David Driskell, advocate for African American art, dies at 88 of coronavirus

By Bart Barnes

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David C. Driskell, an artist, art historian, art collector, art teacher, author and curator who became a primary sponsor and advocate for the role of African American art in the national culture, died April 1 at a hospital in Washington. He was 88.

The cause was complications from the novel coronavirus, said Rodney Moore, his nephew and arts manager.

As an artist, Mr. Driskell was best known for a 1956 painting, “Behold Thy Son,” a graphic representation of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old lynched in Mississippi the year before for allegedly flirting with a white woman.

Mr. Driskell served on the art faculties of several historically black colleges but was best known for his affiliation with the University of Maryland from 1977 to 1998. The university’s Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora, founded in 2001, was named in his honor.
In addition, Mr. Driskell wrote several books on African American art and became an artistic adviser to television star Bill Cosby and his wife, Camille, recommending hundreds of pieces by black artists for their private collection. When Bill Cosby phoned him, he initially thought it was a prank. “I thought my brother-in-law was playing a trick on me,” he told a Smithsonian Institution interviewer. “We would call back and forth and pretend we were celebrities, imitating different people’s voices from time to time.”

In 1976 he curated “Two Centuries of Black American Art” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art — an exhibition of more than 200 works by 63 artists that Thelma Golden, a New York curator, later described to The Washington Post as “a watershed in both its scholarly approach and popularity.”

Yet the exposition was not universally acclaimed when it reached New York’s Brooklyn Museum in 1977, and New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer wrote that the show was more “social history” than art, that some of its art was “mediocre” and through important commissions came across as scattershot. Defending the exhibit on national television, Mr. Driskell criticized Kramer and told NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw that all art is a form of social history.
Mr. Driskell was said to have amassed one of the most comprehensive private collections in the country of mostly African American and African art. But his holdings also included a Rembrandt etching that Mr. Driskell said he found in Denmark and bought for $10, and a Matisse linocut he acquired at an Alexandria, Va., flea market for $3.

His own paintings include landscapes, images of chairs and themes from the Bible. He designed stained glass windows for Peoples Congregational Church in Washington, which he attended. For a chapel at the historically black Talladega College in Alabama, he also designed stained-glass windows.

His work “Behold Thy Son” is on display at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. It’s described in the museum’s catalogue as a “modern-day Pietà . . . depicting the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Christ following his crucifixion. . . . Driskell’s powerful tribute to this tragic event is a testament to a mother’s loss of her son.”

David Clyde Driskell was born in Eatonton, Ga., on June 7, 1931, and grew up in the Appalachian community of Hollis, N.C., in a stone house that was accessible only by a dirt road. He was the youngest of four children and the only boy.

His father was a blacksmith who also made furniture and served as pastor of two Baptist churches. His mother wove baskets from bulrushes and pine needles and made quilts.

As a boy, he ducked household chores and excelled in school. “I guess I was the only kid who showed any interest in art when I was in grade school, which was a one-room segregated schoolhouse,” he told the Baltimore Sun. “So my teachers prevailed on me to do everything that looked like it was art.”
Mr. Driskell was the first in his family to go to college. But he didn’t know that to go to college he had to apply. He just showed up one day at Howard University and talked his way in.

He courted a fellow student, Thelma Deloatch, by taking her to church services and movies. They married in 1952. In addition to his wife, survivors include two daughters, Daviryne McNeill and Daphne Cole, all of Hyattsville, Md.; five grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Mr. Driskell said he was on a pathway to becoming a history teacher before an encounter at Howard with painter Howard Porter, who became his mentor and persuaded Mr. Driskell to switch his major. He graduated in 1955, taught art at Talladega College in Alabama (where he painted “Behold Thy Son”), then returned to the Washington area and received a master’s degree in fine arts at Catholic University in 1962.

He taught at Howard and then at Fisk University in Tennessee from 1966 to 1977, a period when he curated and wrote catalogues on 40 exhibits, including the work of such artists as Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, Palmer Hayden and Alma Thomas.

In Hyattsville, Mr. Driskell lived in an old Victorian-style house with a historic-landmark plaque. “Students regularly crowd into the house to soak up its warmth and eat his gumbo or his wife Thelma’s sweet potato pie,” according a 1998 Washington Post profile.
“This is a man who doesn’t need to thunder,” the article continued. “His speaking style combines the cadence of a minister, the restraint of a gentleman, the erudition of a scholar and the irreverence of an artist. . . . He is of that generation of Southern black men and women who got where they were going through gentle but persistent nudging.”

Outside his house was a yard replete with flowers, vegetables, vines and trees, including a leafless bottle tree surrounded by bottles of soda and milk of magnesia.

Sometimes Dr. Driskell would tell guests that the tree was a “spirit catcher” intended to honor his parents.

“Art was always functional for African people,” he told The Post. “If there is anything different for us, it’s how we deal with the arts and deal with history.”

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