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**Oral history interview with David Driskell, 2009
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with David C. Driskell on March 10, 26, and April 7, 2009. The interview took place at the artist's home in Hyattsville, MD, and was conducted by Cynthia Mills for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Brown Foundation, Inc.

David C. Driskell and Cynthia Mills have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CYNTHIA MILLS: It's March 18, 2009, and we're at the Hyattsville, Maryland, home of David C. Driskell.

David, could you start by telling us something about your origins – your parents and your childhood, growing up on a farm in North Carolina?

DAVID C. DRISKELL: I was born June 7, 1931, in Eatonton, Georgia. Eatonton is a small town southeast of Macon, Georgia, in Putnam County. My father was a Methodist minister and my mother was a housewife.

We lived in Eatonton for the first five and one half years of my life. In 1936 we moved to Appalachia in the western part of North Carolina. We were in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Rutherford County.

I grew up there and spent most of my childhood in that part of the country. I attended a one-room, segregated elementary school and a three-room "consolidated" school. They combined three one-room black schools to form the consolidated school. It was called Brooks Chapel near Hollis, NC. That was a step up for us because had a school bus. We were then bused to school, which was about four miles each way.

DR. MILLS: So there were white schools that were closer to your home.

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, there were several white schools nearby. They were very fine schools, maybe 20 or 30 rooms or so, beautiful brick structures. But, obviously, because of segregation, we couldn't attend them.

My father, when I was about 10 years old, left the Methodist Church and became a Baptist. He then secured a pastorate in the communities of Hollis and Ellenboro. By that time I was close to finishing my studies in the consolidated school and heading to high school. I went to high school in the ninth grade, and at that time we were bused 35 miles to a little four-room high school for black kids in Forest City, North Carolina, Grahamtown High School.

DR. MILLS: So you had to get up early in the morning?

DR. DRISKELL: I had to get up at about 4:00 in the morning to be on hand to meet the bus, and I walked a mile before I was able to get onto the school bus. This was a farming community. It was

kind of hilly, but – beautiful country; very difficult to make a living in that area if one didn't have a profession. We had a small 13 acre farm after being sharecroppers for 10 years.

I rode 35 miles, passing about five beautiful high schools for whites along the way, through the little towns of Hollis, Bostic and Ellenboro. Hollis was less than three miles from my home. I could have gone to school there, were it not for segregation and Jim Crow laws.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: We then travelled through Bostic and through Ellenboro, then on up to Forest City, where there was a four-room high school for African-Americans.

Another thing that was strange, there were a few Native Americans in the area, or First Americans, but there was no school at all for them. They had to declare themselves black and come to the black schools if they desired to get an education.

I don't think there was a written law but it was accepted. First Americans very often married into the black community. One of my classmates married a Cherokee man.

DR. MILLS: And your mother was part Cherokee.

DR. DRISKELL: My mother was part Cherokee from further South, from Georgia, but there was a Cherokee reservation near Asheville, NC. The reservation was about 100 miles from where we were in Forest City. So, I rode a total of 70 miles daily to attend high school.

I attended this little four-room school but we had very good teachers. The emphasis there was finding a way out of this. We didn't really consider ourselves poor, until the sociologists came and told us that we were.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: My parents were not formally educated. My father had the equivalent of about a sixth-grade education, but in the days when he was born that was very good, good for African-Americans. He was born in 1905. My mother had about the same education. She was born in 1907.

Both were cognizant of the importance of education. The teachers and ministers were the role models, and they would say, you should want to be like Miss Gardiner, you should want to be like Mr. Freeman, or be like your dad. Shun the people who don't value education.

That emphasis was always, "if you want something different from this" – they didn't say "better than this," because I'm not sure that they knew anything better, "then get an education." My parents had grown up near Macon, Georgia, but the notion was, if you want something better than this, you've got to get an education. So when we went to school, that was reemphasized. When we went to Sunday school and on Sunday to the church services, that was reemphasized.

It was an encouraging atmosphere. Of course, all of us didn't take advantage of it, but that was what it was like.

DR. MILLS: But you did say that many in your high school class did go to college.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, we were a class of 24 at Grahamtown High School in Forest City, NC and 18 of

us went to college. Now, all 18 of us didn't complete our college education, but the fact that 18 of us went off to college was important.

DR. MILLS: You were the only one who went to Howard [University, Washington, DC], though?

DR. DRISKELL: I was the only one who came to Howard. And as it turns out, regrettably, I was the only one who finished a four or five-year curriculum in college. Now, some eventually went on and did other things. They went to college for two years, some for one year. But I was the only one who actually received a degree from that class.

DR. MILLS: And those who were in your class had been excused from farm work or whatever or were allowed to – they were already sort of selected out because they had made this effort –

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: – to get through high school.

DR. DRISKELL: Indeed they had, but I noticed there were some in my class who were not excused, even though – the teachers would excuse them because they knew they had to be on the farm working. There were times when I was the only one on that school bus until we got to the next town where there was no farming. Some families worked in mills. Textile mills.

DR. MILLS: So you were excused from some farm duties.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. My parents were determined that I wouldn't miss a day in school.

DR. MILLS: And how many siblings did you have?

DR. DRISKELL: Three sisters ahead of me.

DR. MILLS: So you're the youngest.

DR. DRISKELL: I'm the youngest, yes.

DR. MILLS: Ah, and the only boy.

DR. DRISKELL: And the only boy.

DR. MILLS: I see.

DR. DRISKELL: I got a little spoiling, as they say, along the way.

DR. MILLS: Does your childhood home there still exist? I think I saw a –

DR. DRISKELL: It does. No one lives in it. No one has lived in it since my mother passed in 1991. She lived there until she passed. But it was a little house, a little five-room rock house that my father built in the 1940s. That's when he purchased 13 acres of land. Prior to that we were sharecroppers, living with the returns from his ministry and whatever we reaped at the end of the year, having charged a certain amount over a period of time during the rest of the year.

He built this little house in the mid 1940s. He had help for laying the foundation, but he would take his wagon and go down to the creek and load these boulders, these rocks onto this wagon, and the two horses, they'd bring them up the hill, and he built this little house by himself.

DR. MILLS: So your grandfather and your father were both ministers.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: And you've said in one interview that your father might have liked you to be a minister too.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: But do you think that – what do you think that you got from that; some sort of strong sense of morality or civic duty toward, you know, communities of people? And do you – have you practiced religion in your coming decades?

DR. DRISKELL: I think I got from my father and my mother a sense of morality, of the do's and don't's in society; the notion that good people don't do this; good people are responsible, good people participate in community, and good people vote, good people own land. These were things I heard from my father's pulpit.

And there was this judgmental sense of what was good and what was bad. You couldn't necessarily shut the people out who were not considered good. But on the other hand, as children we were told, you don't do those things, which means that you don't really mix with that crowd as much. You don't go to town on Saturday night and hang out and go to the beer parlors. Even though it was a dry county, there was plenty of moonshine and beer and liquor being brought in from other counties.

But we were told, no, you don't do. And you don't run around with people who do that. There was this high standard of morals and a sense of responsibility. Now, that didn't mean that everybody stuck to those laws, but we were cognizant of the importance of trying to live up to that code.

I never took to smoking even though my father smoked; he smoked a pipe, but I didn't like the smell of tobacco. I know my grandfather drank occasionally socially, what we call "taking a sip." And my father never touched the bottle. He condemned my grandfather for doing that, and his punishment to his father was when my grandfather came to visit him from Georgia, he would not allow my grandfather to preach in his church. He would allow him to make remarks but he would not allow him to preach a whole sermon.

We all knew that, Pa Put, as we called my grandfather, we all knew that my father exercised that control over his father.

Even though my classmates very often drank alcohol in my presence and they would try and get me to join in, I felt, no, I didn't need that. When I arrived at college and saw that that was the norm, I was an outsider. But most of my friends respected me and they would say, "Oh, no, David doesn't drink so don't try and force him to drink."

I came to Washington with a very strict kind of religious zeal about things. My sister attended a fundamentalist church. Actually it was a Pentecostal church. I attended services with her often.

DR. MILLS: This sister lived in Washington?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, I had two sisters living in Washington at the time but I chose to live with the one over on Capitol Hill at 309 Eighth A St. NE.

I attended the Pentecostal church with my sister, her husband and their daughter. This sister died last year. She was like my surrogate mother here, with very much of the same persuasions as my mother.

Even when friends came from home that I knew were more socially adaptable to the mores of the time, she would always caution me and say, "Be careful if you're going out with so and so because you know such and such a thing could happen." It was that kind of guardianship, and concern that imprinted me.

When I became an adult, I had absolutely nothing against drinking alcohol. Many of my friends drank. I would often make wine and offer it, but I never sat down and drank it myself.

So, now, how did that affect my religious –

DR. MILLS: Practice.

DR. DRISKELL: I think it may have had something to do with the choice of the church I chose eventually to affiliate with. Once I left home and left the Baptist Church I became a Congregationalist. I reasoned that I chose Congregationalism because it is very close to the Baptist Church. There is no bishop or no presiding elder. It's a local community of people.

But I think the most interesting thing to me was reading the history of the Congregational Church – now the United Church of Christ and how it had become an advocate for the abolition of slavery and had set up the first colleges for African-Americans in the United States, in the South in particular. I ended up being associated with several of those colleges attending Howard University, teaching at Talladega College [Talladega, AL] and teaching at Fisk [University, Nashville, TN].

DR. MILLS: And so, throughout the decade you continued going to church.

DR. DRISKELL: I continued going to church. My church in Washington is People's Congregational United Church of Christ, where I have been a member for over 30-some years. I designed the stained glass windows there.

DR. MILLS: Where is that?

DR. DRISKELL: At 4704 13th St. NW in Washington.

DR. MILLS: Okay. Not to spend too much time on this – but could you describe your father's church and what it was like? What kind of a speaker was he? I was wondering whether, you know, the tradition – being in a family with someone who is an excellent speaker is something that affects one who goes on to write and write history.

DR. DRISKELL: Well, personally, I think that my father's ministry does have some effect on one. I perhaps thought I wasn't listening that well, but I could almost recite his sermons. He wrote a lot of his sermons down. He had the old-fashioned preaching style of chanting. He would explain a point and then there would be this pitch to excite the audience because people would eventually shout and respond to what he was saying.

DR. MILLS: So, chanting.

DR. DRISKELL: Chanting, and it was almost song-like in certain phases. Not a Pentecostal thing because you could always understand what was being said. I think my criticism of the Pentecostal

tradition that I heard with my sister's church was that it wasn't always audible. You couldn't quite figure out what was going on. And then, the people would very often do what they call speaking in tongues and I didn't know what they were saying. My father used to always say that if it can't be understood, then it's not the good news or not the gospel.

DR. MILLS: And was it in a big church building with –

DR. DRISKELL: It was in a church building that in some cases he had helped build, and it was small by today's standards.

DR. MILLS: With hundreds of people or –

DR. DRISKELL: At least 200 or 300 people, and at certain times of the year even more. In the August revivals there would be people standing all outside of the church who couldn't get into the church.

Now, he had more than one church; I would say more than one mission.

My father travelled at least 30 or 40 miles on some Sunday making the rounds, at least three churches: one in our community at White Oak Springs Baptist Church, in Rutherford County; a second one in Polk County; The county seat is Tryon; a little resort town up in the mountains not far from the South Carolina border.

The church near Tryon, Green Creek Missionary Baptist Church, was the most sophisticated of the three churches. The third one was Union Grove, near Landrum, South Carolina. At the Greens Creek Church in Polk County, he was the minister there 25 years.

DR. MILLS: Now, would you go to all those – would the family go to all those places?

DR. DRISKELL: No. Occasionally I would go with him on a Saturday and we stayed overnight. My mother went on Saturday occasionally when my three sisters were teenagers. He usually came back on Sunday evening. Many of the churches held a conference on a Saturday.

DR. MILLS: You've said that your paternal grandfather, who you were just talking about, was born into slavery but then became a minister himself and a teacher. Is that something that you would have talked about as a child or not talked about?

DR. DRISKELL: No, it wasn't talked about. We didn't even know it until after his death. My oldest aunt, Bertha, who was the firstborn to the 10 children in my father's family, indicated that the records were not accurate, but as far as she could ascertain, it was around 1862 when he was born. And she said, he obviously knew nothing about slavery except what they told him afterwards. His name is William Driskell (Pa Put).

DR. MILLS: Because he was so small.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, he was much too young to remember. But even when I became cognizant of this societal problem in this country, I asked my father and my mother if they knew anything that had been passed on to them, and my father was very reticent about it. He often said, "No, I don't know anything about it, and it was bad, it was awful and it's over and we want to get on with our lives."

My mother was a little more upfront. She told me about the experiences of her grandmother. Her

grandmother would have been my great-grandmother.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: Yeah. And she said she had a wash pot, which I now have. Her grandmother helped bring her up. And she said Grandma Leathy would tell her stories about this pot. This was the pot that her mother used to cover her head to pray in slavery so nobody would hear her praying for freedom.

However, when I asked details of what her grandmother told her, she would clam up and say, "Well, you don't want to hear about it. It was terrible." It was the same when I asked her about Grandma Hon, who was the half-Cherokee lady, my mother's mom. Her name is Eugene Cloud. When I asked her about Grandma Hon, she would say, "Well, all I know is they took our land. We didn't have any say-so about it." She said, that's why the boys changed their name from Cloud – C-L-O-U-D – to Clyde.

DR. MILLS: Oh.

DR. DRISKELL: So that's why I have Clyde in my name instead of Cloud. However, until she died, my mother used the name, MaryLou Cloud Driskell.

DR. MILLS: And, lastly, regarding your parents – you did make art in school. You didn't have a program but – and your father made watercolors. Do you want to say a little bit about that early exposure to art?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes; my first teacher, Ms. Edna Freeman, who came to Washington, D.C., in the 1940s and lived here until she died. I want to say, the early '70s, taught in this little one room segregated school in Rutherford County, NC. She was very good at pushing the children in her classes to experiment with natural things. We had no art materials. We had – occasionally, if we were lucky, a box of crayons for the year.

But we came from a background where we saw our parents doing things with clay and natural dyes, with the pokeberry and their leaves. We would often utilize those things in school if we had to do a project.

My father had a few – well, I wouldn't call them lessons, but he had this interest in calligraphy, in writing, as did his father. His penmanship was much like what we called the Palmer method. I emulated both of them. I tried to write like both of them. I have a few of my father's books where – he wrote his sermons. Beautiful handwriting. In some of those pages he did drawings. I have a couple of little drawings here of angels.

DR. MILLS: Just for himself?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, for himself. He didn't know anything about exhibiting or showing them to anybody else. I would see those things, get his theology books and on the clean pages; I would very often draw cars and houses. He didn't approve of that, and very often he didn't know about my drawings until I was out and gone. I did it because I had no paper, whatever sheets were available, I used.

My teachers encouraged me. They saw early on that I could draw well, and they would have me drawing everything that they needed. I would have to trace some things. I remember when I was in the fourth grade, I copied an entire book for the class called *Sleepy Town Wakes Up*. The teacher

then took the book to what we called commencement, which was an exercise at the end of the year where all of the black schools came together at one school and showed off their artistry, and their craftsmanship.

We would often go down to the brook and we get kaolin clay, and make fruit arrangements. We would make apples, oranges. And from the acorns we would put them together and make a bunch of cherries. We made pendants and pins for the ladies to wear. We painted them, of course. We'd get some enamel paint and paint them.

And on several occasions we won first prize in the county with our artistic endeavors. But I distinctly remember the boys who were older making airplanes, model airplanes from wooden shingles. They then painted them with enamel paints.

This was very encouraging to us because we had somebody ahead of us doing something creative. Thereafter we knew what we were going to do. We had spelling bees at the commencement at the same time we showed off our artware. There was one elementary school in the county, interestingly enough, near the South Carolina border called Cliffside Elementary School, and that school was bigger than our black high school. I guess it was due to the civic-mindedness of the people there that there was such a school for black kids on the elementary level.

We went there every year. It was about 20 miles that we would have to drive to show off our wares and have our spelling bees and our speaking contests.

DR. MILLS: So, in the fall of 1949 you went off to Washington, and was that the first time you took a train?

DR. DRISKELL: The very first time I was on a train, according to my mother was when I was four. She got on the wrong train in Eatonton, Georgia, where I was born, she thought she was going to Macon, and she ended up on the wrong train heading to Augusta. Of course she got off and came back. But my second time on a train was in September, 1949 when I decided at the last minute that I was not going to attend Shaw University in Raleigh, NC and, instead, came to Howard University.

DR. MILLS: Okay.

DR. DRISKELL: I arrived three weeks after school was in session and went up to Howard, demanding to enroll. And, they said – when I told them where I came from they said, "Nobody comes from there." But they were very encouraging and accommodating. They tried to be firm with me and said school has been in session for three weeks. "You can't just come to college. You have to make an application." I insisted on staying. I said, "Well, I'm here; give me an application."

Howard University was on the quarter system at that time. By now it is mid-September. I had two acquaintances who were already enrolled from – the other black high school in the county. Their school was a little more sophisticated than ours. It was in the county seat of Rutherfordton. They were already enrolled. They took me under their wings and helped to properly direct me. They were Barbara Mills and LaVella Meechum.

I went to them for counsel and they said, "Well, you know, you're going to have to wait until January." But I went on and sat in on classes and wrote home and said, "I'm in college."

DR. MILLS: How did you afford to pay the tuition? Did you immediately start working?

DR. DRISKELL: I started working immediately and worked until after Christmas. I enrolled in three courses the first quarter, that was January. So I had worked into January, at the Hecht Company. They had a warehouse at Sixth and G Streets NW, where the Verizon Center is now located. I worked there and saved a little money, but the tuition was \$50 or \$60 since I wasn't living on campus.

DR. MILLS: You were able to live with your sister.

DR. DRISKELL: I was able to live with my sister. I continued living with my sister, my oldest sister, Miley McDuffie at 309 A Street, N.E.

DR. MILLS: And you said that you wanted to be a historian.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, I enrolled immediately in courses in history, – mainly European history; I had this great interest in history and did very well in the discipline with an advisor whose name was Dr. Harold Lewis.

DR. MILLS: With the idea of becoming a professor yourself?

DR. DRISKELL: Well, at least a high school teacher. I always – I knew from day one that I wanted to be a teacher –

But I don't think I had envisioned becoming a professor at the time. I remained a history major until 1951.

DR. MILLS: [Inaudible.]

DR. DRISKELL: In 1951 I took my first art course. It was a course in drawing taught by James Wells. And one day I looked over my shoulder and there was this tall gentleman standing there, very well-dressed and groomed, and he asked, "What is your name? I don't know you." I said David Driskell. And he said, "Oh, I don't know you; you're not an art major, then?" I said no. He said, "Well, what is your major?" I said history. And he looked at my drawing and looked at me and said, "You don't belong over there; you belong here." He was James A. Porter. And so, I went and changed my major - just like that.

DR. MILLS: He was persuasive.

DR. DRISKELL: I then started taking art courses.

DR. MILLS: And by "art courses," you also took art history courses?

DR. DRISKELL: Later when I became a bona fide art major, I then took art history courses because one had to have a minor in art history at Howard at that time.

Now, at Howard one can pursue an art history major. but I chose to do an art major and an art history minor.

DR. MILLS: And so you took courses in drawing, painting –

DR. DRISKELL: Drawing, painting, printmaking. I didn't take a ceramic course.

DR. MILLS: Sculpture?

DR. DRISKELL: I did not take a sculpture course. One could declare a major emphasis at that time in either painting, printmaking or sculpture.

DR. MILLS: So you found yourself a bit by happenstance in this department where many of the central figures in the story of African-American art and the writing of its history intersected there at Howard. Now, Alain Locke was there at that time. Did you take – was he teaching courses or what kind of contact did you have with him?

DR. DRISKELL: He was teaching courses in philosophy and I think he was still chairman of the department. I had no courses with him. He lectured in the Humanities Program on either Thursday or Friday afternoon in Rankin Chapel.

DR. MILLS: So he was giving lectures?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, all of the distinguished faculty – they didn't call them that, but I would say the real senior professors in various disciplines – Locke in philosophy; [William Leo] Hansberry in history; John Hope Franklin in history; Merze Tare etc., and I recall she was the only woman who was a full professor in liberal arts at that time; that I knew. James V. Herring was Chairman of the Department of Art. James A. Porter was not a full Professor at that time. He became Chair when Herring retired in 1953.

These distinguished people gave lectures in Rankin Chapel on Thursday and Friday afternoons as it was a part of the teaching plan. For example, if you had a course with Dr. Frank Snowden on Monday, Wednesday, you would not go to his class on Friday; you would go to Rankin to hear someone else speak. Dr. Virginia Callahan or someone else would lecture on Greek and Roman classics or blacks in antiquity or something like that.

And the same thing happened in the social sciences. One would hear Leo Hansberry or perhaps John Hope Franklin or someone like that, and in the humanities Snowden, Locke or Porter, lectured on one of those days. That was my interaction with him.

DR. MILLS: So you went to some lectures, and did you have any personal interaction?

DR. DRISKELL: I had no personal interaction other than taking a course from Professor Herring, and we didn't know of the rivalry, as students, that went on between the professors. I learned as an adult that Professor Herring and Professor Locke did not get along well.

DR. MILLS: Professor Porter and Professor Locke or –

DR. DRISKELL: Pardon?

DR. MILLS: Herring and Locke?

DR. DRISKELL: Herring and Locke, not Porter and Locke.

DR. MILLS: Okay.

DR. DRISKELL: But there was a time ahead of that when I understand Porter and Locke had

differences of opinion about the definition of African-American art and the direction it should take, but that supposedly was resolved.

But I don't think the issue between Professor Herring and Professor Locke was ever resolved, and Professor Herring said to me – it was about Dr. Locke declaring himself the "founder" of the Art Department at Howard University –

DR. MILLS: Oh.

DR. DRISKELL: When he Herring indeed said he was the founder, establishing it in 1921. But not knowing that history, I do recall going to a lecture and Dr. Locke giving us a hard time. He was saying that Dr. so and so and so's funeral was yesterday; he was a great man, and you didn't come; you didn't attend. And our response was, "Mr. Herring wouldn't let us come." Mr. Herring said, "Let the dead bury the dead; you stay here and learn." Dr. Locke said something like, ... "Too bad it wasn't Herring's funeral."

I mean, it was that kind of open, condemnation of each other without people thinking much about it. That wouldn't happen now, out of collegial respect, hopefully. We didn't understand why. We just went back and laughed about it and went back and told Professor Herring what Dr. Locke said. And of course Professor Herring used a few explicit about Dr. Locke, and we just laughed and went on. But we didn't know that we were being used in that regard –

As the carriers – the news carriers. But, you know, as I look back, it was a kind of – professional jealousy. It was also the fact that these brilliant minds were there at Howard. This was perhaps the Mecca for African-American thought in the '40s and the '50s and even prior to that.

And these brilliant men and women couldn't go any other place because no other schools – Harvard didn't want them, Yale didn't want them, Princeton, Columbia, et cetera. The mold was eventually broken when John Hope Franklin went to Brooklyn College [City University of New York, NY], when Dr. Howard Thurman left the chapel – that was a year or two before I came – and went to Boston University, and later Dr. Nathan Scott went to the Chicago Theological Seminary.

Most of the other people were much too old to go anywhere and they remained there for the rest of their lives – Frank Snowden among them. They were magnificent teachers, just amazing. But, to our advantage, they stayed. They were there with us.

DR. MILLS: But at that time among the students there was not exactly this tremendous reverence toward Locke?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, no. We would laugh and make fun of the teachers and make up stories and things like that because, you know, we were just playing the student game.

DR. MILLS: Well, one thing I wonder that – it's not been discussed in the past but now there's new scholarship about how Locke was part of this gay cultural circle. Do you think people were aware of that or Herring was aware of that?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, I think that was perhaps a part of the situation between Herring and Locke. And we were aware of it, and that was a part of our laughter about it. We would say "Well, just don't get too close to them," you know – that kind of thing. There was no real gender definition in the sense of how you treat people in those days with gender differences. You avoided them. My

parents always told me that you do not make fun of anybody, and so I didn't see anything funny about it.

I remember an experience once of a young man in our home who was gay. We just assumed it, based on his outward appearance. Gay people had a hard time in those days since the police would create situations to lock them up.

And there was a young man in our community who said he wanted to be a minister, and my father was trying to mentor him in the ministry, and something supposedly happened in town. We lived 18 miles from town. I didn't get to town that often. And this young man was jailed. I remember my father lamenting and saying, well, regardless of what happened, he's human; he's human like the rest of us and he deserves, to be heard and to be seen.

So I grew up with a sense of tolerance. I don't know that there was any talk about gender differences. It was respect for people. So when I became a professional and saw that there were a lot of differences in the sense of how people lived their lives, I became respectful of their territory, of their thoughts and their ideas, and it was never a problem for me to feel that this is my sister, this is my brother.

When I became a professional and fully understood what was going on, I knew that with all the love and care and mentorship that someone like Professor Herring had given us, was not based on gender; it was based on the notion that he wanted us to succeed.

And when my wife and our two little girls left Talladega College after signing a contract in September of 1962 and came back to Howard University – we didn't have a home, we didn't have a place to live. Professor Herring said, "Well, you can live here in my house." And he then went to Talladega and took the job that I was supposed to have had that year, to keep me from being in legal trouble.

So it was that kind of give and take, and understanding. We all would snigger and laugh when Dr. Locke lectured, instead of sitting there listening attentively to what he was saying.

DR. MILLS: Interesting.

DR. DRISKELL: I recall in the – it was the spring of 1953 I – I had been given a scholarship to attend the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in [Skowhegan] Maine.

DR. MILLS: Yes.

DR. DRISKELL: Now, Howard was one of the fortunate institutions in those days that had an association with the school, and had a scholarship. The Corcoran [The Corcoran College of Art and Design, Washington, DC] had one. The Maryland Institute [Maryland Institute Collage of Art, Baltimore, MD] had one and the Brooklyn Museum and so forth, the Art Institute of Chicago. So, upon arrival there, one was exposed to students from all the United States, and that was my very first time having that experience and my very first time traveling north of Baltimore.

DR. MILLS: So, your first time in a group that was not all African-Americans.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, it was my first time being in a group that was not all African-American. And I think I fitted right in, no problems in the sense of fitting in, but it was a surprise to me that the art world was so small in the sense that – and I could fit into that community of artists. And it later made me understand that I was getting a very good education at Howard.

At that time, as I said, James Wells was teaching printmaking and drawing, James Porter was teaching painting and art history and African-American art history, at that time what we called "Negro art." And I don't think it was being taught any other place perhaps in the world at that time. Lois Jones taught design and watercolor painting. I took courses from all of them.

Professor Herring was chairman of the department and he taught art history and art education. When Lois Jones was teaching, she always emphasized that she taught watercolor painting because I think there was some bias in not allowing her to teach oil painting. Porter taught oil painting.

DR. MILLS: Oh, the woman had to teach the watercolor?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, she had to teach the watercolor and James Porter taught oil painting, Morris Louis taught oil painting, but not Lois. And I know there was a resentment because, see, Lois had more prominence as a painter – as an oil painter than either Louis or Porter at that time. And, most people didn't even know that Morris was teaching at Howard.

When I returned from the summer at Skowhegan, I had started with Jack Levine and Henry Varnum Poor. I didn't do a sculpture there but I did a fresco. Henry Varnum Poor and his daughter Anne Poor were teaching fresco painting. Sidney Simon – Sidney was a painter then; he was not a sculptor at that time. He taught painting and Milton Hebard taught sculpture.

So I came back from Skowhegan saying, "I'm not going to do any abstract painting." Porter said, "You're going to study with Morris Louis." I said, "No, I'm not going to do any abstract art. That man can't paint." You know, that was my attitude. And he said, "You will study with Morris Louis," and of course, I studied with him. [Laughs.]

I thought I was going to be a social commentary artist. I was going to be a painter like Jack Levine. And I had started doing figural work in which I had developed my style like Levine, chiaroscuro painting – first dark and then light. Jack used to say, "You don't need all those colors; you just need the umbers and the earth colors, and by the time you get the yellow ochre on it will look like Rembrandt [van Rijn]'s *Man with the Golden Helmet* [1650]. And don't put any cadmium; they didn't have cadmium back then."

So I was observing all those rules in my painting, and of course I returned and started painting with Morris. And, of course, abstraction came into the picture [laughs]. And I probably did some of my best work there because he was very encouraging about the flow of paint, just the use of it in that sense.

At the same time, I'm taking watercolor painting from Lois and – so I'm being kind of bombarded with all these ideas about painting. In the meantime, that same year, there was very little going on in the sense of major exhibition places in Washington. There was what was called a Washington Society of Artists, and they had a major exhibition every spring. And –

DR. MILLS: Where?

DR. DRISKELL: At what is now the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History – No, no, the big museum at 10th and Constitution Avenue, Smithsonian -

And we called that the National Museum in those days.

DR. MILLS: Oh.

DR. DRISKELL: I don't know if it was in print but that's what we called it. And that's where the exhibitions were held, and that was a big, prestigious thing. And the jurors would come from all around the United States.

So I was bold enough to not tell my teachers but submit [laughs] in 1953 to the Washington Society of Artists a painting that I had done called *City Quartet*. And the juror that year was Max Weber. So I got in and none of my teachers got in.

DR. MILLS: These were anonymously juried?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. Yes. Well, you know, your name may be on the painting on the form, but they would set the paintings out and select them.

So, this painting called *City Quartet [1953]* that I think is in the book Julie McGee [*David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar*; San Francisco: Pomegranate; 2006] was accepted. And, now, I have been going to these exhibits with Lois and with Porter. Now, I have seen Lois's work there earlier but it was strictly juried and there were years when they didn't get in. So this is one of the years.

And so I was timid and quiet about it. I didn't tell anybody that I was exhibiting there because I was fearful of what they would say, as it turns out, they were very proud of me. I had made this jury and there I was Max Weber had juried me in. And then the next year, 1954, I was juried in again. A painting called *Within the City*, and it was a very abstract painting.

Now, I had begun to study with Morris. My work had become a bit more abstract. This was almost a monochromatic painting. And Karl Zerbe juried that one into the Washington Society of Artist show.

So I then, by that time, 1954, going into my senior year, I felt very accomplished having been in these two shows. Professor Porter had invited me to be in a show out in the Midwest with the teachers at Howard. And at the same time I was working as the student curator at the gallery of art with Mr. Albert J. Carter.

DR. MILLS: So the Gallery of Art – you mean the –

DR. DRISKELL: Howard University Gallery of Art.

DR. MILLS: The Howard gallery.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, which was one of the most active galleries in the city – major exhibitions were staged there throughout the academic year. It was there that I saw the First comprehensive exhibition of modern art from the Guggenheim Museum in 1954-55 including the work of Picasso,

Matisse, Maholy-Nagy, Schmidt-Rottluff, et cetera.

DR. MILLS: When did the Howard Gallery open?

DR. DRISKELL: I think it was 1928.

DR. MILLS: Okay.

DR. DRISKELL: It may have been '29. It opened in the basement of Rankin Chapel and it stayed there for many years until the Founders Library was built. It was then moved to the east wing of Founders Library, and that's where I was a student curator.

And Howard used to have what they called the fine arts festivals in the spring, and it was there that I served as a student curator with Mr. Carter for several of those festivals. I remember an exhibition by William H. Johnson, to which Ms. Mary Beattie Brady of the Harmon Foundation came, and that was my introduction to her. And I think it was around 1954 or '55.

And I was introduced to her and the president of the college, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, came. And somewhere I have a photograph with them. I was like the promising young artist. Professor Porter was showing me off and Lois would show me off, and Lois would call me her pet – her pet student.

I was there when Professor Herring retired in 1953. I think Dr. Locke died in 1954. When Professor Herring retired, Professor Porter became chairman of the department. My mentor then was looking out for me and pushing me along, and he would very clearly say to me, "You are not to go to Lois Jones's classes in the evenings at her Quincy Street home. You are my student. You are my student; do you understand?" And I would say yes because there was this kind of ownership thing – you know, you are my student, that's her student, and so forth.

DR. MILLS: Wow.

DR. DRISKELL: So he was looking out for me, but it was interesting because, Lois was a person who insisted on my going to Skowhegan.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: Now, Porter had asked me first and I said, no, I have to work, because I had a family.

DR. MILLS: Yes, and you worked all the time.

DR. DRISKELL: I worked all the time. I drove a taxi in between working hours at the Arts and Crafts Supply store down at 934 New York Avenue, N.W.

I delivered art supplies. I remember the first time I saw this kid – I didn't know who he was; it was Martin Puryear. He was about 10 years old. I was delivering art supplies to the Cornelia Yuditsky School of the Arts over at 19th and I Street NW. And this was a Russian woman who took any kid who had talent. It was the only place that I know of in Washington that did that. At that time, the Corcoran wasn't taking black kids.

Later, Martin went from the Yuditsky School to the Corcoran. I walked in and saw this little black boy painting with the easels and everything, and I was like, what is this, you know? And later on

Martin told me it was he. But Mrs. Yuditzsky would come in and order her supplies from Arts and Crafts Supply Company at 934 New York Avenue, NW, and I would deliver them. Mr. Albert Ellerin was the owner of the store. He had a brother who had a store in Baltimore on Mulberry Street. Mr. Ellerin taught me to drive.

DR. MILLS: And you didn't have a car.

DR. DRISKELL: I didn't have a car before I got married and I didn't own one until 1956. I married in January of 1952, and Mr. Ellerin allowed me to borrow the station wagon sometimes after deliveries for my personal use, not for a whole weekend but for a few days. He lived in Greenbelt, Maryland.

And he was kind of like a surrogate father for me in certain ways. When I didn't have money to pay my tuition – and tuition fees had gone up at Howard – he would give me the money and I would work it to pay it back.

By the time I became a junior I had changed my major and I had a scholarship. I never paid tuition again.

DR. MILLS: Oh. So, Professor Porter had already published his 1943 book, *Modern Negro Art* [New York: The Dryden Press; 1943], and –

DR. DRISKELL: This was his 1939 thesis at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York. We used it as our textbook in the class in Negro Art. Many of the Howard professors used their own textbooks when teaching.

DR. MILLS: – which was a –

DR. DRISKELL: Kind of a standard bearer because he taught from that book. I almost committed the book to memory. He would walk around in the classroom and never use the book and cite what was in the book. And I was so impressed with him and wanted to do that and be like him. I would go back to class, not his class but my other classes with my classmates Georgia Jessup and Earl Hooks and others, and I would stand up and start reciting what was in the book and pretending that I was Professor Porter. I was telling them about African art, American Negro art.

DR. MILLS: And you had not known of most of these artists.

DR. DRISKELL: I had never heard of them.

DR. MILLS:

So he persuaded you, that in addition, that you should follow his model of not just being an artist but also being a historian –

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: – and that there should be some sort of continuum used.

DR. DRISKELL: Indeed. He said to me once, when I was talking about painting, he said, well, that's fine, he said, but you have a good mind so you can't just be a painter; you're going to have to help define the field and keep the tradition going. And he meant walking in his footsteps in a certain way.

I was so impressed with the fact that he would take up time with me and he really was grooming me. I didn't always know that but – and there was this jealousy between Professor Porter and Professor Herring about students. I started working down at the Barnett-Aden Gallery [Washington, DC] around 1952. I had all these jobs in between – driving a taxi, working during the day in between my classes with Mr. Carter in the art gallery, and then going down for a couple of hours to help Mr. Herring and Mr. [Alonzo] Aden at the Barnett-Aden Gallery a couple of hours a week, or driving Mr. Herring someplace because Mr. Herring was very picky about who he would let drive him around town.

He had one taxi driver he would count on, and if this driver didn't show up, this was the same driver that drove Alma Thomas around; if this driver didn't show up, he would (my wife and I didn't have a telephone but we were living with my sister at the time, not on A Street but over in Southeast), he called to leave a message and say, "Tell Driskell I need for him to come and take me such and such a place tomorrow." And then of course I would go over and drive him there in my Imperial Taxi.

DR. MILLS: And that was in your function as a taxi driver.

DR. DRISKELL: As a taxi driver, but then I would have to go downstairs in the gallery and help move things around, help pack things for the exhibition service he had. He had a little exhibition service he operated out of the basement of the Barnett-Aden Gallery called College Art Service, mainly for sending exhibitions to HBCUs.

He had gotten a small grant from the Carnegie Foundation I think around 1948 for the CAS. The gallery was founded in '43.

And he would send these exhibits out to various schools, mainly black schools in the South. They weren't always original works of art. Sometimes they were what he called facsimiles: we called them good reproductions.

DR. MILLS: They weren't necessarily African-American?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, no, no. Very few of them were not African-American. I remember the one that he sent to me at Talladega that made a big impression on me and my students was illuminated manuscripts – the Book of Kells and the Book of Hours. I would use them for teaching purposes just as though they were originals.

DR. MILLS: And he taught Western art.

DR. DRISKELL: He taught Western art. Professor Porter taught African and African-American.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: But we also had a diverse curriculum at Howard at that time. It was very well balanced, as I look back, the Asian art – we offered the art of Mesopotamia – and of course there were very few schools that had that much art history at that time.

DR. MILLS: I agree. I'll just go back to writing history with Professor Porter. So, why was writing history of African-American art so important, and why did he feel it was so important to have someone follow in his footsteps? Because no one else was writing it? Because if it was written, it was distorted.

DR. DRISKELL: Well, for the most part I think it was about the omissions of African American Art

from American art history. And, secondly, nobody other than him, occasionally Locke – Locke was very old by that time and doing very little writing. There really was no one else on the scene writing in depth the way he was. A few people emerged later, but until that time he was really the only one who was actually researching and writing. Occasionally one would find articles beyond his own book that would appear in *Art in America* or some such publication.

Porter was very active with College Art Association [CAA, New York, NY], and that's why I became so interested and dedicated. He took me with him to a session in the early '50s.

I'm trying to remember where it was, but I took that as an indication that I should be involved. So when I went to Talladega to teach in 1955, the first thing I did was join the College Art Association meeting, and I went to my first meeting in 1956 in Pittsburgh. I keep writing to CAA, telling them that I have been a member since 1956, not 1960. I joined in 1956. [laughs]

DR. MILLS: So the Barnett-Aden Gallery, – did you have to make an appointment to go there?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: How did that function?

DR. DRISKELL: With the exception of at opening events, one had to make an appointment because the gallery was in their home. They were very liberal about letting people come to the gallery, but you had to call and let them know. Now, some people just came and knocked on the door and they would let them in, but that was not the norm.

DR. MILLS: But to a certain extent it had to be a group of people who were in the know, who knew to call or –

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, there was a small plaque as you came up the steps. You would never notice it unless you were looking for it; it said Barnett-Aden Gallery. And there was a lot of ivy. You would miss it if you weren't very careful.

DR. MILLS: And that's where you met fellow artists like Romare Bearden?

DR. DRISKELL: I met Romare Bearden there but I don't think I met Jacob Lawrence there. That was the first time I saw Bearden's work.

DR. MILLS: Work that was not seen at the university gallery – nor seen at some place like the National Gallery of Art [Washington, DC], where you might have gone.

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, yes, I went to see it there. And here again, with the social stigma of these two men living together running this gallery, you know, we didn't understand the full implications of that – the gender relationship, anything like that. There were always whispers, "Be careful when you go down there."

But there were never any overtures made to me or anything like that. There was always respect, and Mr. Aden became very fond of me and my family, as did Professor Herring. Professor Herring was like a surrogate father to us. I met Langston Hughes there when I was a student, working there.

DR. MILLS: He was just visiting the gallery?

DR. DRISKELL: Well, they used to have these parties for readings by poets and novelists. I remember the night, this must have been around 1952 – Langston Hughes, May [Howard] Miller – she became May [Howard] Miller Sullivan, the poet; she was the daughter of, I think, the first black dean at Howard University, Kelly Miller. Georgia Douglas Johnson, a Harlem Renaissance poet was there. It was like a salon of sorts.

And people would come, not necessarily for an opening, along with the openings, people such as Madame Evanti [Lillian Evans Tibbs], Thurlow Tibbs' grandmother. I have photographs of her later as she would come and entertain everybody and talk about the grand old days when she was in Europe as an opera singer. I think I had met Lois Jones there, perhaps for the first time.

It was a meeting place of sorts, but the neighbors didn't have any great respect for the place because they didn't think that much about the importance of art, and then to have it in a home, this was a middle-class black neighborhood in the LeDroit Park area.

And Professor Herring told the story of that. They had done a test run with a gallery but none of the neighbors came because they thought it was a numbers house. They saw all of these people coming in and out and they just – they're going in and their response was they were going there to play numbers.

After the gallery opened in 1943 and after Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt's limousine drove up and all the neighbors saw Mrs. Roosevelt going in the gallery, they put on their fur coats and came to the door. And Professor Herring turned them around. He said, "No, you don't want to come here. You know this is a numbers house." "The president's wife is here." And he said, "But, no, it's private; you can't come now."

DR. MILLS: So she came to see an exhibition or –

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, she came for the official opening of the gallery.

Yes. The gallery archive shows a photograph of Mrs. Roosevelt sitting at the desk, signing the guest book. When I came back to go to graduate school in 1961 – actually I had started graduate school at Catholic University [Washington, DC] in 1958, I came back to finish my work in the fall of 1961 and became gallery director. By that time, Mr. Aden was deceased and Professor Herring had gone to Talladega to take over my teaching responsibilities.

I was living there alone. I wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt to tell her about Mr. Aden's death. She responded, writing a note saying she was very sorry to hear about it, and what a nice man he was. I had that correspondence in my file until 1964 when I went to Europe. My wife hired somebody to come in to clean, and they just threw everything out.

DR. MILLS: So, in 1955 you went to Talladega and became a sort of one-person art department.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, I was a one-person department. I visited Talladega recently. It is still a one-person department. But art wasn't a major there. I developed it to the strength of a major. Students who were economics majors and in other areas, attended schools like Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] and got M.F.A.s [Master of Fine Arts].

DR. MILLS: So that was where you really developed your teaching philosophy.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes.

DR. MILLS: And it's always hardest at first, as we know.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. I hadn't had any course work in ceramics. I hadn't gone to Catholic U. at the time – I went three years later. I then took ceramics and other graduate courses. When I was asked, "Can you teach printmaking?" I said, "Yes." "Can you teach ceramics?" I said, "Yes." "Can you teach art education?" "Yes." I had no courses in art education but I wasn't going to let this chance to have a job pass me by.

I went out and learned and I stayed one step ahead of the students by reading and I got to be pretty proficient at throwing on the wheel and making my own glazes, ordering the chemicals and having the students go out and dig and process their clay, and doing things that they weren't teaching at Howard University.

So Talladega College opened up my whole sensibility about experimental teaching and how to look at it beyond what I had learned at Howard and at Skowhegan. It was my notion that teaching had to be thorough, it had to be well done, and it had to connect to something beyond the classroom; life.

I always said, you have to have a goal and an objective in life. I offered a course – called "Christian Art," in which the students had to choose a local church to do an art project. They chose a local Congregational church. There were no white Congregational churches in Talladega.

They made the docel [phonetic] cloth; they made the altar and other decorative things for the church. In those days, we didn't think about documenting things. Somebody may have taken a photograph. All of those things are so important now for the record; we let it slide.

DR. MILLS: But your goal was to inspire their interests –

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, and to bring and broaden the interests of the students in general. I wanted to bring as many students as I could into the department to take courses, regardless of what their majors were. As I said, we had no art major. But we had students like Archie Epps, who went on to become a dean at Harvard; Richard English, who became the dean of the School of Social Work at Howard and later provost; my former minister, Dr. A. Knighton Stanley, who went to Yale and then stayed at People's Congregational Church for 38 years before he retired.

There was one gentleman from Pakistan, he was an economics major and he was one of the students I sent to grad school. He went to Cranbrook Academy and received an MFA in printmaking and ceramics. He came back and taught at Talladega and then became chairman of the Department of Art at Spelman College, [Atlanta, GA]. It was that kind of concentration and media emphasis on direction that interested so many students.

DR. MILLS: And while you were there, then in the summers you came back and worked on your MFA at Catholic University?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, I came back and worked on my MFA, first in the summer of 1958 until the fall of 1961. That was when I bought the property in [Falmouth] Maine and started going there each summer.

DR. MILLS: And so you chose Catholic because you could go back to where your sisters were in Washington or –

DR. DRISKELL: Well, not that so much. By that time Thelma [Driskell]'s relatives were living in Washington so we lived with her in-laws. But Catholic had a history of never having barred African-

Americans students. It was the only school at that time with that record in the Washington area, other than Howard.

The other schools opened up later, but Catholic, from the '40s when its graduate program was set up, admitted African-Americans. Some students from Howard had gone to Catholic U and gotten their master's. So I knew about that and I had great respect for Clara Fontanini, who was a sculptor of note; Alexander Giampietro, a very well known potter; Nell Sonneman, a wonderful painter and textile artist and theorist. And the art history wasn't terribly strong there until Dr. Shapely – John Shapley came later. It was one of the finest, well-rounded programs in the mid-Atlantic.

DR. MILLS: You made your emphasis in painting.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, in painting and but one had to satisfy the requirements of five different areas, emphasizing the notion that a master of fine arts meant more than one thing. So, one had to take painting, ceramics, printmaking, sculpture, and do art history and theory.

DR. MILLS: Washington kept drawing you back; did you ever consider going to New York, which is the center of the art world?

DR. DRISKELL: Never! Never; even when I came back from Skowhegan – there was a painter at Skowhegan who had won First place in painting. There were two first-place winners: Walter Williams, an African-American painter and Anne Steinbrocker, a young painter from New York. On my way back, Anne said, "You have never been to New York." "You have to stop in New York. You have to see New York."

My response was, "I don't need to see New York. I've got to go home to my family." She said, "Call home and tell them you're going to be a couple of days late." So I stopped over in New York and visited with Anne. That was my first exposure to New York, in August, 1953. Her parents were very wealthy. Both of her parents were medical doctors. She lived on Park Avenue.

DR. MILLS: Nice.

DR. DRISKELL: I stayed in the guest room with maid service. I had never seen anything like that before. I thought all New Yorkers lived like that. She hired a taxi the second night I was there and drove me around the city. "You have to see the lights of Broadway." She was really mentoring me in a certain way, even though she was my age. And she said, "Okay, now you've got to see Harlem."

We drove to Harlem. We went to a club called the Red Rooster, which was still famous in those days. We drove around the city. I had never seen anything like this before, houses and buildings, so tall. I arrived late that night. Anne was expecting me. The maid came to the door and said – (she was an Irish woman) "No, you've made a mistake (meaning I was not welcome).

Anne was expecting me. Anne said, "Is it David?" And I said, "Yes, it's David." Anne came to the door, and the maid was like, how dare you let this man in here. Anne gave her orders to prepare the guestroom for me, and against her wishes, she did. It was the most sumptuous place I had ever seen; not even a photograph of anything that looked like that. That was my introduction to New York. I thought everyone lived like that in New York City.

DR. MILLS: But you had studied or – you had met Langston Hughes and studied about people who were in the Harlem Renaissance, but you didn't have any desire to go see what that –

DR. DRISKELL: It was the lack of understanding of the importance of all of that. That would come later. Yes, I had met Langston; I had met Romare Bearden, who was not a Harlem Renaissance artist. I also met Georgia Douglas Johnson, who was a poet of the period, and people like that, but it didn't imprint me and impress upon my mind the relevance of all of this until later.

DR. MILLS: Just to move along, I'll just mention that – so then you went back to – you had the opportunity to go back to Howard and you seized that.

DR. DRISKELL: Nineteen-sixty-two.

DR. MILLS: And that's when James V. Herring went to Talladega – in your stead.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. He filled the position I left vacant at Talladega College.

DR. MILLS: Because that was the mother ship – the department you thought was most important.

DR. DRISKELL: Definitely. That was my aim, my idea all along. When I returned that fall, Professor Porter was still living on Girard Street and he wasn't too well. The dean had called me in and said, "I want you to come to Howard to teach in the Department of Art.

The official invitation did not come directly from Professor Porter; it was Professor Porter who gave the invitation to the dean. The dean, then Dean Warner Lawson, invited me. When I went to see Professor Porter, he said to me, "You must have known the day you left Howard University that someday you would be returning." That kind of reinforced my ideal, in a sense, of Howard being the Mecca; this is where I wanted to be.

I returned there in September, 1962 and immediately garnered the interest of the students, both undergraduate and graduate. I taught painting. The only art history course that I taught at that time was one in modern art. I really pushed it toward philosophy and aesthetics. The word got around that this was a different kind of art history course, so I had to limit the enrollment. We met in the seminar room.

The seminar room wasn't a terribly large space. I had students coming from all over the campus – students from music, from philosophy. Stokely Carmichael, for example, enrolled from philosophy. It was really a very interesting class. Even some professors sat in.

It was a very fervent period as this was the era of civil rights activity in the Washington-Maryland area. Stokely being in the class, was busy with the protests on Route 40 out in Cambridge, Maryland. We called it the movement in those days, an important part of the civil rights struggle. Howard was a very exciting place to be at that time. It was the center, the hub for activity relating not only to civil rights situations but to the political scene, and the antiwar effort. (Vietnam War)

Howard at that time had, according to the literature, more foreign students enrolled per capita than any other university in the United States, even though the student body was less than 8,000.

I taught students from Greece, India, Egypt and from Iran. Even in those days, they were of two different camps. The Shah supporters were over here and the anti-Shah people were over here. And they didn't speak to each other but they were all in my class.

I established relationships with so many of those students that went on for years. I remember in particular there was a young man who was the son of the minister of transportation from Iran. His name was Mohammad Dabrialli. And he married an Argentine woman. I'm not sure that she was a

student at Howard at the time, but I think they moved to Buenos Aires. When the coup came, I assume he wasn't involved in all of that.

And they were so different from American students. They seemed to worship their teachers. The professors were major to them. They wanted to give gifts, and you'd have to say, oh, no, no, you can't do that. A Bokhara rug was a gift from Mohammad. He insisted that he and his wife, had to give me that rug in appreciation of my teaching.

They wanted to give me shoes. I said, no, no, I can't take them. Basically, they were good students. Then there were the students from Greece, so bright. I remember one student, Sofia Zarambucha, who later became the head of one of the largest publishing houses for children's books and art in Athens, Greece. When I visited Greece in 1964, they had everything set up for me as to whom to meet, who to see, where to stay. It was a wonderful era.

DR. MILLS: Interesting. And the class, this modern art class, it wasn't necessarily African-American art.

DR. DRISKELL: No, some of the content dealt with African American art but not all.

My students used to say, one such as Mary O'Neal, that I identified the students by their boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. That was the way I knew them and keep up with them. Mary was the girlfriend of Stokely Carmichael. She later became a fine painter of distinction and taught at the San Francisco Art Institute, and later became chairman of the Department of Art at Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley]. She retired about 3 years ago.

Mary used to say that I was teaching that course in disguise, as she said "in cultural disguise." What she meant was that this really was a very fervent kind of civil rights art course, not altogether art history. It wasn't altogether theory. She called it an action course.

DR. MILLS: Really?

DR. DRISKELL: I centered on topics of where one had to prove that he or she had something to give in society and in art. Lou Stovall was in the course. Sylvia Snowden, and it was a very vibrant atmosphere.

DR. MILLS: I'd like to see the syllabus.

DR. DRISKELL: Yeah, I hope I still have it.

DR. MILLS: And you also were active with the gallery during those years – and were acquiring things for the gallery at some point?

DR. DRISKELL: For the Howard University Gallery?

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. I was acting chair at Howard the second year I came. Professor Porter went to Africa on a Ford Foundation fellowship. I became acting chair of the department and began acquiring works of art for the Gallery of Art.

And I had established a relationship with the American Federation of Arts and other organizations. We had a gift from the Charles Merrill Fund in the amount of \$7,000 for acquisitions.

DR. MILLS: Oh.

DR. DRISKELL: I bought a work by Romare Bearden and one by Alma Thomas. When I left for Fisk, I wrote to the Federation and said, "I'm at Fisk now; do you still have the Merrill Fund?" [Laughs]

DR. MILLS: Did you buy directly from the artists or –

DR. DRISKELL: I bought directly from the artists in some cases – as with Alma. I had to go through Kootz Gallery [New York] to get the Bearden work.

DR. MILLS: Okay. We didn't talk about your beginning to collect. Some of your first objects were gifts from James Herring.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, Professor Herring gave us a [Wassily] Kandinsky for our wedding gift. He also gave us a little head, Rembrandt's mother. But it was an original etching. In the old days they would very often print original etchings in books.

When we moved back to Washington and into his home, upon his return in the spring, 1963, we said to him, "We'd like to get a loan." We thought you would just go to somebody and get a loan. He said, "I'm not your father; I don't have any money to give you." He said, "Sell that Kandinsky." I wanted to put a down payment on a house. I reluctantly called up Mr. Harry Cohen, who had a gallery and a frame shop right down near the Smithsonian American Art Museum [Washington, DC].

DR. MILLS: Oh, Cohen?

DR. DRISKELL: Cohen, C-O-H-E-N. He told me to call Mr. Cohen because he knew him. I sold the Kandinsky to Mr. Cohen and the little Rembrandt as well. That was our down payment on a house that we bought at 1125 Buchanan St., NW.

DR. MILLS: And before that, had that Kandinsky had a place of honor in your house?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, yes, it had. In our living room.

DR. MILLS: All this time you had been living with family members.

DR. DRISKELL: Except at Talladega. The seven years at Talladega we had a house on the campus.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: And we had our little collection we had started – the James Wells, which somehow or another disappeared in the moving.

DR. MILLS: The other things you've purchased?

DR. DRISKELL: The other things I've purchased – some were from students. I used to buy things from Ferdinand Roten. He was a dealer from Baltimore. He would come around to various campuses selling art. The little [Georges] Rouault in the hall, the hand-painted engraving, was one of the early purchases I made from Rotan.

DR. MILLS: Is there anything else you want to say about the – particularly about the years at Howard before you went on to Fisk?

DR. DRISKELL: I was acting chair at Howard twice when Professor Porter went off on research assignments.

DR. MILLS: Were you writing any articles yet?

DR. DRISKELL: No, I hadn't started writing at that time. I wrote curatorial statements – Yes, I remember writing for the Alma Thomas catalogue. I had written quite a bit at Talladega for the catalogues. The first major exhibition I did at Talladega was called "Extended loans from the Guggenheim Museum" [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY]. Obviously there were no African-American artists in that exhibition, 1955, 1956 – and there were some 30 or 40 works: oil paintings, works on paper by [Pablo] Picasso, Kandinsky, [Paul] Klee, [László] Moholy-Nagy and other European modernists.

I was at a meeting attended by Angelica Rudenstine, her husband had been president at Harvard, she had been at the Guggenheim Museum at one time, and we were in a conversation. A I mentioned that my first exhibition I with a printed a catalogue. It was called "Modern Masters from the Guggenheim Museum," fall, 1956.

DR. MILLS: And you wrote an introduction.

DR. DRISKELL: I wrote an introduction to the catalogue as well as the entries. It was about maybe eight or 12 pages.

DR. MILLS: So your first writings really were exhibition catalogues. You didn't really do criticism or those kinds of things.

DR. DRISKELL: No, I didn't do criticism at that time. The exhibitions often came from other sources. Some were accompanied by catalogues.

[END OF CD 2.]

DR. MILLS: We are in our second interview on March 26 at the home of David Driskell in Hyattsville.

After four years at Howard, you were offered a position at Fisk University in Nashville which you assumed in the fall of 1966. And Aaron Douglas had founded that art department at Fisk in the '30s and served as chair for some three decades. How was it that you went to Fisk, and was he instrumental in persuading you to move there?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. I was invited to come to Fisk in April of 1966 to be the principal speaker in the visual arts for the fine arts festival. Fisk had had a fine arts festival for many years and still does. I was encouraged to go to Fisk by Miss Mary Beattie Brady and the Harmon Foundation. I had some hesitation as to whether or not I should go. But she encouraged me to go.

Miss Brady asked, "Had I met Aaron Douglas?" I said, "No," I had known of his work for many, many years and I think I had corresponded with him about some art matters perhaps pertaining to an exhibition. But I had not formally met him. Miss Brady said, "Well, I think you ought to go down."

I didn't realize that Miss Brady had already spoken with Aaron Douglas, saying something to the effect that if Mr. Driskell comes, engage him in a conversation and try and get him to come to Fisk and accept the position that you are leaving. He was retiring in June of 1966. That never occurred to me at the time. [Laughs]

On my arrival at Fisk, I was a part of a – what they considered a big package of outside artists, entertainers, et cetera – coming, including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier and people like that. Of course, I wasn't in their category.

When I discussed the matter with my aunt here in Washington, Aunt Millie Bassett, she encouraged me to go to Fisk. She was a very outgoing person. She had encouraged me to take the job at Talladega and, of course, to come back to Howard. She said, "No, go to Fisk and take a look at it. Fisk is one of our finest schools," meaning HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities]. So I went.

I wasn't terribly impressed when I got there because they were supposed to have somebody meet me at the airport and the person didn't show up. I had to call and let them know no one came – and they said, "Well, we're very sorry, we sent someone, but they were looking for an older man." They passed me by and went on. [Laughs] And I guess I was still in my 30s then – 36 or something like that.

They picked me up and brought me down to the Holiday Inn-Capitol Hill. It was the same place where Poitier and Belafonte were staying. When I walked into the dining room to get lunch there were all these people lined up – ladies – a few of them have their children.

When I came in they said, "Oh, Mr. Poitier, we'd like to get your autograph." I said, "Oh, I'm not Mr. Poitier." They ignored me – [laughs]– you know, and acted like I was Poitier, as if I didn't know who I was. They knew he had been staying there. I don't think I looked like Poitier. [Laughs]

Finally it got over to them that I was not Poitier. One lady said, "Well, who are you?" It was like, well, you've got to be somebody if you're with that group. So I got through that and about 1:00pm, they sent the car to pick me up, and took me to the campus. Coming from Howard, which was a much larger campus, I had this notion that Fisk was all but competitive with Howard in the sense of the architecture, and I assumed that the place was as big as Howard.

Obviously it wasn't. It was a much smaller school. I think at that time it probably had only 1,000 students. So I wasn't overwhelmed. But when I got there and got involved, going to hear the Jubilee Singers sing, meeting Dr. John Work who was a legend in his own time, meeting Aaron Douglas who was equally a legend and seeing the place, it kind of started growing on me. Dr. Stephen Wright was the president. He was leaving that year.

I recall one of the first conversations, being with Mr. Douglas. It was a surprise to me that he and Miss Brady had engaged in this conversation about his retiring and I would be a likely candidate, a good person to come and take over the work that he was doing. My response was like, "Oh, no, I'm at Howard." I had been acting chair and I will – (I didn't say that,) but in the back of my mind – I will become the next chair, so why should I want to come to Fisk?

So we went over to the Carl Van Vechten Gallery [at Fisk University] and saw the [Alfred] Stieglitz collection. It was not in the best of condition as the works hadn't been conserved since Miss [Georgia] O'Keeffe gave them in 1949. So I met the person who was helping Mr. Douglas. It was a one-person department, plus a half-time person who came in and taught art education.

And there was one other persona, Mrs. [Pearl] Creswell, who was like the custodian of the gallery. She was not a curator. They didn't use that title. She took care of the paintings. And – taking care meant making sure they were dusted with a feather – [laughs] – a brush and things like that. I was like, "Oh my God, this is terrible." There was no real professional atmosphere centering on the

paintings. And Mr. Douglas admitted that.

Douglas took me around, showing me the place, and then he engaged in conversation with me about Miss O'Keeffe. And he said, "That's somebody you will want to meet and cultivate. She will like you, but she didn't like me that much. We didn't get along." And then he said, later I'll tell you why. But obviously that was not the time. So he made the case for my coming to Fisk. And I was all but taken back that that was a part of the plan. I thought "Oh no, oh no, I am very pleased with what I'm doing at Howard."

The second day, I received a call from the interim President, the person who became the president after Dr. Wright left. His name was James R. Lawson, a physicist who was going to fill in until the new president was named. He was a Fisk graduate.

He asked if I could come by to see him in the old Erastus Milo Cravath Library. I went by to see him and he too had a plan to draft me into coming to Fisk. We talked and I said to him the same thing. I said, "Well, I really don't think I'm ready to move from Howard." And he had made out a contract and said, "Well, just take this with you."

I earned \$9,000 at Howard and finally, I had been promoted to associate professor. When I came there I was promised associate professorship, but when I got my contract, it was assistant professorship. I had moved to Howard. I did get the salary they offered me. It was two years later that I was promoted to associate professor.

I said, "Oh no, I can't sign this. I'm under contract at Howard." He said, "Take it back with you and think about it." When I looked at the contract and it said, \$18,000, which was twice as much as I was making at Howard, I had to think again before turning it down.

I went back to Washington and talked to Thelma. I said, "No, I don't think so." I called Aunt Millie again and Aunt Millie said, "Now, wait a minute, let's look at this thing real carefully." She again went through her list of schools – Howard, Tuskegee [University, Tuskegee, AL], Hampton [University, Hampton, VA], Talladega, Fisk. She said, "Fisk is at the top now. Fisk is at the top of our list."

She was probably more instrumental than anyone in helping me make that decision and she said, "Now, I know you're looking forward to what could happen at Howard in the future." She then said, "No doubt wonderful things will happen. But I want you to think about what you can do at Fisk that you can't do at Howard."

I said, "I've done shows." I did the Alma Thomas show. I had brought in an exhibition in which Alma Thomas, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and others were exhibited, and we'd had a show of Prentiss Taylor's work and another Washington artist. I can't quite remember. I took into advisement what she was saying and discussed it with Thelma and with Professor Herring who was still active at that time.

Herring wasn't that impressed with Fisk just as he wasn't that impressed with any place. He was kind of, pessimistic about things. After his retirement from Howard, he felt that he had been kind of given a bad deal and pushed out and not given a chance to stay longer if he wanted to, whereas other professors had. So his advice wasn't that strong.

I looked at the contract. I called the interim president at Fisk. I said, "I'm really not of the opinion that I should leave Howard. And I'm a little concerned about the things I'd be able to do at Fisk. I

said, "You don't have a facility." The arts were a part of a humanities setup – a room here and a room there. One of the professors there said, "They don't even have running water in the room, so how are you going to have an art department?"

I thought, well, if they're serious; let me give them a proposal. I sat down and wrote a proposal. I said, "These are the conditions under which I would consider coming"— not necessarily that I would come. I pointed out there were a number of vacant buildings on the campus – old houses that probably could be renovated.

I said, I would want one of those houses in which I could have studios for teaching painting, design, printmaking, ceramics. I went down the line. And an art gallery where we can have rotating exhibitions. I wasn't that concerned about the salary because it was more than I was going to make at Howard in years to come.

Dr. James Lawson wrote back, special delivery and "I'd like for you to come back to the campus and let's sit down and go over these things. I can promise you just about everything that you have asked for."

I went back to Fisk in early May and I had a long conversation with him. He had his planning and facilities person take me around the campus. He took me over to a building just a bit south of Douglas Hall. It was an old 19th century brick building, three stories plus a basement, built in the 1880s as a seminary for the Episcopal students. The building was called Ballentine Hall.

It was a rather large house with a beautiful porch, situated by itself, adjacent to the house that had been designated the James Weldon Johnson House. This is where James Weldon Johnson the poet lived when he was artist in residence at Fisk. So it had historic significance.

I looked into it and started planning in my mind, okay, these two rooms could be the gallery, et cetera. But they'd have to make some openings and renovations. I submitted a proposal to Dr. Lawson and said I would have to have a new kiln. I wanted the best. I shall need an etching press, hand-built from Charles Brand.

Fisk had just entered into an agreement with Rockefeller Foundation to refurbish the arts. He said, "We can do that." I said, "I'd like a budget to bring in visiting artists." He said, "We can do that." He says, "We have a visiting scholars program and we'll just put the art department in with that." I saw those chances and I thought, well, I've got to think very seriously about this thing.

I went back to discuss the matter with Professor Porter, Professor Herring and with Aunt Millie. Everybody was impressed except Professor Herring. He still didn't have any great faith in – [laughs] – in Fisk or what would happen there. So Professor Porter said to me, he said, "Now, you know – you must know – that you are in line to be the next chair." I had been acting chair on two different occasions at Howard. I said, "Well, I didn't necessarily know it." I said, I was hoping. He said, "Obviously."

And I then said, "What about people who've been here all this time like Lois and Wells." He said, "Wells is not interested. Lois would be a very difficult choice to make as the chair." Porter and Lois didn't always get along. So I'm sure that was a personal statement.

Again I discussed the matter with Thelma and I think our two little girls were like fifth or seventh grade or something like that. Thelma asked "Did you look at the schools?" I said, "Yes, I asked about the schools." I said, "They're nearby and within walking distance." Both must have been in

middle school. The high school, Pearl High School, is three blocks away. The middle school is four blocks away. [Washington Jr. High]

I said we would live on the campus. Dr. Lawson said, "There's an apartment available." He said, "At the present time there is only a two-bedroom apartment available in an old 19th century house." We would occupy the second floor as an English professor and his wife lived on the first floor.

I went around on my second visit back – of course, I had talked to a number of people on the campus. I talked to Gladys Ford who was in drama and other people whom I had met on my first visit. They all seemed excited about the possibility of my coming to Fisk. All said they'd be supportive. So I took the leap of faith, decided that I would sign on.

I was offered a full professorship and I said to Dr. Lawson, "Well, if you deliver on your end, giving me all these things that I want, why don't you allow me to come as an associate professor with the provision that if I deliver to you on the first year, I will be promoted to full professor." And he said, "We'll buy it."

So I went to Fisk and my salary was doubled. That was in the fall of 1966. Actually my salary at Fisk was more than Professor Porter was making at Howard University. Dr. Lawson said, "We will increase your salary by \$1,000 next year." He was very serious and committed to my coming.

I arrived September, 1966 and immediately Miss Brady pitched in again from the Harmon Foundation with her plan to launch a program at Fisk – an experimental program, – in the arts, getting the arts out to the high schools, to the other HBCUs or to any institution around. She said, "The Harmon Foundation is closing down next year and we are looking for a home for the works of art by Negro artists. And we'd like to consider Fisk as a repository for some of the works."

She followed through and in 1967 when the Foundation closed, she sent over 400 works of African and African-American artists from that collection that she had gathered over the years of what we call Negro artists from the '20s, '30s, and a few from the '40s. There were a few works of contemporary African art.

However, one had to read very carefully the fine print in all of Miss Brady's letters, they would sometimes be six pages, – not double spaced. She would just sit there and talk into this machine, it looked like the old phonograph, what we called it – and it had a wax cartridge.

DR. MILLS: Cylinder?

DR. DRISKELL: – cylinder. And then her assistant – not Miss Brown, but the other lady, would come in and record these letters. The letters would go on and on and on. [They Laugh.] And immediately once I was there, Miss Brady started making plans to get the works down to Fisk.

But underneath it was on indefinite loan clause which said the works were there during the tenure of David C. Driskell. She had done that at Talladega for a smaller group, and once I left she reclaimed them. She brought them back. I said to her, some of the works have to be gifted. She agreed to that. But quite a few of them – at least half of them – she reserved the right to recall if I left Fisk.

I came to Fisk, the Harmon works came, some major works. By that time, she had intervened with Dr. Adelyn Breeskin at what was then the National Collection of Fine Arts and had made an agreement for X number of William H. Johnson's works to come to the National Collection of Fine Arts, along with other works.

Miss Brady then discussed with me the proposal that she had made with Dr. Breeskin to send 1,000 or more of William H. Johnson's works to the National Collection of Fine Arts and then have certain select HBCUs come and select 10, 12, 20 of those works: Tuskegee, Fisk, Howard, Morgan, Hampton. I'm not sure about any other HBCUs. And that's how those works got there.

She also distributed works by Jacob Lawrence and others – the *Toussaint Louverture* series [1938] came to Fisk – on indefinite loan. The *John Henry* series [1944-1954] by Palmer Hayden came to Fisk on indefinite loan during my incumbency. That's the word Miss Brady used, not tenure – "incumbency of David C. Driskell," which meant that, should I leave, she was going to retrieve them.

DR. MILLS: Did she?

DR. DRISKELL: And she did. Now, there was a little controversy over the *John Henry* series because Mrs. Miriam [Hayden] – Palmer had come when we opened the *John Henry* series on exhibition at Fisk, Palmer and Miriam were there. There was a controversy after Palmer died. Mr. Brady wanted the works to stay at Fisk. But Miriam did not. She wanted to reclaim everything. So Mr. Brady allowed the *John Henry* series to be returned to Mrs. Hayden.

DR. MILLS: Who was Miriam?

DR. DRISKELL: Miriam was Palmer Hayden's wife. Mr. Brady and Miriam really didn't get along well. I don't think Mr. Brady ever forgave Miriam for marrying Palmer Hayden, taking him away from 140 Nassau St. where he was the janitor. Mr. Brady was the person who had encouraged him to develop his artistry. He had been there for years. When Palmer died, Miriam, on the advice of her nieces who were living out in California, called everything back, including the *John Henry* series.

Mr. Brady called me and said, "It isn't what I want but I will do it to keep peace in the family." She said, "I want you to pack up the *John Henry* series and send it back to New York and Mrs. Hayden will claim it."

DR. MILLS: Now where were those being exhibited? In the new gallery?

DR. DRISKELL: Some were being exhibited in the new gallery, some were in storage at the Van Vechten Gallery. We hadn't removed any of the Stieglitz work at that time. A couple years later we did so because I then met Ms. O'Keeffe and got to know her, and to challenge her about the gift to Fisk and asked why not give funds to Fisk so we could conserve the works. And she did. But we will come to that.

So getting back to these works at Fisk; we loaned a few from time to time. Mrs. Creswell, who was the person who took care of the Stieglitz Collection, worked also as the registrar.

We needed a registrar with all of the new works coming in. In the meantime, we were getting gifts from places like the American Federation of Arts, the Charles Merrill Fund and individual gifting. Ken [Kenneth] Noland donated a work. This collection grew and we did not really have proper facilities to exhibit it or house it.

I started what I call the Afro-American series in which I invited prominent African-American artists to come. I invited other artists, other than African-American artists. But the Afro-American series was designed to bring in scholars and artists who had either developed their own work or who had worked with the African diaspora.

The first scholar I brought in was James A. Porter in January of 1967. I invited Professor Herring, but

he refused. [Laughs] So he said, "No, I'm going to Hampton and they're going to pay me \$75 to lecture." We were paying more. [Laughs] But he was so set in his ways, he really didn't think I was making a good move to come to Fisk. Professor Porter came as the first of the scholars.

Then I invited that same year – '66 – Richard Hunt. I brought over the work of Walter Williams from Copenhagen. Richard Hunt came. This program was new to the Fisk community, to the Nashville community, to see contemporary artists' works and to have them come as none of that had been done before.

Now, Mr. Douglas had told me the estrangement that had ensued between himself and the white community in art. Whites were not going to take the time to come across the railroad track to see the only major art in Nashville. This attitude came out of the dislike of Georgia O'Keeffe placing 101 works by modern artists at Fisk in what whites probably thought was a ghetto community. They preferred not see any art. There was this conflict that had gone on for 20 years in Nashville between so called art lovers of both races.

DR. MILLS: Conflict in terms of people just were not coming to –

DR. DRISKELL: They weren't coming. The white community stayed away. People stayed at Vanderbilt [University, Nashville, TN] and at Cheekwood [Nashville, TN] and the black community stayed over in north Nashville.

DR. MILLS: And was this one of the reasons that Georgia O'Keeffe didn't get along with Aaron Douglas?

DR. DRISKELL: No, no. That was personal. That went all the way back to the Harlem Renaissance. Even though they didn't know each other personally, Van Vechten knew O'Keeffe and Stieglitz and Douglas and that was one of the reasons why they all kind of got together.

But Miss O'Keeffe was a very independent woman and she didn't necessarily cater to the notion that art had to be – let's say – ethnically centered. I don't think she condemned Douglas's work or anything like that, but I think she may have felt that just concentrating on an African ancestral perspective in his work was not the wisest thing to do.

I think that went all the way back to the Carl Van Vechten-Douglas-O'Keeffe-Stieglitz association. I don't think there was any great love between Van Vechten and Stieglitz, but I think there was respect of what Van Vechten did because he was the barterer. He was the person who played one of the leading roles in bringing those works to Fisk. It's a very complicated kind of thing. And since I wasn't in on that part of it, I'm getting it second-hand from Douglas and a few other people.

DR. MILLS: Right. So can you tell us briefly about your encounters with Miss O'Keeffe then?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. Once I was at Fisk and saw the condition of the works, Douglas took me around the gallery and said, "Nothing has been moved since she came here in 1949." [This is in 1966] In 1949 O'Keeffe put a little red mark on the linoleum where the blue-period Picasso, *Tête de Femme*[1926] would go. I looked on the floor, and there was that red mark that had been waxed over all these years.

Douglas said, "Here's where she wanted the Marsden Hartleys." And there were red marks for this one, for that one. And here's where she wanted the [Paul] Cézanne lithography and the [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir to go. And he went on and on and took me around. He said, "And this is where she and I had an encounter one day." He said, "She insisted on nailing every nail where everything

was to go."

DR. MILLS: She herself.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, and Douglas saw himself as, well, I'm not an installation person – you know, I have people do that. He was – [laughs] – up there, you know, in the sense of who he was. He told me that Miss O'Keeffe felt that he was arrogant and lazy.

DR. MILLS: Because he wouldn't help with the installation.

DR. DRISKELL: Because he wouldn't help with the nailing. He said he walked around to see how things were going. He told me that once he was bending over a painting, looking at it and he saw Miss O'Keeffe with a hammer drawn back. I'm sure she was planning to nail something in the wall, but he said she had that hammer drawn back as though she had plans to hit him. [Laughs] But those are the little anecdotal things you hear in these conversations. Miss O'Keeffe wasn't there to defend herself, so I don't know that that really happened.

But I started thinking, well, these works need to be conserved and how are we going to get it done? I had made the acquaintance of John Spencer who at that time was at Oberlin [Oberlin College and Conservatory, Oberlin, OH], but he was working with the National Endowment for the Arts. I discussed the matter with him and he said, "What you ought to do is try and meet Miss O'Keeffe and let her know the condition of the works. And ask her if she will appropriate some funds."

He warned me, he said, "It's not going to be easy because if you do that, you're going to have go through Miss Doris Bry." I didn't know who Miss Bry was at that time, so I started corresponding with Miss O'Keeffe and seldom got a letter in return. I'd get a call from Miss Bry. And Miss Bry was about – she was about 6 feet or more. She kind of had a nasal high – [laughs] – and she talked through her nose. She was tall enough – especially in heels – to look down on me.

When I finally met her, she did not seem too friendly. I told her my case. I didn't say I want to meet Miss O'Keeffe – I said, "I would like Miss O'Keeffe to know that the works are not in the best of condition and there is need for conservation and restoration of them."

She said, "Well, Miss O'Keeffe has someone who does her work and we can't just do that on the basis of what you're telling me. We will send our conservation specialist down and have him take a look at it and we will see." She followed through – Felrath Hines comes down.

DR. MILLS: Felrath –

DR. DRISKELL: Hines.

DR. MILLS: Hines.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. He was a painter and a conservation specialist in painting. When Felrath came down, it was my first time meeting him. That must have been in 1967. He reported back to Miss O'Keeffe – he was the only person that she would allow to work on her paintings in her lifetime. Felrath was living in New York at the time.

Felrath was a very quiet man – but he gave me good information about the diplomacy of how to deal with Miss O'Keeffe and Miss Bry. He described Miss Bry as the mouthpiece for Miss O'Keeffe, but she ended up making most of the decisions as Miss O'Keeffe would turn so much of that over

to her.

Miss Bry and I had these conversations back and forth. And Miss Bry said, "We will do the work. There is no money to come to Fisk." Felrath came down and selected X number of pieces to take back to work on. They were shipped out maybe a month or so later. By now we are in time around 1968.

I then wrote to Miss O'Keeffe, saying I'd been in touch with the Wildenstein Gallery [New York City] and they have offered to do a benefit for the conservation of the rest of the work. I would like to stage that benefit in New York. I am aware of her plan to not lend works from the collection. I said, however, this will be for a short period of time.

The one letter that I recall came back and said something to the effect of: "My dear Mr. Driskell, Stieglitz never felt the works improved with travel. Sincerely, Georgia O'Keeffe."

Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways – [laughs] – so about two months later after Miss O'Keeffe's letter came, I got a call from Miss Bry saying, Miss O'Keeffe is having a retrospective of her work, of which X number of pieces will be at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York City] and it will tour in 1970. This is late 1968, so they are already making plans. She said Miss O'Keeffe would like to borrow *Radiator Building* [1927] for the exhibition. Of course, Miss O'Keeffe had always insisted that no works could be loaned to anyone from the collection.

When I received the letter, I thought, okay, this is my time. So I sat down and crafted a very diplomatic but formal letter saying, "My dear Miss O'Keeffe, I must remind you of the stringency of your gift. Regrettably, the work can't be loaned." [Laughs] Now, I had in mind lending the work, but I wanted to engage her because it seemed that that was going to be the only way I was going to get to see her, the only way I was going to be able to plead my case. And so immediately upon receiving the letter, Miss Bry called me. "Mr. Driskell, Miss O'Keeffe wishes to see you at the Stanhope Hotel at such-and-such a time."

DR. MILLS: In New York.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, in New York, right across the street from the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York,]. That's where she stayed. There was a suite that nobody stayed in other than Miss O'Keeffe. I said, sure. I went to New York and met O'Keeffe. And I think that was late 1968. When I came into the room, it was a suite of rooms, Miss O'Keeffe was sitting there by the door and I said, "Oh, it's such a pleasure to meet you. You look so wonderful like you did in those beautiful photographs that Mr. Stieglitz took." I gave her all these compliments. And she was wearing the pendant. And I said that the brooch is beautiful.

DR. MILLS: Brooch?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes – as I had expected to see it. She says, oh, you noticed it. She said, "Sandy made it for me" – meaning Alexander Calder. The pendant had the letters OK on it, made of silver.

She said, "Oh, you like it. Well, maybe someday I'll give it to you." And Miss Bry stood up, all every inch that she was tall and she said, "Miss O'Keeffe, we're giving away nothing today." I thought, well, now, that's not my plan. I'm here to get some money. [Laughs] Miss Brady had trained me well as to how to be diplomatic and how to – weave in and out of political and cultural conversations.

I went right back to praising her and I said, "Miss O'Keeffe, you know, it was so important – so far-sighted of you to – to give those 101 works to this little black college in Nashville." And I said, it has

– in recent years – encouraged interchange between students at Vanderbilt, Peabody, Fisk, Tennessee State [University, Nashville, TN] and so forth.

And she said, "Well, that's what I expected it to do." She noted that under Aaron Douglas that didn't happen. I said, "Well, it's happening now. We have this and much more going on." I said, "We've actually organized a consortium in which the students from Vanderbilt and Peabody come to Fisk and take courses with me in African and Negro art. And I go to Vanderbilt and teach there as adjunct." She was very impressed. I said, it was far-sighted on your part to do that.

I said, "But Miss O'Keeffe, you didn't endow the collection. It's in bad condition now. What did you expect would happen to it? Fisk has no money." And there was silence. She looked at me – and she said, "You know, you have guts." She said, "But I like you."

And she said, "What do you want from me?" I said, "I don't want anything other than to see those works preserved, well-served in the community where people will have access to them and enjoy them without any restrictions." She asked, "How do you plan to make that happen?"

I said, "First of all, the works have to be conserved and we will have to close the gallery for a period of time until the conservation takes place." I said, "I have a proposal from Dr. John Spencer at the National Endowment for the Arts noting if I can get a certain amount of money, he will go to his contingency fund and match it. He won't even have to take it through the policy board." So I think she then understood that I knew the politics of things.

Miss O'Keeffe turned to Miss Bry and said, "Doris, I want Mr. Driskell to have a check for Fisk University for \$50,000. And he's going to get it matched." Miss Bry was furious. [Laughs] And I was like, okay. Like, all right, Miss Bry, I'm winning today. Within about two weeks, the check was sent down Special Delivery.

DR. MILLS: No! [Laughs.]

DR. DRISKELL: And I called John Spencer and said, "Got it, we are ready to go." So he said, great. We then finished the restoration work. But it wasn't the restoration so much as the facility in which the works were housed. There was no humidity control, no air conditioning in that building. It was an 1888 gymnasium which had been converted to an art gallery in 1949 and nothing had been done since that time. The roof was leaking and even with the conservation that took place, it was only going to be a certain amount of time before the works would start deteriorating again.

Miss O'Keeffe and I conversed and she said to me at that same meeting, "You know, this may be the last retrospective I have in my lifetime. I would prevail upon you to lend the work." I said, "You know, you're breaking the code." [Laughs] And she said something to the effect that I think I can trust you to enforce the rules or something like that – which meant that she was very comfortable with me.

Then we started talking about art in general. I guess, complaining, saying, well, "Negro art is still minimal in the museums. There are so many omissions." I said, "We aren't in textbooks and things like that."

And she looked at me and said, "What are you complaining about? You are a male. And the art world is ruled by males." And she didn't make a distinction by my not being white. She made it very clear that she still resented the way men were in control of the art world. She further discussed it with me by saying – bringing in the racial thing and she used the N-word. She said, "Women are the

Ns of the art world, – not you."

I never say what she said publicly. But she was animated and serious about it. I don't think she ever forgave the art establishment – even though she had become successful in her own lifetime, that is for being so gender oriented; so white male oriented. I was saying to myself, oh, wow, she's not only feisty, but she's got spunk and she's still with it. And that was in 1968. So obviously, I went back and I wrote a letter to Miss O'Keeffe saying yes, we will lend *Radiator Building*.

DR. MILLS: This last conversation was in person?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, this was still a part of the same conversation at the Stanhope Hotel.

DR. MILLS: Okay, the –

DR. DRISKELL: We didn't meet again in person until October 1970. Obviously I had agreed that Fisk would lend *Radiator Building* for the Whitney Museum Show. I can't think of the name – all I can remember is Margaret or Marcella – the registrar at the Whitney at that time. She said, "Mr. Driskell, I want to make sure that you are included in one of the dinners that is being held in Miss O'Keeffe's honor."

DR. MILLS: At the opening of the exhibition?

DR. DRISKELL: At the opening in October of 1970. She told me that all collectors or lenders were being invited to dinner prior to the opening. It is in my papers somewhere – whose home I would go to for dinner. Perhaps, Martseller [the name of a collector]?

But it was on Fifth Avenue in the same area where the late Jackie Onassis lived, a very choice area. It was the penthouse apartment. It was a dress affair, for the evening at the Whitney. Everybody was arriving in tuxedo, of course. Thelma did not come with me. Here is this very fashionable, of course, apartment on Fifth Avenue –

I want to say it was either the 900 or 1000 block of Fifth Avenue. So I arrived. Everybody was driving up in big limousines and cars. I arrived in a taxi. The doorman was ushering people in. When I arrived, the doorman asked me, as I was coming in – "Oh, are you reporting to work?"

And of course, I thought, now I can't get my pressure up dealing with this ignorant man. I said, "No, I'm a guest of the so-and-so's, so just like everybody else." And I said, "And I would appreciate your ushering me to the proper" – "Oh, yes, sir, yes, sir!" So I didn't have much of a good feeling for the rest of that evening, and as it would happen, there was some loudmouth man there from Illinois, one of the lenders. I don't remember what gallery or what institution.

He started talking. This was still a rather fervent period about civil rights in the South in 1970. I guess he thought he was really showing his liberalism and appeasing me by putting down the slow progress of things in the South. It was all I could do to hold back – and I finally said, "Oh, no, no, no, you're talking an American problem; this is not just a southern problem." I said, "I live in the South. I live in Nashville, Tennessee."

I said, "I have lived there for the past two or three years." I said, "I have been well received." I said, "For the very first time, we have people of all races coming together looking at art at Fisk university – something that hasn't happened before –" and I said, "And this evening as I came into this building, the doorman stopped me and asked me if I were reporting to work." I said, "That hasn't happened to me in Nashville, but this is the North." And there was silence.

You know, so that conversation changed immediately and went on to something else. Ms. O'Keeffe wasn't at that dinner. So we got through that part of the dinner then we went to the opening at the Whitney. Once we got there, it was impossible to go anyplace near Ms. O'Keeffe. She was totally surrounded. I got as close as I could to the edge of the crowd. Miss O'Keeffe was very alert and she kept looking around. I could see her.

DR. MILLS: Was she in a wheelchair?

DR. DRISKELL: No. She was still very mobile at that time. She kept looking around, and DR. Bry was there with her. I was about as far as from here to that statue over there [20 feet], but there were at least two rows of people in between. She said, "Where is Mr. Fisk?" [Laughs] She couldn't remember my name, but she knew I wasn't in the immediate crowd. She said, "Where is Mr. Fisk?" Fisk was the only black lender in the group.

The registrar, whose name I can't quite remember – I think the first name was Margaret – she had seen me. So she rushed through the crowd, brought me into the crowd to greet Ms. O'Keeffe. She shook my hand, and said, "I'm glad you're here." And we exchanged a few words. I didn't want to try to monopolize her time, though I thought I knew her better than anybody else there.

And that was the last time I saw her. It was an interesting event. We exchanged conversations through Ms. Bry and there may have been – I think there was other correspondence after that, but it wasn't directly with Ms. O'Keeffe.

DR. MILLS: Now, what do you think has happened to Fisk recently, with the attempt to deaccession two of the paintings Miss O'Keeffe gave?

DR. DRISKELL: Well, I was very, very upset about the possibility that they would want to deaccession the works. I knew there were always people on the board who kept saying, "Well, we have these paintings; why can't we sell them?" And my attitude is, we have you on the board; why can't you raise money?" That's what you're here for, not to destroy what I would consider to be the cultural patrimony of the institution.

The art is something that enhances the richness of the institution. It is not there for every time you're in trouble to go down and sell a painting as if you are going to the pawn shop. Everybody there knew, including the president, knew that I was totally against it. And they avoided me. They didn't ask my opinion or anything during that period. Only after the court ruled that they couldn't sell the works and they had to raise a certain amount of money did they then invite me back. They invited me back in October of last year, to come and re-install – to be, like, the guest curator and help them reinstall the works.

And I went and was delighted. I didn't say it but I was glad they couldn't sell.

DR. MILLS: At Fisk, you organized major exhibitions, such as "Amistad II," which opened in 1975 and traveled to some 20 states, and also "African-American Art: An Inside View" [*The Afro-American Collection*, Fisk University; Nashville: Fisk University Department of Art; 1976] And then you had the opportunity to curate the major national show, "Two Centuries of Black American Art" which opened at the L.A. County Museum of Art [LACMA, Los Angeles, CA] in September, 1976. How did that show come about and how were you the one who came to do it?

DR. DRISKELL: Okay. I'll try and tell this without making the story as long as the O'Keeffe story, but it's equally intriguing. [Laughs.] As you said, I have done a number of shows, invited people to Fisk

like Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Alma Thomas.

And so the word had gotten around that something special was going on at Fisk. Actually, by that time, James Porter was deceased and there was no one really doing the kinds of exhibition other than perhaps James Lewis over at Morgan [State University, Baltimore, MD], and it wasn't quite as extensive as the schedule I had taken on.

Occasionally, there were shows being staged at Hampton. But for the most part, Fisk was the place, and young artists, as well – I would invite young artists to come. But I was more interested in the elderly artists who hadn't had a showcase, who were near the ends of their careers. In 1971, we did the most comprehensive show done to date of Aaron Douglas' work.

DR. MILLS: So you stayed in touch with him all those years?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, until my departure – and I was even in touch after I left. I went back to visit Douglas in 1978 and made a selection of his work for collectors, among them the Cosbys, the Granoffs of Providence, R.I. and the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD, Providence, RI]. This was the year before he died. I stayed in touch with him until the time of his death. I also purchased works from Douglas for my own collection at that time.

Getting back to the Two Centuries exhibition, I didn't realize that there was a committee there. I do not recall the exact name of it – but it had to do with black art and outreach; museums were developing that idea at that time, in particular the L.A. County Museum. On that committee was Charles White, Aurelia Brooks, who later founded the California African-American Museum [CAAM, Los Angeles, CA], and a few other people I knew. But I had had no contact with them in the context of LACMA.

I was later told that there had been a survey made of who should curate the exhibition. It had been decided, pretty much, by the art establishment at the L.A. County Museum that they were going to do this show as a bicentennial exhibition. I was the very last person they invited out to present a proposal. I didn't realize that.

DR. MILLS: The others were not African-American?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes, they were African-American, people like Jeff Donaldson, Regina Perry and Rosalind Jeffries. It's my understanding that they had been consulted. Some came. When I arrived, I came with a fairly extensive proposal. I handed it to committee members and read part of it in the meeting with the board of trustees and the directors.

The deputy director, Mr. Rexford Stead, had his hand in the direction of the exhibition, perhaps more than the director. I understand there had been some controversy earlier concerning a couple of curators who had said, "You shouldn't do this show; this is not the kind of show that we should be doing." And to the extent that, if you do it, – we will either resign. I think the board gave them a challenge and said, well, "We are doing the show."

DR. MILLS: With that – why did they decide to do the show then?

DR. DRISKELL: I think that they felt that – it was time to do something inclusive of the Black Community. And I think they were really serious about it. There was only one person – one African-American on the board at that time.

A man by the name of Robert Wilson was on the Board of Trustees.

He was a financier. And I presented my proposal to the board and the committee – outreach committee, which included Aurelia Brooks, Charles White and others. And I recall distinctly a Mrs. Goldwyn.

DR. MILLS: Goldman?

DR. DRISKELL: Goldwyn, like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She was on the board. She said to me, after I made my presentation, "Mr. Driskell, I'm Jewish, but I would not be comfortable doing a bicentennial exhibition which emphasized Jewish artists as a bicentennial project."

She said, "And I'm concerned as to why you feel that this is the kind of exhibition we should be doing." Black American is what we were saying. Later, Charles White said to me, "You were almost provocative in your answer." And yet, I wasn't trying to be. He said, but it was the right answer. And he then said, "I've said that you have to have somebody who is strong enough to understand the politics of this place to do this show."

I said, "Mrs. Goldwyn, I'm doing this exhibition not for black people; I'm doing this exhibition for everybody." I said, "It just happens to be that white Americans have little or no knowledge about what black Americans have done in the visual arts." And I said, "So this is an educational process for everybody. But moreover, it will be a major education for the majority culture."

This is what Charlie was saying, where I was being provocative – and I said, "But I'm sure you know your own culture. I know that you know Jewish culture well. And assuming you do, there would be no reason for you to do an exhibition of the work of Jack Levine and Rauschenberg and people like that." I said, "They are in the forefront of American art. Jewish culture has always been out front." I said, "One of the things I admire about Jewish culture is the fact that it's always out front." I just gave a little lecture on why Black culture was so relevant.

And there was complete silence after I had spoken. It was a mini-lecture on why we shouldn't be looking at art in segments, yet we must do this for black culture because of the omissions. I said, this exhibition, as I see it, will be enlightening for everybody, but especially for the majority culture. So there was immediate consent that they should do the exhibition. I was invited to pursue it.

I was given a small budget for research assignments. So I gave work, research assignments, to a gentleman by the name of Alan Gordon.

DR. MILLS: We have a catalogue.

DR. DRISKELL: Okay. I can remember Allan Gordon, Steven Jones and Leonard Simon. So Leonard then became co-curator with me. He did a lot of research. Then, of course, I proceeded to write the text.

I said to the committee, "I don't think we should concentrate only on painting and sculpture. We need to bring in the crafts and other areas: the history of architecture, – because little or nothing has been done to make that part and parcel of the whole of seeing the visual arts by people of African ancestry."

So there was agreement that I would be in charge of what would be included in the exhibition. I went forth collecting samples from all over and putting this package together. There was one person from the exterior committee of African-Americans working on it, who said to me, "But there are major artists other than those you have cited. Why do you want to cut it off at 1950? There are major artists like Richard Hunt, Sam Gilliam, etc." – and I said, well, logistically, it would be all but

impossible to include all the people I wish to include. You wouldn't have enough space to do that.

Now we must do part one and hope that in the future we can do part two. 1950 was the cutoff date for artists who had not emerged by that time. So the artists such as historical figures like Douglas and [Henry Ossawa] Tanner, Lawrence, Savage and others were included.

Yes there were living artists included, but they had to have been acknowledged as a professional artist prior to 1950 to be included. Several people didn't quite understand what that was about.

DR. MILLS: Well, Keith Morrison called that show and your catalogue, "The most complete summation of African-American art history to date." It developed new audiences, as you had hoped, and brought you to greater attention as an educator and curator; and also developed somewhat of a public discussion about the place of African-American art in art history – including the issue of quality and whether African-American productions could be deemed fine art and high art in the same way.

So what did you think about that response? You had a sort of repartee with Hilton Kramer about these issues.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, it was the kind of thing with established critics who felt that I was splitting and separating the canon. They said, "We ought to just be talking about quality art and not trying to get everybody in." That was not what I was trying to do. I was trying to bring to the attention of the public that there were these artists whose works were a part of the quality canon that fitted into it who had been overlooked over the years. Nobody had said anything about them. Very seldom were they brought into anyone's writings. They could not be seen in museums.

DR. MILLS: And the word "quality" was the word that was used to exclude.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, it was the term used to exclude. It was a term of exclusion. I wanted to prove that one could put a [Robert Scott] Duncanson out there and put it beside a [Worthington] Whittredge or beside somebody else from the second-generation Hudson River School and if you didn't see the name you would be able to tell that that work was done by an African-American. I wanted to bring to the attention of the public that these people wanted to prove to a skeptical world that they were as good as anybody. Bannister, at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, winning the bronze medal and coming to receive it, being told, "... oh, there must have been a mistake; Negroes don't participate in art; this couldn't be your work." He was turned away and not allowed to receive his award at the ceremony.

I wanted to bring these patterns of exclusion, segregation and racism to the attention of the art public. I did it to a certain extent, so people would know that this is not a level playing field and that somebody has to point this out and have the courage to show why it should be done my way; not necessarily perpetuating the notion that it will always be segregated, it will always be separated, but the fact that it needed to be recorded; it needed to be in the compendium – since if it is not there,- As far as I am concerned, it doesn't exist if it is not in the compendium..

So that is what "Two Centuries," was about. But it was also about engaging the establishment in the rules of the canon, so as to say, "No, you haven't seen everything; you don't know everything. And here is a part of it that you should be seeing."

That was what my encounter with Hilton Kramer was about. His text in the *New York Times*, when he reviewed it, [June 26, 1977] was a question – "Is it black art or is it social history?" My response

was, "All art is social history; it's all made by human beings. And, consequently, it has its role in history."

I engaged Kramer in discourse. I recall being on the "Today" show on July 4, 1977. Tom Brokaw was the interviewer. He said to me, the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, "Two Centuries of Black American Art," "but Hilton Kramer says, what is black art and why black art?"

I jokingly said, "Hilton Kramer? What does he know about black art?" In those days you didn't challenge Hilton Kramer like that. You didn't dismiss him. He had to take three-fourths of a page in the *New York Times*, in the *Sunday Times*, to put the show down. And, yet, he had to admit that he had learned something.

What he was saying in his article was so contradictory – he was saying, and I discovered Palmer Hayden and I discovered this. Where has he been in his reading? Where has he been in his knowledge all of this time? These weren't discoveries. It's like Columbus coming over here saying there were no people here when he got there. So he discovered it. It's the same old notion that I have got to name it otherwise it doesn't exist.

I was fed up with that kind of nonsense. I said, "I'll take him on if he wants to engage me in conversation about it." So he wrote about it and I remember going into the office the Monday after this article appeared in the *Sunday Times* [June 29, 1977]. And Dr. George Levitine— Chair of the Department of Art -

DR. MILLS: at the University of Maryland [College Park, MD].

DR. DRISKELL: At the University of Maryland, who said, "You made the *New York Times*." He said, "You know, that doesn't happen around here." And he was so proud. And I said, "But, Dr. Levitine, I said, "Look what Hilton Kramer said." He said, "It doesn't matter what he said! You made the *New York Times*!" [Laughs.]

Kramer actually did not realize what he was doing. He gave me a platform in New York that I didn't have. People knew me. The audacity to go up against Hilton Kramer? Then Sam Hunter [art historian] went to see the show. He was very impressed with it. He said, as an Americanist, he felt that he had been a little derelict in looking at the whole of American art.

So he said, I planned to write an article which would help put this exhibition in the proper context.

DR. MILLS: Because he had written a textbook. *American Art of the 20th Century*.

DR. DRISKELL: Right. In this book, he wrote about corporate sponsorship of art – I can't remember the exact title – it was a major publication, beautiful illustrations. He devoted about 12 pages to "Two Centuries of Black American Art." Hilton Kramer went wild when he found out. [Laughs.]

His question appeared again in the *New York Times*. "Why does Sam Hunter have to validate David Driskell in separating the arts and keeping this thing going about black art. There is no black art; there is only good art," and so forth. Well, everybody reads this in the *New York Times* and ask – who is this David Driskell?

I start getting calls from people wanting to hear from me, engage me in conversation, lectures in Canada et cetera. In the meantime, I said to a colleague, "I only got about \$5,000 to curate this exhibition and I know they printed close to 100,000 catalogues. And had I said I'll do it on a royalty basis, I could have retired from teaching, you know, if I got 10 cents a catalogue."

He said to me, his name was Carlton Moss, a filmmaker from Los Angeles, whom I had recruited to the art faculty at Fisk; he came in once a month and conducted – a course, on blacks in American films, a very popular course, with students from Peabody and Vanderbilt coming to take the course at Fisk.

Carlton said, "No, no, Dave, don't regret having done it." He said, "That show will put you on the map." He said, "You will be known because you did that show. So don't regret that you didn't get the monetary value; it will come in other ways." He was right. Immediately after that I got a call from the people at CBS; they wanted me to do an hour special in their cultural series. "Hidden Heritage" became one of their most popular presentations. [1977]

DR. MILLS: An hour special about African-American art?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, it was called "Hidden Heritage; Two Centuries of Black American Art" [1977]. The film spurred interest all over the country, even as far away as England. Later on I was called by people from the Arts Council of Great Britain to do a film that they could show in England on the same theme.

Carlton was right in that this would be the work that would single me out and allow people to know what I was trying to do. My thesis all along was this isn't just black American art; this is American art. And it needs to be indexed; it needs to be added to the compendium. That's what my goal and objective was.

When I was invited to come to lecture at the University of Maryland – in the summer of 1975, I really had no intentions of coming to Maryland to teach. I lectured in a summer program that had an emphasis on black literature, black music, black art, et cetera, under the division of the humanities; Robert Corrigan was the provost at that time.

Here again, I didn't know Provost Corrigan was checking me out. He had known me since 1968 when he came to Fisk in the first NDA program bringing white professors to black colleges to learn about black culture. I lectured in one of those programs. He had subsequently invited me to come to the University of Iowa [Iowa City, IA] to lecture where he was a professor in the English Department.

DR. MILLS: At Iowa?

DR. DRISKELL: He is Caucasian. He stayed in touch with me over the years. When he became dean at the University of Missouri in Kansas City he invited me to come and lecture there. When he came to Maryland, he invited me to come and lecture. His assistant, a woman by the name of Mary Berger, Dr. Berger, was at the lecture, I lectured on the Harlem Renaissance over in the architecture auditorium. Dr. Levitine was there as was Professor [Richard] Klank and several other people.

So evidently there was this undercurrent, again, about, well, we should probably try and bring him to Maryland. But I didn't know anything about that until later.

DR. MILLS: And the exhibition must have helped to make you an attractive candidate for the faculty.

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, definitely. I think so, definitely.

DR. MILLS: So you made the leap in –

DR. DRISKELL: In 1977. I was invited in 1976, about the same time that the exhibition was going on. But I was very pleased about being at Fisk and everything that was happening at Fisk until I came back from the L.A. County opening. I can't describe the numbers of people lined up two blocks to get into the opening that night. Even people who didn't have invitations came anyway.

When I returned to the Fisk campus, two weeks later, – I had had my classes covered as I had gotten approval to leave.

After showing the dean, Oscar Woolfolk, all of the newspaper coverage, he said to me "Young man, you know what? We don't have room for superstars like you around here." And he named C. Eric Lincoln and Paul Puryear, etc., and he put me in great company.

But what he was telling me was that my job was to stay in the classroom and do nothing else. Now, that was altogether different from what the president who had recruited me brought me there to do. He said, I want you to build this place. And so art became the name of the game at Fisk when I was there. People didn't talk about science at Fisk; they talked about art. I brought in grants from the American Film Institute, from the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts and so forth.

I was pretty about being at Fisk. When the dean said what he did, he put me in great company, – there were about 16 people who decided that we weren't appreciated there; we looked for other places. Robert Corrigan had already offered me the job at Maryland. I had turned it down. But when the dean made that remark, I went home and told Thelma about it. I said, "I don't want to leave because of him; he's not going to always be here." I said, "But I see the walls crumbling here." The money was getting scarce. I said, "I think I can do something at Maryland as a scholar that I can't do here."

So I called Corrigan and said, is the job still available? He said, come tomorrow. [Laughs] I said, no, I can't. I said, I can come at the end of the semester. I can't come until January of '77, I said, "Because I recently received an NEA grant. I don't wish to see the money going some other place." So I stayed through December and came to Maryland in January, 1977.

DR. MILLS: Well, maybe we should turn to your art-making, which is often overshadowed by all of these other achievements. During all of this time you are also an artist. How would you describe the kind of art that you make and the evolution of your art-making?

DR. DRISKELL: As I had previously said, if we go back as far as the art that I was making in Talladega in the 1950s, there was a phase when I decided that I wanted to comment on things, on social issues. That was because I had worked with Jack Levine at Skowhegan and had some influence from him. I felt that I wanted to delve into social commentary art.

I soon got over that. On going to Maine and being reinvigorated by nature, I became very much taken with the countryside and with the landscape. I then moved my art through phases of looking at nature. People were not always a part of it, but when I arrived at Fisk people they became a part of my work again. I think it came about through the African infusion.

And not only was I looking at African masks and statuary and things of that nature, but I began travelling to Africa.

DR. MILLS: You went to Africa in –

DR. DRISKELL: In 1969 for the first time.

DR. MILLS: In 1969.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. Figure became important in my work again. From the late '60s into the '70s I began doing works that were either influenced by African masks or showed a relationship to them; work such as the *Dancing Angel* [1974], which is in your collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Then there were other works, – collages, et cetera, that were very much influenced by Romare Bearden. They were influenced by him to the extent that when I had my first one-person show in New York in 1980 Romey [Romare Bearden] pulled me aside and said, "I'm just taken with the fact that you do collage so well and that you are influenced by what I do and consider me a mentor. But you can do it without echoing me." He said, "You have got to find your own voice in it."

In that exhibition was a little painting about the size of that painting there by James Denmark, which looks like a Bearden, all of us were just enamored with what he was doing at that time.

Bearden said to me, "You can do this, but you need to find your own voice." He took me over to a little painting about the size of the James Denmark painting in which I had torn the paper. It was a landscape with a circle in the background with trees. He said, "Now, that's a collage; it's not me, it's you. That's your voice in collage."

He noted that it doesn't mean that I would have to do it that way all of the time, but he noted a difference. It was a lesson, right there in the gallery with everybody standing around.

DR. MILLS: That was very generous.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. That same summer I went to Yaddo [Saratoga Springs, NY] the summer of 1980. I stayed two months at Yaddo. Normally one is invited for a month but they asked if I wanted to stay two months. I was chair of the Department of Art at Maryland and it was great to get away. I said, yes. It was there that I started developing the tearing of the paper technique instead of cutting it, cutting as I did at Fisk, in *Dancing Angel* and other works where I had cut the paper. I had cut paper from magazines, *Look* magazine and what have you, of African masks added fabric, and pasted these things onto the surface of the canvas.

I still occasionally do that, but I now integrate it with the tearing process that Bearden challenged me to do in 1980. There was one piece that I still own and never show. It hasn't been shown since 1980 – called *Homage to Romare Bearden*. [1976; collection of David Driskell] It looks so much like a Bearden.

That was a lesson learned diplomatically from a master whom I admired; a mentor. I continued using collage, but it was in a totally different way. Now, as you said – people do not always associate my career with painting. Yet I never stopped painting. I painted the whole time. I draw constantly. I have many, many sketchbooks. Every time I'd go on a trip someplace, I do sketches in an accompanying diary based on what happened on the trip.

DR. MILLS: Yet your work is not generally done from a model or a specific site. It's done through memory and imagination?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, it is done through memory and imagination. And Bearden once said to me when we were discussing art, Bearden said, "I don't really see that there is any major difference between what black artists and white artists do." He talked about his association with Carl Holty. I have a couple of Holty's works. He is Caucasian. He said – there was a time when they were both

experimenting with cubism and working pretty much in that vein. He said— "But then I drifted back to my childhood, into memory and cultural associations bringing African influences into my work. He never came to this house to visit, but he came to Nashville, he and Nanette [Rohan]. Jacob Lawrence came here, he and Gwen [Knight], and Jake and Gwen came to our home in Nashville as well.

He said, "If there is a basic difference" and he conditioned it with this 'if,' he said, "I think it may be that we," – meaning African-American artists, "probably rely more on memory and cultural associations in our work."

DR. MILLS: Memory of early life experience?

DR. DRISKELL: Early life and, by cultural associations, I guess he meant the African past, – we bring our own experiences into the art very often, he was saying, without trying to keep up with the current trends of being in vogue. It often is about ourselves.

DR. MILLS: Now, what did your trips to Africa mean to you? You have already said that you reintroduced the figure.

DR. DRISKELL: Those trips to the continent reaffirmed my interest in the African form. I should say African forms – as a viable tool in modernism beginning with Picasso and others. It told me that I could do something special with it, that I could create my own voice with the use of those forms. And that's what I pursued. That is what I tried to do.

But it also gave me the personal satisfaction of seeing that I was right when concentrating on the omissions of history. That happened not necessarily in my painting so much as in the teaching of art history. There were those affirmations that I don't think I would have gotten had had I not gone to experience Africa first hand.

DR. MILLS: Were you surprised by what you experienced?

DR. DRISKELL: I don't think I was surprised because I think by then I had affixed in my mind on certain things that I knew would happen or that I expected to see. I guess I was a little surprised that the – that painting was not as far along as sculpture. In most African cultures, sculpture had always been the main tradition; painting was almost exclusively done on textiles, architecture and in the crafts.

DR. MILLS: So you had returned to key themes, African themes, biblical themes: angels and Old Testament subjects like Jonah and the Whale. And then, as you said, throughout your career themes of nature and pine trees and – which also seem to have a kind of spiritual underpinning. Is that right?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, for me there is this spiritual relationship which is evident in nature. For me nature is the source. Even when I do people I still see them in the context of nature. Also the biblical thing was very heavy in my work and it remains there; I can't get rid of those angels. [Laughs.]

Bill Cosby once said to me, "I don't know about those angels. People start painting these angels; it's like they off into something else, like they're not quite with us." But I grew up in this tradition with my father painting these little angels hovering over the top of churches – and his telling me that the angels protect our churches and that the angels watch over us.

And when I did the painting *Echoes: Let the Church Roll On* [1996], it was homage to my dad with the angel hovering over the church. It became the silkscreen that Lou Stovall did, *Echoes* [1996]. I am going back to his sermons. These are, for me, childhood memories. He would preach these texts – not fire and brimstone, but sometimes the sermons would get a little scary for a 10-year-old kid sitting there listening to the dry bones getting up and walking in the valley and the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. It all stirred my imagination and has remained with me over the years.

DR. MILLS: So they weren't optimistic, particularly? I mean, they were –

DR. DRISKELL: Well, in a sense – he would always equate it with something with conditions. I was very interested – I was more interested in theology after I grew up than what I wanted to admit. I would read the writings of theologians, Paul Tillich, even philosophers like [Søren] Kierkegaard and Rhinhold Neibhur. But behind all of that I was trying to reconcile either my differences with my father's fundamentalism in religion or my affirmation with it.

I look back, there weren't as many differences as I may have assumed being, quote, "educated," leaving the Baptist Church, becoming a Congregationalist. I say that because as I go back and read his sermons I have little stenographer's pads of his sermons, he [Rev. Driskell] would sometimes draw on them. He had a beautiful handwriting. But he was always mixing the social, the social message in with the gospel. If Jesus said "love one another", it meant love across the board. It did not mean love only white people or black people only. It meant everybody should love one another; everybody should be a part of the community.

He emphasized those things in his sermons. He also emphasized the notion that you had to take responsibility for your actions. So he preached the notion that independence, responsibility for one's actions, education, even though he was not an educated person in the sense of college degree, were important for selfhood.

Late in life, in his 50s – he enrolled in evening college courses in the theology department at Gardner-Webb College. It's now a university in Cleveland County, North Carolina [Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, NC]. He was always seeking to improve himself. When I was in the fifth grade, he gave me a book which I kept into my adult life – loaned it, unfortunately, to someone and they never returned it – called, *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* [S.E. Frost; New York: The New Home Library; 1942]. That was when I was first introduced to Plato and Aristotle and modernists such as [Immanuel] Kant and others.

I began reading philosophy as a kid, trying to compare it to what my dad was saying in the pulpit. We would have these philosophical arguments, about the Bible. He took the Bible very literally and I would always say, "I don't think it meant this or that." He would let me have that engagement with him, which, really I think was – he knew what he was doing; he was cultivating my mind.

He always preached the notion that the way out of this, living in Appalachia in poverty and making a living on the farm, was through education. My mother would say, "No, he can't miss a day from school. He can't stay here and work on the farm. He has got to go to school." I had to get up at 4:00 in the morning. I had to get out and take the bus 35 miles to the segregated school I attended.

So how do I tie these things together? It was a form of spirituality in the sense that what he either taught me or tried to teach me was that there is something beautiful in everything. There was the old furniture – he would never throw it away. He would take it and remake it into something else. He was a blacksmith and, of course, as I became educated and learned about blacksmithing, for

African-Americans it went all the way back to the tradition of the person who was able to transform this hard substance into something permanent, the transformation of materials as with the tradition of Ogun in Nigeria. There, the blacksmith was a very respected person. He was like a god figure who could change ordinary matter into permanent things.

On seeing him do blacksmithing, and making crafts, I'm sure that all of those things imprinted my mind a certain way – not just physically, but spiritually as well.

When we go back to the concept of what is spiritual in art, it didn't necessarily mean that it had to be religious in the context of church-associated things.

As I have said, – I always felt that nature was the basic influence in my work and that there was this spiritual role that nature played: the evolution of form; the idea that it is up to us to have the intellect to see within the confines of nature those things that will add to our visual understanding of the world – our visual literacy in the sense that the tree is out there for us to see, use and experience.

We can do several things with that pine tree. We can make an image that is permanent as we see it. We can see it as it exists in the natural world but also I in the spiritual world.

We can think of the many uses for the tree. It can be used to extract a substance from which we will make turpentine and tar and dammar. We can see it as a source for lumber, to build houses.

But we can also see it in another context. We can see it as a spiritual revelation – as a symbol for something else. And that was what I was seeking to find out – what is this something else that I want to see the pine tree as? In the late 1950s when I started painting it and 1960s when I was doing my M.F.A., I was searching for other ways of connecting the pine tree to another dimension in life.

DR. MILLS: Your master's thesis at Catholic was a series of pine trees?

DR. DRISKELL: It centered on a series of pine trees. I said to my advisor, Nell Sonnemann, "Evergreens have always been associated with having spiritual values – everlasting life, eternity, et cetera – so I want to do a series of pine trees in the seasons that communicate that." I was permitted to do that. I know where only one of those pieces is located now. In those days, I curated everybody's art except my own. I just didn't think that much about it and have lost track of so much of my own work.

DR. MILLS: But you still returned to that theme?

DR. DRISKELL: I still returned to that theme because it doesn't change. I did a series at C.U. but I also did others based on my looking at the tree in different ways, seeing segments of the tree, looking down on the tree, looking forward, et cetera. I did not always seeing it as landscape. But I saw it as part and parcel of something larger. That is the way I created a number of trees; such as *Young Pines Growing* [1959] and *Pines at Falmouth*, [1961]. (*Young Pines Growing*, Clark Atlanta University; *Pines at Falmouth*, the Greenville County Museum of Art.)

DR. MILLS: What is your working method? If you were doing that, would you make a sketch – small sketch, first – if you were making a painting?

DR. DRISKELL: In those days, I almost never made sketches ahead of time. My drawing was always independent of my painting. I would draw almost exclusively from nature, almost as I saw it. And my

pine tree drawings – the few that I did were nothing like the painting of pines. They were detailed, even with pinecones. You could tell that it was a blue pine or white pine or whatever. I always felt that there was the need to have this physical contact with the canvas; to go directly and to experience the evolution of the form as I began making the painting. I seldom did sketches for those works. When I went on to the African form, very seldom did I do sketches except for masks in compositions that became inspired by African art.

DR. MILLS: Do you eliminate many of your works?

DR. DRISKELL: I do not keep many of the things ideas with which I get started. Sometimes I paint over things and that's not always good. There is a pine tree that I am donating to the center [David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland]. It is probably the last of that 1960s series. I went out to see it recently and the paint was lifting off and there is another painting underneath.

DR. MILLS: Future art historians can study the – [laughs]. At the University of Maryland, I remember that you taught a fascinating course on methods and materials. You have an interest in natural materials and the way materials were used historically. Does that play into your own art-making?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes it does. I will tell you how that came about. In the summer of 1953, when I attended Skowhegan, I was Leonard Bocour's painting assistant. He didn't teach painting. He taught paint-making: the process of grinding paint. I became fascinated with converting the pigment into paint – the process through which one goes in order to make paint. I redesigned the course when I taught at Howard. I extended it to include organic materials. We went out and collected walnut – black walnut hulls and mixed them with poke berries to make sepia ink. We collected umbers and ochre clays and made oil paints. Did you take that course from me at the University of Maryland?

DR. MILLS: No, several of my friends did. I was always sad that I hadn't. But you included fresco –

DR. DRISKELL: It included fresco, egg tempera and encaustic. As I said, we actually went out to the Washington-Baltimore Parkway in Laurel to a hill that was exposed, where we found yellow ochre clays; pink, reds, umbers; and we collected those clays and brought them back and made them into dry pigments for various forms of painting.

DR. MILLS: This was at Howard?

DR. DRISKELL: No, we did this here at the University of Maryland in the 1980s.

DR. MILLS: So you taught that course for all those years?

DR. DRISKELL: I taught the course First at Howard in the 1960s, at Fisk in the 1970s and at Maryland in the 1980s and '90s. That was the one course I refused to give up. My colleagues would ask, "Are you still teaching that luxury course?"

That was one of my interests and I carried those materials over into my work. So many of my paintings from that period are either encaustic – combination: encaustic and collage, egg tempera and collage, or egg tempera-encaustics and oil, all of which could be a nightmare for scholars in the future. And also mixed organic materials in with the works.

And all of these things are still interesting to me. I would like to see what else is out there and what it can do. I have a big batch of walnut hulls with water in my studio now, seeping through. I will strain it and make a walnut ink. I usually make all of my sepia inks. A lot of my drawings are sepia

are from my home-made inks. In the fall, I added the pokeberry to give the ink a little more redness.

That has been a primary interest of mine over the years. I gave about 150 drawings, traditional-style, to the Driskell Center, a couple years ago and most of them are sepia ink. Some of them date back to my student days, the time when I was experimenting with collage for the very first time under Lois Jones, using construction paper and things like that.

DR. MILLS: When did your work start selling and getting included in major museum collections? This is a lot – but when do you think you felt you had reached a more national fame? And was it still difficult – is it still difficult – for African-American artists to navigate the art market? That's a multi-part question.

DR. DRISKELL:

I think it was in the 1970s that I began developing a market – not a big market, but a select market for my work. My colleagues bought from me. Museums were not buying. One or two – I shouldn't say museums were not buying. One or two museums did. The Birmingham Museum [Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL]– were among the few. The Bowdoin College Museum [Bowden College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME]. But no major museums, even though I was included in one show at the Whitney in 1971. Occasionally my work was in galleries in New York.

I was not a part of the stable of a gallery in New York until 1992. And a part of that was my fault. I didn't trust the New York scene. I didn't want to be involved because my first exhibition there in 1980 was not successful. There were about 25 paintings in the show, of which at least 12 were sold.

DR. MILLS: Where was that?

DR. DRISKELL: I can't remember the name of the Gallery but it was on 10th Street in the West Village. There was no catalogue. I was naïve and trusting of the dealer. He sold at least 12 or so of the 24, 25 works. I never received one penny. So that just turned me off to New York. And he kept lying about it, saying, "I got the money but the other day my wife had an accident and I had to use the money for that."

I thought every art dealer in New York was dishonest until I came upon my good friend John Whitney Payson who had bought Midtown Payson Gallery [New York, NY]. He bought Midtown and named it Midtown Payson. I had known John over the years in Maine; I had exhibited with him in a gallery in Portland, Maine. John said, "No, you must have a New York base. You've got to come to New York."

I had my first major one-person exhibition, I say major New York show; we aren't counting the one that I got ripped off in 1980, in 1993 at Midtown Payson Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue. And it was quite a success in the sense of attendance. John he had never had an opening like that before. At least six of the works were sold, which was good when a show is up only three weeks. And it was reviewed in *Art in America*.

At about that time I would say the ball started rolling. Then John and his director split up a year or so later. Bridget Moore moved across the street to 724 Fifth Ave. DC Moore [Gallery, New York, NY]. John no longer had a New York Gallery. I said, I have to keep a New York presence. I went with Bridget Moore. John still had some of my works at Midtown Payson South in Hobe Sound, Florida, even though I didn't sell much there. We have remained friends over the years but I

consider Bridget my major dealer.

I also had work being shown in the early '90s at the Sherry Washington Gallery in Detroit [MI] and later at the Stella Jones Gallery in New Orleans [LA]. But the works weren't being sold to museums so much as to individual collectors, to some HBCU galleries like Fisk, Dillard University [New Orleans, LA], Hampton University and places like that. Then individual collectors started buying my work. And more recently, a few works have entered major museum collections.

DR. MILLS: For instance, the Smithsonian purchased *The Dancing Angel* but purchased it from a collector.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, from a collector, not directly from me. But more recently, the Smithsonian Museum of African [American] History and Culture [NMAAHC, Washington, DC] has purchased a work. Actually, they are coming to pick it up today.

DR. MILLS: What is it called?

DR. DRISKELL: They have purchased *Behold, Thy Son* [1956]. *Behold, Thy Son*. (oil on canvas)

It's the work based on the death of Emmett Till. The High Museum [of Art, Atlanta, GA] purchased *Upward Bound, 1980*; and the Greenville County Museum [of Art] in South Carolina purchased *Pines at Falmouth, 1961*. There are others but those are the ones that I can remember off-hand.

DR. MILLS: And do you think that the art market is still – it's still more difficult for African-American artists?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh definitely, I do not think it's so much racism as it is a lack of knowledge of what is out there. The publications have not been as numerous in showing works by African American artists, people haven't had the kind of exposure. And they're still coming into commercial galleries being very surprised: saying "Oh, this is done by a black artist? This is African-American art?" They sometimes don't know what to expect.

And a part of that was perpetuated by the notion that "black art," as it is sometimes called, was assumed to be black subjects or about social issues or had to try and solve problems, instead of dealing with media, experimentation, et cetera.

Some African-American artists are still taken with the notion that they can produce art that will be redeeming in the social order and help change the way people perceive them, see or deal with them.

I got over that rather early, to be precise, when I did *Behold, Thy Son* and similar subjects. I think as late as 1968, I still wanted to try my hand at subjects that had political implications, *Of Thee I Weep*, [1968] was responding to what I called the tyranny of the Vietnam War.

I haven't had the compulsion to deal with the Iraq War in a visual way. I'm just so disgusted with the notion that we have seen ourselves, Americans in general, as the peacekeepers of the world, going out – spreading democracy and all of that while, not really being able to solve our own problems here at home. So I've gotten beyond that now. I think a beautiful flower can do that just as well.

DR. MILLS: Do you think there's a kind of tyranny that makes African-American artists feel that they have to deal with more political and identity issues? Does that continue? In order to sell?

DR. DRISKELL: I think it's not so much to sell as for self-catharsis and satisfaction. There are black artists who feel that, "Oh, well, I just had to do it to get it out of my system." Young artists have come to me and said they want to make an art work that will solve problems. They say, "When they see this, it's going to knock them out." Not really filmmakers, writers, painters, not so many sculptors, don't like the discipline of trying to do hard work and make it do what they want to do. But a filmmaker, in particular can say more in one brief film clip than most painters can present, as a social statement, in a life time.

When I was teaching filmmaking at Fisk, the kids would say to me, "Professor Driskell, I'm going to make this film that's going to 'knock 'em out!'" I said, now, first of all, tell me, who is this "them"? You make the film for yourself, extending your artistry, extending your gift, realizing that, okay, this is that creative strain that comes from somewhere. If you don't want to say from the Great Creator, from God, whatever – but it's coming from somewhere because everybody doesn't have it. So it is your responsibility to share that in the sense of intellectual knowledge – visual literacy – so people can understand that you do have a special message. Otherwise, you might as well be ordinary. So why are you going to complicate the situation?

And this is the manner in which I used to teach: If during the first day, you're going to create a great abstraction and you don't know what you're abstracting from. The next day, you're going to create a great composition which solves all the problems – the social ills of the world, and you don't know history that well. You're going to reinvent the wheel along the way, wasting your time when you could be learning media, process, learning the craft. I'd always say, learn the craft first. In the words of Booker T. Washington, "Let down your buckets where you are," that is, before you go out there reinventing things all over the country."

That was always my approach to teaching. I don't think that that person who is so eager to solve problems with his or her art is going to attract the attention of the audience that wants to have quality art. I'm not against social-commentary art but I get very disturbed when people across racial lines say to me, well, it doesn't look like black art. What does black art look like? If I'm black and I made it, if you want to put that social stigma and classification to it, then – I'd rather it just be called art, but if you want to say it's "black art," because I made it, then it is black art because I am black.

DR. MILLS: You have spoken out against or critiqued work by people like Kara Walker. Do you want to say anything about that?

DR. DRISKELL: I began by saying I think that art is such a broad subject that there's room for all of us there for self-expression. We have a spiritual that says, "Plenty good room, plenty good room in my father's kingdom."

I feel that way about art. There's room for everybody who feels that he or she has this special calling to bring visual literacy to the world and to create the new vision; something that never would have been created without the artist's presence. So why set up these rules that say, you can't do it this way because I may not like it? Why delve into it that way?

I think Kara Walker's gotten a bum rap because people want her to pull away from this image that she's doing. She says she's deconstructing and adding her own emphasis to history subjects about race. Now, I'm not defending her in the sense that this is the only thing that's being done or what should be done. But why pick on her? I think some of it is jealousy regarding her success.

I am often asked, "How many Kara Walkers do you own?" And I say, "None." First of all, I can't afford them, and secondly, I have some reservations about some aspects of her imagery. I wouldn't

necessarily want some of the images she makes. I have said to her father – "I'm a very good friend of her father's and she has visited in my home. I simply would not like to try and explain to my great granddaughter of 7 years, what some of the things in her work are about."

I have some reservations as to how I would explain what the sexual implications are. However, it's out there, it's public, and we can't wave a magic wand and make it go away.

We have to deal with it on the level that this is her way of expressing herself. I will defend her to the extent that she has a right to do what she feels is coming from within. That is her soulful expression. I don't want anybody telling me what I can or cannot create.

[End of track one.]

DR. MILLS: This is April 7 and this is Cynthia Mills again at the home of David Driskell for our third meeting.

And today I'd like to start by asking you about your collecting. At the time of your retirement from the University of Maryland, the University of Maryland Gallery mounted the traveling show of your collection,

"Narratives of African-American Art and Identity The David C. Driskell Collection," and that was 1998 [University of Maryland]. And at the same time, a show called "Echoes: The Art of David Driskell," of your own art, also toured. But tell us something about your – what the guiding principles were for your collecting.

DR. DRISKELL: I began collecting art when I was a student. I didn't consider myself a collector then. But I suppose I was influenced by having worked as a student at the Barnett Aden Gallery at 127 Randolph Pl., Northwest Washington, in the 1950s. And also by having the notion of – being inspired by my teachers who said artists should collect. I wanted to live with art the way I saw them live with it, meaning James Herring, James Porter, and Lois Jones.

And so I bought a few things early on but I didn't really concentrate on collecting African-American art until the 1960s when I returned to Howard University. I began collecting works by some of my former colleagues – Earl Hooks – and artists around the city; Bill Taylor and others. I collected a few works by other artists of note. By then, I had collected quite a few works by European artists; mainly works on paper.

DR. MILLS: Early on?

DR. DRISKELL: yes, early on, in the 1950s and the 1960s. I began collecting works from an art dealer who went around to different colleges. He was Ferdinand Roten, of Baltimore. He had no works by African-Americans but I collected a couple of lithographs by Renoir, a couple of German Expressionists works as well as Rouault.

DR. MILLS: And you were doing this with the money you were earning from your various jobs?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. From teaching and occasionally a sale here and there. By that time, I was beginning to exhibit with the Franz Bader Gallery in Washington, mainly drawings and prints. I did not exhibit paintings at the Franz Bader Gallery. The money that came from those side jobs – lecturing, exhibitions and a few sales I would use some of it to make a few purchases.

As time went by, the numbers added up and by the time I was ready to leave Fisk University, I had

amassed a fairly large collection. I had been purchasing works from the artists who came there to exhibit, such as Alma Thomas, Elizabeth Catlett, William Artis and Walter Williams.

I was given a work by Romare Bearden and a few other artists. Walter Williams and various other artists who came there as visiting artists donated work to the Fisk University permanent collection. I would almost always purchase one work for my own collection. In some cases, I had purchased as many – five or six prints and a few paintings by artists such as Walter Williams and Sam Middleton.

I had amassed a sizable collection by the time I arrived at the University of Maryland in 1977, in addition to a number of pieces that Ms. Mary Beattie Brady had given me. Mr. Brady was formerly the director of the Harmon Foundation. When she closed the foundation decided to disperse many works, some of which came to Fisk. That was a year after she had retired. She didn't have a staff to do the work, so I did some of it for her.

As a result of that, she gave me several works – not major works, for example, she gave me about three or four works by William H. Johnson. *Children Playing London Bridge* [1942] and *Seated Woman* [1939], as I recall. And there were several artists in that group. There were a couple of prints by James Wells in the group as well. The collection grew. By the time I came to Maryland, I had amassed a sizable collection of works by African American artists.

I arrived at Maryland and began teaching courses in African-American art history, it spurred me along to do more research. I had already curated the exhibition "Two Centuries of Black American Art" for the L.A. County Museum as its Bicentennial Exhibition in 1976. I visited many of the black artists who were living. I went to their studios. I acquired additional works from some of them for my own collection.

DR. MILLS: Systematically – more systematically?

DR. DRISKELL: More systematically. However, the larger portion of my collection, the more serious aspects of it came after 1977, when I began working with Bill and Camille Cosby to build their collection. There, I had access to various artists that I had not collected before – Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Eldzier Cortor, et cetera.

Once again, I was in touch with Alma Thomas and many other contemporary artists that Bill and Camille bought. That allowed me to have direct access. There were some, of course, that I couldn't afford such as Archibald Motley and Tanner. I purchased a work by Charles White and others in that category. I did not have the means to purchase a Tanner. I purchased Tanners for the Cosbys, along with Duncanson and Bannister. I later purchased a few small Bannisters for myself.

I always visited antique shops in New England as I traveled around, particularly in Maine. I think it was around the summer of 1978, just after I had arrived here, that I came upon two works signed by Bannister. I also came upon a work that has been attributed to Duncanson. It is not signed, but it has all of the stylistic principles that one would associate with Duncanson and his Scottish landscapes.

I would go out and look in very unusual places, off-the-way places. Sometimes I would find works – like in Alfred, Maine, there used to be a little Shaker village there.

DR. MILLS: Center?

DR. DRISKELL: Perhaps, Center. The Shaker community closed down many, many years ago, but I found a little Edward Mitchell Bannister, an oil. I went to the bookstores in New York – the Old Print

Shop, and old bookstores. And there's one on 57th Street near Lexington Avenue. I can't think of the name of it right now, but I would go there religiously; go up on the fourth floor and search through all the old prints and drawings. [Argosy Book Store]

And there, I found another Bannister watercolor for \$5. And – [laughs] – Professor Herring had given me some works when I returned to Howard to teach in 1962. The collection fell in place with that kind of pursuit. I then began spending a little more money on it.

By then, I was selling a few more of my own works. I was also in demand as a lecturer. I had done a few films – one for CBS. I didn't make a lot of money from it but at least my name got out there. People called on me to lecture in places as far away as Canada.

I began to set aside a certain amount of money for art purchases. "I'm going to use this for buying such-and-such." I also bought works by my best students, – anticipating that they were going to go on to fame. [Laughs]

I had done that with people like Lou Stovall, Mary Lovelace O'Neal and a few others and was proven right. And I still do that. [Laughs] I recently purchased a work by Jefferson Pinder and Ellington Robinson, who were my students or mentees at the University of Maryland.

So it is from this kind of searching and looking around and going to other places, going to artists' studios, also exchanging works with artists like William T. Williams that my collection has grown. Unfortunately, I didn't exchange any works with Martin Puryear. – [They Laugh.]. Well, I did. We exchanged prints, but his sculpture was too far beyond that category. I had nothing to match it, but I exchanged work with Sam Gilliam and a number of artists and my collection has been enriched by that kind of exchange.

DR. MILLS: What is your – was or is your goal for your collection? It became quite prominent when this turned out to be an extremely popular traveling exhibition?

DR. DRISKELL: I did not see it so much as a collection because it was so eclectic. I chose things, for the most part, that I could afford, and wanted to live with.

It dawned on me later when people came to our home and said "I see you have a Grafton Tyler Brown, you have a Bannister, you have a Lawrence, you have Catlett, Douglas and other works that are important pieces."

From Douglas, I purchased a painting that was done after the series *God's Trombones* [1927]. The work that I purchased was *Go Down Death* [1934], which I kept for many years. It toured with the Narratives exhibition.

Later, several major museums learned that I had the Douglas' paintings and wanted to purchase them. I was thinking of setting up a trust for my grandchildren. I had other works by Douglas – prints and watercolors that I had planned to keep. I still have several, but I will give those to the Driskell Center at the University of Maryland.

It was from that kind of widespread interest and overview that the collection grew. I am not sure that I thought of it so much as a collection; more as a body of works that I enjoy living with. Some of them, I shall want to live with for the remainder of my life. So that is how I got involved.

Also, I should say, when I began as a curator in 1977 for Camille and Bill Cosby, they would often send me to an artist's studio to acquire works. That gave me an entre to artists. And in some

cases, Bill and Camille would buy works and give them to me. Yes. And I think it was around 1985 or so, on, perhaps, my second trip to visit Elizabeth Catlett in Cuernavaca, Mexico that they bought three bronze sculptures by Betty and gave them to me as a Christmas gift.

DR. MILLS: You became curator for the Cosby Collection about 1977. And how had you met – was it Bill Cosby you first met?

DR. DRISKELL: I had not met the Cosbys when I received a call from Bill in October, 1977. It was interesting because I didn't think Bill was actually calling me. I thought my brother-in-law was playing a trick on me. We would call back and forth and pretend we were celebrities, imitating different people's voices from time to time.

But as it turned out, it was he who was calling. And he said he and his wife were beginning to collect and they had been advised that I would be a good person to help them. He asked could my wife and I come to visit them over Thanksgiving and see what they collected?

I said, "No, we don't go anyplace on Thanksgiving. We are family-oriented and we stay at home." He said, "When do you think you would be available to come?" I said, "Why don't you get back in touch with me in about two weeks?" I said, "I have a number of clients I have to work with."

And I really did. At that time, I was working with a number of clients in Providence, Rhode Island, including Edward Shein, who had found many of these works – the Bannisters, Tanners and Duncansons.

DR. MILLS: Clients for whom you were helping to find, acquire?

DR. DRISKELL: Find works for their collections, yes. Mainly Bannisters, Tanners, Duncansons, Edmonia Lewis's works, 19th century African-American artists. I think Bill kind of took it to be, "Like, you mean, you don't have time for me?" And he said, "I must wait two weeks?" I could make an assessment of where I am and let you know what I would be able to do."

He said, "Where is your wife?" I said, "She is here. He said, "Let me speak to her." Bill he spoke to Thelma and evidently he said to her, "I have spoken with your husband and he said you are too busy to come visit us for Thanksgiving –" She said, "Oh, no, we can come." [Laughs] So that took care of that.

So we did go to visit them in November, 1977 in Massachusetts over at their home near Greenfield. We kind of developed a friendship over the years. And having seen what they collected, which wasn't an awful lot at that time, I knew that they wanted to expand their collection. They had works by European-American artists such as Reginald Marsh – Maurice Prendergast and Thomas Hart Benton and others. But they wanted to move toward collecting work by African American artists.

I was in touch with Ed Shein, who was one of the dealers up in Providence, Rhode Island. It was at their home that I was able to tell them about these works. They started buying Duncansons, Bannisters, Tanners, and in so doing, we were able to amass an important collection from nineteenth century African American artists.

Bill and Camille then they started asking me to go to auctions. By the mid 1980s, I was going to Sotheby's and places like that. In 1981, I went to Sotheby's – [at that time still on Madison Avenue] – December, 1981 – and purchased for them *The Thankful Poor* [1894] by Henry O. Tanner, which became a signature piece for their collection.

The people at Sotheby's got to know me. Whenever they saw me in the audience, they knew what I was there to purchase art for the Cosbys. And luckily, when I went, I didn't really have, I guess, a ceiling like most people. If they wanted the work, they said, "Get it." Of course I acted as if I was buying for myself. [Laughs.]

What is interesting is, Bill had said earlier on – when I began working for them, he said, "Now, you are the curator; you are the expert on art. I'm the entertainer and the expert in that field." He said, "However, there are going to be times when you are going to want to buy things for us that I will say, no to, I am not buying that. And you will have to understand that." And he said, "The simple reason may be I am not buying it because this is my money and I don't want to spend it that way." So we had an agreement. I said, "So long as we understand each other and you are not going to come back later and say, you should have gotten such-and-such a piece."

They came to me most of the time when they heard about something they wanted. Occasionally, I would present something to them. And nine times out of 10, they would follow through and say, yes, we would like to include a work that I had brought to their attention.

Mrs. Cosby looked around and said "Now, I am beginning to be a little concerned because there being so few women represented in this collection. So I want you to start looking for the best among African-American women out there." She started with Edmonia Lewis. And from there, we went to Alma Thomas, Lois Jones, Elizabeth Catlett and then a few contemporary artists, including Stephanie Pogue and Emma Amos.

They were never that much into collecting a lot of contemporary art. But if it was good and had the right stamp of approval, they often collected it.

DR. MILLS: And what was their goal? Just, again, art to live with or to build –

DR. DRISKELL: They wanted art to live with and not necessarily to share. [Laughs.]

DR. MILLS: They haven't really exhibited –

DR. DRISKELL: No, there has never been an exhibition of their collection and I doubt that they will ever allow such. I don't talk about it unless somebody asks. But if they ask me, I will say yes, I am the curator. And so the bulb goes off, you know. Oh, we should do a show of their collection.

DR. MILLS: Right.

DR. DRISKELL: No, they don't do that. They don't buy art for that purpose. I mean, they buy art to enjoy it. And they live with it. I remember the late Bill Lieberman. Was it Lieberman at the Metropolitan Museum?

Yes, a curator from the Metropolitan Museum who was always lecturing to me about, you have got to get the Cosbys to lend. That art belongs to the people. I said, "You know, they bought it, so it doesn't belong to the people right now. They may share it someday, but I can't overrule them and say you must share your art with all who want to borrow it. My job is to follow the directions they give me. And at the present time, they don't lend."

Now, I do recall once they did lend *The Thankful Poor* to one of the venues when I did the exhibition, "Hidden Heritage." And it may have been more than one venue, but I know it was loaned for the venue at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts [Philadelphia, PA]. Occasionally a few pieces have been loaned.

They did lend a work that I had acquired at Sotheby's in the 1980s. It was a Tanner piece, and it was untitled. It had been given the speculative title of *Scene from the Life of Job*. This was a work that I was familiar with as we had purchased it at Sotheby's in the 1980s – I think around 1987 or so. It had been in the collection of the L.A. County Museum for almost 100 years. When we X-rayed *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, in 1975, there was a painting underneath and it happened that it was easy to remove it off because it was painted on paper and pasted onto the canvas. There was a paper separation between the two. I think it was a Mr. Johnson, the person in charge of conservation who separated the two works.

Of course, we had the question about the ethics or the morality of whether Tanner wanted us to ever see that painting. It is a beautiful work – perhaps not quite finished. But like with so many other artists, [Cézanne and his apples] we didn't see a real problem. And the museum okayed our presenting the painting in the "Two Centuries" exhibition.

It was an interesting Tanner because it was different and it may have been an earlier study. It was so different from the work that covered it. The work that covered it, *Daniel in the Lion's Den* was more of an impressionist painting. This work was more in the tradition of Rembrandt and [Jean-Leon] Gérôme, with whom Tanner had studied. He greatly admired Gérôme's work. It was more like chiaroscuro painting, moving from dark to light.

I read as much as I could about it, and about that period. I noted that it was not titled, but obviously biblical and perhaps from that section of the Bible dealing with the life of Job. So temporarily, we called it, *Scene from the Life of Job*. The Cosbys loaned the work to the Tanner show in 1992 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Drs. [Dewey] Mosby and [Darrell] Sowell gave the painting a new title without consulting me. And for all practical purposes, unfortunately, it was the wrong title. I had done research on the work that they retitled. They titled it *Job and His Three Friends*.

There are only three figures in the painting, so the question is where was Job or where was whomever? And since I was their curator, and the Cosbys weren't consulted, it left a bitter taste in their mouth.

DR. MILLS: As far as future loans then.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. The work that they called *Job and His Three Friends*, was exhibited in 1904, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and it was signed by Tanner. This couldn't have been that work. But research gets a little mixed up at times. [Laughs.]

So to make a long story short, I spoke with the director, Dr. Anne d'Harnoncourt about it. She didn't know anything about it. Directors don't get into all of that. She was apologetic. I said, "The only thing that worries me," I knew Anne fairly well and we could sit and talk gently about it, "is that the Cosbys don't lend. When they do lend, something like this happens. They aren't consulted. And this really doesn't make it good for the future."

DR. MILLS: Yes.

DR. DRISKELL: So as I had anticipated, the attitude was, "we are not lending anything else." And to my knowledge, nothing has been loaned since then.

DR. MILLS: Now, do you see – you have said about how working with the Cosbys has enriched your own collecting and meeting of other artists and so forth. Do you see any kind of conflict of being an art historian who works in that kind of situation, works with dealers to find paintings occasionally?

DR. DRISKELL: A Bernard Berenson type thing? No, obviously, I don't have that kind of situation. Well, not –

DR. MILLS: Have you thought on that?

DR. DRISKELL: I have thought about it. And there have been times when conflicts have arisen. Some dealers have said, "Well, Driskell buys from so and so for the Cosbys, but he doesn't buy from me."

DR. MILLS: Oh, I see.

DR. DRISKELL: And that kind of word gets out there and it goes back and it is not very pleasant when you try to explain why you are not buying. I buy at their direction. The few times when I have bought for Oprah, it has been the same thing – Oprah Winfrey. She would occasionally call me and say, do you know about such-and-such an artist? I hear that there is a work that is going to be for sale at such and such a place. Could you go and check it out and tell me what you think?

DR. MILLS: And do you think she contacted you because of your relationship with the Cosbys?

DR. DRISKELL: I know it was so although I had met her many years ago when she graduated from Tennessee State University in Nashville. It was through visits at the Cosbys that I would occasionally see her. She would be there looking at their art and Bill would say, "Well, there is the man. That is David. He is the one to go and get it for you."

She did follow through on several occasions. On one occasion, she called and asked me to go with her to do some shopping for Shaker furniture and objects. That kind of got to be a sensational thing because the papers, the main antique digest published it. And then the – oh, what do you call them – the rag papers and things got a hold of it.

DR. MILLS: Tabloids?

DR. DRISKELL: Tabloids got it and pictured David – no, they didn't even call my full name. "Oprah Winfrey with friend blowing \$500,000." They then placed a picture of Stedman [Graham] over on the other side like he was looking all mean at me, that kind of craziness.

DR. MILLS: Who was that?

DR. DRISKELL: Stedman, her boyfriend. You know, just that kind of stuff the tabloids do to sell papers. Always lies. That kind of craziness. But then she as late as, I would say, 3 years ago called me and asked me to go and look at some Beardens.

DR. MILLS: So she has a significant collection of African-American art?

DR. DRISKELL: Oh, yes. She has a very significant collection in the studio at Harpo at a 110 Carpenter Street in Chicago, as well as in her various homes. And she has collected quite a bit of work by African-American women artists.

DR. MILLS: Well, a lot of scholarship on African-American art actually has been produced in catalogues of private collections such as your catalogue published in 2001 of the Cosby collection [*The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby, Jr.*, San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2001]. Is that because not as much work is in public collections? Or it is almost a time in which some of these private collections are going to shift, perhaps?

DR. DRISKELL: I think it is mainly because much of the work is still in private hands, not in museum collections. I think the Smithsonian American Art Museum is exceptional in that it has a large body of work that was donated by the Harmon Foundation and from other sources, but that is not the norm.

Collecting has been very slow and not very consistent. One could readily say without being unfair that the omissions are blatant. And in many cases, it is a matter of people who are in charge not knowing about these artists or not pursuing research in the area.

I think the various curricula offerings at leading institutions in recent years, at least in the past 15 or so years, have increased the possibility of scholarship being extended.

DR. MILLS: And I think museums are now interested in – are more interested in bringing in diverse audiences.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, yes.

DR. MILLS: And then there is no African-American art to show or other –

DR. DRISKELL: Right, right. That is evident all over. And once that becomes evident, people then start looking and saying there are no works represented by people of color. So I think, in spite of the lack of funds and patronage, in some cases, a few museums are trying hard, in some cases, to correct those omissions.

DR. MILLS: You mentioned increased course offerings at universities, for instance, in African-American art or art of the Diaspora. I wanted to ask you about the change you have seen in scholarship on African-American art history over your long career? Of necessity, the early scholarship, including some of your own, was sort of recuperative, finding out about people's careers and to a certain extent, celebratory? It stressed that these were careers worth studying and, you know, of equal worth. What do you think has changed? What needs to be done now?

DR. DRISKELL: I think growing the field is still essential in that these courses must continue to be offered at mainstream institutions, so that wider access is there for those who wish to pursue studies in that area. I have always argued that it is the responsibility of an enlightened faculty at any institution to know that you are not really teaching American art in its fullness until such time that these courses are offered – not just in African-American, but Asian, Asian-American, first American, women artists et cetera. All of these things are part and parcel of the whole of American art.

In most cases the teaching has been woefully inadequately in representing those people who have come out of University with a degree in American art. Many have not heard about major figures in African American Art. I think the solution is to continue growing the field not only through curricula offerings, but through exhibitions because documentation is so important. If things are not adequately documented, the assumption is that they are not there.

DR. MILLS: Do you think that the textbooks should integrate the study of African-American art as part of the whole more? And do you think that more diverse populations should be doing scholarship on African-American art history, which has largely been the precinct dominated by scholars who are African-American themselves?

DR. DRISKELL: I do think that it shouldn't be limited to African-American scholars. I think it should be a field that is wide open and that the notion that – the first point you made was what?

DR. MILLS: It is whether textbooks should have –

DR. DRISKELL: The textbooks. Yes, I think that largely is one of the major problems that there is not information out there that has been disseminated or in print, for people to make reference to in these areas. And upon making reference, then how do they follow through? What do they do to ensure that the students or scholars who are interested have access to that information?

For example, in the standard, everybody's text, Helen Gardner, *Art through the Ages*. There was usually one African American artist represented; Jacob Lawrence. No one contested that blatant omission.

DR. MILLS: Sometimes Horace Pippin in the earliest texts.

DR. DRISKELL: Sometimes Horace Pippin, indeed. And African-Americans very often had a problem with that because the assumption was that it had to be quote, "primitive." [Laughs] Most African-American scholars, African-American historians, get a little uptight about the use of that word, "primitive," and not premiere class, not first class, but that which is less than European.

I think the textbook issue is a big one. For example, not until 1982, after the death of Professor Peter Jansen was there two examples of black artists in the history of art book used as the bible in art for so many years. [Jansen's History of (Western) Art] It is interesting how that came about. I saw his son, Tony [Anthony] Jansen, at an art history meeting. It may have been New York. And I had seen Professor Jansen in 1982 – out at the CAA meeting in San Francisco.

And at that time, I was still on the board of CAA. But I recall being on the elevator with Professor Jansen and Elizabeth Catlett was on the same elevator. Ms. Catlett is very outspoken. She saw Professor Jansen and said, "Dr. Jansen, you were one of my teachers at the University of Iowa– in 1940. You don't have any reason to remember me, but why don't you have more women artists in your book?"

DR. MILLS: There were none. There were no women artists represented in his text.

DR. DRISKELL: And he didn't even look in her direction. [Laughs] He just kept looking the other direction and, with his German accent. He said, "Are there women artists?"

It was so cold. Of course, she didn't pursue it any further. But she said, as we got off the elevator, "Well, see, that is what I mean. And as long as people like that are writing the textbooks, we will be left out." It is much of what Georgia O'Keeffe said to me, much the same thing. It is a man's world when it comes to art. And she was almost like accusing me when I was complaining: "What are you complaining about? You are a male."

But I think therein lies the problem. Tony, Jansen's son, approached me after his father's death – said, "We have got to do something about the omission of black artists in my father's book." His solution was to put two African-American artists in the book. He had consulted with me. I said I don't want to be labeled the person who told you to put two artists in the book. I said you should put more. And I gave him X number of people. Here again, no woman appeared. No Catlett, no Selma Burke, no Lois Jones, none of those people. No Edmonia Lewis. It was Henry O. Tanner and William T. Williams whose work was chosen.

I think his compromise was like, okay, we will do a 19th century and we will do a 20th century artist. And there haven't been too many improvements, you know, in that sense. I don't know that it is going to happen, if it is going to happen at all. But I know women artists in general are

underrepresented. Elsa Fine used to stay on me about what she was trying to do to push more women artists. And she helped establish the women's caucuses, I recall, at CAA.

DR. MILLS: And the *Woman's Art Journal*.

DR. DRISKELL: And the *Woman's Art Journal*. Elsa used to teach over at the little black school in Knoxville, Tennessee, Knoxville College. And that is where I first met her back in the '70s. So she had been a voice for women artists and black artists as well.

I guess I kind of got pulled into being a voice or the voice for African-American artists because there was so little being done. There were other scholars out there working, such as Samella Lewis. And there were the younger ones that came along. It has been a godsend, Leslie King Hammond, Tritobia Benjamin, Edmund Barry Gaither and Rick Powell, all of whom have started impacting the field in a positive way.

There is an even younger group of African American scholars, that is coming along now, such as Renée Ater, Tuliza Fleming, Jackie Francis, who are beginning to have a very profound voice in the field. But I think here again, until there is more information in print, and more attention is paid to the textbooks and what is disseminated out there, we are going to continue to have these problems.

DR. MILLS: I remember you could only often find little, tiny black-and-white pictures of things. And now – this is a good segue to your role as a mentor of young scholars and you have really helped with the series of books published by Pomegranate Press of which you are the series editor [The David C. Driskell Series of African American Art], I believe, in allowing or helping young scholars to publish books that provide color plates of artists and a lot of this information that you are talking about. How did that get started?

DR. DRISKELL: After I published *The Other Side of Color*, the Cosby collection, with Pomegranate, they saw that there was a viable need for that kind of thing in the market. That book was sent out in large volumes. In April of 2001, I lectured on their collection at the Metropolitan Museum. I think it was kind of one of the major events in helping to turn the tide and in letting mainstream people see what black artists have done along with their importance – beyond the "Two Centuries" exhibition.

The Metropolitan Museum sent the announcements out to their mailing public. Their auditorium holds about 800 people. Well, over 1300 people showed up for that lecture, which showed the kind of interest is there.

DR. MILLS: For the lecture about the Cosby collection?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, about the collection and Mr. [Philippe de] Montebello [director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art] was overwhelmed. He hardly knew what to say in response to that kind of appeal. Yet we couldn't get the lady who was in charge of the bookshop to order more than about 50 copies of the book. She said nobody buys that many books.

And 200 or 300 people lined up to buy the book. They were furious that there were so few books available. I think that gave people the notion that if it could happen at the Met, it certainly could happen at other places. People started making inquiries. I met with the publisher. And they decided that they wanted to offer something else. So what should it be?

I said well, there are several books and catalogues out there on artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, Richard Hunt and Sam Gilliam. But there are a number of stellar artists who should be represented in the compendium. So why not consider a series in which some of the less

published artists, living and dead, are represented?

We started out with the notion that we would publish X number of books. At first, we said 12. Then we said 10. [Laughs] So what should the format be? Not terribly long and maybe no more than 25,000 words. Good color reproductions and good scholarship are essential. But let's give the young scholars a chance. Let's call on those who have recently proven their interest in this area of scholarship.

So it was from that perspective that we began our First book on the work of Charles White. We then went from Charles White, who was deceased, to a living artist, Betye Saar. The third on was Faith Ringgold. And each case, we were looking at the young scholars to write. In the case of Charles White, the young lady from Spelman College, Andrea Barnwell, who had been one of Rick Powell's doctoral students at Duke wrote the manuscript.

The book on Betye Saar was a little difficult for us. We had to get Betye to give a lot of the information to the writer. We moved on from there to Faith Ringgold with Lisa Farrington who had done her dissertation on Faith. The fourth book was written on Archibald Motley who died in 1981. I had made the acquaintance of Motley about 10 or 12 years before he died. I went back to see him when I made purchases of his work for the Cosbys, so I had access to his family.

And the fifth book we did was on Keith Morrison.

DR. MILLS: By Renee?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. By Renée Ater, one of our own students, and now teaching at the University of Maryland.

DR. MILLS: That is really nice for these young scholars, it helps them toward tenure and all those things.

DR. DRISKELL: Indeed.

DR. MILLS: So you had an established corps of scholars with this interest.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. And the sixth book was Charles Alston written by Alvia Wardlaw. W She was a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and a professor at Texas Southern University [Houston, TX]. And the seventh one is being done by Adrienne Childs, University of Maryland printmaker on Margo Humphrey.

DR. MILLS: At the time you had decided to retire, there was a desire at the University of Maryland to do something to honor your legacy. And I guess Ira Berlin and I don't know who else –

DR. DRISKELL: He was the acting dean at that time.

DR. MILLS: He was? He and others came up with this idea for -

DR. DRISKELL: Stephanie Pogue was Chairperson of the Department of Art at that time.

DR. MILLS: Stephanie, who you had probably brought there.

DR. DRISKELL: Yes. I recruited for both Fisk and Maryland. She was one of my students at Howard in the '60s. I recommended that Stephanie attend Cranbrook, and get her MFA. And she did. I then

brought her to Fisk to teach graphics. She became chairman at Fisk after I left. And then I brought her to Maryland.

DR. MILLS: And so the idea of an academic center – what is the full title? The Driskell Center –

DR. DRISKELL: The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora was the title given in 1998 when I retired from teaching. There are some other words that have been added since, but I think that the original title is enough.

DR. MILLS: [Laughs] And what was your role in the formation of this?

DR. DRISKELL: Actually, I didn't play much of a role other than when Acting Dean Ira Berlin, and a few other people came to visit me to talk about what should be done upon my retirement. I simply said, "Grow the field and make a place for scholars to come and investigate and pursue research." I said, "My wife and I will be happy to donate works of art and part of our archive." I said, "However, we have spent a lifetime collecting these works. Some we will want to pass down to the family. But we feel if you are serious about setting up a center, we will donate X number of works to you. Maybe we will ask you to buy a few of them. But for the most part, we will donate works by African American artists."

DR. MILLS: A significant portion of your collection?

DR. DRISKELL: Yes, a significant portion. And to date, we have donated more than 200 works. And there are still over 100 works there that are promised gifts.

DR. MILLS: So they are works by yourself and by others?

DR. DRISKELL: Mainly by others. What was proposed by the university was they would buy some of my own works. So that I am being paid for some works.

DR. MILLS: You have repeatedly said that one of your great goals is to grow the field. What do you think has been the most important part of your legacy and, you know, what are you hoping to see evolve from all of the things that you have done? What is most important?

DR. DRISKELL: In December of 2000, President Bill Clinton, on advice of the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded me the Humanities Medal, he said it was for, and I am paraphrasing him – "for opening our eyes to the beauty of African-American art," and helping to bring it into mainstream American culture. That to me was a very big thing.

So I think if there is a legacy at all, perhaps it is the notion that American culture is greatly enhanced by our knowing all of the facets of it, in particular, African-American culture, a culture which has persisted in spite of the omissions, in spite of the problems that arose out of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow. This has been an important infusion of culture into American culture in general. I have had a great interest in African culture in Brazil and studied that independently, as well as in Central America but African American culture here at home is a very important aspect of American culture.

I think the notion of a legacy is something that everyone wishes to have. If I could say what it should be, I would simply say integrate all of these studies into one title, American art, American culture. I do think it is important to know the origins, the area from which something or somebody comes. But I think the greatness of our nation, in these United States is that we are this infusion of people from all over the world and that all of us have made a significant contribution to the meaning

of what American culture is or will become.

When I travel to other countries and I see the distinct aspect of oneness in the sense of the unity of their culture, I think about the variety of things on which we draw in this country. That is our strength. I think that is what makes us so colorful. So I would hope that the infusion of the African-American visual element will strengthen American culture.

DR. MILLS: Okay. Thank you.

[END OF CD 6.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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