

On The Scene

Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color Showcases The Works Of One Badass Artist

By [Anna Merlan](#), Mon., Jun. 13 2011 at 12:30 PM

Dr. Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) was a painter, textile designer, teacher, basketball coach, piano player, and total badass. She made art well into her 90s, traveled all over the world, lived in Paris, traveled extensively through Haiti and Africa, married a fellow artist (in 1952, when she was 47), all at a time when black female artists had trouble getting space on the walls of galleries, or even any recognition for their talents. The Women's Museum in Fair Park has a great retrospective of her work, *Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color*, showing now through July 23. I went on Sunday, paid a measly five bucks and had the whole exhibit to myself.

Mailou Jones was born in Boston, and graduated with honors from Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts. She worked for years as a designer for a textile company, Cretonne Drapery Fabric. She realized it was time for a major career change when she was driving to her family's home on Martha's Vineyard and saw one of her designs displayed in the window of an interior decorator's shop.

She went in to introduce herself as the artist behind the design; the owner looked at her and said, "How could you have done that? You're a colored girl." So Mailou Jones was like, "The hell with this," (or something similar, I'm conjecturing here) and moved to Sedalia, North Carolina to teach at an African American prep school, the Palmer Memorial Institute.

She founded the art department, taught dance, coached the basketball team, and played the piano in church on Sundays, and I'm guessing, was probably pretty fun at parties. In 1930, she left to teach at Howard University in Washington D.C., where she would stay until her retirement in 1977.



All images courtesy of loismailoujones.com



Mailou Jones design for Cretonne Drapery Fabric

Looking at this lovely exhibit, which hangs alone on the Women's Museum's third floor, it's clear that Mailou Jones had three basic stages in her career. Early on, she's most influenced by Impressionism, and has some beautiful watercolors, portraits, and still life works. But they're quiet paintings, you know? They stay on the wall.

Then she spent 1937 and 1938 in Paris, and all of a sudden you see this huge leap forward in the risks she took and the subjects she tackled. There's a really distinct Cubist influence in her work after that, combined with the same kind of delicacy and precision she used in her earlier paintings.

One of the most interesting paintings from the Paris era is "Les Clochards, Montmartre," which depicts a homeless couple sitting in a subway station underneath an alcohol ad. With its thick black outlines and simple, expressive shapes, it reminded me a lot of Marjane Satrapi, the comic artist who wrote and drew Persepolis.

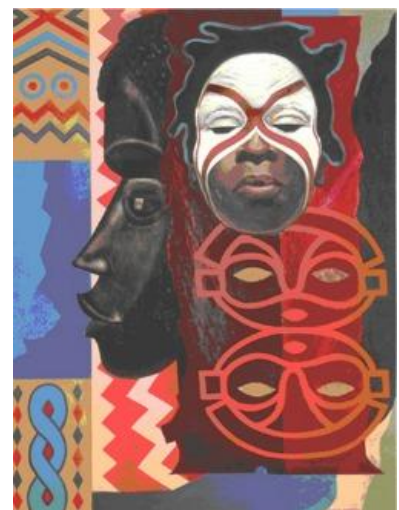
Once Mailou Jones went to Haiti in the mid-'50s, she reached the most amazing stage of her career, one where she blended her earlier influences with a more Modernist voice. In 1953, she married Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, a graphic artist who was also part of a prominent Haitian political family. After their marriage, she spent a lot of time in Haiti, and her paintings from the island are stunning: they depict markets, textiles, beggars, street scenes, all soaked with bright, almost hallucinatory color and the same bold, definite composition she used in her textile work.

These paintings, and the subsequent ones she did after traveling through 11 African countries, have a much louder presence than her earlier watercolors - when you're standing in front of them, it's hard to look at anything else. Like the Paris work, the Haiti and Africa paintings all have an incredibly current feel. Some of her collages, like "Vévé Voodoo II," which blends Cubist influences and references to voodoo, wouldn't look out of place next to [Wangechi Mutu](#), a famous African American female collage artist who was born around the time Mailou Jones retired.

But Mailou Jones was rightly irritated at being referred to primarily as a "black female artist." Although she made paintings about the Harlem Renaissance, Jim Crow, lynching, civil rights, and African independence, she was also determined to be known on her own terms, without any qualifiers in front of the word "artist." So go check out the work of this hip lady, not because you should, but because it's great. Also, make sure to look for the photo of her painting with a kitten on her shoulder, because it's pretty much the cutest thing I've ever seen.



DANS UN CAFÉ À PARIS (LEIGH WHIPPER) 1939
Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 1/2 in.
Collection of E. Thomas Williams, Jr. and Audlyn Higgins Williams
Exhibited at the Société des Artistes Français, Paris, 1939



"Ubi Girl from the Tai Region," 1972