

Major Retrospective of Late Artist Comes to Polk Museum

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The story goes that Lois Mailou Jones turned from her intended career in textile design to painting after a run-in with a decorator. The 23-year-old Jones saw one of her designs in the decorator's shop and said she had designed it.



'Jennie' - Lois Mailou Jones - A Life in Vibrant Color in Lakeland Fl., Tuesday June 29, 2010.

"You couldn't have done this. You're a colored girl," the decorator replied.

In fact, Jones was a graduate of the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Art. Determined not to be limited by race or gender in an era when both were strikes against her, Jones began to devote herself to painting. By the time of her death, Jones had been honored by President Jimmy Carter and her work had been collected by several major American museums.

"Any great artist has to overcome adversity. She's the epitome of a persevering artist," says Adam Justice, curator of art at the Polk Museum of Art.

A new major retrospective of Jones' art, organized by her estate, recently concluded at the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, N.C., and now is on tour. The Polk Museum is its first stop. "Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color," begins today and continues through Sept. 26 in the two main galleries at the museum. The exhibition contains 65 pieces, representing all the periods of Jones' long career and all of the styles she embraced.

Polk Museum Executive Director Daniel Stetson says he jumped at the chance to host the exhibition.

"We're always looking for good projects. American art is always one of our best subject matters. And we value diversity. I had known of her work for years and always admired her achievements," he says.

A lecture on Jones' work, followed by a reception, has been scheduled for 6 p.m. on Aug. 27. The lecturer will be Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, associate dean of the Division of Fine Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the Gallery of Art at Howard University in Washington.



"Ville d'Houdain" is a landscape of a French town done in 1951.

Jones (1905-1998) took a faculty position at Howard in 1930, where she remained until her retirement in 1977. In 1937, on sabbatical, she went to Paris to study and there she found encouragement and freedom from the racial prejudice that plagued her in America. Her works from that period show influences of classicism and Impressionism - studies of nudes, still-life watercolors, street scenes and slice-of-life portraits. Some of the paintings are finely detailed, some have looser brush work.

Jones would return to France throughout her life, and scenes of French life continue to appear even in her later works.

She is associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, but she didn't spend much time in New York. Rather, Justice says, Jones was inspired by Alain Locke, a writer and patron of the arts considered the father of the Harlem Renaissance, who encouraged her to use black people as subjects.

One of her first paintings in this direction is "Jennie," included in the exhibition, a portrait of a young woman preparing a meal. Justice notes that she is dressed in vibrant yellow and clearly is not working as a servant but is in her own kitchen, giving her a quiet independence. The paintings during this period include numerous portraits of ordinary people.

In 1953, Jones married Haitian artist Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel, and thereafter she would draw on Haitian and African cultures to create striking visual celebrations of black culture. In

"Mere du Senegal," she shows an intimate scene of a mother braiding her daughter's hair, framed by a geometric traditional design.

Her use of color grew bolder as she used traditional Haitian and African color schemes and objects such as masks. In the more modernist "Le Sirène de l'Espoir," a mermaid-like creature is rendered in jet black against a background of neon oranges, blues and greens.

Justice says in spite of some recognition later in life, Jones did not get many shows during the prime of her career.

"She's still rather unsung. I hope this retrospective will bring her to the forefront," he says.

Viewers of the exhibition will get to test a new feature at the museum, an audio system for self-guided tours. Visitors receive instructions on how to use their cell phones to listen to brief audio clips that help them understand the exhibition. For visitors who do not have cell phones, a receiver is available for them to use. The Lois Mailou Jones exhibition will have eight audio stations.