoop.

The painting, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is striking for several reasons. First, Jones’s choice of a horizontal composition is unusual; portraits tend to be vertical in orientation. Second, is the attention and compositional draw of Jane’s accessories—her bangled wrist, the pin on her shoulder, and her gold hoop. Her visage, her clothing, and her accessory choices emphasize that all of these elements combine to form her identity. Jeanne is a portrait not only of Jane Nardal, but also a Diasporic identity. This picturing of Diasporic subjecthood is reflected not only in Jones’s choice of sitter, but also in her decision to fill the background with the various shades of blackness.

With the portrait, Jones participates in the picturing of blackness—an action facilitated not only vis-à-vis the Diasporic nature of Paris, but also a shift from interrogating African art objects to black bodies (here African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American). Importantly, this new interest in Diasporic
subject hood occurs at the same moment that Jones is also exploring African art. Both works bear 1938 as their year of completion. *Jeanne* illustrates that an African American visual artist, like her African American literary counterparts, was engaging with members of the Négritude movement and suggests that works like *Jeanne* be read through the theories advanced by the Afro-Diasporic individuals who were involved in it. On the other hand, it elucidates that the collage of Jones’s experiences (aesthetic and cultural)—her time at the Académie Julian, her painting in *plein air*, her exploration of African art, and her interactions with Afro-Diasporic peoples living in Paris—meld together and inform her aesthetic.

**A Portrait Practice: Picturing Blackness**

As Benjamin and Gaither present the narrative of Jones’s career, when Jones returned to Howard in the fall of 1938 she was approached by Locke, who wanted to use one of her Parisian cityscapes in his forthcoming volume, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and Negro Theme in Art*.94 As mentioned in the preceding chapter during the conversation, Locke supposedly encouraged Jones to “re-evaluate her subject matter and to take her heritage more seriously.”95 With the word “heritage” Locke was referring to Africa and African art, Jones’s experiences as an African American woman, and the black experience at large.

95 Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones*, 50.
The representational paintings of African Americans that Jones produced at the end of the 1930s and in the 1940s—*Dans un Café à Paris* (also known as *Leigh Whipper*, fig. 30) from 1939, *Jennie* from 1943 (fig. 31), and *Mob Victim* (fig. 32) from 1944—are considered part of her “Locke period” and are hailed for their careful, realistic portrayals of black subjects. They documented African Americans in everyday environments. Of the 1940s portraits, Benjamin states: “[Jones] was trying to place the black subject in a context that was very much a sense of pride—she didn’t want to portray the stereotypical images or anything that referenced them in a demeaning manner.” In each of the paintings a singular black figure dominates the composition of each painting. *Jennie* stands in a kitchen—her eyes cast downward, only her lids visible—preoccupied with the blade with which she is scaling a fish. Jones’s *Mob Victim*, shows the subject (a man she found walking on U Street in Washington) leaning against a tree, hands bound by rope and head raised in quiet meditation and anticipation of his fate.

In the 1939 portrait of African American actor Leigh Whipper (1876-1975), *Dans un Café à Paris*, Jones captures not only Whipper’s likeness, but also the essence of Parisian café society. In the portrait, Whipper sits unhurried at a table with a half empty bottle of rosé and two sandwiches on a plate. His shoulders are hunched in relaxation and his arms cross in front of him on the table. His gaze does not meet the viewer, who ostensibly sits at the table with

him, but rather he looks off engrossed in the action occurring on the Parisian streets. If Jones’s social realist portraits of the 1940s are seen as documenting the “black experience,” then Dans un Café (Leigh Whipper) suggests that for some African Americans this experience included participation in French café life. Moreover, Jones’s socio-realist portraits of the 1940s when considered alongside her portraits she completed in Paris elucidate the presence of multiple black identities, some quintessentially American, African, or Afro-Diasporic in nature.

Despite her concerted efforts to deal with the black experience in literal terms, however, Jones felt that Locke was overlooking her work. On July 10, 1944, she wrote to him that:

> It was rather disheartening to read the Forward to the catalogue for the “New Names in American Art” exhibition and find my name omitted. Perhaps sometime we should talk about my work. I’m sacrificing so much to have a career and my present salary at Howard is in no way sufficient to aid in my work, yet I keep on. Kindly let me know when it will be convenient to talk—perhaps in the fall.\(^7\)

In fact, Jones’s Mob Victim was included in the exhibit. The show, which was on view at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago for the month of October, displayed her painting alongside works by Richmond Barthé, Romare Bearden, John Biggers, her Howard student Elizabeth Catlett, Palmer C. Hayden, Jacob Lawrence, James Porter, and Hale Woodruff, among others.\(^8\) Jones took issue with Locke because he did not single her out in the essay he wrote for the exhibition pamphlet; he had, however, named Jacob Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, and

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\(^7\) Jones to Locke, July 10, 1944; Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-12, Folder 34; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Eldzier Cortor, Charles Sebree, and others as part of a group of young artists who were on the verge of receiving “national stature” and were making “substantial and important contributions to our national art.” Some black artists were achieving Jones’s dream—their names were appearing in the history books.

**Animating Africa**

By 1945 Jones was becoming restless and frustrated. In November, she submitted an application for a teaching position in the Department of Design at Brooklyn College. That same year she also sent a proposal to the Rosenwald Foundation requesting funds for additional training in Paris, to be followed by a trip during which she intended to pursue “creative work in Painting and studies of the Arts and handicrafts of the Vai and Loma tribes of the North West Province of Liberia, West Africa.” Jones did not win the fellowship, perhaps due to the foundation’s dwindling funds. However, her application evinces a desire to travel to the African continent that would not be fulfilled for almost thirty years.

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100 Jones to Professor Serge Chermayeff, Chairman of the Department of Design, Brooklyn College, November 14, 1945. Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-11, Folder 14; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
101 Founded by Julius Rosenwald, former president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, the foundation was completely devoted to philanthropy; it donated more than $70 million to a variety of causes before becoming bankrupt in 1948. For more on the relationship between African American artists and the Julius Rosenwald Fund see: A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, ed. Daniel Schulman (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2009).
102 Fisk University Archives, Julius Rosenwald Papers, Box 495, Folder 20.
While she waited for a reply from the Rosenwald Fund, Jones busied herself with work for the Liberian Centennial Commission for the Celebration and Victory Exposition to be held in Monrovia, Liberia, from 1947 to 1949. Fellow Howard University faculty member and prominent Washington architect Hilyard R. Robinson, who served as the technical director for the exposition, probably facilitated Jones’s commission.\textsuperscript{103} The exposition celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Liberia as a sovereign state; its additional aim was to promote world peace based on “cooperation, mutual understanding and progressive enterprise.”\textsuperscript{104} Ultimately, Jones was unable to visit the exposition as she had hoped to do, but her illustrations did grace the cover and pages of the hardcover exposition pamphlet.

With the cover (fig. 33) Jones introduces a compositional trope that I have termed blackness in triplicate. On the green linen cover, a trio of faces (one female and two male) cascade down the left following the curve of a palm tree trunk. The three faces represent three different “African types.” At the bottom, one finds a “colonial” type wearing a white pith helmet and a crisp white suit replete with red tie. Although he is black, his military inspired uniform suggests ties to colonialism and Western exploration of the African continent. Above him is a “traditional” man who sports a red fez and an embroidered jacket with gold and black designs. The lone female appears at the top. Her tunic, striped in gold, mirrors the traditional dress of the man directly below. Her white headscarf is

tied with a strip of striped cloth. With its representation of “African types,” the cover image bears a striking visual affinity to posters produced by the French Colonial Government for the Exposition Coloniale Internationale in 1931 (fig. 34).

Where the French Colonial poster by Jean Victor Desmeures illustrated Asian, Native North American Indian, Middle Eastern, and African identities, Jones’s Liberian Centennial cover celebrated the presence or potential of multiple African identities. Both Jones’s Rosenwald Fund application and her participation in the Centennial and Victory Celebration demonstrate that by the 1940s, Jones’s conceptions of Africa had shifted from interrogations of African art objects towards an interest in exploring the potential of African and Afro-Diasporic identity that necessitated investigations of both black objects and black bodies.

In 1950, Jones again shifted her attention to African bodies when she painted The Lovers (also known as Somali Friends; fig. 35). Jones assigned human form to Africa in The Lovers, a brightly colored composition that captures the mutual gaze between a woman and a man of African descent. Jones’s depiction of the couple combines the aesthetic elements found throughout the first thirty years of her career: the background is graphic and abstract, filled with geometric green palm fronds and an exaggerated curvilinear motif in red and gold that are reminiscent of her early textile designs. The pair is clad in clothing that signifies their non-Western status—the young man wears a swath of white

fabric wrapped around his body while his female companion is dressed in a mix of brightly colored and patterned fabrics, her neck adorned with a chunky bead necklace. Jones’s treatment of their facial features (highlighted and glossy skin, delineated eyebrows, and angular cheekbones) references the humanized masks in her 1928 Opportunity cover. Last, and perhaps unintentionally, the young Somali woman with the short, pressed hair; gold earring; and pursed red lips bears some resemblance to Jones’s own Self-Portrait from 1940.

Whereas her 1940 Self-Portrait had a pair of African figurines in the background, The Lovers can be read as Jones’s visualization of these figures coming to life—an animation project facilitated via the contact with African art objects and peoples of African descent she had encountered in Paris and Washington. In The Lovers, one can see the progression from African Americans looking at African art objects to peoples of African descent looking at each other.

**Conclusion**

Jones’s relationship to Africa began before her 1938 sabbatical in Paris. By tracing her early artistic explorations of African themes from her days at the Museum School through her arrival at Howard University in 1930, one is able to learn that Jones was an active, albeit fringe, participant in what is now called the Harlem Renaissance; a period to which she has previously been seen as a latecomer. Moreover, Jones’s time in Paris was transformative not only of her painting style, which became impressionistic, but also of her understanding of Africa. While in Paris Jones spent time studying African art in galleries and museums, but she also interacted with peoples of African descent. The analysis
of Jones’s portraiture from the late 1930s—specifically her paintings *Jeanne* and *La Tête d’un Nègre*—illustrate Jones’s nascent interest in picturing the different faces of blackness. Thus, by the end of her sojourn in Paris one finds Jones’s interest in Africa shifting from visual interrogations of African objects to picturing of African and Afro-Diasporic peoples that initiates her exploration of the contours of black identity.

For me Haiti is Africa, for it marvelously expresses the roots, links, and ties to mother Africa. I feel that Haiti, black America, and Africa are one.¹

–Lois Mailou Jones

Introduction

On August 8, 1953, Loïs Mailou Jones married Haitian graphic designer Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël in Cabris, France. She was 48 years old. Jones and Pierre-Noël first met in 1934, during a summer design course at Columbia University.² The two had been out of touch until Pierre-Noël appeared on her Washington, D.C. doorstop in 1953. After their marriage, Jones set up a studio in Port-au-Prince and the couple spent their summers in Haiti from 1954 to 1964. Their marriage established a triangular route between Haiti, France, and the United States that Jones would traverse regularly for the rest of her life. It is this travel and her cultural production in these various locales that enables a consideration of Jones as a figure of the Black Atlantic.³

This chapter is an examination of Jones’s Afro-Diasporic experiences and encounters from 1954 when she first visited Haiti through the early 1970s when

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¹ Jones interview with Benjamin, November 1, 1986. Benjamin, The World of Loïs Mailou Jones, 8.
² The two enjoyed a summer romance and corresponded for a bit after Jones returned to Howard, but eventually fell out of touch. When Pierre-Noël reappeared in Jones’s life, Jones was engaged to Eric Feher, a Hungarian artist she had met in France. Benjamin, The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones, 53; Charles H. Rowell, 366. Danley, in Hill, ed., 296, 298.
³ Sociologist Paul Gilroy has popularized the concept of a Black Atlantic, which he defines as the construction of black identities in Europe and the Americas based upon travel and exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean. For the organizing motif of his study, Gilroy deploys a maritime-inflected vocabulary and “the image of the ship in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean.” Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
she first set foot on African soil. Whereas Jones’s earlier artistic engagements with African and Afro-Diasporic motifs might be considered flirtatious, an analysis of paintings she produced in the 1950–1972 period reveals a marriage of Afro-Diasporic and African aesthetics on her canvases. Further investigations into her pedagogy and research agenda support my claim that Jones functioned as a visual interlocutor who was committed to the visualization and translation of the Afro-Diasporic experience for American audiences.

Jones’s epigraphic description of Haiti’s relationship to Africa is rife with the visual. Roots, links, and ties are all binding agents, but subtle differences distinguish them. A root possesses several connotations. On the one hand, it refers to the underground ecological support system that gives life to flora and fauna; on the other it is a point of origin. Roots can be thin, thick, straight, crooked, widespread, or singular. Links are defined both as individual rings that hook onto one another to form a chain as well as connecting elements. As a verb, tying represents the act of binding together, making a bond or a connection. As a noun, a tie is any element that can be used to tie. Roots can be read as biological, links as connecting chains, and ties as man-made connections or affiliations. Moreover, these roots, links, and ties can take diverse form. For Jones, Haiti was the vehicle through which myriad “roots, links, and ties” to Africa were exposed. Between 1954 and 1973, through her travel, artwork, teaching, and research,

Jones continuously worked to uncover and make visible these various connections within the Afro-Diasporic world.

In 1952, a French publishing house produced a portfolio of Jones’ work titled Loïs Mailou Jones: Peintures 1937-1951. The 1951 painting La Primus, known also as African Rhythms (fig. 36), is the final work presented in the oversized volume. Arranged in chronological order, twenty of Jones’s French landscapes and still-life paintings precede this casein composition. In the context of the portfolio, La Primus can be read as the capstone of Jones’s career up until that point and the start of a new direction in her artistic trajectory. In title and content, the painting refers to Pearl Primus (1919–1994), the Trinidadian choreographer-turned-anthropologist renowned for her powerful jumps and African themed dances. Primus, who played an instrumental role in introducing African dance to the United States, drew inspiration for her choreography from African art. Many of Primus’s dances were visions of African sculptures coming to life and they celebrated the diverse range of Afro-Diasporic dance traditions.

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5 Loïs Mailou Jones. Peintures, 1937-1951 (Tourcoing, France: Presses Georges Frère, 1952). The original edition was issued unbound. Mary Beattie Brady and Eric Feher contributed text for the preface and Jones’s Howard colleague James Porter wrote the additional text.

6 In the 1952 portfolio, the piece is titled La Primus. However, the slide of the painting in Jones’s papers at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is titled African Rhythms.

7 Pearl Primus was born in Trinidad and moved to New York City at age three. She studied to become a doctor before deciding upon dance as a career. How Jones became aware of Primus and her work is unclear. She may have seen one of Primus’s performances in New York in the early 1940s (e.g., her guest-artist appearance in Asadata Dafora’s African Dance Festival, held in 1943) or one of Primus’s college-tour performances. The photos of Primus in Jones’s collected papers at Howard are undated. For more on Primus see: Peggy and Murray Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011) and Margaret Lloyd, The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1987), 265–276.

8 In 1948, Primus received a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship to study in Africa. Although her previous choreography had dealt with African themes, Primus had not yet been to the continent. The Rosenwald Foundation originally rejected her application, but when the president saw her work he decided that the “Rosenwald Foundation owed it to themselves and to the world to send her to study the authentic forms at their source.” Lloyd, The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance, 265;
With *La Primus*, Jones captures both a literal dance performance and the “coming to life” of African art; this painting represents the awakening of an Afro-Diasporic art practice that resides in the present, contemporary moment rather than in the past.

The rectangular canvas is divided into two “stages” separated by the orange flames of a fire that burns at the bottom of the composition. The backstage area, on the right, is filled with a series of small, white-on-black sketches. The imagery, which includes archers hunting antelope and women with enlarged buttocks farming, perhaps alludes to the ancient, white finger-painted rock art produced by the Bantu-speaking cultural groups of southern Africa. At the top right, a silhouetted white figure is shown mid-jump. Another dancer, wearing a black-and-white costume that divides his body in half, leaps toward center stage, legs split. Beneath him, a third dancer also wearing a black-and-white costume steps through the fire onto the main stage. The two leaping dancers are poised to join a fourth figure, who stands at center stage with his arms and legs extended, welcoming them into the fold.

The dancers’ split, black-and-white bodies possess a duality that has visual, cultural, and racial significations that, in turn, resonate with Primus’s modernizing adaptations of traditional African art forms. Jones’s dancers, who are moving from background to foreground and from right to left, are springing


Jones referenced South African cave painting in her 1939 illustration *Under the Influence of the Masters*, published in the April 1939 issue of *Negro History Bulletin* (see ch. 2, n.3).
to life. As they do so they are embodying a movement away from ancient Africa, as manifested in the two-dimensional cave paintings and a journey toward the contemporary moment the center of the canvas represents. *La Primus* can also be seen as symbolizing the opening of the black world that Jones experienced in the 1950s that included exposure to new African Diasporic locales and artistic traditions.

In the same year as her marriage, Jones completed a watercolor entitled *Héritage Egyptien* (fig. 37) in which the busts of three women are set against a graphic backdrop of Egyptian symbols and glyphs rendered in shades of burnt orange, rust, maroon, and dusty green. Nefertiti, the famed Egyptian queen known for her beauty and power, is shown in profile to the right wearing her signature headpiece. In the center, a second woman of African descent is depicted in full-frontal view. In lieu of Nefertiti’s regal navy crown, she sports a light blue headscarf, a curl on her forehead, and large gold hoops that swing from her ears. The sweetheart neckline of her black shirt exposes her décolletage. Her almond-shaped eyes, heavy dark brows, pursed red lips, and delineated cheekbones mirror Nefertiti’s features. To the left of this forward facing woman,

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is a third female shown in profile and positioned as if she is standing back to
back with Nefertiti.

At first glance with her blue headscarf, gold hoop, and black shirt, this
third woman appears to be the same person that is pictured in the center.
However, subtle variations in her facial features indicate that Jones has depicted
two distinct individuals. The third woman’s nose and chin are slightly more
rounded than her counterpart’s; her skin is a few shades darker. In Héritage
Egyptien, Jones gives her viewer not only three women, but with the three
distinct poses, the three different shades of black skin, Jones’s paints three
different faces of blackness. In her choice to use women as the symbols of
heritage, Jones also signifies the reproductive. Not only are the women in
Héritage Egyptien “sisters,” but also they are also potential mothers in their own
right, who can create ancestral links and future generations.

Of the painting Jones wrote, “In Egyptian Heritage [sic] . . . I combine the
triple influence of Egypt, Black America and Africa.” With Héritage Egyptien,
Jones speaks to what I have termed blackness in triplicate—a post-double
consciousness acknowledgement of multiple black identities that possesses
African, African Diasporic, and African American dimensions. In reading the
three black women as faces of the African Diaspora that emanate from a shared
ancient African root (Egypt), Héritage Egyptien illustrated Jones belief that Africa,
black America, and Haiti are one. The interpretation of Jones’s work that I

International Colloquium on Culture and Development in honor of President Léopold Sédar
Senghor’s 70th birthday, Dakar, Senegal, October 1976), 14. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-18,
Folder 3; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
presented in chap. 2, namely that her portraits of black subjects from the 1940s were meditations on blackness in both African American and newly formed Afro-Diasporic contexts, draws attention to Jones’s growing interest in the diverse faces of blackness. Along with this interest came another concern with the black body in motion. This new focus mirrored the increase in Jones’s own travel and contact with Afro-Diasporic peoples that began with her interactions with Louis Achille and the Nardal sisters in France in the late 1930s and would continue through the 1970s. Jones’s use of French in the painting’s title acknowledges her relationship to France and taps into the Francophone black world. In doing so, Jones joins a global conversation on blackness that stretches from the United States to the Afro-Caribbean to the shores of the African continent.

**Haiti, Stepping Stone to Africa**

In February 1954, a few months before the Pierre-Noëls flew to Haiti for a delayed honeymoon, the American travel magazine *Holiday* ran an advertisement titled “Pages from a Holiday Hunter” (fig. 38)\(^\text{12}\) that praised the intoxicating allure of tropical islands.\(^\text{13}\) Executed in black, white, and Caribbean blue, the spread included flight itineraries from the United States to the islands

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\(^\text{12}\) An increase in Americans’ disposable income after World War II allowed more of them to travel by air; before the war, few African Americans had flown commercially. Although flights were not segregated the many airports were, and in some cases the “Black” areas were enough to deter African Americans from flying. For more on the history of African Americans and air travel see: “Air Travel and Segregation,” in *America By Air* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian National Museum of Air and Space), accessed June 15, 2010, http://airandspace.si.edu/americab Bair/heyday/heyday13.cfm

\(^\text{13}\) *Holiday* devoted its entire February 1949 issue to the West Indies. The February 1954 issue included an article on Jamaica’s Montego Bay.
that began with a stop in Havana before jumping to Port-au-Prince, the
Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and on to the Virgin Islands. Copy positioned
beneath the flight map assured readers that “Once you set foot on a Caribbean
stepping stone you seem irresistibly drawn to the next.” At the turn of the
twentieth century, African American novelist Pauline Hopkins (1893-1930) also
invoked the stepping-stone metaphor when describing Haiti. For Hopkins, Haiti
was not just part of the Caribbean archipelago, but a “stepping stone to Africa.”
Located 710 miles off the southern coast of Florida, Haiti was physically
accessible to African Americans. Moreover, its small size in comparison to the
enormity of the African continent made it easily traversable as well as
psychologically manageable.15

Throughout first decades of the twentieth century, writers and
intellectuals spoke of Haiti’s connection to the rest of the black world. In 1929,
Locke called Haiti “the most favorable reservoir now left of that original
primitive earth religion and fetishism which was transplanted from the old

15 The U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915–1934) also kept it at the forefront of the American national
agenda. African American visitors were fascinated with the island’s history as a port of call in the
Atlantic slave trade, tales of its successful slave rebellion that resulted in a black-led government,
and its enviable record of independence. Haiti’s place in the African American literary and visual
imagination took varied forms. One was the cinematography of Dudley Murphy’s Emperor Jones
(1933), an adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s popular 1920 play of the same title. Another was the
song “Haiti,” sung by Josephine Baker in the French film Zou Zou (1934), in which she longs to
return to the island nation as a caged bird. Yet another was the ethnographic and fiction writings
of Zora Neale Hurston, the Howard University alumna and Boas-trained anthropologist whose
Mules and Men (1935), Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in
Haiti and Jamaica (1938) all dealt with her time in Haiti. For more on the relationship between
African Americans and Haiti see: J. Michael Dash, Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes
and the Literary Imagination (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 45–72 and Millery Polyne, From
Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1897-1964 (Gainesville:
world of Africa in the wake of the slave trade.” Writing in 1938, Hurston used familial terms when she described “Haiti, [as] the black daughter of France.”

Thus, at mid-century Haiti occupies a unique position within the Afro-Diasporic network that included links to both the “old world of Africa” and to Metropolitan France. Historian Clare Corbould notes that while the allure of Africanisms may have drawn African American attention, once in Haiti, intellectuals and cultural producers used the island as “an anvil of sorts on which to forge a diverse and vibrant African American identity . . . [with] an affinity to people around the black diaspora . . .”

African American artists had frequented the Caribbean, and Haiti in particular, since the mid-nineteenth century. These artists included, among others, nineteenth century painter Robert Douglas who visited in 1838; William Edouard Scott (1884–1964) who spent thirteen months in Haiti in 1931 and 1932; Aaron Douglas who traveled to Haiti in 1938 with a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship; Eldzier Cortor (b. 1916) who taught at Haiti’s major art school the Centre d’Art from 1949 to 1951.

Art historian Krista Thompson argues that works by these African American artists were “central in forging diasporic links between African American and Haitian contemporaries and inspiring black

19 James Porter reported that Douglas, a Philadelphia based artist, traveled to Haiti in 1838. Porter, Modern Negro Art (New York: Dryden Press, 1943), 23. Scott traveled to Haiti with the support of a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship and had a studio in Port-au-Prince; it has been suggested that his facility with French influenced his decision to study in Haiti. Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti, The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1914-1942,” American Art 21, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 80, 90.
populations throughout the diaspora to imagine freedom, to dream, through Haiti.”

One of the dream destinations that African American artists reached through Haiti was Africa.

In his 1939 *Opportunity* review of Aaron Douglas’s Haitian paintings, Locke had been quick to criticize Douglas for his “retreat from [his] bold earlier style to mild local color impressionism.” But whereas Haiti seemed to temper Douglas’s palette, Jones’s work underwent dramatic shifts as she gradually abandoned her representational, impressionistic style for more abstract, graphic, and brightly colored compositions. For Jones, Haiti functioned as an aesthetic laboratory that allowed her to experiment with new artistic techniques, mediums, and subjects.

When Jones visited in Haiti in 1954, she joined the many African American artists, scholars, and writers who traveled to the Caribbean in search of blackness and retentions of African culture. However, connecting with Africa or developing a new aesthetic style was not Jones’s initial intention. In 1954, Haitian President Paul Magloire (1907-2001) commissioned Jones to complete a series of paintings featuring the Haitian people and landscape. During their

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20 Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti,” 74.
21 In this essay Locke also mentions Jacob Lawrence’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture* series. Locke, “Advances on the Art Front,” *Opportunity* 17, no. 5 (1939): 134–135.
22 When Jones went to Haiti in 1954 she followed in the footsteps of her Howard colleagues Locke, Porter, and Howard University Romance Languages professor Mercer Cook, who had taught in Port-au-Prince from 1943 to 1945. In the summer of 1943 Locke had served as an Inter-American Exchange Professor to Haiti; before he left America, he paid Achille to translate his lectures into French. Porter had been the first Department of Art faculty member to travel to the Caribbean. While on sabbatical in 1945–1946, he collected photographs and other documentation in Haiti and Cuba that he later used in his Latin American art history courses. Of particular interest to Porter was the “historical material on African influences on their art.” Porter’s Haitian research was similar to Herskovits’ search for Africanisms as described in his 1941 *Myth of the Negro Past*, in which he sought to demonstrate that African Americans had a cultural past rooted in African cultural traditions.
ensuing visit to Haiti, the Pierre-Noëls took the opportunity to enjoy a belated honeymoon in Pierre-Noël’s native country. In Haiti, Jones was well connected. Her husband was an internationally known graphic designer and a member of a prominent Haitian family (his stepfather was the Chief Justice of the Haitian Supreme Court). Moreover, as the pair was traveling on the invitation of the sitting president Jones occupied a unique position of privilege.

Several years before Jones traveled to Haiti, her Howard colleague James A. Porter published his travelogue “Picturesque Haiti” in *Opportunity*. In the short essay Porter personified the island:

Seemingly, nature herself has undertaken the role of welcoming committee, as on either side of the city the traveler observes the slow advance of two great ridges of mountains like the outstretched arms of a body of which the head is the city of Port-au-Prince.

Like a favorite aunt, Haiti extended a warm welcome to Porter, and the African American readers of *Opportunity*. Porter brought his reader on a tour from the countryside to the heart of Port-au-Prince that sought to illustrate that while Haiti at first appears “picturesque” at its core, it is anything but pretty. Unlike Porter, Jones found the country and its people to be incredibly picturesque and

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24 Gaither interview with author, National Center for Afro-American Artists, Boston, May 17, 2010. Jones reported that the Pierre-Noëls were related to Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, the Haitian settler who established a trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River that would become the city of Chicago. She also noted that her husband’s family would have preferred him to marry a Haitian woman but accepted her. Danley, Hill, 298 and 300.


26 Porter, “Picturesque Haiti,” 178.
as she spent more time in the country she moved beyond simple documentation of the Haitian landscape towards a translation of the cultural experience.

The works Jones painted the first summer—Quartier du Fort National, Haiti and Église Saint-Joseph (Croix-Bassale) were quasi-Impressionist scenes that rendered her European training visible. In Église Saint Joseph, 1954 (fig. 39). Jones’s subject is, ostensibly, the yellow church that stands guard over Port-au-Prince. However, the church is relegated to the background of the image; the artist—and, by extension, the viewer—are preoccupied with the shanty village that stands in the church’s shadow. Jones gives clues to her interior position. At the edges of the composition are architectural elements painted in shadow. With her position outside of the action, Jones establishes herself as a casual observer rather than an active participant in the square’s daily activity. In acknowledgement of her recent marriage, the painting is signed Loïs Pierre-Noël.

In Peasant Girl (fig. 40), also completed in the summer of 1954, Jones’s artistic gaze rests on a young girl who is seated against a low wall, selling fruit from a basket at her feet. The work resembles Jones’s portraits from the 1940s in that the girl’s figure dominates the compositional frame and her eyes are averted. However, the work’s relative flatness, its pictorial emphasis on the girl’s hands and bare feet, and the presence of the rough basket between her legs, all indicate a real shift from Jones’s previous work.

Although Jones probably based her composition on a girl she saw at the market in Port-au-Prince, the piece bears an art historical affinity to William Edouard Scott’s 1932 The Turkey Market (The Haitian Turkey Vendor; fig. 41), also inspired by a Haitian market scene. In Scott’s oil painting, the principal subject is
a woman carrying turkeys to market. However, to the bottom left of the composition one finds a young vendor selling orange fruit from a crate balanced on his or her knees. The vendor, whose head is covered with a scarf, leans against a tree trunk. Scholars like Thompson have read Scott and other African American artists working on and in Haiti in the 1930s as being interested solely in the “‘picturesque scenes’ and ‘native types.’”\(^\text{27}\) While Jones’s *Peasant Girl* might be read as one of these “native type,” the work’s compositional similarities to Jones’s portraits from the 1940s denote an empathetic or humanizing quality. Moreover, the composition’s experimentation with flatness suggests something more is at play within the painting.

At the end of Jones’s first Haitian summer, First Lady Madame Magloire sponsored an exhibit of her paintings that included forty-two works completed in Paris and in Port-au-Prince.\(^\text{28}\) The exhibition of Parisian and Haitian works together further cemented Jones’s relationship with the Francophone world, her association with its black Diasporic inhabitants, and highlighted the influence of travel on her artistic production. President Magloire’s invitation to Haiti and commission intended to capitalize on Jones’s skills not only as an artist, but also as an art teacher. During her time in Haiti, Jones was asked to teach at two art schools: the Centre d’Art and the Foyer des Arts Plastiques.\(^\text{29}\) On her time at Centre d’Art, she later said:

\(^{27}\) Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti,” 75.
\(^{29}\) In 1944, American artist DeWitt Peters founded Le Centre d’Art, which was both an art school and a commercial gallery in its early years; it has been credited with spearheading modern Haitian art. For more on the history of Haitian art and art schools see: Selden Rodman, *Where Art is Joy: Haitian Art: the First Forty Years* (New York: Ruggles de LaTour, 1988).
The teaching experience . . . put me in touch with the leading artists in Haiti, and I was able to work with them. I found, however, that they were not interested in any training at all. They did not want to know anything about drawing from a model, or about structure, or color theory. They were interested in meeting me as a person, a fellow artist, and in watching me as I taught the younger group of Haitians.\textsuperscript{30}

This statement suggests that Jones had expected the “leading artists in Haiti” to be excited about the prospect of being taught by her. Jones’s Haitian contemporaries, however, were more interested in fostering collegial dialogue than in developing teacher-student relationships with the visiting artist. The Haitian artists wanted to see Jones’ pedagogical methods and to participate in an artistic exchange rather than to observe didactic demonstrations. Although no further evidence of how this dialogue was facilitated is readily available, the idea of artistic exchange between Jones and contemporary Haitian artists is noteworthy.

In 1955 the couple returned to Haiti. One of the works Jones completed that summer was the watercolor \textit{Voodoo Worshippers} (fig. 42), in which Jones documents three women engaged in a voudou ritual. Voudou (a.k.a. vodun, vodou, voodoo, and vodoun) is a Haitian religious system derived in part from traditional African religions that is based upon a strong belief in rituals, intermediary spirits, and powerful images.\textsuperscript{31} Jones’s compositional choices and

\textsuperscript{30}Benjamin, \textit{The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones}, 77.
use of the watercolor medium capture the secretive and mysterious nature of voudou as practiced by local cult groups.

The clandestine nature of the ritual is expressed in Jones’s use of perspective. Rather than looking down upon the scene or being positioned as an active participant within it, the viewer is situated behind the three female subjects and sees only their backs. The viewer must strain to look beyond the figures, which are huddled in a rough circle, heads slightly inclined toward its center. It is as if the viewer has snuck up upon them, unnoticed, while keeping a safe distance. The viewer can see the worshippers and what they are looking at, due to Jones’s insertion of a gap between the single figure on the right and the other two on the left. Within this space, at the heart of the composition, a secondary group of figures stand in a village setting. Above the two scenes, facing the viewer, an African-inspired mask floats along the top of the composition partially covered with a light wash of blue paint.

In *Voodoo Worshippers*, Jones expertly manipulates the watercolor medium to indicate the scene’s multiple liminalities. Opaque black paint is used to demarcate black skin, whereas the women’s white clothing is delineated with an absence of pigment. Moreover, the transparency of the white clothing allows the viewer to literally see through the figures and view the action happening in front of/between them. Jones’s brushwork is visible lending a sketchy quality to the

piece. Adding to the mystery of the painting, are shadowy rectangles and triangles of red, yellow, and blue, which add a graphic and abstract air to the composition. *Voodoo Worshippers* demonstrates that Jones’s awareness of voudou practices dates to the beginning of her Haitian experiences and indicates an impending move away from the representational towards the abstract.

One example of this evolution is the previously unpublished oil painting *Les Barques, Port-au-Prince Harbor* from 1957 (fig. 43). The work is both the documentation of a specific locale and a meditation on form. The long horizontal canvas is filled with the angular sails of the boats moored in the harbor. The sharp lines of the jib stays, masts, and hulls work with the larger geometric shaped sails and create an angular pattern that fuses the composition in a fashion reminiscent of Jones’s early textile designs. In *Barques*, Jones utilizes a brightly colored pastel palette. Her use of vibrant color would become one of her signatures.

Jones cemented her temporary abandonment of the representational with her 1960 mixed media piece *Cockfight* (fig. 44), in which she employed a collage technique. The work’s title is indicated with the word COQ (French for “rooster”) cut from newsprint positioned above the painted word FIGHT. The painting’s title is a reference to the popular Haitian pastime of fighting roosters—“Du Spo” (ostensibly shortened from du sport) appears cut off on the bottom

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32 Interestingly, Pauline Hopkins’s 1900 essay on Toussaint L’Ouverture in *The Colored American Magazine* was illustrated by a photograph of the Port-au-Prince Harbor that looked similar to Jones’s 1957 painting; the stays and halyards of the sailing vessels crisscross both compositions.

33 Jones’s *Cockfight* bears an affinity with another Douglas painting: his 1927 *Birds in Flight*. It also shares a title with an undated work by William Edouard Scott that he ostensibly created in Haiti in 1931–1932. Scott’s work focuses not on the roosters, but on the man who is responsible for caring for them between bouts. Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti,” 82.
right edge of the painting. Rather than create an immediately recognizable subject, here Jones combines painted and mixed-media elements to form a deconstructed rooster that emerges from the kinetic composition.

Collage, initiated by Cubists Picasso, Braque, and Gris in the 1910s, had marked a dramatic shift in twentieth-century image making.34 “The invention of collage put into question prevailing notions of what and how works of art signify, what materials artists may use, and what constitutes unity in a work of art.”35 Jones’s later experiments with collage in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s raised similar questions in regard to definitions of black art. Jones’s use of collage is thought by some art historians to be evidence of the influence of Romare Bearden (1911–1988),36 who began experimenting with collage in 1963.37 Bearden is credited with championing collage among African American artists in the 1960s, but Cockfight is evidence that Jones’s use of collage predated Bearden’s.

As the 1960s progressed Jones continued to experiment with collage in a series of mixed-media pieces from 1963: Vévé Voudou II (fig. 45), Vévé Voudou III (fig. 46), and yet another work titled Vévé Voudou II (fig. 47). The works also

illustrated Jones’s ongoing fascination with voudou symbolism—specifically *vévés*, the cornmeal idiograms drawn by voudou priests (hongans) to attract specific gods (loa). Jones’s knowledge of voudou practices came from first hand experiences in Haiti and through books. She described her great interest in watching the rituals and seeing “the *vévé* as the [hongan], the priest, [who] would draw with cornmeal on the ground of the temple the *vévé* selected for the ceremony.” She also owned both volumes of Philippe Sterlin’s 1953 *Vévés Vodou… Series I-II* published in Port-au-Prince, which suggests that she spent time studying the *vévés* outside of the rituals. An analysis of these compositions reveals not only that Jones committed herself to documenting the rituals, but also represent an internal shift in Jones’s understanding and participation in Haitian culture.

*Vévé Voudou II* (fig. 45) is a mix of text, image, and materials. While two *vévés* appear on either side of the composition they are not the central subjects. Rather, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the multi-layered nature of the work and with the visible glue bubbles the act of pasting that brought the piece to fruition. In *Vévé Voudou III* (fig. 46) the *vévés* take center stage. In the middle of the canvas is Jones’s version of the Gran Bwa *vévé*. Lord of the forest and charged with powers related to healing and initiation, the Gran Bwa is symbolically represented by trees and leaves executed in shades of brown and green. To the

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40 Philippe Sterlin, *Vévés Voudou…Série I-II* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions Philippe Sterlin, 1953)
41 Cosentino, 178.
left of the composition is her version of the Loko vévé attributed to the Loko Atissou loa, father of initiates. By painting the vévés, Jones mirrors the initiation process in which initiates were required to learn how to draw the various vévé symbols. Jones numbered the works as a series rather than giving them individual titles, which suggests that she may have viewed them as practice sketches. Both of these pieces illustrate how far Jones has evolved artistically since her 1938 Les Fétiches, a growth facilitated by her exposure to Haitian art and culture. Emphatically flat and unapologetically Diasporic with their collaged elements, these works are definitely post-Cubist and post-Continental France.

A photograph of Voudou ground drawings (fig. 48) suggests that Jones’s use of collage in these paintings may have also been part of her effort to document what she was witnessing. In the photograph, a series of idiograms drawn on the ground are accompanied by an assortment of three-dimensional objects (beaded rattles, bottles and bowls filled with liquid, shells, and other materials) that at times are placed on top of the drawn vévés. In her Vévé Voudou II (fig. 47), recently restored by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Jones works over the composition to such an extent that it is as if she has mimicked the collage nature of the ritual itself.

Vertical in orientation, executed in a muted color palette and with a mix of seemingly unidentifiable shapes and materials, uniformed viewers might at first interpret Vévé Voudou II as another one of Jones’s abstract works. However, Jones presents the viewer with a bird’s eye perspective of vévés being used in a ritual. Her method speaks to the additive process of the ritual. On the canvas three white vévés are shown with a series of other elements, some refer to wooden
objects while others are additional drawings. In the center, are two oblong shapes filled with circular elements made of layers of paper and paint. Jones’s repeated brushstrokes are visible, in places the paint bleeds. The piece does not feel hurried, but rather gestural. In that, the resultant image is as much the objective as the act of making the image.42

Jones’s Vévé Voudou paintings from 1963 are different than her 1955 Voodoo Worshippers. Collectively, they serve as evidence that over the course of her ten summers in Haiti, Jones shifted from observer looking in on the rituals from the outside to a more active participant with first hand knowledge of how the rituals were executed. This shift occurs at the same moment that her aesthetic evolves from the representational to the abstract. Arguably, Jones’s use of mixed media and collage, which requires the piecing together of disparate elements, is what allows her to stitch together motifs and diverse traditions on a single canvas. Moreover, as Robert Farris Thompson has noted, much of the voudou visual arts were themselves translations of African art forms.43 Thus, Jones’s translation of voudou symbols in her Vévé Voudou series serves as another route for her to access Africa. In short, it was collage that enabled Jones to make sense of her Diasporic encounters.


43 Robert Farris Thompson, “From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti’s Africanizing Vodou Art,” in Cosentino, 91-119.
Picturing Africa: At Home and Abroad in the 1960s

While Jones spent the 1950s in Haiti, her contemporaries were beginning to cross the Atlantic and explore Africa. Aaron Douglas journeyed through West Africa (Dakar, Accra, and Lagos) in 1956.\textsuperscript{44} John Biggers (1924-2001) received a UNESCO grant in 1957 and traveled through Ghana and surrounding countries.\textsuperscript{45} Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) and Raymond Saunders (b. 1934) went to Africa in 1963 and 1964.\textsuperscript{46} Although Jones did not participate in this first wave of African American artists’ visits to Africa, Africa came to Jones in several ways during this period.

In July 1958, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) arrived in Washington for an official visit that generated substantial public interest. A \textit{Jet} article detailing the president’s arrival noted that “[Nkrumah] was prepared to shake some 50,000 hands, give about 25 speeches, and to be honored at upwards of 35 functions in four major cities.”\textsuperscript{47} In the months just prior to Nkrumah’s voyage to the United States, Jones painted a large mural in his honor that was mentioned, without reference to its location, in the May 29 issue of \textit{Jet}.\textsuperscript{48} This large mural of Nkrumah is in fact one of two murals executed by Jones in the

\textsuperscript{44} Stephanie Fox Knappe, “Chronology,” in \textit{Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist}, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 221. The author of “His Dreams Come True: Sculptor Barthé is On his Way” (\textit{Afro-American}, November 6, 1937) noted that Barthé was scheduled to go to Africa in to study the people of West Africa.


\textsuperscript{46} The front cover of the November 1963 newsletter of the American Society of African Culture included a photograph of Jacob Lawrence and Kofi Antubam in Lagos, Nigeria, where Lawrence was exhibiting his \textit{Migration Series} paintings. Cedric Dover Papers, Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

\textsuperscript{47} “Nkrumah to Shake 50,000,” \textit{Jet} (July 21, 1958).

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Jet} (May 29, 1958).
entrance foyer of 1022 Maryland Avenue, NE. The residence, located blocks from the Capitol, was at one time the Retreat of Foreign Ministries run by the National Baptist Convention, at which foreign missionaries on leave from their assignments could find lodging.

The mural of Nkrumah, which Jones completed in the spring of 1958, was the second of two; the first had been conceived of by Nannie H. Burroughs (1879–1961), president of the Woman’s Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention, who commissioned Jones to paint a mural (fig. 49) that represented the past, present, and future of Africa. Here, Jones embodies the past in a group of pyramids and an African mask that appear at the top of the stairwell; the present is symbolized above the staircase by a map of the African continent that shows the centers of Baptist missionary activity; and the future is depicted as an African family, positioned at the bottom of the stairwell. The movement from past through present to future mimicked the journeys of the vacationing missionaries, whose descent from the upstairs bedrooms would have been accompanied by symbols of Africa’s past, followed by reminders of the good work they were doing in the field and, at last, an image that would remind them their goal: to reach the people of Africa.

The Nkrumah mural, A Birth of a New Nation (fig. 50), is also a montage of images on the large foyer wall. From left to right and top to bottom, these include a photo-realist portrait of Nkrumah wearing traditional African textiles; a mixed gender, multigenerational group of Africans, seated with books in hand as if in the midst of a discussion; and, in the background, a white house. The Ghanaian flag and coat of arms dominate the top of the composition. Beneath them, a
world map accompanied by arrows indicates the export of Ghanaian cocoa to the Western world. One cannot help but note how closely Jones’s map replicates similar maps that illustrated the exportation of chocolate-colored bodies in the Atlantic slave trade. Jones’s selection of images is telling: Ghana is a specific geographic locale, a home to educated black peoples, an exporter of goods, and a former colonial state now led by a black man.

As Gaither notes: “Forging a strong identification with Afro-Americans, Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah, its president, became symbols of the ascent of black people worldwide.” Jones’ mural demonstrates her awareness of the changes taking place in the black world. Her direct connection to both Nkrumah’s 1958 visit and the foreign missionary guest house hint at her involvement in a cross-cultural network that was developing in Washington among politicians, diplomats, artists, and scholars from America and Africa. It was during the early 1960s that Jones was invited to a host of different African embassies in the capital as the consulates celebrated the wave of independence sweeping the African continent. Although she had yet to set foot in Africa, in her daily life Jones was interacting regularly with individuals from Africa, Haiti, and the Caribbean.

In May of 1960, Mary Beattie Brady of the Harmon Foundation wrote to Jones to inform her that Tanzanian painter Sam J. Nitro (1923–1993) from the Department of Art at Makerere College in Kampala, Uganda was in Washington.

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50 Jones was invited to parties at the embassies of Ghana, Gabon, Nigeria, Senegal, and Burundi, among others. Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-11, Folder 10; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
with his wife.\textsuperscript{51} In the letter, Brady admits that Jones might not “have the time to chase up the Nitros,” but suggests that making a connection with them could lead to an “interchange of ideas.”\textsuperscript{52} The following year Brady sent Jones materials on contemporary African artists assembled by the foundation, for her to use in her classroom.\textsuperscript{53} It is unclear whether or not Jones had solicited the materials from Brady or if Brady was aware of Jones’s interest in the subject and passed them along. In any case, here again one finds Jones being asked to serve as a negotiator or translator of ideas between African American, African, and African Diasporic peoples; clearly she functioned as an artistic interlocutor, able to translate and advance African art through her own art work and her position as art instructor at Howard University.

At the end of the 1960s, the Howard student body and the sociopolitical climate of the United States were undergoing radical shifts that would affect Jones’s position as both faculty member and artist. The 1960s bore witness to the

\textsuperscript{51} The Makerere Art School, founded in 1937 by Margaret Trowell, was the first such institution in East Africa. Its students were educated in the European artistic tradition. After Trowell’s retirement in 1958, the 1960s ushered in a new era as a younger generation of artists took over. Nitro had been a staunch supporter of Trowell and did not agree with the new, more Western direction the school was taking. Shortly after his trip to the United States he would leave the school and begin working for the government. For more on the Makerere Art School see: Simon Njami and Luce Duran, \textit{Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent} (New York: D. A. P., 2005), 239; Evelyn Nicodemus, “Inside. Outside,” in \textit{Seven Stories About Modern Art}, ed. Clementine Deliss (London: Whitechapel and Flammarion, 1995), 33; and Tobias Doring, ed., \textit{African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/Sites of Creativity and Conflict} (Amsterdam and New York: Ropodi, 2002), 138–144.

\textsuperscript{52} Brady to Jones, letter dated May 27, 1960. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-7, Folder 9, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

growing fight for civil rights, the rise of the Black Power movement, and increased African American activism. Jones’s 1964 collage *Challenge America* (fig. 51) spoke to these changes. Completed during the same year that Congress passed the Civil Rights Act (and inspired by the 1963 March on Washington, which culminated in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech) the work directly engages the black experience in an American context. With its varied formal elements, *Challenge America* can be read as a medley of blackness that references Africa, the Declaration of Independence, the Mississippi riots, Sojourner Truth, capitalism, Abraham Lincoln, Negro history, Malcolm X, voting rights, and Josephine Baker among others. Its dominant motif is the black face.

In the Object Report she filled out for the Hirshhorn Museum after its purchase of the piece in 1977, Jones recalled that the clippings she used to form the portraits of the black leaders found in *Challenge America* were taken from the black mass media (e.g., *Ebony*, the *Afro-American*, and others). Jones saw the collage as part of “a series of works which deals with the Black Experience. It marks a continuation of earlier works inspired by Dr. Alain Locke.” One must note that it was also in 1964 that Romare Bearden garnered acclaim for his *Projections* series in which he culled images from the same mass media sources used by Jones and used commercial offset printing to enlarge notebook-sized collages. 

54 Jones interviews with Danley, in Hill, ed., 289.
55 The works Jones said were inspired by Locke include *Jennie, Mob Victim*, and *Dans Un Café*. Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 19, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
56 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 6.
Challenge America does show that Jones had heeded Locke’s earlier suggestion to produce works that reflected the realities of the black experience. It also illustrates, however, her engagement with contemporary trends in African American art, namely collage, and her continued preoccupation with the faces of blackness. In both form and title, Challenge America speaks to Jones’s awareness of rising black radicalism and suggests that if she was not preceding Bearden, she was at the very least keeping pace. Despite her flirtation with the political in Challenge America, however, Jones was still considered a conservative by her students. At Howard in the mid-1960s, she was seen as a symbol not only of authority on a volatile campus but also of the old guard of artists that stood in the way of younger black artists who were loudly calling for a new African American aesthetic.

David Driskell, a former student recalls, “In the 1950s [Jones] was the entrenched professor. She was the target but she managed to stay above the antibourgeois rhetoric. Gradually she was recognized for her historic links.”57 As the tumultuous decade continued, Jones developed a new research project, one that enabled her to transcend the political unrest on campus. With its focus on constructions of the black artist, her new research project allows us to consider her alongside the newly politicized definitions of black art that arose at that time.

Seeing Black: 1968

Howard students launched protests in February and March of 1968 that nearly shut down the university. In an open letter to administrators, students laid out their demands, foremost “that the University 'begin to move towards becoming a black university.’” The student body was adamant that Howard must adopt a more “Afro-American orientation” in all aspects: curriculum, racial makeup of faculty, and ideological stances. Some of these changes would be addressed in the fall 1968 semester, when Howard’s course catalogue included a full page of courses in African and Afro-American Studies that were explicitly meant to “blacken” the university. In Howard’s annual report for 1967–1968, Dean Warner Lawson reported that:

The College of Fine Arts did not escape the impact of the social revolution now taking place and whose focal point is in the student population of the world . . . As a result of student desires, major curricular changes have been effected. These changes include the offering of new courses and the re-constructuring (sic) of existing curricula. The departments most keenly affected were the departments of art and drama.

Students in the Department of Art sought black art themed courses as well as improved studio space, regular class schedules, revised major requirements, and

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58 In 1967 and 1968 a series of student protests took place across Europe, the United States, and parts of Asia. These students, born during the prosperous post-WWII era, came of age during and were shaped by a range of social movements and events: the fight for Civil Rights, Feminism, the Cold War, and Cuban Missile Crisis. When this generation entered their college years, many had embraced Leftist politics and were increasingly anti-establishment. College campuses were one of the many sites were protests were held.
60 “Student Demands Result in New Black Courses,” The Hilltop, September 20, 1968.
more readily available art materials.62 One of the students’ major demands was for an art history curriculum that focused solely on black artistic production.

Two years prior to the unrest on the Howard campus, Jones had applied for research funds to support a three-phase project she titled “The Black Visual Artist.” She wished to document the work of contemporary black artists working in Haiti, Africa, and the United States. She aimed to compile a photographic archive that Howard students and faculty could use in their research and artistic production. Jones spent the summer of 1968 completing the first phase of research in Haiti and intended to conduct the third phase in Africa during her 1970 sabbatical year; her research on African American artists would be ongoing.63

Perhaps influenced by the events on campus that spring and sensing a lacuna of visual materials related to these contemporary black art practices, Jones wrote to Dean Warner Lawson that summer: “With the current stress and focus of our leading colleges and museums on ‘The Black Arts’ I feel that Howard University should certainly make [a] contribution.” On the subject of African art she added, “There is available visual material on the Primitive Sculpture, and

62 In October 1967, The Hilltop conducted an investigation of the Art Department in response to student complaints. Joanne McKnight, “Hilltop Investigates: Art Students Speak Out on Course Inadequacies,” The Hilltop, October 26, 1967. In an interview with the author on the Howard campus (February 9, 2012), Akili Ron Anderson described his involvement with the student protests and the impact of these activities on his coursework in the Department of Art.
63 Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 15, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
some Crafts and Textiles of Africa, but very limited visual material on contemporary African Sculpture and Painting.”

Jones’s development of an art historical research agenda differed from the work on black art written by her colleagues Locke and Porter. Where they wove selected artists and artworks into larger cultural narratives using word and image, Jones sought to produce a largely visual archive that documented black Diasporic art practices. By creating the archive, Jones could meet the student demand for exposure to black artistic production and provide an alternative mode of learning about black art—one that privileged the act of seeing or looking, rather than reading.

Just before Jones left for Haiti in the summer of 1968, her long-time colleague James Wells retired. The following spring brought even more change with the death of James A. Porter. Hired by James V. Herring, who founded the Department of Art, Wells, Porter, and Jones had been the core faculty in the department since the 1930s. Thus, Jones was the only member of this old guard who survived the transition of the 1960s to the 1970s. Despite Jones’s length of service, there was no talk of her taking over as Department chair. Instead, visiting artist Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999) served as acting chair while Howard conducted a nationwide search for Porter’s replacement.

**On African Soil**

In April 1970, before the official close of the academic year, Jones departed

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64 Jones to Dean Warner Larson, Proposal for Black Visual Arts Project, July 1, 1968. Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 19, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
for a four-month tour of Africa during which she would begin the third phase of her Black Visual Arts Project. Jones’s claim that her research in Africa “would be excellent for the Black Studies programs which we are featuring and promoting at Howard University” again highlighted that she intended her work to augment the new interest in black studies at Howard. Her research would serve as a route for Howard students to access their African artistic roots. The trip took her to eleven countries (Congo, Dahomey, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Sudan) where she interviewed contemporary artists, visited studios, and photographed works.

While she had conducted preliminary research stateside once in Africa Jones said, “The first thing I did when I entered a country was go to the USIS [United States Information Service] Center and ask them to let me see their file on contemporary African artists in order to compare their listing of artists with the research I had done in the States.” She also gave lectures on contemporary African American art at various USIS headquarters. In her final report she noted that the lectures had been “beneficial in that the [local artists in attendance] were made aware of my presence and my mission, and as a result,

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65 Jones interviews with Danley, in Hill, ed., 305.
66 Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 15, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
67 Jones interviews with Danley, in Hill, ed., 305.
68 According to her reports, Jones delivered USIS lectures in Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo-Kinshasa, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. Benjamin, The World of Lois Mailou Jones, 29. Her scrapbooks at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art include flyers circulated by the USIS advertising her talks. Jones cited excerpts from her research trip in an undated talk outline titled “The African Cultural Presence in America.” The lecture, which included slides, appears to have been for the Howard University Institute for the Arts and Humanities. Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-18, Folder 2, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
contacts with them were made easier.” Though her immediate research focused on contemporary art practices, while in Africa Jones sought out collections of traditional art as well.

Speaking with biographer Tritobia Benjamin in 1986, Jones recounted how in Africa she:

was privileged to see our ancestral arts in their settings and in the museums and galleries, and to visit the studios of leading contemporary African artists. The trip provided me an opportunity to get a clearer picture of the various ways in which African art has influenced Afro-American artists.

Jones’s description of how the act of seeing influences the understanding of both African and African American art complements my argument in chap. 1 that African American artists needed to see African art in order to incorporate it into their own works.

Jones took thousands of photographs during her four-month journey. In Nigeria, she used her camera at the Lagos Museum; in Dahomey she visited the Musée Éthnographique de Porto-Nov and the Musée d’Abomey; and at the National Museum in Accra she was allowed to make slides of their entire collection of contemporary art. In addition to photographing traditional works, Jones visited artists’ studios and shot their most recent works. In these photographs the artists were often included in the frame. At times Jones posed the artists in front of their art, as in her image of a wood carver in Bronzeville.

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69 Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-16, Folder 15, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

70 Benjamin, The World of Loïs Mailou Jones, 8.

(fig. 52), and at others sometimes only the artist’s hands are visible on the edges of the canvas they hold up for the camera. She was deeply impressed by the artistic output of several students and, according to Benjamin, “was responsible for recruiting many of the African artists who subsequently came to the United States to study at Howard University.” When Jones returned to Howard in the fall of 1970, a new chairman was there to greet her. This was Jeff R. Donaldson (1923–2004), whom Benjamin had met the previous May (a month after Jones’s departure to Africa) at the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art (CONFABA) at Northwestern University. Donaldson, a co-founder of the Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC) and its successor, Afri-COBRA, had been selected as Porter’s successor during the summer.

In September of 1971, Jones finished her “Black Visual Arts” project by depositing the thousands of slides and dozens of boxes of materials from her African journey into the Howard University archives, where they remain almost untouched. Done with the time-consuming research project and report, Jones returned to her art practice with renewed vigor. She spent the summer of 1971 in Port-au-Prince where she completed a series of paintings. Although the resultant

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72 Her final report included a recap of activities that listed the studios and art schools she had visited and photographed. Unfortunately, Jones labeled only a small fraction of the slides with locations and rarely listed artists’ names. Some slides can be dated by the processing dates, but in most cases where and whom she documented cannot be discerned.

73 Benjamin, *The World of Loïs Mailou Jones*, 8. During my research I was unable to verify Benjamin’s statement on Jones’s influence in attracting African artists to the Art Department.

74 The members of Afri-COBRA were concerned with creating a new black aesthetic in which African aesthetic and artistic traditions would be combined with sociopolitical ideologies and community engagement. As a pivotal figure in the history of African American art, Donaldson is still deserving of book-length study.
works—*Moon Masque, Dahomey, and The Magic of Nigeria*—were completed in Haiti, they contain distinctly African motifs.

For example a formal analysis of *Moon Masque* (fig. 53), a mixed-media piece, illustrates how Jones effectively juxtaposed traditional arts of Africa with contemporary African American artistic production and also addressed the growing Afro-Diasporic sensibility of the era. Two trios of horizontal lines divide the rectangular canvas into three registers; the top and bottom registers are filled with abstract graphic designs inspired by Ethiopian textiles.\(^{75}\) As she confirmed to Danley in 1977, with *Moon Masque* Jones was differentiating between the Nigerian studies she had done in Africa and the Ethiopian textiles from which she drew inspiration. This distinction is significant because it indicates Jones’s awareness of the differences between national aesthetics and styles. In other words, Jones was fully aware that Africa is a continent of individual countries, each of which possesses unique aesthetic traditions.

At the heart of Jones’s composition is a replica of a mask made by the Kwele culture group of West Africa. This type of mask, which Jones called a “moon” mask due to its white pigmentation and round shape, would have been used in initiation and other social rituals administered by the Beete cult. The three silver foil pieces—pasted atop the canvas—give the appearance of tears. The mask is surrounded by three concentric circles that alternate in hue between light and dark. Flanking the Kwele mask, are two black faces shown in profile.\(^{76}\) Although these silhouetted faces appear similar, under scrutiny it becomes clear

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\(^{75}\) Jones interviews with Danley, in Hill, ed., 292.

\(^{76}\) Benjamin, *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones*, 97.
that Jones is depicting two unique visages. The head on the left has a subtly curved forehead, smallish red eyes, an angular nose, petite pointy lips, and a slightly receding chin, whereas the head on the right has a sloping forehead and nose, wide green eyes, extended lips, and a long chin.

*Moon Masque* has elsewhere been interpreted as an example of Jones’s “effort to ‘combine the motifs from various regions of Africa’ in one composition.” Moon Masque is yet another example of Jones’s exploration of blackness in triplicate. The Kwele mask at the center of the composition signifies the Motherland, as the concentric circles emanating from the center signify the ocean waves that separate America and the Afro-Caribbean; these waves are also referenced in the two unique visages that border the canvas. Twenty years earlier in her *Héritage Egyptien*, Jones placed black America and the Caribbean at the center of her imagining of the faces of the African Diaspora, or black world; three decades later, Africa reclaims center stage in Moon Masque. While her Afro-Diasporic experiences and encounters in Haiti and France were transformative of her style, ultimately they served as routes for Jones to access her African roots.

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77 The Bantu-speaking Kwele people reside in the West African region that is now the Republic of the Congo. The Beete cult, which is responsible for initiation and other regulations of social behavior, used masks such as the one replicated in Jones’s piece. Although the use of these masks for ritual purposes had declined by the 1920s, carvers continued to produce them for the European market. For more on the debate surrounding the authenticity of Kwele masks see: Scott Rodolitz and Arthur Bourgeois, *Remnants of Ritual: Selections from the Gelbard Collection of African Art* (Amherst, MA: Ethnos, 2003); Leon Siroto, *East of the Atlantic, West of the Congo: Art of Equatorial Africa: The Dwight and Blossom Strong Collection*, ed. Kathleen Berrin (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995); and Louis Perrois, “Art of the Kwele of Equatorial Africa: Ancestor Masks, Bush Spirit Masks,” *World of Tribal Arts* 6, no. 4 (Spring 2001).
Conclusion

In March 1973, Jones became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at a major American museum when her *Reflective Moments: Loïs Mailou Jones, 1930-1972*, curated by Edmund Barry Gaither opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. With this exhibition Jones came full circle: her work now hung in the very galleries that she had walked as an art student almost fifty years before. Gaither noted that Jones’ 1960s interest in Africa emerged from a series of “threshold experiences” that date to the late 1930s and 1950s that included her encounters with Afro-Diasporic and African people in France and her Haitian experiences.

This chapter has examined Jones’ mid-career diasporic encounters and experiences in Haiti, the United States, and Africa. After a discussion of how Haiti functioned as a stepping-stone for African American artists, the chapter focused on Jones’ time in Haiti during the 1950s and how it resulted in a dramatic transformation of her aesthetic style. It was during this period that Jones adopted a decidedly more abstract aesthetic characterized by the use of graphic elements and bright colors. Her movement away from the representational coincided with her increased knowledge of Haitian art and culture, specifically the visual culture of Haitian voudou. Jones’ experimented with the collage medium in her Haitian inspired works from the early 1960s. Her

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78 The exhibition was on view from March 11 to April 15, 1973.
use of collage predates that of Romare Bearden, who is often cited as influencing Jones.

At the start of the 1960s, Jones’s interactions with Africa increased. She was commissioned to paint a mural in honor of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and she attended a slew of colonial independence events at African embassies in Washington, D.C. These activities implicated Jones within an expanding cross-cultural network. As the political climate of the 1960s continued to heat up, Jones stayed above the political fray. However, in light of growing unrest on Howard’s campus and the desire for more black themed courses Jones developed a research project that interrogated contemporary black art practices in African, American, and Afro-Diasporic contexts. It was this project that brought her to the African continent in 1970. In Africa, Jones conducted studio visits and interviews with a number of contemporary African artists. While the photographs and materials she collected were intended to assuage Howard student demands for more black arts, with the research project Jones becomes an art historian in her own right. Thus, at the start of the 1970s she was investigating the contours of black identity on canvas and on paper.

I’ve been asked the question over and over again: does Black art exist? My first answer is concerned with the title to which I have responded that ‘Black Art’ is a title or label for art work produced by Black artists in an effort to bring about an awareness that Black artists exist! In other works it aims to establish for them identity.¹

-Loïs Mailou Jones (n.d.)¹

Will the Negro’s art be African or American, primitive or modern? Or will it be a composite of all of these?²

-Alain Locke

Introduction

In December 1984, MoMA ran an advertisement in the New York Times for its blockbuster exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (fig. 54).³ The quarter-page ad juxtaposed a face from Pablo Picasso’s 1907 Cubist masterpiece, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, with a visually similar mbuya [sickness] mask from the Pende group in Zaire.⁴ In large font beneath the two countenances were two questions: “Which is ‘primitive’? Which

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² Locke, Negro Art: Past and Present, 6.
is ‘modern?’ These queries were intended to problematize viewers’ distinctions between the categorizations of “modern” and “primitive.”

In the physical exhibition, Western “modern” paintings and sculptures were shown alongside complementary “tribal” objects from Africa, Oceania, North and South America. The show was designed to illustrate how African and Oceanic art objects were “external influences on the modern painters and sculptors.” Despite the presence of challenging quotation marks, objects could only be modern or primitive; according to MoMA, it was not possible to be both. This intransigent position drew significant criticism from the art world. Critics took particular issue with the exhibition’s denial of Modern African art.

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8 For more on the function of quotation marks and how they are used as to both frame and resist see: Marjorie Garber, *Quotation Marks* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Jennifer Brody has also addressed the problematic of punctuation in regards to art. See: Brody, *Punctuation Marks: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
9 The 1984 “Primitivism” exhibition generated several curatorial responses among them the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* held at the Pompidou Center in Paris. The exhibition was not free from controversy and curator Jean Hubert Martin drew criticism for his selection of untrained non-Western artists, which perpetuated the idea that the West was the only region capable of producing trained artists. See: Jean Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989). In response to *Magiciens de la Terre*, the Studio Museum in Harlem mounted *Contemporary African Art: Changing Traditions* in 1990 that showcased nine African artists (both untrained and trained) which provided a much more accurate picture of contemporary art practice on the continent. See: Studio Museum in Harlem, *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem). In 1995, Whitechapel Gallery hosted *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* curated by Clementine Deliss as part of the AFRICA ’95 celebrations in London. The show sought to publicize modern African art to British audiences and included a critique of previous displays. Of the exhibit’s aim, Deliss wrote: “Collectors who neither knew Africa nor were ready to engage with the problematics of the local art critical situation could effectively begin to build up an important body of work characterised by its foolproof graphic ‘Africananess,’ often connected with folk or religious activities rather than a distinctive and self conscious art practice.” Clementine Deliss, ed. “7+7=1: Seven Stories,
When Loïs Mailou Jones visited the “Primitivism” show in the fall of 1984, her African mask-inspired and Cubism-influenced painting, *Les Fétiches* (fig. 3), was on view at the Emily Lowe Gallery at Hofstra University on Long Island.\(^9\) Jones was dismayed that her work had not been included in the MoMA exhibition. “Perhaps it should be in the exhibit at the Modern,” she said, “but there is a case of they don’t know me. I should be in that show.”\(^11\) Jones was not alone in her feelings of exclusion. Romare Bearden and Martin Puryear (b. 1941) were the only two African American artists who appeared in the exhibit’s extensive two-volume catalogue.\(^12\) Thus, the “Primitivism” show eschewed a discussion of how African art may have influenced modern African American artistic production.

It was around this time that Jones drafted the *Africa Series* list (fig. 55). The handwritten document outlined twenty-one of Jones’s African-themed works, beginning with the mask filled *Les Fétiches* in 1938 and continuing through to her abstract 1982 *Surinamia* (fig. 56). Given her feelings about the *Primitivism* show, the *Africa Series* list might be read as Jones’s personal exhibition checklist (i.e., works she would have submitted to MoMA curators for consideration). By paying particular attention to Jones’s evolving visual language in her work from

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\(^9\) In 1984, Jones exhibited at the Emily Lowe Gallery (Hempstead, N.Y.), Jamaica Arts Center (N.Y.), and the Museum of African Art (Los Angeles). Benjamin, *The World of Loïs Mailou Jones*, 31.


\(^12\) A small reproduction of Romare Bearden’s 1964 *The Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism* appears in Kirk Varnedoe’s essay “Contemporary Explorations,” in Rubin, ed. (679).
the 1970s and 1980s, this chapter uncovers how Jones’s work offers a possible visual solution to limiting definitions of black art. Indeed, Jones’s art from this period is characterized by a composite aesthetic that combines African, Afro-Diasporic, and African American themes. A formal analysis of her paintings elucidates that Jones’s collage or composite aesthetic involved the mixing of black art objects, black cultural signifiers, black geographic locales, and black bodies. Together, these elements visualized the multi-faceted nature of blackness itself.

After considering Jones’s work at the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s, I posit that Jones modified the concept of the Janus figure to represent the past and present faces of blackness. Ultimately, I argue that Jones’s twinning of black bodies and black art objects, combined with her use of a collage aesthetic, demonstrates that her work—like blackness (as both a racial and cultural construct)—is always composite, and pulls from a range of geographical, visual, and cultural histories.

**After Africa: Loïs Mailou Jones’s work from the early 1970s**

The previous chapter concluded with a discussion of Jones’s African tour in the summer of 1970. Jones returned to Africa in the summer of 1972. But instead of conducting independent research, on this visit she served as a tour
guide on a five-week trip that brought twenty individuals to ten African
countries. Promotional materials promised that participants would:

see Africa and its outstanding art and history though the eyes of Loïs
Pierre-Noel . . . who has visited Africa numerous times and has intimate
first-hand knowledge of the areas you will visit and the places and things
you will see . . . But art is not all you will experience on this great holiday.
You shall see the people—proud black people—running their own
governments and shaping their own destinies.

The tour organizers exaggerated Jones’s on-the-ground experience in Africa (she
had only been to the continent once before). However, Jones’s art was a different
story. Her continued engagement with African themes is evidence that Jones had
artistically “visited Africa numerous times.” Jones’s 1972 *Ubi Girl from the Tai
Region* (fig. 57) illustrates how her second trip to Africa transformed her work.

*Ubi Girl* brings the viewer on a tour of Africa—a trip that, just as the tour
organizers advertised, included African art and peoples. Similarly to her 1938 *La
Tête d’un Nègre*, Jones’s title for *Ubi Girl* reads like an ethnographic museum
label. However, Jones gives the viewer much more than a quintessential portrait
of a young girl from the southwest corner of the Ivory Coast. The painting is a
mélange of African design motifs, objects, and countenances.

The viewer’s gaze divides among the quartet of faces in the composition.
Left of center, a large Baule or Dan portrait mask is shown in profile. Next to this
mask, the painted face of a young girl floats atop a side view of a two-toned
maroon heddle pulley. A duo of abstracted Pende masks (fig. 58), rendered in

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13 The tour visited Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, the Republic of Zaire, Nigeria,
Dahomey, Ghana, and Senegal. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Folder 53, Box 215-14; Moorland-
Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

14 Ibid.
orange outlines, is superimposed beneath the young girl’s face. Vertical bands of pattern and solid color make up the composition’s background. These variegated patterns and vertical strips allude to West African weaving practices in which weavers use heddle pulleys to operate small looms that produce long, narrow fabric strips that are sewn together to create larger textiles.

The way that Jones overlaps the central elements in *Ubi Girl* is significant. The Dan or Baule mask is underneath the heddle pulley, and the Pende masks sit on top of the pulley, but underneath the photorealist face of the young girl. The viewer is left with the impression that Jones could not stop adding to the canvas, or perhaps that she was unsure which motif should get center stage. With the overlapping, Jones engages in a disjointed weaving practice. Of the painting’s multiple elements Jones said, “There was something about the deep look in her eyes that impressed me as being symbolic of Africa—so much so that I combined in that painting two masks from the Congo and also the profile of a huge fetish from Ivory Coast, which seemed to me to give an overall feeling of what I consider Africa.”  

Her use of collage as both aesthetic choice and cultural statement reflects that blackness is itself a mix of objects, faces, and motifs.

Jones’s new technique was mentioned in a 1973 article published by the IPS Africa Branch (part of the US Information Service). Jones was quoted as saying, “Each time I made a study of African design, I found the imagery and motifs so inspiring that I’ve had to utilize them in a sort of combination. . .This


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overlapping and bringing together of ideas is very successful in creative work.”

As discussed in chap. 3, Jones first experimented with collage in Haiti during the 1960s. Her works *Vévé Voudou II* (1963; fig. 47) and *Challenge America* (1964; fig. 51) are early examples of her engagement with the medium. In these 1960s works Jones literally pasted the elements together, however, in *Ubi Girl* Jones uses paint to achieve a similar effect. In 1982, Jones would revisit the compositional layout of *Ubi Girl* in her *Petite Ballerina du Senegal* (fig. 59). In the latter work, Jones swaps out the other elements, but the heddle pulley remains; this retention adds credence to the premise that Jones is concerned with the weaving together of histories, cultures, and identities. This juxtaposition of African art objects with a black body foreshadows Jones’s other works from the 1980s, almost all of which include such a pairing.

*Ubi Girl* is number five on the *Africa Series* list, sandwiched between Jones’s 1971 *Dahomey*, her brightly colored interpretation of a Dahomean appliqué wall-hanging, and two mask-themed compositions from 1972: *Congo Dance Mask* and *Guli Mask*. Three other paintings completed in 1971 and 1972 round out the top ten. Jones’s 1979 *Sudanesia* (fig. 60) occupies the eleventh spot. Jones’s titular use of the Greek suffix *-nesia*, perhaps shortened from *-mnesia* (the suffix for memory) implies that the work operates as a memory of Sudan. The composition does not appear to be based upon that country, however, but instead is filled with abstract references to the masquerade traditions of Burkina

Faso, Mali, and other regions of French West Africa. In any case, *Sudanesia* is more than a pastiche of African masquerade motifs. The lizard at the top right, composed of thick white lines and black cubes, suggests the influence of Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). However, when considered in relation to the mask form that appears below, it is clear that Jones is referencing a kanaga mask produced by the Dogon peoples of Mali.\(^{17}\) Regardless of interpretation, Jones’s poetic reference to Sudanese culture and reliance on what may at first be perceived as abstract rather than representational forms speaks to her ongoing artistic conversation with Africa, the Diaspora, and modernism, this back and forth would continue for the remainder of her career.

One notes an absence of works produced between 1972 and 1979 in Jones’s *Africa Series* list and her larger catalogued oeuvre. This hiatus can be attributed to several factors. In 1973, Jones was preparing for her retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and was about to embark on a new research project, “Women Artists of the Caribbean and Afro-American Artists,” funded by Howard University in 1973–74.\(^{18}\) She was also busy fulfilling her teaching responsibilities at Howard and travelling within the United States, Africa, France, and Haiti. However, during this period Jones created several works with African themes that she did not include on the list, including her 1976 portrait of Senegalese President and Négritude movement leader Léopold Sédar Senghor.

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\(^{17}\) A popular mask form, Kanaga masks are used primarily during funerary ceremonies and rituals called dama. For more on Dogon dama ceremonies and masquerades see: Carol Beckwith, “Spirits and Ancestors,” in *African Ceremonies* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 236-357.

Seeing Senghor: Senegal 1976

In October of 1976, Jones was part of a Howard University delegation that traveled to Senegal to participate in the International Colloquium on Culture and Development held in honor of President Léopold Sédar Senghor’s seventieth birthday. At the colloquium, Jones gave a lecture titled “The African Influence of Afro-American Art” and presented President Senghor with a portrait (fig. 61). Hommage au Président Léopold Sédar Senghor (fig. 62) differs from Jones’s social-realist portraits from the 1940s such as Jennie (fig. 31) and Mob Victim (fig. 32). In those works, as discussed in chap. 2, the black subjects filled the centers of the compositions and were part of Jones’s efforts to document the African American experience. In Hommage au Président, only Senghor’s head and part of his shoulder are visible at the bottom right of the canvas. As in her 1958 mural in honor of Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah (fig. 51), Hommage au Président is a montage of African referents in which the likeness of Senghor is only one part.

Several locations (top to bottom: Senegal, Benin, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe) are referenced via symbol. At the bottom left, a soapstone Zimbabwe bird (an iconic emblem of the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe) is pictured against a brick backdrop. Above Senghor, Jones places an Ife terracotta head with facial striations and elaborate beaded crown. The sculptural head is positioned so that

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19 The Howard delegation included Dean Jerome Lindsay, Vice-President Lorraine Williams, and lecturer Irene Petty. E. Fannie Granton, “The Washington Scene,” JET (October 7, 1976): 40.
20 Construction of Great Zimbabwe began in the eleventh century and continued for more than three hundred years. The city was known for its stone walls, which rose higher than thirty-five feet. During nineteenth-century excavations of the city, eight soapstone Zimbabwe birds were discovered. For more on Great Zimbabwe see: Monica Visona, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Suzanne Preston Blier, A History of Art in Africa, 2nd ed. (Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 471–76.
its gaze mimics that of Senghor. Produced between 1000 and 1400 AD, terracotta heads, such as the one pictured in Jones’s portrait, played a large role in the symbolic representations of prominent Ife rulers.21 By depicting only Senghor’s head in Hommage, Jones continues the representational tradition.22 Jones creates a further bond between the ancient and contemporary black leaders by overlapping Senghor’s likeness with the Ife head. Her inclusion of the Ife terracotta and the Zimbabwe bird are direct references to ancient African art and culture in Southern and Western Africa.

To the left of the Ife terracotta, Jones inserts a mixed-gender group of African figures. The young woman who stands at the center of this group holds a young child in her arms; muscular men engaged in agricultural labor surround them. The group’s traditional white robes suggest that this is a historical tableau. Above the group are shapes rendered in black, yellow, and orange that at first appear to be some of Jones’s geometric designs; however, they represent the windows and horseshoe staircase to the House of Slaves on Gorée Island (fig. 62). Located just off the coast of Senegal, the Portuguese used Gorée Island as a final holding cell during the Atlantic slave trade.23 The House of Slaves and Gorée

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21 Located in Nigeria, Ile-Ife was one of the largest Yoruba city-states. According to Yoruba legend, Ife was the site of humanity’s origin. The facial striations visible on the terracotta are a common characteristic on Ife terracotta heads. The striations, according to Alisa LaGamma, have been interpreted as the shadows cast by the beaded crowns worn by Ife leaders. LaGamma also suggests that women may have been responsible for creating the Ife terracotta heads. For more on Ife representational traditions see: Alisa LaGamma, Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 37-71.

22 There is some debate that these Ife terracotta heads may originally have been part of life-size sculptures. Jones’s replication of the head suggests she was familiar with Ife terracotta’s in Western collections and sought to capitalize upon the representational tradition.

23 A museum commemorating the history of Gorée Island opened in 1962; the island was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. For more on Gorée Island see: Roger Atwood, “Senegal’s Forgotten Slaves: the Untold Story of Goree Island,” Archaeology vol. 65 no. 5 (Sept-Oct 2012);
Island occupy a unique place in the collective memory of peoples of African
descent. At the bottom of the canvas two lines of yellow text float between the
plinth of the Zimbabwe bird and the blue edge of Senghor’s blazer lapel. The
text, _Dessous l’arc en ciel de ta paix_ [Below the arc in the sky of your peace], is the
final line of Senghor’s poem “ _Prière de paix_” from his 1948 volume, _Hosties
Noires_.

_Hommage au Président Léopold Sédar Senghor_ brings the viewer through a
nonlinear history that includes the Atlantic slave trade, the classical Ife and Benin
kingdoms, the contemporary moment in which a black man returns to the seat of
power in Senegal, and the ancient times of Great Zimbabwe. Yet the picture is
more than just a portrait of Senghor or a history painting. In orientation and
content, _Hommage au Président_ follows the tenets of a commemorative postage
stamp. Jones’s familiarity with the medium undoubtedly came from her
husband, Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, who was an internationally recognized
stamp designer. However, _Hommage au Président_ does not just commemorate
Senghor. Jones’s content choices—the horseshoe staircase of the House of Slaves,
the Ife terracotta head, and the photorealist portrait of Senghor—work to expand
the concept of blackness in triplicate.

In chap. 3, I contended that Jones’s conception of blackness was linked to

Paul Lane and Kevin C. MacDonald, _Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory_ (Oxford: Published
for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2011).

24 Léopold Sédar Senghor, _Hosties Noires_ (Paris: Seuil, 1948). The poem was dedicated to Georges
and Claude Jacqueline Pompidou.

25 In 2004, the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust donated a large collection of Pierre-Noël’s
stamps to the National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C.
three locales: Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. In *Hommage au Président* blackness is even more multi-faceted. Blackness is both a physical location and a shared experience, embodied by references to the Atlantic slave trade via Gorée Island. As a condition (both physical and aesthetic), blackness is ancient and classical, as signified by the Ife terracotta head and the Zimbabwe bird. Last, blackness is human and modern, as indicated by Jones’s inclusion of Senghor’s portrait and his twentieth-century words. Jones’s arrangement of these compositional elements, and the way she manipulates them so that they cascade and overlap, highlights the painting’s movement through art and cultural histories. *Hommage au Président* speaks to the way in which blackness, and by default art produced by black individuals, is necessarily a pastiche or mix of experiences, locations, objects, and peoples that come into contact or collide with one another in a variety of ways.

Jones said that the portrait “dealt with the theme of African influence . . . and a tribute which I paid to . . . Papa Ibra Tall [b. 1935], who is the outstanding Senegalese artist.”26 An artist and art teacher, Tall returned to Senegal in 1960 after several years in France where he was involved with the Négritude circle. Upon his homecoming, he founded the Section de Recherches en Arts Plastiques Nègres. Tall, who was skeptical of Western education, advocated the use of “‘identifiable’ African subject matter.”27 In describing his aesthetic, he explained:

> It was a question of creating, for myself, an artistic language which seemed to me to belong to Africa and to Senegal . . . What interested me

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26 Danley, in Hill, ed., 292.
in finding a kind of authenticity was not to create pure decoration but to create a language of visual forms which defined me for myself.\textsuperscript{28}

Arguably, Jones was involved in a similar exercise and was creating a visual grammar to explicate her experiences in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Her interest in understanding black art also took verbal form. In the opening remarks of her lecture “The African Influence of Afro-American Art,” Jones described the interwoven nature of contemporary African American art, African art, and black identity:

the art of our ancestral homeland so permeates contemporary Afro-American art that it is presently impossible to speak of Afro-American art without speaking of African art, without expressing our indebtedness to Mother Africa who has nurtured us spiritually and aesthetically, who has given form to the Black Art Movement, which aspires to reflect the Black experience and heritage as a means of establishing Black identity.\textsuperscript{29}

One notes that for Jones, the label of black art and the influence Africa work together to establish black identity.

In the lecture, Jones mentioned her own use of African art and discussed two contemporary African American artist collectives, Afri-COBRA and the Harlem-based Weusi-Nyumba Ya Sanna, as examples of contemporary African American engagements with African motifs and aesthetics.\textsuperscript{30} Members of Afri-

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{29} Jones, “The African Influence on Afro-American Art,” undated manuscript, 1. She originally gave this lecture in 1970 to a USIA audience during her African tour, and repeated it in 1976 at the Senghor Colloquium. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-18, Folder 3; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Cobra were committed to an aesthetic and ideological agenda related to the promotion of an identifiable black aesthetic and a positive black identity.\textsuperscript{31}

At the time of Jones’s 1976 lecture, Afri-COBRA co-founder Jeff Donaldson was chair of the Department of Art at Howard. Donaldson advocated an art praxis that fused life with art.\textsuperscript{32} His push for appreciation of both an African aesthetic and a connection between the visual arts and the “contemporary reality” of lived conditions echoed the calls to action made in the mid- to late 1950s by pioneers of performance art, who also sought to break down the boundaries between art praxis and life in search of an authentic art.\textsuperscript{33} Like Tall and Jones, Donaldson was concerned with the creation of a true, or authentic black art practice, one grounded with references to African heritage. His arrival at Howard in 1970 is said to have re-ignited the department’s interest in African art. In addition to hiring several Afri-COBRA members to join the department’s faculty, Donaldson’s tenure saw the expansion of the Art


Department’s curriculum with the addition of courses on African and African American art history.\textsuperscript{34}

Despite their collegial association, Jones and Donaldson represented two distinct generations of African American artists. Unlike Jones, Porter, Wells, and Herring, who came of age during the Harlem Renaissance, Donaldson’s birth in 1932 made him a child of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Like Jones, Donaldson spent a year teaching in the South. Unlike Jones, who coached basketball in her spare time during her year in North Carolina, Donaldson organized in Mississippi for Medgar Evers and the NAACP; he gravitated toward the philosophies of Malcolm X (1925-1965), whereas Jones and her cohort saluted Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Donaldson and Jones’s interactions must be considered against the increasingly politicized socio-cultural background of the late 1960s and the growing interest in Pan-Africanism.\textsuperscript{35} Donaldson championed what he termed “TransAfrican art,” an aesthetic that pulled from African elements common to all peoples of African descent. For Donaldson and other members of Afri-COBRA, “There [was] no difference, at least stylistically, in the interpretation and explication of Black art in the United States, the Caribbean and Africa.”\textsuperscript{36}

While the sentiments of Afri-COBRA appear similar to those expressed by

\textsuperscript{34} Two of these new faculty members were Wadsworth Jarrell and Frank Smith. Donaldson also hired James Phillips, a member of the Weusi group in the early 1970s. Larry D. Holland, “Art is Revolutionary, Too!” The Hilltop, November 17, 1972.


\textsuperscript{36} Nubia Kai. AfriCobra: the First Twenty Years (Atlanta: Nexus Contemporary Art Center, 1990), 6.

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Jones, the group’s interest in creating an overtly political art was a key difference. Jones alluded to how Africa had been co-opted in service of the political at Howard when she said:

With Jeff Donaldson there, Frank Smith, they were all leaning towards that direction and influencing the students, however . . . when I first went to Howard to teach, you’d be surprised to see the African influence that I introduced . . . Apparently it was part of me way back, it isn’t something that came with the movement, the revolution, it happened way before.37

The absence of an overt political ideology in Jones’s work may be one reason why her African inspired art from this period has not been critically theorized. Jones had supported Donaldson’s appointment in 1970, and in 1973 she nominated Donaldson to another three-year term as department chair.38 But by the end of his second term, her patience with him as a colleague was running thin. Evidently this disenchantment was mutual: in May 1976, at a departmental meeting, a unanimous vote determined “that Professor Pierre-Noel should not continue to be an active member of the faculty.”39 Understandably, Jones was miffed that she had not been aware of the meeting and that the entire department had not been present. Although she attempted to protest the decision, the 1976–77 academic year was Jones’s last as a Howard professor. She retired that May, after forty-seven years of service at age 72.40

38 Jones to Dr. Vada E. Butcher, Dean of College of Fine Arts, Howard University, letter dated February 8, 1973. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-11, Folder 14; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
39 Loïs Mailou Jones to Jeff Donaldson, June 21, 1976. Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-7 Folder 18; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center Howard University.
40 Jones continued to lecture and teach throughout the United States after her retirement and, according to former Howard students, visited the Howard campus frequently.
FESTAC ’77: Artists, Objects, and Africans Collide

In October 1976, writing on official letterhead for the FESTAC United States Zonal Committee, Donaldson invited Jones to attend the upcoming Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) planned for January of 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria. As chair of the North American Zone (NAZ), Donaldson was responsible for assembling the four hundred forty-four African Americans—a mix of artists, musicians, performers, and celebrities—who would fly to Nigeria to attend the festival. His invitation to Jones may have been prompted by her participation in the seventieth birthday festivities for Léopold Senghor at the beginning of October.

For those twenty-nine days, the Nigerian city of Lagos was the capital of the black world. The festival brought more than seventeen thousand individuals to the sprawling festival site, much of it new construction funded by the...
Nigerian oil boom. The May 1977 cover of *Ebony* declared that “Festival in Nigeria Strengthens Bond between Black America and Africa.” In addition, the festival’s theme—the traditional arts of Africa—brought together traditional African art, contemporary black art, and artists of from all parts of the African Diaspora. These artists and objects joined in celebration of Pan-Africanism as linked inextricably to the arts (visual and performative) of Africa.

Jones had submitted two pieces to the original planning committee for consideration in 1974: *Moon Masque* (fig. 63) and *Philome and Robert in Haiti* also painted in 1971. While it is unclear whether or not Jones resubmitted works when FESTAC was rescheduled only *Moon Masque* was exhibited at the United States Exhibition Pavilion in 1977. FESTAC ’77 embodied a blurring of cultural and racial boundaries, an institutional point of contact for black art and culture on a global scale, and the mingling of black objects and black bodies. Jones’s participation in the festival places her within this nexus.

**La Baker: Josephine and Jones**

Jones returned to Howard after her Nigerian trip in 1977 and completed *La Baker* (fig. 64) in the ensuing months. The painting, which measures 40.5” x 56.5,” is one of Jones’s largest compositions. Not only does it encompass the spirit of FESTAC ’77 and its displays of black art and performance, the large canvas represents Jones’s homage to one of her lifelong idols, Josephine Baker.

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44 *Ebony* cover, May 1977.
45 Lois Mailou Jones Papers Box 215-29 Folder 29; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

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(1906–1975). Baker had left the United States for Paris in 1925; there, with her exotic dancing in La Revue Nègre, she became an overnight sensation.\(^{46}\) The title and subject of La Baker are similar to Jones’s 1951 La Primus (fig. 37). As discussed in chap. 3, La Primus celebrated Afro-Diasporic choreographer Pearl Primus’s work with representations of black dancers and references to African cave paintings. In La Baker, Jones offers up a trio of brown female dancers joined by a variety of African forms, who perform steps from the Charleston on a psychedelic stage. The Charleston, known for its fluid movement and potential for improvisation, was a dance first popularized during the 1920s and was one of Josephine Baker’s signature dances.\(^{47}\) In La Baker, Jones captures both the dance’s polyrhythmic moves and its African origins.

The composition is filled with radical color choices and sharp angles, as fields of turquoise, orange, and magenta are coupled with multi-colored checkerboard segments. A mask shape and Gabon reliquary figure are pasted onto the orange field at the center of the composition, which is bookended by

\(^{46}\) Born in St. Louis as Freda Josephine McDonald, Baker got her start performing with the Dixie Steppers and as a dancer in Shuffle Along. After the show closed, she performed at Harlem’s popular Plantation Club before becoming an expatriate in Paris and performing in La Folie du Jour as well as La Revue Nègre. In the 1930s Baker starred in several musical films, including Zou-Zou and Princess Tam-Tam. For more on Baker see: Benneta Jules-Rosette, Josephine Baker in Art and Life: the Icon and the Image (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

two African figurines (perhaps Luba or Hemba). With the painting’s quilt like aesthetic, Jones taps into African American quilting traditions and women’s art in general. Jones’s use of high-key color, flatness, and pattern in the composition make reference her ongoing conversation with high modernism, the work’s quilt-like aesthetic also signals an engagement with women’s art and African American quilting traditions.\(^4\)

Jones captures Baker’s coquettish spirit with the curl of the central dancer’s elongated eyelashes and her flirtatious sideways glance. This dancer, perhaps meant to represent Baker herself, wears a pink costume that splits her body in half. Notably, Jones’s choice of the chocolate brown and fleshy pink for the costume has racial implications can be read as a commentary on Baker’s appeal to both white and black audiences. The split costume is reminiscent of those worn by the male dancers in *La Primus*, which also embodied a sense of racial duality.

Two dancers flank the central performer. The three dancers share the same brown skin, yet the dancers on the edges are nude except for pink feather plumes that adorn their backside. Torn from pink tissue paper, the feathers stand in contrast texturally to the flatness of the acrylic paint. The two dancers are faceless, and while they both sport Baker’s signature forehead curl it functions as an accessory rather than humanizing element. Two seated African American...
figurines appear at the edge of the canvas. These statuettes are also faceless and nude, yet their black surfaces contrast with the dancers’ chocolate-toned skin.

Jones has posed the dancers so that their positions mirror those of the African figurines. On the left the dancer arches her back with her arms open and outstretched, a pose that accentuates the roundness of her behind. Although the plumes of her costume obscure part of the African figurine, they separate in a way that exposes the similarly curved backside of the African figurine behind her. To the right, the dancer bends forward with her hands on her knees in a step from the Charleston. Her position also echoes the sharp angles of the African figurine in front of her. With the repetition of poses (in African and African American form) Jones suggests a link not only between the black body and the African figurine, but also to the Charleston’s relationship to African culture.

Rather than accentuate the differences between the human dancers and the material objects, Jones strives to connect them and to illustrate their similarities. The collective nudity, facelessness, and bodily similarities ascribe human characteristics to the objects and objectify the human figures. In La Baker, as she did in La Primus, Jones explores the connection between black artists (visual and performance) with African art and the potential animation of African art.

Jones’s title, La Baker (the nickname given to Baker by the French press), also plays with the human-object distinction. Jones’s addition of the French article la seems to effectively turn Baker into a consumable object. With the title Baker goes from a person to an icon. However, in La Baker Jones appropriates more than just a nickname. The central dancer in La Baker is a quotation of a 1925
watercolor (fig. 65) of Josephine Baker by French poster artist Paul Colin (1892–1985).\textsuperscript{49} In Colin’s sketchy watercolor, Baker appears in mid-movement, her arm swung across her body as she dances atop a black piano. Faceless and nude, Colin’s Baker is objectified. While Colin’s watercolor is clearly the inspiration for Jones’s \textit{La Baker}, Jones places Baker within a different moment. Baker still performs a move from the Charleston, but her arms have swung open, squaring her body to the viewer. Moreover, where Colin’s Baker performed on a blank stage Jones places Baker into context that includes references to modernist art practices, African and African American visual culture, as well as conceptions of black performativity.

\textbf{From Pairs to Pastiche: Jones’s works from the 1980s}

On April 2, 1980, President Jimmy Carter honored Jones at the White House with African American artists Richmond Barthé, Romare Bearden, Margaret T. Burroughs, Jacob Lawrence, Archibald Motley, James Lesesne Wells, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff.\textsuperscript{50} Carter introduced Jones as “a painter, a designer, an illustrator, and also an educator [who has] mixed Haitian emphasis with the black experience.” Jones’s 1980 painting \textit{Damballah} (fig. 66) exemplifies this mixing. As in \textit{Hommage au Président}, Jones combines word and image to

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\textsuperscript{49} Colin published a portfolio of Baker-inspired lithographs titled \textit{Le Tumulte Noir} (Paris: Éditions d’Art “Success”, 1927). The original portfolio, issued as a limited run of five hundred, included forty-five hand-colored lithographs measuring 18.5” x 12.5”. The African figurines in \textit{La Baker} appear on pl. 11 of \textit{Le Tumulte Noir} and the pink-feathered dancers on pl. 35. Jones’s central dancer is a visual quotation of a Colin watercolor now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery. It is unclear if Jones would have encountered the watercolor during her many trips to France or in the United States.
\end{flushright}
convey a symbolic message. In title, *Damballah* refers to the Voudon deity of creation. On the far left, Jones includes a green, blue and orange snake, one of the symbols associated with Damballah.\(^{51}\) To the snake’s right, an Afikpo Igbo mask spans the width of the canvas.\(^{52}\) Braids of raffia encircle the sides of this monkeylike mask; its right side is covered by a rectangle that contains the faces and shoulders of four black vendors. These merchants, with their vibrant clothing, minimalist features, and ebony skin, are reminiscent of the market scenes Jones painted in Haiti during the 1960s.

Jones described herself as prone to combining “motifs from various regions in Africa, which result in a composition that tends to unify Africa.”\(^{53}\) However, rather than smoothly blend her references to Haitian voudoun, Africa, and contemporary Haiti in *Damballah*, Jones elects to render the seams visible by placing each referent in its own contained segment. The painting’s sections are pasted together, at times overlapping and obscuring one another. With its mix of patterns, objects, animals, and peoples, it is unclear which element is meant to occupy center stage.

In *Damballah* and other works from the early 1980s, Jones engages in what

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\(^{51}\) Some art historians have referred to the snake form as kakilamba snake. Finley, 55 and Benjamin, ). However, the form could also be a reference to a Baga Bansonyi snake mask from Guinea. For more on Baga masquerade traditions see: Visona, 176-179 and Nigel Barley, “Sculpture in the form of a stylized serpent (bansonyi), Baga, Guinea” in *Africa: Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Phillips (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995), 476.


\(^{53}\) Lois Mailou Jones, undated notecards, Lois Mailou Jones Papers, Box 215-18, Folder 52, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
I call a pastiche practice—a literal mixing of pictures and symbols that are pasted or collaged together to form a whole. With the piece-iness of *Damballah*, Jones again taps into the quilt aesthetic of *La Baker*. Conceptually, pastiche is Jones’s visual technique for confronting black identity and black art. Her works from the 1970s and 1980s indicate that creating a seamless representation of blackness is impossible: blackness is inherently comprised of breaks and disjuncture.

In a trio of paintings from 1982—*Les Jumeaux* (The Twins; fig. 67), *Petite Ballerina du Senegal* (fig. 59), and *Deux Coiffures d’Afrique* (Two African Hairstyles; fig. 68)—Jones repeatedly pairs black bodies and black objects. In *Les Jumeaux*, a pair of carved wooden figurines depicted with arms intertwined at the waist stand in front of an abstract Akan stool. Akan stools, from Ghana, were the prized possession and symbol of Akan rulers. The stools are made of wood and typically decorated with intricate geometric designs. Jones nods to the wooden material by rendering the stool’s outline in brown and its traditional decoration by adorning it with a running blue and brown chevron design that demarcates its curved seat; the legs are made up of multi-colored concentric circles. The stool looks flat, however, in comparison to the rounded wooden figurines that appear in front of it. Although both objects appear on a two-dimensional canvas, Jones creates the illusion that the figurines are three-dimensional.

The manner in which Jones animates the twin figures is noteworthy. Each has one arm wrapped around the other’s waist; the other arms are raised as if to wave, with palms facing outward. These figurines, are used as material conduits

between the human and ancestral spirit world. With the placement of the arms, Jones forges a physical connection—not just between the two African figurines, but also with the viewers who stand outside the canvas. The figurines, who physically embody ancestral spirits, represent the past and wave to the viewers in the contemporary moment. *Les Jumeaux* perpetuates Jones’s pattern of pairing black objects with black bodies (here unseen) and animated African art objects that serve as connecting links between past and present.

*Petite Ballerina du Sénégal* is compositionally similar to *Ubi Girl from a Tai Region* (1972). Here, Jones retains the layout of *Ubi Girl* and simply swaps out the major elements. In both works, the head of young African girl floats in the center on top of a two-tone maroon heddle pulley. In *Ubi Girl*, the young girl’s face was painted; in *Petite Ballerina*, her face is bare and she wears an elaborate headdress fashioned from cowry shells and white feathers. In place of the orange Pende masks, Jones has added a pair of red abstract designs. Along the edge of the heddle pulley, Jones has replaced the portrait mask from *Ubi Girl* with a seated carved figurine (perhaps another Baule figure). The head of the figurine and that of the ballerina are set so nearly on the same plane that it is as if the ballerina’s head could be affixed to the body of the African sculpture.

With the two heads and one body in *Petite Ballerina*, Jones creates a modified Janus figure that has two heads, one wooden and one human. As the Roman god responsible for guarding points of entry, Janus is traditionally represented with two faces that enable him to look both forward and backward.

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In African art, Janus figurines are given bodies and/or heads that face in opposite directions. Arguably, Jones’s combination of black bodies and black objects reconceptualizes the Janus figure.

The young dancer from *Petite Ballerina* also appears *Deux Coiffures d’Afrique* (fig. 68), where she sits at the bottom of the composition, gazing downward and to the left. Her shoulders and torso, which are wrapped in printed cloth, lean forward and pull away from the flatness of the background. Here Jones replaces the feathered headdress from *Petite Ballerina* with an elaborately designed hairstyle. Behind the young girl is a female figure rendered in light blue whose hair is styled in an equally complicated design, perhaps of Fulani origin. In *Deux Coiffures*, Jones comments on the past as represented by background woman, whose coloring is similar to the Ife terracotta found in the Senghor portrait, and the present as embodied by the young girl in the foreground. By placing their two heads and torsos in line with one another, Jones also alludes to the continuity of cultural traditions. Perhaps she was thinking of familial lineage in response to the death of Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël in April 1982. Bearing in mind that she and her husband remained childless, Jones’s repeated picturing of a child and commentaries on generations in her works from this period can be interpreted as her meditations on a family she never had.

In *Initiation Liberia* (fig. 69) from 1983, Jones’s young girl has transformed into a young woman who fills the center of the canvas. Her hair is done in a complicated braid, a band of white cloth covers her eyes, and four rings encircle her neck. At the left of the composition, her profile is replicated twice. In the first profile, outlined in white, her features are simplified and schematized. In the
second profile, which appears in the depths of the background, her facial features are reproduced as a solid gray silhouette. The multilayered background contains a mix of patterned segments and blocks of solid color that are superimposed atop one another. The curved outline of the heddle pulley from *Ubi Girl* and *Petite Ballerina* is seen in the depths.

Aside from the heddle pulley, which would probably be indistinguishable to those unfamiliar with Jones’s earlier works, *Initiation Liberia* does not contain overtly African objects. However, the young woman could be a humanized Mende Sowe helmet mask from Liberia.56 These masks, which represent idealized female beauty, are worn solely by female masqueraders during rituals associated with Sande, the female secret society. Neck-rings and elaborately braided hairstyles characterize the masks. The white band over the girl’s eye area replicates the white scarves that are often tied around the mask to symbolize the initiate’s face paint.57 By humanizing the mask in *Initiation Liberia*, Jones successfully blurs the line between human and object. By the mid-1980s, she would move on from pairing black bodies and black objects to the personification of black histories.

Throughout Jones’s career, she sustained a noteworthy dual interest in initiation practices and black women. As discussed in chap. 3, in Haiti during the 1960s Jones witnessed Voudon initiation rites, drew *vèvès*, and produced related works such as *Vèvé Voudou II* (fig. 46). These mixed-media pieces implicated

57 A collection search of the National Museum of African Art reveals that a Sowe mask (object no. 77-22-1) was acquired in 1977; this may be the mask that inspired this image.
Jones not only as an observer, but also with her choices in perspective as a pseudo-initiate in the Afro-Diasporic religion. A similar case might be made for Jones’s initiation-themed paintings of the early 1980s: *Initiation Liberia* and *Ubi Girl from the Tai Region*. These works indicate that for Jones, the black female body served as a conduit and a medium for exploring Afro-Diasporic identities.

Jones contemplated the origin of humanity in her 1985 work *The Beginning* (fig. 70), completed in Haiti, in which she visualizes an Afro-Diasporic creation story. As in many of her works, Jones divides the canvas into vertical segments. At the left, a nude black couple is shown in silhouette on a swath of yellow sand. Above them, two bands of blue in different shades signify the ocean. The coral rectangle that fills the area above these bands represents the sky. Standing face to face, the male and female clasp hands around a green object—Jones’s take on the infamous apple. Beneath this black Adam and Eve, a multicolored serpent at their feet glides upward, flicking its tongue. With the snake, the symbol associated with Damballah, the Voudou god of creation, Jones makes reference to both Judeo-Christian and Voudou creation myths.58

At the center of the canvas is an elaborately carved Senufo Kpeliye’e mask whose outline is executed in light brown. Strands of raffia hang from its sides. In the composition, the mask serves as a metonym for the African continent. On the far right, a white sphere (sun or moon) is depicted close to the horizon line. A serpentine, green plant at the right mirrors the snake seen on the left. Balancing

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58 According to Voudou mythology, the earth was created by the movement of the Damballah serpent. When he shed his skin, he released all the water that created the oceans, lakes, and rivers. The reflection of the water and the sun created a rainbow with which Damballah fell in love. The sky represents his wife, Aida-Wedo.
the entire composition is the ocean, which appears on both sides of the mask. The way the ocean flanks the African mask speaks to the African Diaspora and the transport of African bodies across the Atlantic.

*The Beginning* might be read as a bookend to *Ascent of Ethiopia* (fig. 18), painted fifty years earlier in which Jones documented the incorporation of blacks into urban American society during the Harlem Renaissance. In *Ascent of Ethiopia* Jones commented on the role of Africa in the nascent African American identity. However, in *The Beginning* Jones articulates the origin of all humanity as black.

Three years after *The Beginning*, Jones completed *We Shall Overcome* (fig. 71). The title, of course, is a direct reference to the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Like *The Beginning*, *We Shall Overcome* is a commentary on black humanity and survival that relies on representational rather than abstract forms. The composition is crowded with a mix of black bodies, black faces, emblems, and assorted words. Whereas Jones collaged pieces cut from popular media in her 1964 *Challenge America*, she uses watercolor in *We Shall Overcome* to achieve the same affect. This use of watercolor is both a nod to Jones’s artistic roots and a demonstration of her artistic dexterity.

The large heads of two prominent African American clergymen-turned-political activists are immediately visible. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. appears at the top left, in front of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool and Capitol. Rosa Parks’ name is visible beneath his chin. The Rev. Jesse Jackson (b. 1941), a 1988 presidential candidate, looks across the composition from the right. Between these iconic figures, superstar black entertainer Michael Jackson (1958-2009) peers out. The smiling faces of actor/comedian Bill Cosby (b. 1937) and
actress Phylicia Rashad (b. 1948), of the groundbreaking television series *The Cosby Show*, fill the top right corner. A cascade of black athletes—New York Yankees outfielder Dan Winfield (b. 1951), Philadelphia 76ers forward-guard Julius Erving (b. 1950), figure skater and 1988 Olympic bronze medalist Debi Thomas (b. 1967), and Washington Redskins quarterback Doug Williams (b. 1955)—divide the composition in half. To the left of the athletes, one finds the name of former Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry (b. 1936) on a circular pin next to a black soldier in combat gear.

Beneath Thomas’s skates, the words “November 28, Wappinger Falls” appear; this is the date and place of the alleged beating and humiliation of African American teenager Tawana Brawley in 1987. The textual reference to this incident appears above a trio of Klansmen in white robes. To the right of the athletes, South African archbishop and civil rights activist Desmond Tutu (b. 1931) stands in front of a pair of microphones. The arms of a group of African dancers, who appear behind Tutu circling red-orange flames, mirror his outstretched arms. Beneath Tutu, a multiracial crowd carries a white banner that reads “Apartheid Kills;” beneath the ‘K’ sits a white skull. In front of the skull stands a young black man sporting a black cap and round white sunglasses with dollar signs over the lenses. To his left a young black male in a tank top and do-rag turns towards the marching crowd, the word “cocaine” falling in white letters from his mouth.

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59 Brawley made national headlines when she accused six white men, including three police officers, of rape. Cosby and the Rev. Al Sharpton (b. 1954) were among numerous prominent black public figures who came to her aid. It was later determined that Brawley had falsified her story. For more on the controversy surrounding the Brawley case see: Robert D. McFadden, *Outrage: the Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax* (New York: Bantam, 1990).
This painting, which is poster-like in its composition and detail, is a notable departure from Jones’s earlier works. The composition is multi-layered, both in its collaged elements which overlap and build upon one another, and in its meaning. Its focus is also entirely contemporary and its execution is representational, with none of Jones’s signature abstractions of color blocking. The title coupled with Jones’s inclusion of numerous African American heroes among pop-culture symbols and concrete references to the challenges facing blacks at the end of the 1980s (e.g., drugs, racism, crime, police brutality, politics) combine to convey a message of strength and of coexistence.

In *We Shall Overcome*, Jones does not quote artistic sources, but rather assembles a powerful mix of black people, personalities, locales, and historical events. The collage-like painting is a time capsule, a commentary not only on the 1980s, but also on the complexity of black history that had brought African Americans to this era. Given the works examined in this chapter, which are characterized by African and Afro-Diasporic themes, *We Shall Overcome* seems unexpected. It represents a retreat from overtly African themes, yet remains both a critique and a celebration of blackness.

**Conclusion: A Composite Composition**

In 1936, Alain Locke contemplated the future of African American art and suggested that it could be a composite of African, American, modern, and primitive elements. Jones’s work from the 1970s and 1980s, which were produced after her travels to and from France, Haiti, and Africa, reflect the composite aesthetic to which Locke alluded. While it is likely that Jones read
Locke’s thoughts in his *Negro Art: Past and Present*, her development of a composite or collage aesthetic was a career-long effort.

The chapter began with Jones’s thoughts on the 1984 “Primitivism” show which ignored questions related to the African influence on twentieth century African American production. Jones’s *Africa Series* list, written in the early 1980s, functions both as Jones’s potential exhibition checklist and as a loose framing device for this chapter’s examination of the evolving visual language Jones developed to deal with her diverse African and Afro-Diasporic experiences. During the 1970s, Jones made four trips to the African continent: two multi-country tours in 1970 and 1972, a trip to Senegal for Senghor’s birthday celebration, and in 1977 Jones participated in the global celebration of blackness that was FESTAC ’77.

Formal analyses of the works Jones created after each of these trips reveals Jones’s experimentation with a collage or composite aesthetic that involved the mixing of black bodies, black art objects, black locales, and black cultural signifiers. These works are a major leap from her earlier work discussed in the preceding chapters and represent a visual resistance to a one-dimensional Africa. In the end, the visual grammar she developed spoke to the presence of multi-faceted black identities at the end of the twentieth century. It was also an acknowledgement a black artist’s engagement with Africa need not be seamless and rather is always characterized by a series of breaks and moments of disjuncture.
Conclusion

In 1996, the Studio Museum in Harlem named Loïs Mailou Jones Artist of the Year.¹ She was 90 years old. As she accepted the award, Jones told the audience, “My friend Dorothy West tells people she’s the last surviving writer from the Harlem Renaissance. Well, I’m the last artist.”² Two years later, Jones died of a heart attack in her Washington, D.C. home. In her obituary, New York Times art critic Holland Cotter described Jones as “an iconic figure and an important historic link in a path-breaking generation of black artists.”³ Indeed, with a prolific career that spanned from the 1920s through the early 1990s, a lengthy tenure as an art instructor at Howard University, and as one of a handful of female artists in a sea of male contemporaries, Jones was undoubtedly a vanguard figure in twentieth century American art.

Fifteen years after her death in the winter of 2012-2013, the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) used one of Jones’ paintings, the 1938 African mask filled oil Les Fétiches (fig. 3), as the lone illustration in its call for papers (fig. 72) for “American Artists in Dialogue with Africa and the African Diaspora.”⁴ With this selection, organizers heralded the painting and by extension Jones, as emblematic of the symposium’s theme.

² Ibid.
Les Fétiches was but one example of Jones’s continuous conversation with Africa and the African Diaspora. Jones’s dialogue began with an introduction to African art objects while an art student during the Harlem Renaissance and persisted until the end of her career. Moreover, Jones’s conceptualization of Africa steadily expanded over the course of her career to include not only African objects, but African and African Diasporic bodies, cultural traditions, and locations. In fact, SAAM organizers need only look at their own gallery walls for evidence of Jones’s on-going interest in African and African Diasporic identities: her 1971 Moon Masque, her 1982 Surinamia, and her 1983 Initiation Liberia are all in the museum’s permanent collection. A more fitting advertisement for the symposium may have included these other paintings as demonstrative of how Jones negotiated, conversed with, and traversed African and Diasporic themes, objects, bodies, and locales over the course of her seventy-year career.

This dissertation began not with Jones’s work, but rather with an exploration of when and how American audiences came into contact with Africa as manifested in African objects. It was at the turn of the twentieth century that African art was taken up by the European avant-garde, which resulted in the reclassification of African objects as art rather than ethnographic curiosity. Chapter One noted that the initial display of African art as such in the United States, began as it had in Europe, in small Modernist galleries run by white members of the avant-garde. We saw how during the 1910s and in the early 1920s African art was institutionalized with exhibitions at increasingly more mainstream art museums. This movement of African art from the ethnographic
museum to the Modernist gallery to the major art museum also resulted in a wider racial audience.

What becomes clear in tracing this early history of the display of African art on American soil is that such exhibitions were few and far between, particularly at venues frequented by African American populations. Moreover, individuals residing outside of New York City would have had even more difficulty gaining access to such objects in museum and gallery settings. Thus, those artists interested in African art would have had to actively search for such inspiration. As a result, the photographic reproductions and illustrations of African art that appeared in books, periodicals, and magazines became another important contact zone.

The writings of cultural theorist and Howard University professor Alain Locke, which appeared in a range of publications in the 1920s and 1930s, were one such point of textual contact. Locke became a central figure in the dissemination of a nascent criticism of African art. Locke’s writings exposed his views on the role African art could play in the development of a distinctive African American artistic tradition. Locke believed African American artists should capitalize on the success of the European Modernists and find a way to incorporate African motifs into their work. In Locke’s view, African art was a critical part of African American cultural heritage and thus needed to be reclaimed by African Americans.

Chapter Two introduced Loïs Mailou Jones and examined the appearance of African themes in her work during the early phase of her career. Jones’s interest in Africa began while in high school and continued through her art
school training at the Museum School in Boston. Jones’s early incorporation of African art and aesthetics into her work offered her purchase within the Harlem Renaissance to which she has traditionally been viewed as a latecomer. Via a careful interrogation of Jones’s activities at the end of the 1920s, one can locate her entrance into the black arts scene in the summer of 1928, two years before she joined the faculty at Howard University. An analysis of Jones’s 1937-1938 sabbatical in Paris unveiled that at the end of the 1930s Jones’s interactions with Africa evolved from contact with African art objects to contact with Afro-Diasporic peoples.

Importantly, it was during Jones’s year in Paris that she became acquainted with Jane and Paulette Nardal, two sisters who were influential in the Négritude movement in Paris. In demonstrating Jones’s awareness of the Nardal sisters, it becomes possible to read her paintings from this period through the lens of Négritude and to consider how Jones herself engaged in acts of picturing black identity in the late 1930s. After a brief discussion of Jones’s social-realist portraits from the 1940s, the chapter moved to a consideration of Jones’s involvement with the Liberian Centennial Celebration in 1946. With her cover illustration for the exposition, Jones introduced a compositional trope I termed “blackness in triplicate,” in which Jones rendered visible the possibility of multiple African identities that as her career continued came to include a range of African, Afro-Diasporic, and African American identity constructs.

Chapter Three explored how Jones’s art practice was affected by a series of Diasporic experiences and encounters she had in Haiti, Africa, and the United States between 1950 and 1970. During these years she married Haitian graphic
designer Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, established a studio in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and in 1970 completed her first trip to the African continent. Her travel and increased exposure to African Diasporic cultures provided another route for an African American artist like herself to reach the roots of African culture.

Jones returned to the idea of blackness in triplicate in her 1951 painting La Primus and her 1953 watercolor Héritage Egyptien. The two paintings elucidated Jones’s growing Diasporic consciousness and the place of Africa within this expanding nexus of black culture. The subsequent analysis of Jones’s work produced in Haiti revealed a dramatic shift in her art as it moved from representational to increasingly more abstract. This move towards abstraction occurred at the same moment that Jones’s understanding of Haitian culture evolved from that of an outside observer to an active participant.

Jones’s Diasporic experiences were not limited to those occurring in Haiti and in France. At the start of the 1960s, Jones was involved in a series of events at African embassies in Washington, D.C and her activities (artistic and otherwise) implicated her in an expanding cross-cultural network of African, Afro-Diasporic, and African American intellectuals, artists, and politicians. Jones’s work from this period must be considered in relation to the ever-increasing social and political unrest of the 1960s. While Jones was not overtly political, the research project she developed at the end of the 1960s on the black visual artist in African, Haitian, and African American contexts spoke to rising student demands at Howard University for a black-centered curriculum. The research project also exposed Jones’s interest in delineating the contours of contemporary black art in a global context.
The final chapter examined Jones’s art from the end of her career and explored the direction of her work after she traveled to Africa in 1970, 1972, 1976, and 1977. Ultimately, when tasked with making sense of her ideas about Africa I posit that Jones turned to pastiche and collage as an aesthetic response to her many African and Afro-Diasporic experiences and encounters. The visual language of collage enabled Jones not only to cope with the multiple layers of experiences she had over the course of her career, but also to speak to the presence of multiple black identities at the end of the twentieth century. While there might be a desire to see African American artists reconcile Africa seamlessly in their work, with her choice to pursue a collage or composite aesthetic, Jones reflected not only the multi-layered nature of her experiences, but also the multi-faceted nature of blackness itself. Jones’s paintings from the 1980s, which are characterized by their visible seams and stitching together of diverse black motifs, spoke to late twentieth century conceptions of identity.

The last chapter ended in 1988 ten years before Jones’s death. In her obituary, Holland Cotter portrayed Jones’s art as “eclectic, academic work. . .[that] ranged from impressionistic landscapes to political allegories, and from cubistic depictions of African sculptures to realistic portraits.” However, it is Jones’s continued exploration of and search for an African and Afro-Diasporic ethos that unifies her seemingly “eclectic” work. Moreover, it is this dissertation’s close and extended scrutiny of Jones’s career that helps make sense of how her work accomplishes multiple objectives vis-à-vis the question of Africa

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in the construction of black artistic identities in the twentieth century. Her early works exemplified Africa’s inspirational role for modernism, her mid-career practice highlighted Africa’s cataclysmic and political importance to African Americans, and throughout her career she produced works that commented on Africa’s function as a primitivist foil to Western modernism and its cultural importance to African American heritage. Jones’s persistent use of African motifs in her work, her active exploration of the various social and cultural contexts of Africa and the Diaspora are all part of her desire to produce work that resists the idea of a one-dimensional Africa.

As an artist, an art instructor, and a budding art historian in her own right, Jones is a fitting case study to examine how ideas of Africa informed constructions of black artistic identity in the twentieth century. Her lengthy career enables a consideration of how her practice evolved in relation to changing ideas of Africa, but also responded to key black cultural movements, among them: the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, the Civil Rights Movement, and Pan-Africanism. Moreover, Jones’s continued return to Africa and the African Diaspora over the many phases of her career suggests that the role Africa played in delineating the discursive contours of black art in the twentieth century constantly needed to be re-evaluated and re-examined by artists and art historians alike.
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Smithsonian American Art Museum
Call for Papers: American Art in Dialogue with Africa and the African Diaspora
Fourth Terra Symposium on American Art in a Global Context
Friday and Saturday, October 4 & 5, 2013

Since the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, Africa has played an important—albeit shifting, contested, and often unseen—role in the history of art of the United States. American artists of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with various agendas have imagined and depicted Africa and African peoples in their work or turned to African cultures and art objects for inspiration. Anthropologists and art historians have scrutinized African American visual production in search of cultural retentions, while many modern and contemporary black and Latino artists have alternately highlighted or occluded reference to Africa or African Diasporic cultures in their work. Artists from the U.S. who have traveled to the continent or engaged firsthand with international African Diasporic communities have often found themselves and their work altered by these experiences in significant and unexpected ways. More recently, globalization and the growth of international biennial exhibitions have facilitated multi-directional exchange and brought contemporary artists from Africa and the Diaspora increasingly into contact with the mainstream U.S. art scene.

The conference organizers seek original, innovative scholarship investigating heretofore unexamined aspects of this transatlantic dialogue, from the visual culture of slavery and abolitionism to American modernism; from the Black Arts Movement to the contemporary art world. Papers engaging with a wide range of visual art media including performance art, decorative arts, folk art, and craft are welcome.

Paper proposals should be written in English and should include a 300- to 500-word abstract and a short curriculum vitae. They should be sent to Amelia Goerritz, Fellowship and Academic Programs Coordinator, Smithsonian American Art Museum, P.O. Box 37012 MRC 970, Washington, D.C. 20013-7012, or via e-mail to AmericanArtSymposium@si.edu. Deadline for submissions: January 30, 2013.

Confirmed speakers will be required to submit the text of their 30-minute symposium presentations by September 1, 2013. The symposium will be available for viewing in a simultaneous and, later, an archived, webcast. Funds for travel and accommodations are available. Presenters from outside of the U.S. may be eligible for additional funds to support the travel of an international graduate student guest.

“American Art in Dialogue with Africa and the African Diaspora” is being organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in partnership with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Part of the Terra Symposia on American Art in a Global Context, it is supported by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art. The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. For regularly updated symposium information, please visit www.AmericanArt.si.edu/research/symposia/2013/terra/.

Lois Mailou Jones, (in A/Niverse), 1955. Oil on linen, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Mrs. Norva P. Green, Dr. H. Hart, and Francis McNeave

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Biography

Rebecca Keegan VanDiver was born in Falmouth, Maine. After graduating from the Middlesex School in Concord, Massachusetts, Rebecca matriculated at Harvard University. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with an A.B. in History of Art and Architecture in 2004. Rebecca entered the Ph.D. program in Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University in the fall of 2006. She obtained an M.A. in Art History from Duke in 2009. In 2013, Rebecca received a Ph.D. in Art History & Visual Studies and a Certificate in African-American and African Studies from Duke University. Her research has received recognition in the form of grants and fellowships awarded by the Smithsonian Institution (2008), the Inter-Institutional Academic Collaborative Travelling Scholars Program (2010), the American Council of Learned Societies/Henry Luce Foundation Dissertation Fellowship in American Art (2010), the Mellon-Mays Graduate Initiatives Program (2008, 2010, 2012), and the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia (2011-2013).

Currently, Rebecca lives in Charlottesville, Virginia with her husband Bryce and their two dogs, Fenway and Wrigley.