



Lois in her studio. Reprinted with permission from the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust.

“Full Circle”: An Interview with Dr. Chris Chapman, Executive Trustee, Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust

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On September 22, 2011, I interviewed Dr. Chris Chapman, Executive Trustee of the Lois Mailou Jones and Pierre-Noël Trust, when he was at the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in Laurel, Mississippi to deliver the opening presentation at the Lois Mailou Jones Exhibition which was on display for six weeks, September 22 to November 6, 2011. An anesthesiologist, Dr. Chapman was Jones’s godson as well as her confidant for many years and has authored an essential guide to her life and work, *Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Color* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007).

PCK: In the preface to your book, you say that Lois gave you a “nine year graduate course in art history.” Would you tell us how she did that?

CC: When my wife Marilyn and I met first with Lois, she gave us a tour of her home to see if we wanted to rent the guest house which included access to the basement and the entire house. My wife came back and said you’re going to love this house; she has paintings on all the walls. I said if you like it, we will move in.

When I met Lois, she told me she was a famous artist and I would be the man of the house, to take care of the car, the yard, and deal with any men that came to the house because her husband had passed away in 1982. I agreed and left for work at Georgetown Hospital. When I returned later that day, I found cameras and TV trucks outside Lois’s home and when I went inside she invited me to sit down and listen while she

was being interviewed by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, a reporter for the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour on PBS and also known as the woman who desegregated the University of Georgia in 1961. After the interview, Loïs said, "Do you believe me now, Chris?" and I replied, "Yes I believe you and I have the utmost respect for you."

Loïs, the professor she was, said, "I will teach you the history of each painting as they hang in the house, then on trips to the Island [Martha's Vineyard where Loïs's family owned a home], I will teach you history from my perspective of art exhibitions. When you first walk into the house, you see *Monsieur Cadet Jeremie*, an oil painting that I did of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Haiti. This canvas represents security for me and a man protecting the home." The care that Loïs took in placing her works in different rooms was a revelation to me, but I later learned that she thought of all her works as her children and she was very interested who bought them and where they went.

In her foyer hung *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, a reminder of her mentor Meta Warrick Fuller, whose life-sized statue, *The Awakening of Ethiopia*, showed an African American woman unwrapping herself from mummy-like bandages. Also in the foyer, Loïs kept strong paintings like *Bebella* and *Still Life with Fish*. In the dining room, where Loïs spent most of her time, there were street scenes from Paris, which reminded her of the freedom she had to paint such scenes of the city. Loïs also had four still-life paintings in the dining room to represent the impressionist inspired works she did at the Académie Julian during her first Howard University sabbatical in Paris in the 1930s. But in the living room, she always kept her strongest, most emotional painting, *Mob Victim (Meditation)*. The living room was surrounded by two other smaller rooms, one for her Haitian art and one for the African art, which symbolized the ties and love she had for those regions.

My art history lessons continued, then, when we packed her car with paintings for the 10-hour car ride to Martha's Vineyard. The first couple of years I would drive and just listen to Loïs teaching me about art. The conversations were so important and fact-filled that we started recording our sessions over the years. These conversations would always start with Loïs discussing her communications with Hale Woodruff, Romare Bearden and his wife, John Biggers, Augusta Savage, Jacob Lawrence, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Locke, pioneers in charting black history.

PCK: Loïs's works are displayed in galleries, museums, exhibits, art institutes, homes of presidents, etc. all over the world. Would you point out a few of the places and people that have honored her and her art.

CC: Many heads of state own Loïs's paintings. Hillary and Bill Clinton own *Breezy Day at Gay Head* (1940), and former French president Jacques Chirac has *Le Jardin du Luxembourg* (1938). She painted African and Haitian heads of state as well. A number of prominent African Americans have also acquired her work, including Michael Jordan and Bill Cosby. And among the many famous museums that displayed Loïs's work are The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, The National Museum of American Art, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Smithsonian Institute. But the list could go on and on. Her work can also be found in a number of colleges and universities, including Howard University, Hampton University (Virginia), Fisk University, and Atlanta University.

PCK: Loïs was a pioneer in the arts and civil rights. How did she challenge and change the prejudices against African American artists having their work excluded from galleries and museums, and in shows, for competition?

CC: Starting in 1922, and for about 30 years, The William E. Harmon Foundation was the only institution that encouraged African Americans to submit their art for exhibition and awards. One of Loïs's colleagues at Howard University, James Wells, convinced her to submit *Negro Youth, 1929*, a portrait of one of her Palmer students, and it received honorable mention. Mary Beattie Brady, Harmon Foundation Director, also encouraged Loïs to paint various scenes in Europe during her sabbatical from Howard. Loïs said the Barnett-Aden Gallery, a private gallery in Washington DC, started by Professor James V. Herring from Howard University, was very important in terms of offering African American exhibitions. The gallery asked artists to donate works to organize an exhibition, and Loïs donated her favorite painting *Green Apples*, and Céline Tabary, her close friend in France, donated *Eskimo Man* to the collection. The Barnett-Aden Gallery had also welcomed guests like Madame Lillian Evanti and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The collection from the Gallery eventually went to Adolphus Ealey who then sold it to BET Founder, Bob Johnson.

When Loïs returned to Washington in 1938 from Paris, she was challenged to find wider recognition for her work. Paris had been color-blind, and African art was all the rage. In Paris, an artist simply sent work to an exhibition and no one asked if the artist was male, female, black, or white. In America, however, a black artist could not crate and send his/her works to a gallery. Loïs knew she had to win some competitions to make her name known. Helped by her friend from the Académie Julian, Céline Tabary, Loïs used the same simple strategy of submitting a painting with Céline's name as the artist. When a painting was sent by a white person, no questions were asked. For the Corcoran Gallery's annual show in 1940, Céline submitted Loïs's Martha's Vineyard landscape called *Indian Shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts*, and won the Robert Woods Bliss Award, which was Loïs's first major prize. But she was not ready to reveal her identity and asked that the prize be mailed to her. At other times, Loïs would send her works to museums and not claim the prize, afraid that they would withdraw the award if they knew she was black. But after she had won several awards, she felt she could come forward and not risk a rejection because of discrimination. Sometimes, too, she would ship her work to exhibitions where it was assumed she was white, and her work would be judged in a color-blind competition. This practice went on for a little while until she had amassed enough awards and praise to feel that she could compete on an equal plane as an artist. Loïs's coming out in this way helped end discrimination against black artists.

In the fall of 1994, Loïs's touring exhibition *The World of Loïs Mailou Jones* was displayed at the Corcoran, along with a celebration of her 89th birthday. The chief curator publicly apologized for the way she had been treated as a young artist and declared that her work "had entered the canon of noteworthy art of our time." It was a very satisfying moment for Loïs, and I was happy to be there to see it.

PCK: In addition to being a pioneer in the art world, she was a friend to and painted portraits of important figures in the literary world, e.g., Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, etc. Would you tell us about her friendships with these writers, e.g., any stories, events that might shed light on her knowledge of their work or how they may have influenced her?

CC: Zora Neale Hurston, another leader of the Harlem Renaissance and a prolific writer, studied with Alain Locke whom Loïs knew from The

Harmon Foundation and who was also a colleague of hers at Howard. In 1944, he would change the direction of Loïs's palette when he told her she would use one of her impressionist Paris works in his upcoming book, but he encouraged her to do more with the black subjects—"All of you artists have got to do something about this movement. You've got to contribute as artists." This advice resulted in her creating one of her most powerful works—*Mob Victim (Meditation)*—in 1944. Hurston was an expert on Haiti and voodoo symbols, which she and Loïs often discussed. Loïs and Langston Hughes were also connected through Carter C. Woodson. Loïs illustrated books and magazines for Woodson, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. in history, and the influential publisher of the *Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin* for teachers. In 1939, Loïs illustrated his *African Heroes and Heroines*. Woodson's Black History Week had expanded into Black History Month, and he gave Loïs credit for assisting him with that early endeavor. Hughes also wrote for Carter Woodson. Interestingly, Hughes and Loïs were in Paris at the same time. They collaborated on an illustrated poem called *Parisian Beggar Woman, 1938*. Loïs also knew Romare Bearden. She would like to tell how he would call her, saying he was in New York City, walking the beat to sell his art and she had the good life teaching at Howard University, and that she should come to New York and go to galleries as he did to sell her works. Loïs's response was she loved teaching. Not surprisingly, Loïs had a huge book collection, including works written by friends such as Carter Woodson, Alice Walker, Bearden, all given to her, with inscriptions.

PCK: Loïs was incredibly prolific and painted so many different landscapes—from Martha's Vineyard to North Carolina to France to Haiti to Africa. How might you catalogue or organize her work into periods?

CC: Loïs Jones's life spanned many of the historical events of the 20th century. To understand the changes she encountered, it does help to divide her life into significant periods, along with highlights from each period. She was born in Boston in 1905. She went to a vocational high school for the arts and then to School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on a scholarship for four years. Afterwards, she received a graduate scholarship to attend the Designers' Art School in Boston. Her studies there led her to be a textile designer from 1927 to 1928 for Schumacher Company in New York, and the F.A. Foster Company in New York and Boston. Recalling this period of her life, she told me: "The designs were printed and sold all over the USA but my name was never mentioned. As it was

my wish to go down in history as a 'painter,' I decided to 'PAINT.' I told you several times that the managers in New York wanted to meet the designer. So while in New York, I took the elevator upstairs to meet the managers, and when I got off the elevator, if you could have seen the look on the faces of those people, you would have thought a major crisis was going on. I smiled and got in my car to drive back to Boston. On my way through Rhode Island, I saw my prints on some couches and chairs in a decorator's showroom window; I jumped out of the car, ran inside and told the manager 'I did that!' He said, 'You could not have done that—you're colored.' I knew from that day on I would sign anything I created. I would continue to travel to the Vineyard every summer with my family and paint with watercolors which were my pet medium."

In 1929, her teaching career began. As she said, "She went south and started her teaching career at Palmer Memorial Institute for Charlotte Hawkins Brown. That was during the Great Depression and she was glad to have a job. She recalled, "I created works like *Negro Youth*—one of my students who dressed well and looked very thoughtful. My painting *Brother Brown* showed how people in the South live in certain regions." In 1930, she was hired by Howard University where she taught for 47 years. From this period of her life, she recalled, "Chris, you know the pay was less at Howard and I decided to make the transition anyway, but, I thought after all those years, I would be chairman of the department and I will not speculate on what held me back."

Nevertheless, Loïs endowed Howard with 65 percent of her trust distribution. Among the most significant time in Loïs's career was the Howard University sabbatical leave in 1937-1938. Loïs traveled to France to attend the Académie Julian, and one of the first paintings she completed at the Parisian school was *La Mère*, then *Cauliflower and Pumpkin*, which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Art critics at that time said Loïs's "subject matter landscapes, still lifes, and street scenes were the model of Paul Cezanne's" work. During that same period, Loïs's aesthetic voice was found in Impressionism. As I said earlier, Paris had no racial barriers; African Americans, consequently, came to Paris for the freedom. Loïs saw an exhibition of Picasso's African masks and she thought, "That's my heritage." And so she painted *Les Fétiches* (1938), which consists of masks and ritualistic objects, a complete departure for an impressionist painter. She also painted her friend, exotic dancer Josephine Baker, who was the toast of Paris. Loïs recalled she would go to the theatre with Baker and people would come

up to her and the famous black dancer and would ask if she was a dancer, too, and Loïs would say no, but I know her. Loïs had wanted to meet the famous artist Henry O. Tanner but he passed before she arrived in Paris. She did meet Émile Bernard who invited her and her classmate Céline to all his social events at his home in Paris. Bernard was a friend of Van Gogh's and Gauguin's, and kept their reputations alive by publishing his correspondence with them after their deaths. In one letter to Loïs, after she left Paris, he wrote, "You are a remarkably gifted artist and I hope that you will have the power to fully mature and achieve your own style without letting yourself be influenced by *fashion* . . ."

The years 1939-1944 were crucial for Loïs as well. Breaking the color barrier in Washington, DC, she made some dramatic changes in the segregated art world. Her *Indian Shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts* (1940) won a Corcoran Gallery prize and was exhibited. Alain Locke, who had encouraged her to focus on black subjects, resulted in paintings such as *Jennie* (1943), *Mob Victim (Meditation)* (1944), and the *Pink Table Cloth* (1944).

In 1953, Loïs married Louis Pierre-Noël, a Haitian artist, and another chapter of her life began with her travels to Haiti. In 1954, the style of Loïs's work changed. Her paintings like *Marche, Haiti* (1963) used bright colors to show the colorful life of the people in town centers, on rooftops, and in the markets selling cloth. Between 1971-1980, Loïs also traveled to 11 African countries to meet artists and learn the culture. She painted works like *Ubi Girl from Tai Region* (1972), which hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and *Damballah* (1980), which was recently purchased by the Hunter Museum.

In 1989-1997, she came "Full Circle," to quote her phrase. In 1989, at 84 years old, Loïs traveled to Paris to see if she could return to create landscapes and still lifes as she had done in Paris fifty years before. She returned with colorful and gorgeous works like *Nature Morte aux Melon* (1989). I remember her saying, "Chris, why don't you go to Paris with me and I will introduce you to Céline?" Because my schedule at the hospital was very heavy, I could not make the trip. But Loïs called from Paris and said Céline was ill and could not travel with her to paint but that was not a problem. At 84 she rented a car, a Renault, and traveled around Paris alone to complete "Full Circle." She became even more popular in the years after that, claiming that "At 90, I arrived." She had achieved her life's ambition of becoming known as an artist.

PCK: I believe one of her paintings—*Vévé Voudou III* (1963)—is being used for an HBO series—*Treme*—which concentrates on post-Katrina New Orleans. Why do you think this specific work of Loïs's was chosen?

CC: *Vévé Voudou III*, a collage 37" x 45," was hanging in a restaurant in the French Quarter when the producers of *Treme* saw it. They immediately thought of the Haitian and French connections to New Orleans, primarily through the history of France and the Louisiana Purchase, and the immigration of Haitians to New Orleans. Loïs's painting evoked the mythos, history, and vibrancy of the city for the producers and captured the themes and symbols they wanted to present in *Treme*.

PCK: Did Loïs keep any diaries, notebooks, collections of letters that might help us further understand and appreciate her immense body of work?

CC: Yes, Loïs was a natural at documenting her life. Her papers at Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center fill 80 boxes. She also gave me all of her notes from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from 1923-1924, called "The History of Design," which shows her sketching all the art works in the Museum. She went to art exhibitions and museums around the world and sketched and annotated from early in her career. For instance, she sketched the passengers, crew and scenes on the *S.S. Normandie* as she traveled to Paris in September of 1937. Those previously unpublished sketches were found at Céline's not long ago, and I was able to include some of them in my book. Loïs also wrote letters to her mother and Céline which provide a great number of details that relate to her work. The Howard archives also contain boxes of her teaching materials, clipping files, scrapbooks, photographs, travels with her husband Pierre. It's a wonderful collection that needs to be shared.

PCK: What artists do you think most significantly influenced her work?

CC: Loïs said Meta Warrick Fuller, a pioneer sculptor, greatly inspired her and encouraged her to go to Paris to study art. Fuller had studied in Paris and worked with Rodin. Fuller's sculpture *The Awakening of Ethiopia* (1914), which symbolizes her African heritage, hangs in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in the New York Pub-

lic Library. Another artist of the Harlem Renaissance, whose color and technique greatly inspired Loïs, was Aaron Douglas, the designer and painter of the murals in the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library.

PCK: Which modern artists did Loïs most inspire?

CC: She had so many students. Elizabeth Catlett may be one of the most famous. She also thought very highly of Dr. David Driskell and asked him to be on the board of her Trust. Driskell, who is the curator for Bill Cosby, wrote this tribute on October 26, 1994 to Loïs "Dear Loïs, Thanks for the many years of mentoring, encouragement and love. You always believed in me and supported my artistry. May God continue to bless you richly in the years ahead. Love, David C. Driskell." For the Howard University Charter Day, February 14, 2005, he cited Loïs's many students who went on to famous careers: "The work of many of her former students has been lauded in art circles around the globe among which are Elizabeth Catlett, Earl Hooks, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Sylvia Snowden, Lou Stovall, and Franklin White, among others." Another one of Loïs's students, Cecilia Washington, paid Loïs this tribute, to her on her 89th birthday at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC: "Because of you, these photos share a taste of my success with you. Through these companies, you helped me reach my goals—Hallmark Card Company, Walt Disney World, ARA Services, and Universal Studios, Florida, etc. The beginning is the result of the end and the end is the result of a new beginning." Another "Full Circle" in Loïs's remarkable life.

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