

## **Patterns of Change: the Work of Loïs Mailou Jones** **By Catherine Bernard, Ph.D.**

Loïs Mailou Jones' artistic development is intimately connected to her exposure to diverse cultures. The following brief survey of a career that spanned over six decades is an attempt to uncover the complexity of Jones' creative development and to examine some of the artistic and political choices she made in direct relation to her travels to Europe, Haiti and the African continent. In fact, crucial stylistic changes occurred as she integrated the knowledge and experience gathered through her exposure to these different cultures, and her canvases reflect her enduring passion for people and places.

Throughout the history of African-American art, a number of intellectuals, activists and artists traveled to Europe, Africa and the Caribbean and encountered new cultural environments. The chief motivation was to escape segregation and racism and to have the opportunity to explore new creative paths and materials in a friendlier atmosphere. In this regard, Jones' itinerary is exemplary. She found herself at the crossroads of some the most influential movements of the 20th century: the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights movements, Pan-Africanism. She participated in each of these movements while challenging herself by renewing her artistic choices continuously.

### **Modernism, the Harlem Renaissance and Europe**

*I love people and places so that the desire to travel began very early with me.<sup>1</sup>*

The very first time Loïs Jones felt the desire to travel abroad was after one of her conversations with sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller. She had met Fuller along with musician and composer Harry T. Burleigh during vacations on Martha's Vineyard in the early 1920's. During a conversation, Warrick Fuller advised her to go abroad if she wanted to achieve some level of artistic recognition.

*When Meta told me she had met Rodin and worked in his studio, I was inspired to no end, and I made up my mind very definitely –that's what I am going to do: I am going to France to study.<sup>2</sup>*

Consequently, she arrived in France in 1937 and stayed there for a year, on a General Education Board Fellowship, for what she described as one of the most fruitful episodes in her career.

In going to France, she followed in the steps not only of Meta Warrick Fuller but also of another famous African-American expatriate, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and like him, enrolled at the Académie Julian, upon her arrival in Paris. She planned on meeting him and receiving his advice, but Tanner had passed away three months before her arrival so she never met him. She recalled going to the Luxembourg Museum to see his work which gave her the hope to one day become as successful.<sup>3</sup> Many other Harlem Renaissance artists undertook the trip to France in the 1920's and 30's seeking to

escape segregation and racism at home and develop their artistic education in places like the Académie Julian or the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, both traditional art schools.<sup>4</sup> They wanted to immerse themselves in the artistic atmosphere of Paris, which, at the time, was still considered capital of the arts. Indeed, the School of Paris between the two World Wars was an important gathering of international artists, who worked in close proximity and created an atmosphere of creative productivity.

During her one-year stay, Loïs Jones met other artists. Among them, Emile Bernard left a lasting impression. She met him as she was painting outdoors on the bank of the River Seine. After they got acquainted, he generously gave her advice and support and allowed her and fellow artist Celine Tabary<sup>5</sup> to drop off their heavy paint boxes and materials in his studio at Pont-Marie, near the Seine. He also invited them to his *soirées*, which gathered artists, writers, and musicians and this helped Jones to develop the feeling of belonging to a community and a stronger sense of artistic identity. She also befriended Albert Smith, a fellow African-American artist, who had decided to come live in Paris after his release from the army at the end of World War I. They became close friends and gave each other support through their conversations. She preferred Albert Smith's quiet company to that of "the fast crowd," which gathered around jazz musicians and Josephine Baker, who was then performing at the Casino de Paris.

Marie Beatty Brady, the influential director of the Harmon Foundation, had come to visit her in Normandy and had told her in her rather patronizing tone: *Now Loïs, I want you to take your sketchbook and sketch everyday...*

*You know we expect big things of you when you come back, so I want you to be very serious while you are here.*<sup>6</sup> But Loïs Jones didn't need this warning. She was working "furiously" all day long and she produced a substantial amount of work during the year she stayed in Paris.

She painted mostly landscapes in a style that blended impressionism with the realist/academic tradition, as in *Rue Norvins*, *Montmartre*, *Rue St Michel*, or still lifes such as *Chou-Fleur et Citrouille*, or *Tulipes*, she also studied Cézanne for composition and structure. *Les Pommés Vertes* (figure 1), a still life with apples, is reminiscent of the post-impressionist master in the composition and the palette. A photograph of her, painting outdoors, near Notre-Dame, had appeared in *Le Journal des Beaux-Arts*, with a caption saying how much an admirer of Cézanne she must be, because of her painting "Les Pommés Vertes." Jones however denied having any previous knowledge of that painting. Most of the landscapes and still lifes painted during that period were thematically and stylistically conservative and reflected her academic background. She painted outdoors a lot, and her landscapes of the Seine or of the Paris streets reflect her primary concern with capturing the effects of light and colors, which result in impressionistic works.

**FIGURE 1** *Les Pommés Vertes, 1938*

**African Art**

However, with *Les Fétiches* (figure 2), also painted while attending the Académie Julian, Jones broke away from this style. The painting combines cubism with an African theme.<sup>7</sup> Jones had previously incorporated African motifs in *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (figure 3), a painting of 1932. Ethiopia was often used as a symbol for the African continent, and its culture was regarded as one of the most ancient of the African continent. The sculpture by Warrick Fuller: *Ethiopia Awakening*, a bronze of 1914, presented Ethiopia under the guise of a young woman stirring from sleep and dressed in the garb of ancient Egyptians. The sculpture was well known to Jones and Harlem Renaissance artists and is a probable source for Jones' painting. In *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, Jones mixed references to Egypt with African-American culture, and ancient pyramids are paired with the skyscrapers of urban America. These works by Warrick Fuller and Jones echo the early Pan-African ideology of political figures such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois,<sup>8</sup> which prefigures what will become a major component of the Civil Rights movement.

**FIGURE 2 *Ascent of Ethiopia, 1932***

**FIGURE 3 *Les Fétiches, 1938***

*When I arrived in Paris, African art was just the thing. All the galleries and museums were featuring African sculptures, African designs, and I sketched, sketched everything.<sup>9</sup>*

Although specific sources can be recognized,<sup>10</sup> the features and characteristics of the masks are simplified. Jones chose to accentuate the

geometric components and played with strong contrasts of light and shadows to enhance the volume and the depth. Different layers of meaning and references coexist in *Les Fétiches*. The choice of geometric shapes and the monochromatic range of color are reminiscent of Cubism. German Expressionism, more precisely Emil Nolde still lifes of masks, are also referred and show Jones familiarity with various aspects of European Modernism. Jones did sketches for *Les Fétiches* in Paris' African art galleries and the composition reflects the dramatic setting and lighting used to present African art during this period. The title, borrowed from the French, is also consistent with the dramatic description of the masks. The French word *fétiche* refers to objects used in religious practices seen as pagan, and mysterious. The title echoes the image of Africa as the Dark Continent, an image that dominated early 20th century popular imagination as well as the scientific discourse.

The African theme was an important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance theories. The process by which Matisse, Derain, Picasso, the German Expressionists, and many other modern artists had borrowed from African art had been the original input to the renewal of an exhausted European Academism. By integrating African themes and forms to their work, African-American artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Jones, Hale Woodruff, William Johnson, Aaron Douglas among others, reclaimed their own heritage in a conscious process, which Jones clearly explained. When she brought *Les Fétiches* to her professors at the Académie Julian, they criticized the change of style and subject matter from her usual impressionist landscapes and still lifes:

*I had to remind them of Modigliani and Picasso and of all the French artists using the inspiration of Africa, and that if anybody had the right to use it, I had it, it was my heritage, and so they had to give in.*<sup>11</sup>

Another influential work of this period is a portrait: *Jeanne, Martiniquaise* (1938) with which Loïs Jones established a more personal style. The mixture of expressive colors and texture with a strong geometric composition is comparable to the structure in many of Cézanne's paintings, and to African sculpture. Jones' representation of a young Caribbean woman is important as it contributed to the creation of positive images and identity.

When looking back at the year 1937-38, Jones remembered it as one of the happiest of her life; one during which she devoted herself completely to her painting in an atmosphere free of the brutality of segregation, which allowed her to be herself. She recalled, *France gave me my first feeling of absolute freedom.*<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, the Parisian sojourn helped her to better define her style, and to experiment with Modernism and African art first hand. It also contributed to the development of a stronger artistic identity as she felt that she belonged to a community. She had quite a number of exhibitions while she was overseas that doubtlessly contributed to her feeling of success.

Shortly after her arrival, she had brought some of her textile designs to her professors at the Académie Julian who included them in a small exhibition in Asnières, a suburb of Paris. Then in 1938 she exhibited *Les*

*Pommes Vertes* and *La Cuisine Dans l'Atelier de l'Artiste* at the Grand Palais for the Salon de Printemps de la Société des Artistes Français. The latter was favorably reviewed by *Les Beaux-Arts* magazine; she also showed works at the Salon des Indépendants; and in commercial galleries at the Galerie de Paris and Galerie Jean Charpentier.<sup>13</sup>

After her sojourn abroad, Jones' commitment to painting and being an artist was fully established. For the traveler, the return home is often a time of assessment and reflection upon the completed journey. It also often serves as a catalyst for further transformations.

## **Home: Cultural and Social Engagement**

### **Alain Locke**

In the fall of 1938, Jones returned to Howard University and resumed teaching classes in watercolor and design (she had been hired there in 1930). Alain Locke the influential writer, critic, and leader of the Harlem Renaissance, was then Chair of the Philosophy Department at Howard. Shortly after her return, Jones met him on campus and Locke gave her this advice that would prove to be greatly influential. Jones remembered:

*Lois, I like your street scene, the Rue Norvins and I am going to include it in my book [the Negro in Art]. But Lois, you have got to do more with your heritage. Do you realize what it would mean to you? Look what it has meant to Matisse, Modigliani, Brancusi, and he went on, naming all the artists who used African art in their work. 'It would mean so much more to your work, because it's your heritage.'*<sup>14</sup>

Locke's advice was consistent with the position he had advocated in numerous publications since the 1920s position in which he repeatedly asserted the importance of the African cultural heritage in the definition of African-American identity. In May 1924, Locke had published one of his earliest essays on the visual arts: "A Note On African Art"<sup>15</sup> in the second issue of *Opportunity* (the magazine of the National Urban League). In the essay, Locke demonstrated the link existing in African art between aesthetic characteristics and socio-cultural content. This aspect, he argued, gave African art its cohesive force and cultural strength. He also saw African art as a catalyst for a new and more universal aesthetic. He introduced an idea that he will consistently develop in subsequent essays and that he will use in his plea to African-American artists. He sought to define the role African Art played in the formulation of European Modernism. He stressed therefore the necessity for African-American artists to reclaim their own heritage.

*The New Negro* published in 1925 is a collection of writings by scholars, writers, and poets, such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston. Locke who contributed to the book with several essays edited it. In *The Legacy of Ancestral Arts* he strongly demonstrated once more the necessity for African-American artists to appraise the technical and formal strengths of African art: simplicity of conception, design, bold patterns, mastery of tri-dimensionality as well as surface designs. He also analyzed the impact it had on European art:

*If African art is capable of producing the ferment in modern art that it has, surely this is not too much to expect of its influence upon the culturally awakened Negro artist of the present generation.*<sup>16</sup>

*Negro Art Past and Present*, published in 1940, includes Jones' painting *Rue Norvins, Montmartre*, and is an ambitious survey of African-American art that includes historical and pioneer figures of early African-American art as well as contemporary artists. Locke divided these in three categories: Traditionalists, Modernists, and Africanists. He also added a chapter on traditional African arts and again reiterated the importance of African arts in creating an idiom of expression specific to African-American artists that would locate them in the avant-garde of American art. Locke developed a "Negro theme" through which the value and integrity of African-American culture could be acknowledged and that would contest the denigrating caricatures so prevalent then in popular culture.

In these three influential publications, Locke had set the stage for the renewal of styles and themes in African-American art, renewal that was carried on by the artists of the 1920's through the 1940's. Jones contributed to the "Negro theme" and the sense of racial pride with several compositions, among which was *Mob Victim* (figure 4). She painted this seminal work in response to Locke's plea and also because, she explained, she was so saddened upon her return from France to hear endlessly about the lynchings taking place all over the country.

#### **FIGURE 4 *Mob Victim, 1944***

The model used by Jones in *Mob Victim*, originally called: *Meditation* and later renamed, was a homeless man. This man had seen his own brother lynched, a story he told Jones while he was posing for her, making the painting even more poignant.<sup>17</sup> In this work, Jones opted for a figurative style and a simple composition, which allowed her to convey directly the powerful combination of emotions and political content. This painting shifts from decorative still-lives and idyllic landscapes to a socio-political subject. She considered *Mob Victim* a contribution to the protest against racist violence. Emotion is the instrument through which the viewer is confronted with the political reality described. The simple and non-descriptive space makes the image inescapable, its very nakedness emphasizing the violence of the scene. Jones originally had painted a rope around the man's neck, a device she erased afterward. The refusal to dramatize the representation enhances the power of the image, conveyed by the facial expression and hand gesture. Throughout her career, Jones has always been careful to approach such charged content from a personal point of view, to avoid propagandist figuration and didacticism. *Mob Victim* is interwoven with the memory of the model translated into a work speaking of the memory of a community.

Around this time, Jones painted several depictions of African-Americans in various settings, including genre scenes. *Jennie (figure 5)*, represents a young African-American woman cleaning fish; her posture and stern face bring gravity to the task being accomplished and a sense of

dignity to menial work. She remembered how Hale Woodruff took a particular interest in that painting and sold it to the Business Machines Corporation. It was one of her first important sales.<sup>18</sup> As was the case with *Jeanne, Martiniquaise*, the portrait of *Jennie* helped fill the void created by the lack of suitable images representing African-Americans, particularly Black women. Jones remembered how she had to learn how to paint people of color, because she had never been taught how to translate the various shades of brown skins when she was a student or young artist, and how she first learned by painting self portraits.<sup>19</sup> *Eusébia Cosmé* is another portrait, this time of a glamorous Black woman, smiling at the viewer. *The Pink table Cloth* (1944) and *the Banjo Player* (1944) are genre scenes, reminiscent by their subject of Henry Tanner's paintings, and are treated with the same directness and sensitivity as *Mob Victim*, characteristics which are the trademarks of this period. The 1940's marked a turning point for Jones as she matured as an artist and engaged herself politically through the choice of subjects and the manner in which she approached them.

#### **FIGURE 5 *Jennie***

The 1940's were also trying times: Jones experienced the climate of segregation and ostracism that prevailed in the country as she tried to approach galleries to represent her work. After she came back, she went to the galleries on 57<sup>th</sup> street in New York. Art dealers would look at her work and compliment her on her wonderful impressionist style but added: *we won't be able to carry your work because you are colored, we are sorry but we can't do anything for you.*<sup>20</sup>

During that period, however, she began to exhibit widely throughout the United States and started to receive serious critical attention. She was always concerned that because of the prevalent racism, her work would be refused if she submitted it in person. She often mailed her work instead. Once she asked Céline Tabary, —who was then staying in Washington, D.C., prevented from returning to France after a short vacation because of the onset of World War II—to submit a painting in her name at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in 1941. At the time, the Corcoran forbade entries by African-American artists. The painting – *Indian shops, Gay Head, Massachusetts* (1940) — won the Robert Woods Bliss Prize for landscape. However, she had to ask the certificate to be sent by mail, for fear of being refused the honor if she showed up in person.<sup>21</sup>

These circumstances reinforced for Jones the desire to forge ahead and to be recognized. In response to the atmosphere of ostracism and the lack of available exhibition spaces open to African-American artists, she and Céline Tabary started an art group in 1948: “the Little Paris Studio” that gathered artists and art teachers from the D.C. area. The group met weekly and organized annual spring shows, which established a venue for African American-artists in Washington, D.C.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the 1940's, Jones had achieved her goal: she was recognized as an influential artist, her work had received national attention and had been exhibited at major national venues. A personal event, her

marriage with Haitian artist Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, marked another turning point in her career. Through him, she discovered Haiti's art and culture.

## **Haiti and Africa**

*From the first time I visited Haiti, I fell in love with its people and its culture.<sup>23</sup>*

Jones' marriage to Vergniaud Pierre-Noël took place in Celine Tabary's hometown, Cabris, a small southern city in the summer of 1953. During the following years, she made annual trips to Haiti and became quite familiar with its landscapes, people and culture. The colors, tropical flora, light, affected her painting profoundly: she expanded her style into a freer geometric abstraction, and increased the scale of her work and her color palette. This stylistic transformation also allowed her to bridge her passion for design—her first artistic training and successes were in textile design—with the renewal of subject matter freshly inspired by life on the island.

The Haitian period in Jones' career is merged with her discovery of Africa. In her mind, Haiti and Africa were places close in culture and spirit, and she often referred to Haiti as "little Africa." The works of the 1960's Haitian period and those created in the 1970's after her travels to the African continent are comparable with their bold colors, geometry, and simple patterns combined to create a series of strong abstractions. It is although in Haiti that the transformation began.

She first traveled to the island in the summer of 1954, invited by the Haitian president, Paul E. Magliore, to create a series of paintings depicting Haitian life that were exhibited in a solo show the same year in Port-au-Prince. During her stay, she also taught at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince, where she met Haitian artists. So, it was as a well-known artist, sponsored by the Haitian government that Jones first encountered Haiti. It certainly helped her to feel accepted and at home, a feeling she said, she experienced right away.

Jones and Pierre-Noël continued to visit Haiti regularly for three decades. Each visit proved fertile, and a renewed inspiration for Jones.

*It was like learning a new vocabulary: the colors, the patterns, the different cultural traits and practices. You can really see it in the works I painted when we were living in Haiti, starting in 1960, and I have been working in that direction ever since.<sup>24</sup>*

The works completed during her first sojourn on the island are very much a continuation of her earlier work. They are descriptive and use the blend of realism and expressive colors and textures that had become her trademark. *Eglise St Joseph (La Croix Bassale), Haiti (figure 6)*, or *Peasant Girl, Haiti (figure 7)*, both of 1954 represent picturesque scenes typical of her early Haitian period. *Cockfight (1960)* and *Market, Haiti (1960)* show a transitional style, announcing the more drastic alterations to come. In both compositions, abstract geometric elements are combined with bright colors, applied flat on the canvas. The influence of cubism is lingering in both

works, especially in *Cockfight* that is especially —shapes and lettering—reminiscent of cubist collages.

**FIGURE 6** *Eglise St. Joseph (La Croix Bassale), Haiti, 1954*

**FIGURE 7** *Peasant Girl, Haiti, 1954*

Jones however moved away from the remnants of her formative years and the European period and evolved a dramatic personal interpretation of the Haitian life and landscapes. In *Les Vendeuses de Tissus* (1960), the new, brilliantly colored style fully emerged. The painting is composed like a frieze and strong rhythms are created by the contrast of bright colors, black and white, and the linear geometric patterns especially present in the textiles. This painting seems to reflect an ease of execution and a lightness of rendering that make it a visual feast. Similar elements can be found in many works of the period such as: *Bazar du Quai, Haiti* (1961) *Marché, Haiti*, (1963). Also apparent in the works of the Haitian period is her fluency in design and composition, both of which go back to her early years as textile designer.

In *Vévé Vaudou III* (figure 8) painted in 1963, she superimposed symbols and objects used in *Vaudou* rituals with vévé drawings, used during ceremonies to call upon and represent the divinities –loas– of the *Vaudou* pantheon.<sup>25</sup> The use of mixed media and collage in these works allowed her to play with abstract shapes and varied textures. The technique echoes cubist collages and the *vaudou* ceremonies themselves, during which drawings, flags, bright colors, and shimmering materials are brought together.

**FIGURE 8 *Vévé Vaudou III, 1963***

Jones' interest in *Vaudou* and in many other aspects of Haitian traditional life is important for two reasons. First it demonstrates her growing interest in the African sources of African-American culture, a reflective process that had started with the acknowledgment of African art but certainly resurfaced with a renewed vitality during that time, when she became close to Haitian culture. It is fundamental in her personal and artistic development as the further transformations of her painting in the 1970's clearly establish.

The second reason is the possible link between the new style and themes and the Caribbean Indigenist movement, better known in literature, but also important to the visual arts. Indigenism started in the 1920's and has links with the Négritude movement of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sedar Senghor. It can be briefly defined as a cultural reorientation and renovation in Caribbean arts, that rejected the European dominated official modes of expression and proposed a reevaluation of traditional cultural lore: folktales, legends, traditional subjects, religious beliefs etc... with an emphasis on the specific Caribbean historical and cultural environment. This movement, although present throughout the French and English speaking Caribbean, was especially vigorous in Haiti. Writers, artists, and historians often see Haiti as the birthplace of a Caribbean consciousness, of which Indigenism is a fundamental component.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of Jones' first sojourn in the island, Indigenism was fully established and she had to be aware of it, especially through her connection to the Centre d'Art of Port-au-Prince. One artist, Pétion Savain, was amongst the first to respond visually to the ideas of Indigenism. His follower George Ramponeau also contributed to Indigenism with works describing Haitian life: market scenes, landscapes, and genre painting. Both artists were well known in the 1950's and 1960s. Indigenism in Haiti suffered a drastic transformation and became touristy, easy to digest folklore under the dictatorship of the Duvaliers and the Tontons Macoutes, in power from 1957 to 1986. Jones' stylistic renewal it can be argued was linked to the prevalence of Indigenist theories and is reflected in her paintings of the period, particularly those portraying market scenes and *Vaudou* themes.

### **Further transformations**

From April to June 1970, Jones traveled to Africa and visited 11 countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Zaire, Nigeria, Mahoney, Ghana, the Ivory Cost, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. Funded by a Howard University grant, this research trip allowed her to gather visual and biographical materials on contemporary African arts and artists. She compiled extensive documentation that she presented to Howard University. She would return several times: in the summer of 1972; in 1976 at the invitation of Léopold Sedar Senghor; in 1977, she exhibited at FESTAC, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Cultures in Nigeria, an exhibition that gathered all the important names in the arts of the African Diaspora.

The research activities of Jones should be briefly underlined here. Throughout her career, but especially during the Haitian and African periods,

Jones researched extensively the visual arts from the Caribbean and Africa. In 1968, she had started “The Black Visual Arts” project, funded by Howard University. Completed in 1976, it comprised more than a thousand slides and other documents on contemporary artists in Africa, Haiti and the United States. This project started as a documentation of Haitian contemporary arts and developed into a larger research project including contemporary African arts. Another research grant from Howard University in 1973 allowed her to focus on Black women artists from the Caribbean and the United States. These activities proved to gather invaluable research materials and helped establish the visibility and importance of contemporary arts of the African Diaspora.

The Pan-African context of this period provides clues to Jones’ works of the 1970’s and indeed is an intrinsic part of her artistic development during these years. The political situation and the conflicts in the United States and on the African continent demonstrated the need for political and cultural solidarity between the members of the African Diaspora to gather support for the anti-colonial wars in Africa and the fight for Civil Rights in the United States and the Caribbean. Through her travels to African countries, Jones was immersed in a political and cultural climate that she integrated in her painting.

*I was privileged to see our ancestral arts in their original settings as well as in museums and galleries and to visit the studios of leading contemporary African artists. The trip also gave me a clearer picture of how African art has influenced the Afro-American artist.*

*My work reflected the powerful influence of this association. By combining the motifs from various regions of Africa, I try to explore on canvas a sense of the underlying unity of all of Africa.*<sup>27</sup>

**FIGURE 9 *Moon Masque, 1971***

When she came back from her first trip in the summer of 1970, she locked herself up in her Haitian studio and started what is known as the “African Series.” The nearly 50 paintings are painted in acrylic, a medium better suited to the resolutely flat compositions and bold designs of these works, and can be considered as Jones most ambitious and daring body of work. *Moon Masque (figure 9)* includes a Kwela mask from Zaire framed by textile patterns that divide the canvas in three horizontal bands, an arrangement that also reflects West African woven strip cloths. Black, ochre and red organize the canvas in series of complex rhythms.

The Haitian style, which retains a narrative sense and a realistic treatment of the figures, is furthered into bolder abstraction. The narrative is gone and replaced by the juxtaposition of symbolic motifs, underlying the variety of African cultures as well as their proximity and unity, all elements of the pan-African discourse. A similar pictorial system is explored in *Ubi Girl From Tai Region (figure 10)*. It combines a Dan mask seen in profile — symbol of feminine beauty, used in Dan initiation ceremonies in Ivory Coast— and the face of a young woman, half painted with white paint (similar white paint also appears in Dan masks). The background is composed of abstract patterns and the outline of two Central African masks. *Dahomey, (1971)* is

based upon the animal figures used in Fon textiles and relief architectural sculptures. These animal motifs are used to depict the kings of *Danxome*, a kingdom established in the 16th century until the demise of the last king, Gbehanzin, exiled by the French to Martinique after the colonization of the country.

**FIGURE 10 *Ubi Girl from Tai Region, 1972***

These compositions exemplify the stylistic transformations following Jones' travels to the African continent and are marked by a growing awareness of world cultures, African art and cultural heritage and by Jones' relentless strive for trial and renewal. They are joyful and strong and take place proudly among hard-edge abstraction and the Washington Color School to which they are related through the flat and precisely shaped motifs and the bold flat field of colors. The works created during these years reflect also the Pan-Africanist sensibility that grew out of the Civil Rights era and they resonate with the actuality of their times. Geometric abstraction remained specific of Jones' work through the 1980s and the 1990s and coexisted alongside the more traditional watercolor landscapes that she continued to paint during stays in France or on Martha's Vineyard.

Jones' career encompassed so many aspects: research, teaching, mentoring, activism in the field of the arts, in addition to the considerable body of work she created, that it is somewhat daunting to fully assess her contribution to American art. When I had the privilege to meet her a few times, in her Washington, D.C. home, I was astounded by her generosity in sharing her ideas, memories, and thoughts. This same generosity is the

trademark of her painting and of her constant striving for transformation. Loïs Mailou Jones was a prolific artist who defied the limitations that were imposed on her because of race and gender biases. She developed her career during times when Black women had little exposure and recognition. She nonetheless commanded attention through her talent, her capacity for work, her insatiable curiosity and youthfulness and this is arguably the most important part of her legacy. Her voice is best able to sum it up: *My work and ambition are so strong that I will paint until the last day.*<sup>28</sup> And so she did.

Catherine Bernard, June 2003

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### **List of Images**

**Figure 1** Les Pommes Vertes, 1938

oil on canvas  
36 x 28 1/4 in.

**Figure 2** Ascent of Ethiopia, 1932

Oil on canvas  
23 1/2 x 17 1/4 in.  
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee

**Figure 3** Les Fétiches 1938

oil on linen  
25 1/2 x 21 in.  
National Museum of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

**Figure 4** Mob Victim, (Meditation), 1944

oil on canvas  
41 x 25 in.

**Figure 5** Jennie, 1943

oil on canvas  
35 3/4 x 28 3/4 in.  
Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

**Figure 6** Eglise St Joseph (Croix Bassale), Haiti, 1954

oil on canvas  
23 1/2 x 28 1/2 in.

**Figure 7** Peasant Girl, Haiti, 1954

oil on canvas  
28 1/2 x 21 in.  
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,  
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin, Sumner Fund.

**Figure 8** Vévé Vaudou III, 1963

mixed media  
37 x 45 3/4 in.

**Figure 9** Moon Masque, 1971

mixed media on canvas  
41 x 29 in.

**Figure 10** Ubi Girl from Tai Region, 1972

acrylic on canvas  
60 x 43 3/4 in.  
The Hayden Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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### **Footnotes**

1- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington, D.C.

- 2- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington, D.C.
- 3- *Since the Harlem Renaissance: Fifty Years of Afro-American Art*, exhibition catalogue, Lewisburg: Center Gallery for Bucknell University, 1984, p. 23.
- 4- In addition to Loïs Mailou Jones, Hale Woodruff, William Johnson, Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley, Laura Wheeler Waring, Albert Smith, Aaron Douglas, Gwendolyn Bennett, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Augusta Savage, William Thompson Gross and William Emmett Grant were also in Paris during the 1920s and the 1930s.
- 5- Céline Tabary a fellow student at the Académie Julian had been assigned the role of guide and translator for Jones and the two became close friends. Their friendship lasted throughout their lives. They visited each other many times over the years. Jones would always stay with the Tabary family during her numerous trips to France and she got married to Vergniaud Pierre-Noël in Céline's hometown.
- 6- Loïs Mailou Jones, phone interview with the author, winter 1995.
- 7- Jones had first encountered African art at the Ripley studio. She was attending the High School of Practical Arts in Boston and assisted in designing masks and costumes for the Ted Shawn School of Dance, in the early 1920's.
- 8- The first Pan-African Congress was held in Paris in 1919 with 12 delegates from Africa, 21 from South America and 16 from the United States and in its final resolution condemned the colonialist nations. A second Congress held in London in 1921. W.E.B. DuBois attended both events.
- 9- Loïs Mailou Jones, phone interview with the author, winter 1995.
- 10- The mask on the left side: Songye mask; center: possibly a Fang mask, or a Kongo - Vili mask; bottom center: possibly a Dan mask, because of the presence of a white band over the eyes; bottom right: possibly a Guro mask. I am grateful to Carol Thompson, Curator at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta for her help in attributing the masks in *Les Fétiches*.
- 11- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington D.C.
- 12- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, May 1993, Washington, D.C.
- 13- *The World of Loïs Mailou Jones*, exhibition catalogue, Washington D.C.: Meridian House International, 1990, p. 27.
- 14- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington D.C.
- 15- Alain Locke, "A Note On African Art," in *Opportunity*, May 1924, pp.134-138.
- 16- Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro*, New York: A. & C. Boni, 1925, p.267.
- 17- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington D.C.
- 18- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington D.C.
- 19- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, June 1994, Washington D.C.
- 20- Loïs Mailou Jones, phone interview with the author, winter 1995.
- 21- Benjamin, Tritobia, H.: *The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones*, San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994, p.49.
- 22- Ibid, p.51.
- 23- Loïs Mailou Jones, interview with the author, May 1993.
- 24- Quoted in Brace, Eric: "Painting that Blurs the Boundaries" in *The Washington Post*, Monday May 1, 1995.
- 25- The presence of *Vaudou* in Haiti (and in various forms throughout the Caribbean, South America, and the U.S) signals the presence of the African heritage. *Vaudou* itself is a blend of several African religions: the *Orishas* of the Yoruba religion, the *minkisi* or sacred medicines of the BaKongo, interwoven with the saints and lore of Catholicism. Haiti, because of its history and the revolution led by Toussaint l'Ouverture in 1791 and

the creation of the first Black Republic, has preserved the strong heritage of West and Central African cultures and has proven a rich ground for the development of syncretic cultural forms.

26- The writer, ethnographer, and political leader Jean Price-Mars, had been one of the most visible proponents of a reevaluation of Haitian traditional culture. His book: *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, published in 1928 studied the historical foundations of Haitian culture. In it, he described the double heritage –African and European-- of Haiti. Price-Mars' work is fundamental in the development of the theories of Négritude and of Pan-Africanism.

27- Benjamin, Tritobia, H.: *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones*, San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994, p. 98.

28- Quoted in Jo Ann Lewis: "The Transformations of Lois Mailou Jones" in *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1990