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Lois Mailou Jones: Color tells a story

By Michael O'Sullivan

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True to its title, "Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color" is a biography of sorts. Part of that story is told in pictures, some 70 of which are on view at the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#).

And colorful they are. From Jones's early, almost abstract fabric designs of the late 1920s to her still lifes of fruit and flowers (painted into the 1990s), warm, rich color is central to the work of the late Washington-based painter (1905-1998), who taught in the Howard University art department from 1930 to 1977. But there's another meaning suggested by the word color in the title. As an African American, Jones's race and heritage played an important - and at times challenging - role in her career.

Take the 1940 landscape "Indian Shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts." When Jones submitted that pretty little canvas to a competition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1941, blacks were not allowed to enter. For that reason, the artist asked a French friend (fellow artist Celine Tabary, seen in Jones's 1940 watercolor "Celine") to drop off the painting for her. As it happens, "Indian Shops" went on to win the contest's Robert Woods Bliss Landscape Prize. Rather than blow her cover by accepting the award in person, Jones asked to have it mailed to her. It was not until the painter's 89th birthday - celebrated with a party at the Corcoran - that the museum officially apologized for its discriminatory policies.

To some degree, however, there's a part of Jones's story told outside the frames, in the spaces between her pictures.

Look at the dates of the paintings in the show. From the 1920s, when Jones was still a teenage art student, to the 1940s, there are 37 works in the show. Between 1970 and her



Many of Jones's works reflect her African American heritage. The portrait "Jennie," top, speaks to black dignity

death in 1998, there are 23. But during the artist's prime, the 1950s and 1960s, there are a scant dozen works. That's because the artist, who had no regular gallery representation at the time, was forced to sell her own work herself, out of her studio. Without records, many paintings from those decades are officially lost.

Fortunately, some of Jones's best work was painted in her youth and sunset years. The 1943 "Jennie" - a portrait of one of the artist's art students - is a quiet yet masterful celebration of black dignity, even as its teenage subject is shown performing the menial task of cleaning fish. At the other end of the spectrum, the 1971 "Dahomey" (the former name for the African country Benin) is a boldly graphic, almost cartoonlike incorporation of African animal totems, against a geometric background of hot red and yellow.

At first glance, they don't look like they could have been painted by the same person. But despite its gaps, "Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color" convinces you that they couldn't have been painted by anyone else. The enduring power of color - both in Jones's paint and in her life - shines through.

osullivanm@washpost.com LOIS MAILOU JONES: A LIFE IN VIBRANT COLOR Through Jan. 9 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW (Metro: Metro Center). 202-783-5000. www.nmwa.org. Hours: Open Monday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sundays noon to 5 p.m., closed Christmas and New Year's Day. Admission: \$10; students and seniors \$8; members and age 18 and younger free; free admission the first Sunday of the month.