

# Dallas Art News

## Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color at The Women's Museum

Posted Tuesday, July 12, 2011

**Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color**  
**The Women's Museum**  
**Through July 23, 2011**

*Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color* is in its final month hanging at [The Women's Museum](#) in Fair Park. The show comes down July 23, so hurry to see it.

This exhibition was developed by the [Mint Museum of Art](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina, in collaboration with the [Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel Trust](#) and toured by International Arts & Artists.



*Mère du Senegal* by Lois Mailou Jones, 1985 (courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust)

A retrospective exhibit that illustrates over 70 years of an artist's life is an honor to experience. There are some sacred self-discovery moments depicted in paint here you won't want to miss. Included in the show is one of her last known paintings, executed when she was 91 years old.

Jones is an artist that chronicled her life by sharing it with paintings. This show is autobiographical, but it is also archetypal. If you're like me and you love a show that has many layers, you'll really like this one. The show is at once, all of these things: beautiful art, the story of a woman in a man's world, and the story of a black woman finding self-acceptance and self-expression using her art.

I'll describe the show in four periods – early work, portraits, landscapes and streetscapes and mature period. This show is lovingly curated and beautifully hung by The Women's Museum. Pick up one of the Family Guides at the desk and/or purchase the catalogue in the gift shop – it's a great way to relive the show later.

The Women's Museum both celebrates and educates about the roles women have played in shaping our culture and society and they do it quite well. There is enough inspiration and pride in this building to fill one twice the size. If you never have before, take the time when you visit the show to experience the Museum too – it's really a celebratory place.

### **The Early Period**

Lois Mailou Jones was born in 1905 in Boston and spent summers on Martha's Vineyard with her grandmother, who was a housekeeper and nanny. She must have displayed artistic talent early as she graduated from the High School of Practical Arts and won scholarships to attend evening and Saturday classes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At the Museum, her training was very traditional as evidenced by a few pieces that begin the exhibition. Artists' formal training often begins by copying other artist's work, particularly sculpture. The show has two charcoal drawings of Rodin sculptures – both technically outstanding, but carefully and somewhat tentatively modeled. A slightly bolder figure study is also included from her student days.

Several years later, Lois worked as a textile designer for cretonne draperies – you’ll recognize these designs as your grandmother’s curtains if she was shopping in the 1930s and 1940s. The paintings in the show are delightfully retro and colorful – they certainly would be marketable again now in that weird way that “everything old turns new again.”

Before we walk by with just a smiling glance, there is something very important to the life story of Lois Mailou Jones in these tempera paintings.

Stand a couple inches from the painting and look for a reworked section, a stray brush stroke, or evidence of overpainting. There is none. These paintings are flawlessly rendered with some of the highest technical skill I’ve ever seen. The control of the brushstrokes is absolutely amazing. Those of you who have worked with tempera paint know how difficult it is to get flat color, clean lines, and opacity. These examples are the work of a very accomplished technician – in addition to being absolutely stunning design.

According to the narrative stop cards throughout the show, young Lois desired to continue to grow and develop as a “fine artist “ – one who signed her work as opposed to an anonymous designer. She found the world of higher education both as student and teacher; she inhabits this world throughout her life. Jones spent almost fifty years as a Howard University professor as well as multiple guest teaching stints in France and Haiti over her long career.

The next period in her life is one of a great career “growth spurt.” Lois takes the opportunity to travel to France – the paragon of fine art and art education at the time – to study and produce work at various academies.

*La Mère, Paris* was painted during one of these trips. Here, Jones paints a charming rendition of the mother/child painting, a very soft and undefined picture of a woman with her hair bobbed and her very pink and blue child. It’s a beautiful painting in browns and blues, but really tells us nothing about Lois Mailou Jones other than that she’s an accomplished artist.

### The Portrait Period

Her portraits from this period, however, are some of the best work in the show. *Dans un Café à Paris* (Leigh Whipper), 1939 is a painting Jones called one of her favorites and it’s easy to see why. Leigh Whipper was a famous black Broadway stage and film star about 30 years Jones’ senior. She painted him in a Paris café as he enjoyed hamburgers and a beer. It’s really great portrait of a man in that place in life when he’s content to linger at a café. Lois paints black skin tones so beautifully – she is true to what she sees in the complex colors that makes up a

complexion. A purple shadow here, an ochre midtone, perhaps a golden highlight. What a gift she has for portraiture. (And the hamburgers will make you hungry – guaranteed.)



Design for Cretonne Drapery Fabric by Lois Mailou Jones, 1932 (courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust)



La Mère, Paris by Lois Mailou Jones, 1938 (courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust)

While some elements of this work are Cezanne-like, I see American Regionalism (Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton) here too. It interests me that Jones drew from so many varied influences in her long and prolific career.

I have to stop for a moment to tell you that every piece in the show has a different frame. Some are clearly antique frames. The effect of this unusual exhibit presentation is that you feel as if these paintings are hanging on Jones' walls at home and that suddenly you're walking through her D.C. home while she describes the decades of her life to you. It's a very intimate, very personal experience.

Spend lots of time savoring these portraits from Jones' mid-career. There's a wonderful small self-portrait where she portrays herself with African sculptures behind her on a credenza. Painted in 1940, her work is beginning to read as the work of an African American woman artist – another layer of richness. However, there is, even at 35 years of age, a certain reluctance to reveal too much or be too bold.

Remembering that she is a woman in a man's field and a black woman in a white-dominated world probably explains her tentativeness. She's worlds away here from anonymous drapery design, but she's got some more living and painting to do before it feels like she's really come into her own.

One of my favorite portraits from this period is *Dr. Rene d'Avignon*, 1947 – a small thickly textured (a la Cezanne) portrait of a young man with a jaunty chartreuse sweater and purple tie under his gray suit. She defines the good doctor's face with brushstrokes angled this way and that, thickly layering the oil paint so we clearly visualize the structure of his face. It's a dandy.

The best portraits in the show – all from this time period where her work becomes more personal – showcase yellow as a prominent color. There's an absolutely gorgeous *Eusebia Cosme*, 1944 – an exuberant yellow painting of a friend that has such a joyful Carmen Miranda vibe to it. It's loosely painted with thick oils in texture and very girly and fun.

*Lillian Evanti*, 1940 is a delicious Impressionistic portrait of another friend, a beautiful brunette opera singer. Against golden yellow drapes (which could have been designed by Jones herself!), the diva has a yellow fan, yellow flowers and a lace mantilla in her hair, a yellow dress, and red jacket. The textures! The colors! Bravo!

Pay attention to the autumn colored tree-shapes in the background. Here's another example of American Regionalism style in Jones work. The same style shapes are often found in Grant Wood's landscapes of the period.

*Jennie*, 1943 depicts one of her students scaling fish in Jones' kitchen before or after a painting session. Jennie is dressed in yellow, the fish are pink and grey and there are lemons and yellow flowers to pick up and distribute yellow throughout. It appears to be simply a snapshot, but these colors and spatial relationships don't happen by accident. The artist set up a still life using her friend and student and then captured it for us.

Finally from this period, I adore the double portrait *Two Women*, circa 1950. Jones paints these two beautiful sisters (or best friends?) in a tight headshot, straight-on and close together. It's a loosely rendered painting, but these stylish ladies with their good hair and red lipstick aim to be remembered. The colors in their complexions and outfits (one of them yellow!) sing.

### **The Landscape / Streetscape Period**

Along with her portrait interest, Lois also painted landscapes and streetscapes; there are a fair number of these in the show too. Most of these paintings were done in France, Haiti, or Africa while Jones was traveling or teaching.

There are two really interesting rooftop paintings from France. *Paris Rooftops Montmartre*, 1965 and 1966 – some of her first paintings done in acrylic rather than oil – have a “Cary Grant cat-burglar movie” authenticity. 1965 is a starry night scene in beautiful deep blues and grays punctuated by yellow moonlight and skylights to warm the picture. Never tied to a particular style, it has heavy black outlines while 1966, a sunny daytime scene, does not.

The Women’s Museum has hung these two side by side, and you probably wouldn’t guess the same artist had painted them a year apart. Jones paints in a wide variety of styles – and over a period of decades. It’s a skill she uses to her advantage – carefully matching style to subject.

Let me tell you for a minute about Jones’ Haiti paintings. Lois Mailou Jones married Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel, a Haitian graphic artist in 1953. For the next two decades, she painted streetscapes and Haitian subjects often. Her spirit soars in these paintings – I think Haiti must have really set her free because these paintings are joyful, colorful, and full of people. I have a feeling she thought of Haitians as “her people.”

One of my favorites from among these is *Marche, Haiti* 1963. Here she paints a dozen or so folks presumably walking down the street carrying baskets, boxes, baked goods – on their daily routines. She’s shifted the perspective, though, tilted the picture off center, and boxed the scene in with a couple of bold window shapes. The effect is a confident primary-colored painting. The people in the picture are all painted one complexion – almost a silhouette effect, but she’s sketched in some facial features in white. The kinship she feels with the people in her Haiti paintings is palpable.

In many of her later landscapes and streetscapes, Jones uses a technique more often seen in illustrators work. It’s very effective and stylish – she overpaints a very fine and graceful set of straight black lines over the shapes in the picture and she extends the line slightly beyond the shape she’s outlining. It’s almost an architectural drawing technique – very unusual and unique to her and quite pleasing to the eye. I’m astounded by her steady hand and the fluidity of the line.

### **The Mature Period**

Finally, Jones is in a personal place beginning in the 1960s where she can fully explore and celebrate being a black woman artist. She travels to Africa and returns often to her decorative painting technical skills to paint large flat areas of paint – but this time, she’s painting Adrinka icons and symbols of her African heritage. Again you’ll be startled by her steady hand even into her eighties.

The large bold declarative painting *Dahomey*, 1971 is a glorious example of this period. Orange and red color blocks behind bold black figures with bright pops of complimentary colors are depicted in this one. Others have mask images, cloth patterns, applied gold leaf, beads glued on, or tissue paper applied to them. Jones has thrown away the rule book now and is fully comfortable to paint what she feels.

Among these paintings is the one that The Mint Museum of Art chose for the Family Guide cover: *Mère du Senegal*, 1985. This isn’t my favorite painting from this period, but I love the symmetry it creates with *La Mere, Paris* – painted 50 years earlier. In her later years, Jones is painting her ancestry, her roots. This painting



*Mère du Senegal* by Lois Mailou Jones, 1985  
(courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust)

is as tender a “mother and child” as any artist from time immemorial has painted, but it’s an Afrocentric take on the milieu. So fresh, so bold, and so informative for her viewers who haven’t had the opportunity to see Africa ourselves. Look at the decorative elements in the back and then the triptych of color she’s used – akimbo – to back the figures. It’s a pretty great piece.

There are seventy paintings in this show. It’s a tour de force – as was she. Lois Mailou Jones achieved numerous solo shows at galleries like the Corcoran in D.C.; is represented in collections like The National Portrait Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art; has been the subject of a number of books and a documentary movie; earned tons of awards, including the Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts from President Jimmy Carter; is the subject of Lois Mailou Jones Day in Washington D.C. – July 29; and received two honorary doctorates – one from Massachusetts College of Art and the other from Howard University.

It’s a pleasure and an honor to have made her acquaintance through this awesome show. Don’t miss it!

**About Kent Boyer**

*Kent Boyer is a life-long arts enthusiast and Dallas innovative educational programming designer. Mr. Boyer is also a neighborhood architectural photographer whose photographs can be seen at [picasaweb.google.com/kboyer1011](https://www.picasaweb.google.com/kboyer1011).*