

## Lois Mailou Jones: Impressions of the South

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Although she was born and raised in New England, the South left a profound impression on the life and work of Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998). Her travels and experiences in the South shaped the contours and transformations of her distinctive style as a painter, designer, and educator over a remarkable 60-year career. When I speak of the South, I not only refer to the geographical area of the Southeastern and South Central United States traditionally linked to upholding the legality of slavery prior to its demise. But I also include Haiti and Sub-Saharan Africa as I trace in this essay the Southerly black Atlantic geography of selected key examples of Jones's work. But first I want to offer some background information on Lois Mailou Jones.

She was born into a middle class family in Boston in 1905. Her mother, Carolyn Dorinda Jones, was a popular cosmetologist and her father, Thomas Vreeland Jones, was a building superintendent who later became a successful real estate attorney and developer after becoming the first African American to learn a law degree from Suffolk Law School in 1915. Her family summered on the tony island of Martha's Vineyard where they owned property in the black middle class enclave of Oak Bluffs. Jones became friends therewith Harlem Renaissance novelist Dorothy West (1907-1998) and renowned Pan-Africanist sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968), who noticed her promise as an illustrator at a very young age and encouraged her to pursue a career as an artist. To be sure, her family, friends, and mentors in New England supported her aspirations while instilling in her the inner strength and pride to bring them to fruition.

Outgoing, determined, and focused, Jones was trained at the High School of Practical Arts in Boston from 1919 to 1923, the School of the

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1923 to 1927, where she majored in design, and the Design Art School in Boston from 1927 to 1928, receiving a graduate diploma. During these foundational years, she earned numerous fellowships and awards to support her studies, including an apprenticeship with designer Grace Ripley, who introduced her to the art of designing costumes for theater and dance. Yet despite her successes and the support of family and mentors, Jones received her first unsavory taste of New England-style institutional racism when she was denied a teaching position at her alma matter, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and, instead, was told by the school's director to "go south to help [your] people," according to her biographer, Tritobia Hayes Benjamin (79). This statement made by the school's director exemplifies the subtle and often patronizing system of inequality based on race that developed in the North, usually occurring systemically within institutions, such as schools, businesses, and government offices to shape and control social relations and to maintain the status quo. While institutional racism was also certainly pervasive in the South, it was more frequently maintained there with overt forms of physical violence and terrorism, including lynching and rape, which often went unpunished. Significantly, Jones's first opportunity to "go south" came shortly after her humiliating confrontation with northern racism, which served as a wake up call for the eager, young artist.

Jones's first experience in the South came in 1928 when she was recruited by pioneering educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1883-1961) to establish an art department at the Palmer Memorial Institute, a preparatory school for black youth in Sedalia, North Carolina. Founded in 1902, the Palmer Memorial Institute was named after Alice Freeman Palmer, a former president of Wellesley College and Brown's friend and benefactor. Brown's accomplishments seem to come to life in Oscar Micheaux's (1884-1951) silent film *Within Our Gates* (1919), the earliest surviving feature film by an African American, which tells the story of a young African American woman who seeks a Northern white patron for a Southern school for black children (Micheaux). Other pivotal elements in the film include an attempted white on black rape and a double lynching, the violent horrors of racial dominance and control associated with the South in its support of Jim Crow laws and white supremacy. Brown established her school at a time when racial uplift became the focus of the national black leadership following Booker T. Washington's much criticized *Atlanta Compromise* speech at the Cotton States Exposition in 1895 and the subsequent publicized debate between African American



Figure 1. *Sedalia, North Carolina* (1929). Mint Museum bequest of Drs. Chris and Marilyn Chapman.

educators, notably Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee Machine, who favored industrial and practical education, and W. E. B. Du Bois and his Talented Tenth, who favored training in the humanities as well as political activism. The Palmer Memorial Institute initially focused on both industrial and academic education, but by the time Jones was hired to establish the art department, a college preparatory curriculum was in place and her training at notable New England art schools was welcomed as was her particular expertise in watercolor and design.

Although unfamiliar with the social and cultural norms of rural North Carolina, Jones nonetheless thrived at Palmer, amidst her first impressions of overt racism and Jim Crow discrimination. She taught courses in drawing, painting, and watercolor with an underlying design focus and immersed herself in the social and extracurricular activities of the school. She coached the women's basketball team, gave dance classes, and played the piano at Sunday religious services and at other social functions. While Jones embraced the economic livelihood that her new position offered on the eve of the Great Depression, she opposed the poverty and disparity in social and economic opportunities for black families while living in the relative comfort of Palmer, or closer to home, her middle-

class upbringing in Boston. Her perhaps distant relationship to the rural surroundings and strivings of the underclass of rural North Carolina can be seen in the two watercolor landscapes *Sedalia, North Carolina* (1929) in Figure 1 and *Negro Shack 1, Sedalia, North Carolina* (1930) in Figure 2. Both paintings depict domestic dwellings from a reserved distance and represent a key site of memory in the African American cultural landscape. In the first, Jones uses shades of emerald green to set the scene for a simple two storey home where a mother and child sit in the front doorway. Four white daisies in the foreground lend perspective as do the shadows cast by the canopy of lush foliage painted overhead with a cubist expressionist flair. It is a tranquil scene reminiscent of the first signs of spring, of rebirth, where the bonds of motherhood emanate with the light that is cast in the foreground. In its stylistic rendering, this work recalls the late 1920s-mid 1930s era paintings done by William H. Johnson in Norway and Paris, where German expressionist influences pervade in his moody landscapes.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas *Sedalia, North Carolina* is painted in prismatic emerald hues, *Negro Shack 1, Sedalia, North Carolina* is rendered in more realistic earth tones. The actual "negro shack," a rustic log cabin with two doorways, one small window and a chimney, appears in a clearing



Figure 2. *Negro Shack 1, Sedalia, North Carolina* (1930). Credit G.R. N'NAMDI Gallery.



surrounded by tall green trees in the background and brown earth with patches of grass and red flowers in the foreground. Red accents focus the eye around the image from a shirt hanging on the clothesline to the far left, to a small ball near a chair and small red flowers in many places. A young boy in blue overalls stands in the doorway to the left while it appears that a young girl in a white shift hides in the shadows of the doorway to the right. This image, like *Sedalia, North Carolina*, hints at the extreme social and economic disparities between the North and the South, while making a case for the ongoing Great Migration. To be sure, both of these images set the scene for Jacob Lawrence's acclaimed *Migration of the Negro Series* (1940-41).<sup>2</sup> Both images, moreover, foreshadow the work of Farm Security Administration photographers from 1935-1942, including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Arthur Rothstein, who captured the social and economic disparities of southern blacks and whites in the midst of the Great Depression and just a few generations removed from slavery.<sup>3</sup> Like their now well-known black and white photographs documenting the Great Depression, Jones's watercolors serve as anthropological landscapes of the historical memory of slavery and reveal key sites of African American historical memory.

Most of all, Jones took a keen interest in her students, their aspirations and their strivings. They symbolized hope and foreshadowed the generations to come of black intellectuals and artists. That she prized the youth of Palmer as the future of the race can be seen in Figure 3 in her acclaimed charcoal drawing, *Negro Youth* (1929), which depicts a pensive young man in profile. His thoughtful gaze is accentuated by the artist's clever use of light and shading, giving a sculptural appearance to the young man's chiseled profile. Light washes his face, while his ear and neck are left in shadow projecting depth and thoughtfulness. Artist Faith Ringgold affirmed that *Negro Youth* "expressed Lois's talent for portraiture and forecast her feeling for the mask, which would become a major force in her art from the sixties on" (3). *Negro Youth* also prefigures Jones's later, three quarter profile portrait of Langston Hughes, who, during the heady years of the Harlem Renaissance, represented the promise of the black writer. The soft and engaging portrait of one of her students in *Negro Youth* won an Honorable Mention at the annual *Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists* held in 1930 by the Harmon Foundation in New York. The Harmon Foundation was established in 1922 on the eve of the New Negro Arts Movement by philanthropist William E. Harmon to support and publicize the work of African American artists. The annual *Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists* was held from 1927-31 and



Figure 3. *Negro Youth* (1929). Credit Smithsonian Art Museum, Bequest of the Artist (November 24, 2006).

in 1933 and 1945. Influential New Negro Arts Movement architect and Howard University intellectual Alain Locke (1885-1954) was on the board of the Harmon Foundation and more than likely encouraged Jones to submit her work to the 1930 Harmon Foundation exhibition. Her subsequent Honorable Mention served as her entrée to the art world.

Indeed, it was through her efforts on behalf of her students at Palmer that Jones moved to Howard University in 1930. The previous year, she invited James V. Herring (1887-1969), then Chair of the Art Department at Howard, to Palmer to view an exhibition of student work and to lecture to her classes. Deeply impressed

by her command of teaching and the successes of her students' work, Herring invited Jones to join the Art Department at Howard as an instructor of design where she remained on faculty for the next 47 years until her retirement in 1977. Howard's international student body and distinguished professors, with representatives from the Caribbean and Africa, appealed to Jones, as did the middle class leanings of this bastion of intellectualism. While geographically situated in the South, Washington nonetheless had the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Jones's Boston. Unquestionably, she benefited from collegial relationships early on with seminal figures in the history of African American art, including Alain Locke (1885-1954), printmaker James Lessene Wells (1902-1969), painter and art historian James A. Porter (1905-1970), and printmaker and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett (born 1915), who was also her student. Moreover, Jones gained experience from her travels abroad to France in the 1930s, where she painted some of her best known post impressionist works, including Parisian street scenes and landmarks, landscapes in the south of France, and her most critically acclaimed painting from the period, *Les Fetiches*





Figure 4. *Jennie* (1943). Reprinted with permission from Howard University, Washington, DC.

(1938), in which five stylized African masks hover dramatically amid a darkened picture plane. But upon her return from France, her subjects took on a more realistic temperament, in part due to the seriousness of the times with WWII weighing heavily on the nation, and in part due to the urgings of Porter and Locke for her to turn her paintbrush to the social reality of the black subject.

In so doing, Jones returned to portraiture with fresh, new ideas and produced four key works of note between 1940 and 1944: *Self-Portrait* (1940); *Jennie* (1943); *Eusébia Cosmé* (1944); and *Mob Victim (Meditation)* (1944). Each painting, in its own way, suggests her growing awareness of black subjectivity, history and identity, evoking ties to the South, West Africa, and the Caribbean as well as connections to racial violence, domesticity, and cultural identity. Each of these portraits, while picturing a black subject in more realistic and closer settings, still employs some of Jones's favorite post-Impressionist techniques, including heavy brush strokes and the thick application of oil paint. In *Self-Portrait* (1940), for instance, she stares directly at the viewer wearing a red blouse and a blue painter's smock. With paint brushes in hand and a canvas to her side, it is

easy to imagine that she is at work in her studio. A relationship is forged between the artist and the two West African statuettes behind her as she paints them and herself presumably from the reflection in a mirror before her. *Self-Portrait* evokes an introspective mood as Jones contemplates her own cultural identity in relationship to the objects around her.

*Jennie* (1943) in Figure 4, shares a similar meditative mood, though one that focuses more closely on the domestic setting and the labor being performed. This tight focus is achieved in the close cropping of the image and the focus of Jennie's downcast eyes on the knife that she is using to clean the fish in front of her. Jones's gentle warmth encapsulates Jennie's brown skin as light touches the bridge of her nose and her golden blouse and apron, which seem to cast a subtle glow upon her forearms. The entire kitchen is awash with yellow, including the cupboards and cabinets behind her and the lemons on the table in front of the water jug. The fourteen year-old Jennie was a student in Jones's Saturday Morning Art Class, which she taught from her home in Washington in the early 1940s along with her friend, Céline Tabary, whom she met in Paris. *Jennie* is an important social document of domestic labor that glorifies its subject through the use of bold color and brilliant light. Jennie is ennobled in the work she does.

Jones enjoyed a life-long interest in dance and performance and these interests influenced the subject and style of her paintings. Her earliest theatrical designs were made when she was still a student in Boston as an apprentice for costume designer Grace Ripley in the 1920s. A decade later, while studying mask design at Columbia University, she created the costumes for Asadata Dafora's (1890-1965) dance drama *Kykunkor* performed in Harlem in 1934. Jones also was a great fan of modern American choreographers Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), who became known for her anthropological work in Haiti, and Pearl Primus (1919-1994), who promoted African dance in the United States and took up themes of racial oppression, violence, and black heritage in the 1940s. Jones's glowing portrait of *Eusébia Cosmé* (1944) celebrates her Afro-Cuban roots and effervescent personality. Star of the stage and screen, Cosmé came to the United State in the late 1930s and became known for her elaborate costumes and her unique Afro-Antillian performances of poetry by Luis Pales Matos, Nicolas Guillén and Langston Hughes.

The portrait of *Eusébia Cosmé* is bright and upbeat. She smiles pleasantly as she sits with her hands crossed in the lap of her light yellow, ruffled dress. Yellow flowers on her dress complement the yellow flowers in her hair, gold baubles and colorful bracelets. Behind her in the distance



Figure 5. *Mob Victim (Meditation)* (1944). Reprinted with permission from the Stella Jones Gallery.

a vibrant group of dancers are caught in mid-performance. This portrait looks forward to Jones's later work derived from her first hand experiences in Haiti and West Africa, where her color palate becomes bolder, if not indicative of warmer climes, yet the expressionist style and heavy application of oil paint is characteristic of her work in the 1940s.

In contrast to the warmth of *Jennie* or the energy of *Eusébia Cosmé*, *Mob Victim (Meditation)* (1944) in Figure 5 shows the solemn reserve of a man waiting to be lynched as he contemplates his fate. The victim, whose hands are bound by rope, is surrounded by a dark and ominous rural setting closely cropped by bare tree trunks on either side and wisps of curling, gathering clouds at the top. Dignified, he looks upwards to heaven as if to ask for a reprieve from God. But he is trapped in a foreboding setting symbolizing a mob gathering to witness a lynching. In fact, Jones first painted the condemned man with a noose around his neck, according to her biographer Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, but the rope was later removed since Jones felt it was too direct, too brutal (51). Violent scenes such as

these were publicized in real photographic postcards taken by observers, who were members of the lynch mob, and sent through the US mail. But in 1908, the US Postal Service banned sending such brutal material, though this restriction was never properly enforced and postcards with photographs of such atrocities continued to be sent regularly in the mail through the end of World War II by individuals who viewed lynching as if it were a spectator sport.<sup>4</sup> Examining *Mob Victim (Meditation)* closely, it is not hard to imagine that Jones may have seen one of these disturbing images or heard something of mob violence and lynching during her years at Palmer Memorial Institute. Indeed, former student, Elizabeth Catlett, and her contemporary, Jacob Lawrence, created similar scenes of mob violence and lynching in the 1940s, providing their own views on this universal theme in African American art.<sup>5</sup>

Undeniably, Jones kept a close ear to what was going on around her politically, and when the Black Arts Movement began in the mid-1960s with "Black Pride," "Black is Beautiful," and "Black Power" as popular slogans, she, along with her students and other faculty at Howard University, became a part of the movement with their art. As she stated in her class notes, now archived at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University,

The Black Arts Movement was realized by members of the art faculty at H.U. Prof. James Wells, James Porter and I. We were pioneers in introducing the movement among our students, Elizabeth Catlett, Malkia, Delilah Pierce and others. With the assassination of Martin Luther King the Black Arts Movement launched on an intensified momentum, which resulted in nationwide presentations of "Black Art Shows." Black artists were determined to establish their identity and to offer to the black community an art which reflected customs, traditions and the beauty of black people. Black owned galleries throughout the nation were established, galleries which offered the black artist exposure and a market for his work. As a result of this intensified movement, black businesses emerged as patrons of the arts. (Battle and Wells 191)

Jones's special contribution to the Black Arts Movement can be found in her long-standing dedication to the art of classical and contemporary Africa and its Diaspora, particularly in Haiti and in the United States visualized, as we have seen, in her Southern paintings. Even prior to the mid-1960s, af-





Figure 6. *Street Vendors, Haiti* (1978). Reprinted with permission from the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust.

ter her 1953 marriage to Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, Jones frequently lectured, taught, and painted in Haiti, where her palette changed, quickly soaking up the rays of bright sunshine and vibrant presence of African culture in the marketplace, in the faces of people, and in the spirituality of their religious practices and rituals. Her Haitian paintings produced there were more geometrical, almost cubist, yet abstract with flat, hard edges that boldly claimed the proud history of Haiti as the first independent

African nation in the West. No doubt, Jones found a spiritual home in Haiti, where she felt closest to Africa. Many of her works painted there in the 1960s share a sense of movement with African dance and religious processions and ritual practices. In fact, as she affirmed, "The art of Africa is lived in the daily life of the people of Haiti."

Symbols, such as the ideographic writing called *vèvé* which acts as a beacon for the spirits in the ceremonial rites of Haitian Vodou, and related masking traditions, made their way into some of the more abstract paintings that Jones created in Haiti like *Vèvé Vodou II* (1962) and *Vèvé Vodou III* (1963). Leslie Judd Portner, writing for the *Washington Post* observed, "Lois Mailou Jones is moving from an impressionist technique to one with strongly accented patterns... *Voudou* is an oil collage in a sophisticated cubist manner." Jones's background in design combined with her innate sensibility for the texture and weight of fabric produced such rhythmic and colorful paintings as *Les Vendeuses de Tissus* (1961)

and *Street Vendors, Haiti* in (1978) seen in Figure 6. Both works project the perpetual motion of commerce through the draping of fabric, the movement of vendors, and the balancing of head burdens. Shadows cast upon cobblestone streets drawn in angular fashion retrace the depth and three-dimensionality of cubist works of an earlier era. Jones's first Haitian paintings received rave reviews in her 1966 solo exhibition at Galerie Soulanges in Paris, where they were noted for their verve, abundance of color and cubist style (Michel). *Street Vendors, Haiti* also recalls her earlier works from the South, including *Sedalia North Carolina*, for its cubist style, and *Negro Shack*, which uses bold accents of red to highlight the depth of field and call attention to the clothes hanging on the line.

The artists and intellectuals who led the Black Arts Movement set their eyes on Africa and many of them traveled there to increase their understanding of their black identity through its art, history, culture and literature. Among them were poet and playwright Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka), poet Maya Angelou, artists Delilah Pierce, John Biggers, James A. Porter, Tom Feelings, Jeff Donaldson and David Driskell, and architect J. Max Bond. Jones would not be left out of the exodus to the motherland. Seizing the vibrant moment of heightened black consciousness, Jones designed an extensive three-part research project in 1968 called "The Black Visual Arts" to document contemporary African Diaspora art of Haiti, Africa, and the United States in interviews, as well as photographs and slides. Supported by Howard University, Jones traveled to Haiti in 1968; and visited eleven African nations in 1970 (Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal); and nine others in 1972 (Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, Nigeria, Dahomey and Ghana). She amassed a collection of more than 1,000 slides and scores of hours of interviews with contemporary artists. As Jones explained, "The slides will be used for lectures, to show the students, the faculties, the community and anyone in the United States . . . what is really being done by black artists all over the world" (Oyekola 28).

Jones was especially impressed with the art schools that she visited, including the School of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum, Sudan, the artists of the Oshogbo School in the Yoruba region of Nigeria and the Manufacture Nationale de Tapisserie in Thiès, Senegal. As an African American cultural ambassador in Africa, Jones thrived on this artistic exchange and arranged to lecture on the simmering Black Arts Movement and the history of African American art in many of the countries she visited. She believed that "there should be an exchange of works between

African artists and Afro-American artists . . . and vice versa." (28). Upon her return to the United States, she shared the riches of her research by organizing exhibitions, lecturing, teaching new techniques, and by making the research materials she amassed available to her students and others.

Undeniably, the South—as place, as idea, as memory—in its many different guises and permutations powerfully influenced the work of Loïs Mailou Jones. The long-lasting effects of the Atlanta Compromise contributed to her landing her first job in the South—in Sedalia, North Carolina. Although there is little written evidence that she experienced overt racism there, her paintings of the rural dwellings *Sedalia, North Carolina* and *Negro Shack* point to her awareness of not only the difference in socioeconomic status that the two works seem to picture but also her familiarity with the "Southern Negro shack" as a site of memory in African American history. Back in Washington, her portraits of black subjects, also exude a prescient awareness of the impending civil rights movement. To be sure, she was deeply affected by the Society of Washington Artists' exclusion of blacks from their annual awards show. Of major historical importance, Jones broke the color line by having her friend Céline Tabary submit *Indian Shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts* (1940), which Loïs painted in Martha's Vineyard, for this competition. When she won the Robert Wood Bliss prize for landscapes in 1941, Jones was not present to receive the award which was subsequently mailed to her. Her portraits from this period in Washington assert her awareness of her transnational Southern black Atlantic identity. Moreover, her later travels to Haiti and West Africa reflect Jones's understanding of and affinity for the African Diaspora, and this reflected in the changes that take place in her color palate and the flat, energetic, design-focused style that permeates her work from the late 1950s onwards. Throughout her career, the South was a catalyst for Loïs Mailou Jones making an indelible impression on her aesthetic choices.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: the Art and Life of William H. Johnson*. Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> In 1940–41, Jacob Lawrence produced his critically acclaimed 60 panel tempera painting series, *The Migration of the Negro*, which was purchased by the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC and the Whitney Museum in New York. Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed. *Jacob Lawrence: the Migration Series*. (Washington, DC: The Rappahannock Press in association with the Phillips Collection, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936); Walker Evans's *Negro Church* (1935); and Arthur Rothstein's *Gee's Bend* (1940) Washington DC: Library of Congress; Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Black and White Photograph Collection, Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>4</sup> James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth Catlett's linocut, *Civil Rights Congress* (1949), Art Institute of Chicago, Prints and Drawings Collection. [http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184340?search\\_id=1](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184340?search_id=1); and Jacob Lawrence's gouche, Plate 15, "Another Cause was Lynching," from *The Migration of the Negro Series* (1940–41). Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed. *Jacob Lawrence: the Migration Series*. (Washington, DC: The Rappahannock Press in association with the Phillips Collection, 1993).

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