Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

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My essay concerns the work of the African-American painter, designer, and educator Löis Mailou Jones, and how travel and migration influenced her life as an artist, including her aesthetic choices, formal practice, theoretical understanding and pedagogical philosophy. Jones was a lifelong educator and her travel, indeed her migration to France and later to Haiti was essential to her worldview and aesthetic practice. She had studios in each of those countries, which she visited frequently for long periods, in addition to her studios in Washington, D.C. and on the island of Martha’s Vineyard in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. In addition to Europe and the Caribbean, Africa was a central focus of Jones’ oeuvre, figuring in her pattern of travel and migration as well as in her paintings from the early 1970s onwards. The essay that follows will be framed by the artist’s use of the mask as a visual and symbolic trope to connect with Africa and her African roots, and then to Haiti and a larger African diaspora. This chapter stems from an earlier essay, ‘The Mask as Muse: the Influence of African Art on the Life and Career of Löis Mailou Jones,’ written for the 2009 retrospective exhibition Löis Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color, curated by Carla M. Hanzal for the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina.1

A 1983 photograph of Loïs Mailou Jones taken in her studio by the famed Scurlock brothers of Washington, D.C. shows the artist in her element, surrounded by images, objects and pieces of history that fueled the fire of her creative energy. Masks peer out from nearly every corner of the room, in animal form, in African ceremonial art, and in framed paintings and reproductions of her own work. A glimpse of her vast library of art books is visible on the right side of the photograph, along with some paintbrushes, pencils, a wooden anatomical model and a poster for the documentary ‘Fifty Years of My Art’ about Jones’s half-century of painting. A photograph of her late husband, the Haitian graphic designer Louis Verginaud Pierre-Noel, peeks out from behind a sconce on the adjacent wall just below a large cow’s skull. Reminders of her training in Paris and subsequent frequent sojourns there include a postcard of the tourist icon Sacre Coeur in front of the bookshelf among her paint brushes, a poster for her critically acclaimed solo show at the Galerie Soulanges in Paris in 1966, and her 1938 oil painting Le Model on the back wall. Behind her, a formal black and white portrait from the 1950s projects the same energy and joie de vivre as Jones as she smiles proudly for the camera. With three paintbrushes in hand, the artist seems eager to paint another boldly colored work filled with African-inspired masks and repeating design motifs.

Two of Jones’s vibrant works in colorful acrylic from her Africa Series are prominently displayed in the Scurlock photograph: Damballah (1980) is on the easel behind her and Symbols d’Afrique (1980) is to her left.² Both paintings are tightly designed using a linear grid in which recurring African masks, icons and patterns are systematically placed. In a 1984 interview with artist and critic Evangeline J. Montgomery, Jones described the direction of her work: ‘I am pushing, more or less in

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² The vast majority of the works from Jones’s Africa Series were painted in Haiti and inspired by her trips to Africa in 1970, 1972 and 1976, or observations of African cultural and religious practices in Haiti. A handwritten index card from the artist’s archive lists twenty-one paintings belonging to her Africa Series, beginning with Les Fétiches (1937) and ending with Surinamia (1982). LMJP/MSRC, box 215–18, folder 52, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
the direction of symbolism, African symbolism and Haitian symbolism, color and design.' In Damballah, named after the Haitian Vodun god of creation, a large Afikpo Ibo mask is clipped by a brightly colored panel of Haitian street vendors marching with wares for sale atop headburdens. To the left, a richly patterned Kakilamba snake in green, blue, black and orange provides a visual reference to Damballah, also known as the serpent god. Jones chose to show Damballah during a spiritual possession, as he is slithering on the ground and revealing his serpentine tongue. Symbols d’Afrique is richly patterned with a mixture of alternating masks, textile designs and Adinkra symbols of West African Ashanti origin. As Jones once explained, ‘Oftimes I combine motifs from various regions in Africa, which result in a composition which tends to unify Africa.’ Both paintings show Jones’s longstanding commitment to working with the mask. They also illustrate her strong afrocentric leaning at this late stage in her career, with the repeated use of African symbols and choice of bold colors and patterning. But this was not a recent innovation in her practice. Rather, it was present in her work from the very beginning.

The Early Years

Early in her training at the High School of Practical Arts in Boston (1919–23), Jones was ‘introduced to Africa through creating the masks with Ripley Studios.’ This apprenticeship enabled the young artist to apply her budding knowledge of design to the performing arts,
specifically dance, when she was asked to assist with fashioning masks and costumes for the Ted Shawn School of Dance.\footnote{Ibid., p. 6. Ted Shawn (1891–1972) was a pioneering choreographer of early American modern dance. He is known for establishing the Denishawn School of Dance in Los Angeles in 1914 (with Ruth St. Denis, his wife and dance partner of many years), where he devised a popular technique of music visualization for modern dance and trained, among others, Martha Graham. Shawn is also credited with organizing the Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers after separating from his wife in 1930, and launching Jacob’s Pillow, a popular dance school, theatre and retreat in Becket, New York.} Always a thorough and inquisitive researcher, Jones went back to the original sources and studied traditional mask forms from Africa. This experience would influence the way Jones approached many of the innovative endeavors she embarked upon in the coming decades, including teaching the creative application of design as well as styling the look of her own canvases.

The mask as a sculptural form added volume and three-dimensionality to the way in which Jones saw the world, not to mention how she approached portraiture. The charcoal drawing *Negro Youth* (1929) depicts a pensive young man in profile. His thoughtful gaze is accentuated by the artist’s clever use of light and shading, giving a sculptural appearance to the young man’s chiseled profile. Light washes his face, while his ear and neck are left in shadow projecting depth and contemplation. As the artist Faith Ringgold once said, *Negro Youth* ‘expressed Loïs’s talent for portraiture and forecasts her feeling for the mask, which would become a major force in her art from the sixties on.’\footnote{Faith Ringgold, untitled essay honoring Loïs Mailou Jones’s fifty years in art, 23 September 1985, p. 3, LMJP/MSRC, box 215–19, folder 14.} This soft and engaging portrait of one of her students at Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, NC, where she taught from 1928 to 1930, won an Honorable Mention at the Harmon Foundation exhibition in New York in 1930. Jones joined the art department at Howard University in 1930, where she would work for nearly fifty years as an artist, educator and mentor with a career spanning the New Negro Arts Movement of the 1920s and 1930s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In another early, notable work, *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (1932), the profile is again utilized by Jones to depict the central figure of Ethiopia (Ancient Africa) in the bold, richly hued mask of an Egyptian pharaoh in full headdress. Smaller, almost flat figures ascending the staircase of
a burgeoning ‘New Negro’ consciousness, indeed of culture itself — of ‘art, drama and music’ — also appear in profile, as do two stylized African masks representing the yin and the yang of theatre arts. This much-discussed work owes a stylistic debt to the New Negro Arts Movement muralist Aaron Douglas, known for his flat ‘Africanized’ profiles and radiating radio waves, as well as the sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller, to whose bronze *Ethiopia Awakening* (1914) Jones’s work pays homage. *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, which was shown at the culminating Harmon Foundation exhibition in New York in 1933, celebrated the racial pride and artistic flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1934, Jones spent the summer at Columbia University in New York, where she studied ‘masks from non-Western cultures, including Native American, Eskimo, and African ethnic groups,’ according to her first biographer Tritobia Hayes Benjamin. It was also there that she first met the Haitian graphic designer Louis Verginaud Pierre-Noel, who would become her husband nearly twenty years later. Just up the street in Harlem, Aaron Douglas was working on his renowned series of murals *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) for the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), where regular art exhibitions, dramatic performances and cultural events were held. There, among other Black intellectuals, she would meet the renowned bibliophile Arthur Schomburg with whom she would later work on the *Bulletin of Negro History*.

Not too far from the library at 306 West 141st Street, an artists’ salon called the 306 Group had emerged the year before at the studio of Charles Alston. The salon included sculptor Augusta Savage, painters Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, among others. Savage, who had returned to New York after studying in Paris on a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, ran the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, which would become the influential Harlem Community Arts Center in 1935 under the Federal Art Project. The city was abuzz with the visual and performing arts and Jones would harness the fruits of her studies at Columbia and her interactions with artists and educators to participate in this creative moment.

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While there, she worked with Asadata Dafora, the celebrated choreographer, drummer, composer and performance artist from Sierra Leone, who was stirring up the modern dance world by introducing a ground-breaking performance style that blended traditional African dance with drumming and theatre.10 Dafora’s most notable work was a dance opera called Kykunkor (or Witch Woman), to which Jones contributed her design expertise. According to Maureen Needham, Kykunkor was ‘the first opera presented in the United States with authentic African dances and music, performed in an African tongue by a mainly African-born cast.’11 Jones played an instrumental role in creating the ceremonial look of the performance when she designed the dancers’ headdresses and assisted with the costuming. The mask as a moving form — as danced — or, to borrow a phrase from art historian Robert Farris Thompson, as ‘African art in motion,’ came to life for Jones in the revolutionary choreography and percussive drumming of Dafora’s ‘dance drama.’ The popularity of his particular brand of modern African performance art was carried on the coattails of vaudeville, European Modernism, jazz and the New Negro Arts Movement, and paved the way for exquisite new styles in modern American dance pioneered by choreographers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Jones’s time in New York that summer shaped the dramatic ways she portrayed the mask, beginning with her most well-known painting, Les Fétiches (1938).

Paris

A 1938 photograph of Jones in her skylit Paris studio shows the artist at work before an easel surrounded by paintings she made while studying at the Académie Julian. Pictured among them is Les Fétiches, displayed


on the right. Painted in a post-Cubist, post-Primitivist manner, that work shows five highly stylized African masks in frenzied movement, as if part of a ceremonial masquerade. Dramatically placed before a black backdrop, the masks converge and overlap at different angles, creating a sense of depth and excitement. While in Paris, Jones frequented the Musée d’Homme and other museums, galleries and marketplaces, where she studied the substantial collections of African and ethnographic art on display, and later was inspired to paint Les Fétiches.\(^\text{12}\)

The masks in Les Fétiches reference specific examples from different cultural groups in Africa. The striped mask is styled after a Songye Kifwebe mask from Central Africa. The large mask in the center with raffia pieces is drawn from a Guru Dan mask from West Africa. The impact of her earlier design work in dance and theatre for Shawn and Dafora was synthesized in this powerful painting.

Upon her return from Paris in the fall of 1938, Jones resumed her teaching position at Howard University, where New Negro Arts Movement theorist Alain Locke urged her to consider themes of African heritage, social injustice and race pride in her painting. But this idea was already fresh in her mind. As Kinshasha Holman Conwill has remarked on the significance of Jones’s first year Paris, ‘Her realization of French admiration for African art, and her increased understanding of African sculpture’s significance in the development of modern art, boosted her pride in her African heritage.’\(^\text{13}\)

The Children’s Page

From 1937 to 1942, Jones was on the editorial board of the Negro History Bulletin, published by Carter G. Woodson’s Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Washington, D.C.\(^\text{14}\) Founded in 1930, the

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14 Dr Carter G. Woodson’s Associated Publishers, founded in Washington, D.C., in 1921, were responsible for the publication and distribution of books on Black topics that were passed over by mainstream publishers. Woodson also pioneered Negro History Week in 1926 (now Black History Month). See Benjamin, The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones, p. 45.
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The bulletin’s purpose was ‘to inculcate an appreciation of the past of the Negro’ for a general audience and school-aged children. Each volume featured a special theme, such as the ‘Negro in Foreign Lands,’ whose 1940–41 topic was intended ‘to broaden the scope of the usual treatment of the Negro in the schools’ to include the treatment of race in Africa, Asia, Europe, the West Indies, Latin America, Canada, and Australia.’ Jones introduced the Children’s Page in the November 1940 issue, an activity page where schoolchildren were encouraged to color an illustration or design she had drawn or to engage in a constructive art-making project aimed at teaching Black history creatively. The first Children’s Page was undoubtedly inspired by her lifelong study of African ceremonial arts and classical sculpture, particularly the mask. Jones also designed ‘a Picture to Color,’ depicting various scenes from Black life, including An African Village, or important historical figures like Toussaint L’Ouverture.

Haiti

Without a doubt, Jones’s 1953 marriage to Louis Verginaud Pierre-Noel transformed both her life and her art, producing a clear change in the style of her painting and choice of subject matter. Jones first traveled to Haiti in 1954 at the invitation of President Paul E. Magliore, who commissioned her to produce a series of paintings depicting Haiti’s people and landscape. During this first trip, she stayed for several months and taught at the Centre d’Art while its founder DeWitt Peters was on leave, and at the Foyer des Arts Plastiques. According to Jones, ‘The teaching experience at the Centre d’Art 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.’ At the culmination of her first visit to Haiti, she exhibited forty-two paintings

16 The Negro History Bulletin, 4:2 (1940), p. 34.
17 See, for example, ibid., pp. 36, 86.
18 Benjamin, The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones, p. 77.
created in Paris and in Port-au-Prince called *Oeuvres de Lœis Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel*, at the behest of the first lady of Haiti, Madame Magliore. Her first paintings in Haiti still showed signs of her European training and included street scenes and images of neighborhoods and the docks in a soft palette.

Over the next thirty years, Jones frequently lectured, taught and painted in Haiti, where her palette had changed by the 1960s, quickly soaking up the rays of bright sunshine and the vibrant presence of African culture in the marketplace, in the faces of people, and in the spirituality of their religious practices and rituals. Paintings produced there were more geometrical, almost cubist, yet abstract with flat, hard edges and hot colors that boldly claimed the proud history of Haiti as the first independent African nation in the West. Jones found a spiritual home in Haiti, where she felt close to Africa. As she once remarked, "The art of Africa is lived in the daily life of the people of Haiti." Many of her works painted there in the 1960s shared a sense of movement with African dance, religious processions and ritual practices.

Symbols such as the ideographic writing of the ceremonial rites of Vodun and related masking traditions made their way into some of the more abstract paintings that Jones created in Haiti, like *Vévé Voudou II* (1962) and *Vévé Voudou III* (1963). A critic writing in the *Washington Post* observed, "Loïs Mailou Jones is moving from an impressionist technique to one with strongly accented patterns [...] "Voudou" is an oil collage in a sophisticated cubist manner." Jones’s background in design, combined with her innate sensibility for the texture and weight of fabric, produced such rhythmic and colorful paintings as *Les Vendeuses de Tissus* (1961) and *Street Vendors, Haiti* (1978). Both works project the perpetual motion of commerce through the draping of fabric, the movement of vendors, and the balancing of head burdens. Jones’s first Haitian paintings received rave reviews in her 1966 solo exhibition at Galerie Soulanges in Paris, where they were noted for their verve, abundance of color and cubist style.

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Pedagogy

During the Black Arts Movement, as art historian Richard J. Powell has observed, ‘Many artists whose careers extended back to the 1930s and 1940s resurfaced with a renewed sense of racial solidarity and political insurgency. Painters Loïs Mailou Jones and John Biggers, and sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett all aligned themselves with the younger generation of Black artists, creating works that underscored their shared interest in African design sensibilities, the Black figure, and the continuing struggle for civil rights.’

Jones believed that teaching the visual arts and design was an ‘interdisciplinary’ affair well before that phrase came into popular parlance in the academy. She was at the forefront of designing and implementing Black Studies curricula in the visual arts. In a paper titled, ‘The Correlation of Visual Arts and Design with Music and Drama,’ she urged other Black educators:

The rising importance of Black Studies in American education offers a challenge to the Black Visual Arts and Design, Black Music and Black Drama to serve as a correlated cultural focal point in the planning of a new curriculum. The three areas should strive together in developing an understanding of the Arts and emotional growth in our Black students.

She argued that the ‘traditional African forms of art, which have always incorporated drama, music and a form of design’ could be harnessed to draw upon Black heritage ‘in creating projects and “happenings”’ that ‘not only tend to humanize the environment, but result in establishing the Black man’s identity which is so firmly established in the roots of his ancestors.’ With this statement she effectively married traditional African plastic and performing arts with one of the popular performance art forms of the day, ‘happenings,’ to suggest an art practice with the social agenda of the Black Arts Movement: strengthening Black identity.

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24 Ibid., p. 10.
She further asserted that the planned spontaneity that made happenings all the rage in the contemporary art world of the 1960s and 1970s had been an important element in African performance arts all along.

The Black Arts Movement

When the Black Arts Movement began in earnest in the mid-1960s with ‘Black Pride,’ ‘Black is Beautiful,’ and ‘Black Power’ as popular slogans, Jones, along with her students and other professors at Howard University, didn’t miss a beat. As she stated in her class notes now on file at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University,

"The Black Arts Movement was realized by members of the art faculty at H.U. Prof. James Wells, James Porter and I. We were pioneers in introducing the movement among our students, Elizabeth Catlett, Malkia, Delilah Pierce and others. With the assassination of Martin Luther King the Black Arts Movement launched on an intensified momentum, which resulted in nationwide presentations of ‘Black Art Shows.’ Black artists were determined to establish their identity and to offer to the black community an art which reflected customs, traditions and the beauty of black people. Black owned galleries throughout the nation were established, galleries which offered the black artist exposure and a market for his work. As a result of this intensified movement, black businesses emerged as patrons of the arts."  

Jones’ special contribution to the Black Arts Movement was her longstanding dedication to the art of classical and contemporary Africa and its diaspora, particularly in Haiti and the United States. Seizing the vibrant moment of heightened Black consciousness, Jones designed an extensive three-part research project in 1968 called ‘The Black Visual Arts’ to document the contemporary African diaspora art of Haiti, Africa and the United States in interviews, photographs and slides. Funded by Howard University, Jones traveled to Haiti in 1968; eleven African nations in 1970; and nine African nations in 1972. She amassed a collection of more than 1,000 slides and scores of hours of interviews with contemporary artists. As she explained, ‘The slides will be used for

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lectures, to show the students, the faculties, the community and anyone in the United States […] what is really being done by Black artists all over the world.'

Jones was impressed with the art schools that she visited, including the School of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum, Sudan, the artists of the Oshogbo School in the Yoruba region of Nigeria and the Manufacture Nationale de Tapisserie in Thiès, Senegal. As an African-American cultural ambassador in Africa, Jones thrived on artistic exchange and arranged to lecture on the simmering Black Arts Movement and the history of African-American art in many of the countries she visited. She believed that, ‘there should be an exchange of works between African artists and Afro-American artists […] and vice-versa.’

Upon her return to the United States, she shared the fruits of her research by organizing exhibitions, lecturing, teaching new techniques, and by making the research materials she amassed available to her students and others. And here, I’d like to acknowledge for anyone interested in further reading on this period the excellent essay by Lindsay Twa, ‘Developing Diasporic Dialogues: James A. Porter and Lōis Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, and the writing of Haitian Art History,’ published in the January 2015 issue of Gradhiva, which discusses the significance of the pioneering research programs of Jones and Porter in thinking about a genealogy of Haitian art history.

It was the fusion of experiences that Jones gained as an artist/educator during the Black Arts Movement and as an artist/researcher in Haiti and Africa that produced the new and dynamic look of her canvases from the 1970s onward. ‘Many of my works with an African theme and African motifs were actually created in Haiti. Some of my most creative compositions, for which I researched African icons, patterns, masks and sculptures were actually done in my Haitian studio.’

Jones painted *Haiti Demain* in response to the social, economic and political strife following the failed Duvalier regime. The painting indicts the government and references the mass exodus of Haitian migrants on

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27 Ibid.


29 Loïs Mailou Jones, LMJP/MSRC, box 215-18, folder 46.
unstable boats and the greed and corruption of the government. But her practical training as a designer and her belief in the mask’s expressive qualities remained foundational to the new look she crafted. She drew upon these experiences to write an important position paper titled ‘The African Influence on Afro-American Art,’ which she presented at the International Culture and Development Colloquium held in Dakar, Senegal on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of President Leopold Senghor in October 1976. In that address, she declared,

The influence of African Art permeates the entire contemporary Black art scene […] In art, in music, in literature, Black Americans are returning to their African roots and utilizing this heritage as the basis for their artistic and political expression in the United States.\(^{30}\)

At that meeting, she presented President Senghor with her painting, *Hommage au Président Leopold Sedar Senghor*, commissioned by Howard University President James Cheek. Notable in that work, tightly designed to include a collage of classical African motifs, historical images and a photo-realist portrait of Senghor, was a small illustration of a preeminent lieux de mémoire in African American culture: the ‘door of no return’ at the *Maison des Esclaves* at Gorée Island in Senegal.\(^{31}\) She declared, ‘The major influence of my current work is still African in origin and I am certain that this trip will renew and enrich my inspiration.’\(^{32}\)

**Africa and the World**

Jones’s trips to Africa in 1970 and 1972 ‘provided opportunity to get a clearer picture of the various ways in which African art has influenced the works of the Afro-American artists.’ She recalled, ‘In Africa, I was able to see examples of the ancestral arts in their original settings and in the museums and galleries […]. It was a rich experience that I will never forget.’\(^{33}\) The subsequent paintings that Jones produced upon her return from Africa had a distinct and innovative look. She adopted a


\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 12.
new approach to figuration, often incorporating photo-realist portraits with stylized African masks, sculptural icons and Adinkra symbols. As the artist explained, ‘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 in creating a work.’ In *Homage to Dahomey* (1971), Jones drew stylized profiles of repeating Antelope or Chiwara masks along with other design motifs, animals and the supreme Adinkra symbol pictured in the form of a bulls-eye — Adinkrahene, meaning greatness, charisma and leadership. Bright colors of orange and gold separated by bold black diagonal lines and bright blue accents set off the dramatic canvas to recall the appliqué tradition of Dahomean wall hangings dating from the seventeenth century.

*Ubi Girl from Tai Region* (1972) shows the head of a young female initiate painted with white and red markings symbolizing protection, superimposed on the huge profile of a heddle pulley from the Ivory Coast and repeating outlines of masks and designs from Zaire. Similarly, the acrylic collage *Moon Masque* (1971), which was exhibited at FESTAC in Nigeria in 1977, has at its center a white-faced Kwele mask from Zaire flanked by the profiles of two young men and textile designs from Ethiopia. Jones’s use of design elements from different African regions was no mistake. Rather, this innovative choice showed the artist exercising a form of aesthetic interdisciplinarity that united seemingly disparate aspects of the composition. Each of these works hints at Jones’s understanding of the psychological meaning of the mask. As she once said, ‘The mask, in fact, dominates the Afro-American interest in African art. This is not surprising since the nature of the mask is so well adapted to artistic development.’ Other African-American artists during this period, including Romare Bearden, Jeff Donaldson, Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett, Ed Love and Napoleon Henderson, among others, showed a fascination with the African mask. Bearden often incorporated snippets of African masks from magazines in his

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signature collages of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Village of Yo (1964). Even Ringgold’s soft sculptures like Faith and the Brown Children (1968) referenced the African mask in motion.

**Conclusion**

It was the mask that drew Lōis Mailou Jones more than anything to create works that envisioned a multiplicity of Black experiences. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the _Africa Series_, her last significant body of work produced in Haiti and Washington in the 1970s and 1980s. Around the same time that the Scurlock studio portrait was taken, Jones made a list of twenty-one works in her _Africa Series_. A careful perusal of that list, handwritten on an index card, reveals the depth of her longing for Africa and how she catalogued her work towards the end of her career.

At the top of the chronological list is _Les Fetiches_, painted from her study of African masks in Paris galleries and museums in 1937–38. The paintings completed in 1971 and 1972 respectively were inspired by her first two trips to Africa in 1970 and 1972 under the auspices of her Black Visual Arts grant from Howard University. Works like _Congo Dance Mask_ (1972) and _Guli Mask_ (1972) reference specific ceremonial masks, while _Magic of Nigeria_ (1971) is a fanciful combination of masks of her own creation. _Homage to Oshogbo_ (1971) and _Ode to Kinshasha_ (1972) employ mixed media collage to place flat abstract masks within geometric patterns. Paintings completed later reference subsequent trips to Africa in 1976 and 1977, as well as regular sojourns to Haiti and research trips in the Caribbean and Suriname around the same time.

Travel to Haiti and Africa no doubt had a major impact on Jones’s content and method. One can easily observe how her paintings from the 1970s onward bring back into play her early direction as a textile designer. Many of these vibrantly colored works rely on carefully positioned symbols, masks, animals or portraits that repeat at a syncopated rate to form polyrhythmic compositions. Others, however, take on a more conceptual appearance like _Symbols du Suriname_ (1982). The paintings of her _Africa Series_, with their high gloss and dramatic color arrangements, challenged popular Western notions of contemporary art, including abstraction, Minimalism and Pop. To be sure, she was influenced by Jeff
Donaldson’s Afri-Cobra Group, a collective of artists founded in 1968 who advocated the use of highly polished reflective surfaces and bright bold colors that projected the beauty of Black people. But other influences included the popularity of psychedelic, metallic and fluorescent colors of the space age made available to artists through the novelty of acrylic paint and polymer paint, which, according to art historian Kellie Jones, not only dried faster but offered new color possibilities.36

The Scurlock studio portrait, moreover, provides a visual dimension to the handwritten list, becoming a photographic document of her *Africa Series*. The image shows *Damballah* and *Symbols d’Afrique* (discussed earlier) prominently displayed, while a small reproduction of her celebrated *Moon Masque* (1971) is visible on the easel behind her. Africa was a lifelong source of inspiration and pride for Löis Mailou Jones. Historians like Woodson and Schomburg, intellectuals like Du Bois and Locke, dancers like Dafora and Primus, and artists like Fuller and Donaldson reinforced her unwavering commitment to Africa, its art and its heritage. She dedicated her life to raising the visibility of Black artists in America, Africa and Haiti, and did so despite barriers that she often faced as a woman artist of color. With a career buttressed by the two major movements in African American art of the twentieth century — the New Negro Arts Movement and the Black Arts Movement — Jones’s unique Black perspective was often viewed through the mask, a symbol of classical African art and a signifier of Black identity.

Bibliography


Moorland-Spingarn Research Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C., Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel Papers, LMJP/MSRC.


