

Sunday, Jan. 30, 2011

'A Life in Vibrant Color': Lois Mailou Jones' retrospective opens at Hunter Museum today

A decorator once told Lois Mailou Jones that a "colored girl" wasn't capable of producing such beautiful designs. This was a turning point in the young black woman's artistic career -- a career that eventually brought her recognition from U.S. presidents for her contributions to the arts.

A retrospective exhibit of paintings, drawings and textile designs by Jones opens today at the Hunter Museum of American Art. "A Life in Vibrant Color" includes 70 works and showcases the many themes Jones explored during her long and illustrious career.

Jones (1905-1998) was educated at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She began her career as a textile designer and sold her bold fabric creations to many department stores until the aforementioned insult by a decorator. This prompted Jones to shift her focus to the fine arts so she could sign her name to her work.

While teaching at Palmer Memorial Institute in North Carolina, she began painting. These early works, however, were much less colorful than the later pieces for which she would become famous.

Jones evolved continuously throughout her career -- her work reflecting the influence of people who crossed her path, as well as her travels to France, Africa, Haiti and the Caribbean.

She also conveyed the social struggles of African-Americans through powerful physiological portraits. Her marriage in 1952 to noted Haitian graphic artist Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel instigated a change in the subject matter and palette of her paintings. Her frequent trips to Haiti re-energized her strong design sense and inspired vivid acrylic and watercolor paintings that displayed a fascination with Caribbean culture.



Lois Mailou Jones' love of bold color is evident in her 1980 acrylic painting "Symboles d'Afrique I."

After additional trips to African countries, her work became characterized by brilliant color, rich patterns and a variety of Haitian and African motifs.

In addition to her outstanding accomplishments as an artist, Jones was also a noted educator at Howard University in Washington, D.C., for 47 years. Among her students were David Driskell, Elizabeth Catlett and Robert Freeman.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter honored Jones for her outstanding achievements in the arts. During the last 10 years of her life, both President Bill Clinton and French President Jacques Chirac met the artist and collected her work.

Jones continued to paint until her death in 1998.

"A Life in Vibrant Color" continues through April 24.

The Hunter, 10 Bluff View, is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Wednesday, Sunday; and 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday. Call 267-0968.



This gouache-on-board painting, "Marche aux Puces Rue Medard, Paris," is one of Lois Mailou Jones' earlier works.