

"David Driskell completed high school in Macon, Georgia and heard of Howard University. So, he took a bus to Washington and went to Howard to study. They told him he needed to make application to matriculate before he could attend, but they allowed him to sit in classes provisionally. Somehow, they forgot that he had not officially enrolled and after a year he was taking classes and being graded like other students. David never matriculated. He enjoyed telling that story.

I met David in 1966 when Dr. James A. Porter, the seminal and great African American art historian, introduced us at Howard University where David was an Associate Professor of Art. I was a baby in my crib then, I used to joke, and David would laugh. In 1967 David became Chairman of the Art Department of Fisk University and invited me to join him as the Assistant Professor of Art, replacing Aaron Douglas who had retired. More than a decade later he invited me to join him at the University of Maryland, where we took turns being each other's bosses. David was only the third African American full professor of any kind to be hired in the history of the University of Maryland. I was the fourth. Together, we wrote books and articles, lectured across the country, consulted for organizations, promoted African American art worldwide and supported each other's solo exhibitions. David and I would talk about our responsibility to help not only black people but also people of other cultures. We felt that as black people who experienced prejudice, but who had attained position despite it, we had an obligation to help others in need. We took it as our mission. We worked together on humanitarian projects, such as offering protection to Iranian students during the Iranian revolution in 1979. We developed pathways for Chinese American students to study art at Maryland, to such an extent that in the 1980's the Chinese government invited us to visit. We developed relationships with artists in Bahia, Brazil and created art exhibitions with artists from all over Brazil. We developed relationships with artists and arts organizations in Japan and Korea and facilitated graduate students from those countries to study with us at the University of Maryland. Several became lifelong friends. And we developed relationships with African countries too, most especially Nigeria, and invited the great anthropologist, Ekpo Ayo, to join us at Maryland.

The total faculty of the Art and Art History Department of the University of Maryland included more than 30 people. The African American section alone is widely considered to not only have been the greatest African American art faculty ever assembled in the history of the USA; but, also, would have been a national top ten art department faculty all by itself. At various times it included David Driskell, Sam Gilliam, Martin Puryear, Ekpo Ayo (former National Commissioner for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria), Stephanie Pogue, James Reed, Margo Humphrey, Sharon Patton (who would become Director of the African Museum of Art of the Smithsonian Institution), and me.

A few years ago, I observed to David that he, aided by a few others, including a naïve little Jamaican boy, had created the field of African American art, which did not exist before our time. "David," I said, "We did it!" He just smiled tight lipped and nodded his satisfaction.

David shaved his head like mine, his only brother he said, then when he quickly grew it back—I said it was because he feared my creditors might mistake him for me. I tried to teach David to drink alcohol but didn't succeed until he was almost 80. That's the only thing I could ever teach him. David was highly religious, and I was not. As he knew, I struggle with religion. I would say that I didn't understand how if there was a God, he could allow so many good people, so many poor black people among them, to suffer so. I said I wanted no part of his damn Heaven. David said God would forgive me, that God knew I was a good person. He said just because he went to church and I was absent did not mean that God judged me more harshly. I said you better see that he does not, for if I go to Hell, I'll tell God your secrets, which no one else knows. He would laugh in mock terror. A few years ago, he took a trip (his first trip) to Jamaica, and visited my birthplace. He was my best friend. But David had a vast network of friends well beyond me. He was among the most kind and generous persons I have ever known. He helped artists and scholars of every culture and race. Every African American artist and art historian alive owes a debt to David C. Driskell."