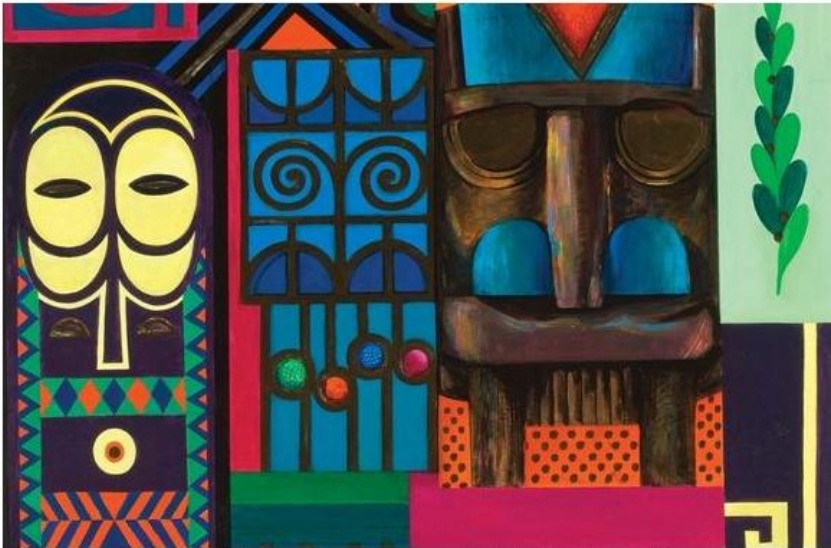


[A Curious Blend of the Exotic and the Personal](#)

By [VINCENT HOWARD](#) | Jan. 29, 2011



Lois Mailou Jones, 'Symboles d'Afrique I,' 1980. Acrylic. Courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel Trust

“How could you have designed that?” a textile decorator asked a young Lois Mailou Jones in the summer of 1928. “You’re a colored girl.”

This rhetorical question, laced as it is with incredulous racism, may have haunted the Boston-born artist for years, but it certainly didn’t halt her career. In fact, it had the opposite effect. Already an award-winning textile designer, Jones turned from making patterns for department stores to crafting paintings and illustrations for galleries, a venue she hoped would be more accepting. The decision proved pivotal: It started Jones on an anomalous course that spanned seven decades and sparked a number of black art movements. In 1973 she became the first African American to be featured in a solo show at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. Today, her paintings hang in many major museums and collections.

Jones’ 75 years of work have been assembled for an exhibit that opens Jan. 30 at the Hunter Museum of American Art. “Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color” includes more than 70 paintings and other works. This broad view allows one to take in the many

subjects and styles that captivated Jones over the years as she traveled throughout France, Haiti and West Africa observing their people and absorbing their culture into her aesthetic.

Jones' formal concerns varied, yet her work is unified by an abiding interest in African-American life and lineage. She found affirmation early on from Alain Locke, Langston Hughes and other contemporaries of the Harlem Renaissance. And in an era of U.S. segregation, Jones met racial unrest with paintings in celebration of African-American society.

Mob Victim, a 1944 oil painting, offers an overt comment on Jim Crow politics. The model for the painting had told Jones of how his brother had been lynched, which is the crime this piece brings to mind. It shows a black man standing against a dark and blurry background, his hands bound in front of him. Yet his face is upturned and shows no hint of shame. His expression contrasts the ominous tones and changes the painting's overall mood. "He has a very stoic, almost beatific look on his face," said Ellen Simak, the Hunter's chief curator, "so it's not a violent painting at all."

Jennie, a 1943 oil painting, tracks in more subtle emotional content. It shows a black girl cleaning fish on a kitchen counter. She runs a knife through the scaly grime, but her yellow blouse remains as bright and fresh as the pair of lemons at her side. Her hair stays up and neatly pinned in place, and her face is poised but calm. Jones had a gift for finding the dignity of subjects engaged in mundane scenes and for drawing viewers in to the simple beauty of the ordinary.

In 1953 Jones married Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel, a Haitian graphic artist. The next year they visited his Caribbean homeland, where Jones received a special commission from President Paul E. Magloire to paint local people and places. The project yielded several remarkable works, including the oil painting *Peasant Girl, Haiti*. True to its title, it depicts a barefoot girl crouched on a dirt roadside. Leaned back on a stone wall, a basket of fruit resting between her legs, she seems to be taking a moment's rest from her work. Her gaze is downward and pensive, yet her sense of composure exudes an eminent mood that belies her humble dress and surroundings.

Jones would return to Haiti often throughout her life. As she soaked up the country's environs, working its dusty roads, sun-bleached hills and crowded villages into her paintings, her style began to change. The French modernist influence that she had picked up on her many trips to Paris and Cabris, gave way to a distinctive, contemporary manner. "Her work took a big turn," said Simak. "It became much more brightly colored, and it became more abstracted."

Marche, Haiti, a 1963 painting in acrylic, is representative of this shift. It is dominated by sharp lines, geometric shapes and sparse, economical detail. It looks down, as if from a rooftop, on a throng of market women weaving through a narrow street, lifting sacks and baskets of goods above their heads. From our raised angle of vision, their sleeveless blouses become a patchwork of vivid blues, oranges, greens and purples. Their skin is deep ebony, accentuating their bold clothing. Their blank faces turn our attention back

onto the crowded spectacle — to the commotion, the colors, the bright baskets that seem to float above the stands, raised by unusual strength.

In 1969, Jones traveled to Africa on a research grant from Howard University, where she taught for 47 years. She visited 11 African nations, met contemporary artists and took over 1,000 slides of their work. The study had a profound influence on her own art. Her paintings were soon populated by ceremonial masks, brightly painted faces, loud colors and layers of striking patterns.

Simak sees these later developments as the full flowering of Jones' earliest work, particularly the textile designs, which were "very interested in pattern." These early pieces "were big and bold and bright and colorful," Simak said. "And then you look at her late work, that has all that pattern, and you see a similarity. There was that interest there, but she didn't have something to apply it to until she went to Africa and found that subject matter and inspiration to bring it forward."

Ubi Girl from Tai Region, a 1972 painting in acrylic, exemplifies Jones' later style. A girl's face, covered in luminous white and red paint, hangs disembodied above two masked silhouettes. Beneath her, a wide streak of two-tone crimson stretches from the top of the canvas to the bottom. The profile of a second masked face juts out from underneath. Several patterned layers of vivid blue, brown and red form the background. Taken together, these disparate designs form a dense pastiche. It's a jumble that borders on disorder. But the piece is held together by its unifying colors, its sense of depth, its pleasing symmetries and its curious blend of the exotic and the personal. The same could be said of Jones' oeuvre.