



# David Driskell, *Lady in Waiting*, 1992

## ARTIST BIO

David Driskell (1931-2020) was exposed to art from a young age. In his one-room segregated elementary school, his first teacher taught him to experiment with natural materials. He emulated his father's and grandfather's calligraphy and often secretly drew cars and houses on the pages of his father's theology books. Driskell began his studies at Howard University in 1949 with the intent to major in history and become a teacher. However, in his first art course, his talent was recognized, and Driskell was advised to switch majors. Inspired by a professor, he later received a master's degree in art history. Driskell went on to follow that same professor's footsteps in tackling the "omissions of African American art from American art history" as an artist, an art historian, a professor, a collector, and a museum curator. In 1976, as part of his quest to address the underrepresentation of African-American art in the academic world, he curated an exhibition titled *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, which celebrated the works and achievements of 63 Black artists who lived and worked between 1750 and 1950. With this exhibition, he intended to "bring these patterns of exclusion, segregation, and racism to the attention of the art public" and point out that the art world was "not a level playing field." Driskell worked in a range of media, including painting, drawing, collage, and printmaking. Similarly, his subject matter ranged from biblical themes, political topics, and African rituals to scenes from urban life and the natural world.

## STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Driskell's artworks often incorporate bright color palettes and busy compositions, and the viewer must take a moment to observe his art before making sense of what they are seeing. Many of Driskell's pieces were influenced by his trips to countries in West Africa—especially his residency at a University in Nigeria. He said, "I try to pattern my art with certain aspects of African and African-American iconography...in particular with African textiles, with costumes – especially with the Egungun costume, where the Yoruba dancers wear large costumes with strips of quilted cloth." Additionally, Driskell took influence from his childhood in the countryside, where he grew up using plants, berries, and clays for medicinal and crafting purposes.

## ARTWORK

At first glance, *Lady in Waiting* may simply appear like a cacophony of striking color; however, a closer look reveals how Driskell combines figurative and abstract elements to depict a seated figure. A woman's face with blue eyes can be detected peering out from the upper register of the work. The shape of a child's upturned head is also discernable at her knee, as is the outline of an infant on her lap. Driskell incorporates inspiration from Yoruba (yohr-

uh-buh) textiles and uses expressive brushstrokes to bring an energetic feeling to the work. With a combination of geometric and organic lines and shapes, Driskell moves the viewer's eye throughout the energetic composition, never inviting the gaze to rest on a singular focal point. By placing complementary colors next to each other, the artist allows each color to stand out boldly and contribute to the overall visual interest of the painting.

## INTRODUCTION

Many influences can be seen in David Driskell's art, including Yoruba textiles and tradition. He also said, "I'm relying on patterns of color to be the bearer of form." *Lady in Waiting*, a painting that is both figurative and abstract, represents the intersection of these ideas.

## GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Interpret an abstract work of art
- 2 Learn about the Yoruba festival with Egungun and find similarities in their own lives
- 3 Create a pattern inspired by their ancestors and Yoruba festivals
- 4 Articulate their reaction to David Driskell's painting in collaborative poetry

## LOOK AND DISCUSS

- Close your eyes and count to five. Now open your eyes and look at the painting. What is the first thing you see? Why do you think your eyes were drawn to that part of the painting?
- Now look more closely at the painting. What else do you see? Can you see any human features? Where?
- Notice the colors in the painting. Are they mostly warm or cool? How do they make you feel?
- Think about the title. What is a Lady in Waiting? What do you think the artist might be communicating about the figure in this painting? What might her life be like as a lady in waiting? How are we supposed to feel about her?

## CONTINUE THE STORY

The colors and layers in *Lady in Waiting* take inspiration from the Yoruba tribe's textiles and traditional clothing from when the artist lived in West Africa. Fabric has been used throughout Africa for a variety of cultural purposes including storytelling, communicating between tribes, and celebrating rites of passage—each region using unique patterning in their traditional fabrics and clothing. The Yoruba live in a region of Nigeria and Benin, and they celebrate many religious ceremonies and festivals with Egungun (Yoruba for "masquerade"). These masquerades honor their ancestors: Yoruba priests wear elaborate sacred dress as they take on the spirits of their ancestors and communicate messages of warning and blessing. Because the costumes invoke the energy of many ancestors, they are often bright in color, and varied in pattern and design. The dress is made from layers of costly textiles that convey the power and status of the ancestors and each year a new layer of expensive fabric is added. The mask and costume cover the face and hands of the priest, concealing their identity. As the mask-wearer spins, the layers of cloth create a "breeze of blessing." Amulets within the uniform contain medicine symbolic of protection, and metallic objects are sewn onto the fabric to reflect the light, representing a connection to the world of their ancestors.



- How do you celebrate and commemorate your ancestors?
- What types of clothes do you wear for certain occasions: playing sports, going to bed, hanging out with friends, etc.? How would you dress to meet someone famous?
- At what occasions might you wear a mask or costume?
- What similarities do you see between these Yoruba outfits and Driskell's *Lady in Waiting*?
- Why do you think Driskell decided to incorporate these elements into his painting?

## ACTIVITY #1: CREATE A PATTERN

**Materials:** Paper, colored pencils or crayons

**Subject Areas:** Visual Arts, Social Studies

**Duration:** 30 minutes

After discussing the inspiration this painting takes from Yoruba textiles, create your own textile to represent either yourself or one of your ancestors. What repeating shapes and colors will you include in your fabric to convey your ancestor's personality and interests, or your own? If you were to incorporate your fabric into sacred clothing, what other objects might you sew on to represent yourself or your ancestors? Share your outfit with a partner.

## UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Create (V.CR)

Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection and evaluation.

Strand: Respond (V.R)

Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

Strand: Connect (V.CO)

Students will relate artistic skills, ideas, and work with personal meaning and external context.

## ACTIVITY #2: COLLABORATIVE POETRY

**Materials:** Paper, pencil

**Subject Areas:** Visual Arts, English Language Arts

**Duration:** 20 minutes

Starting with a blank piece of paper, write one line about the painting, then fold down the top of the page to cover your line and pass it to the next student. Repeat this process with each piece of paper you receive.

- First line: Describe the colors in the painting.
- Second line: Write about the lines and shapes in the painting using at least two adjectives.
- Third line: Discuss the woman in the painting. What is she like?
- Fourth line: Write another line about the woman. How does she spend her time?
- Fifth line: Describe how the painting makes you feel.

When you have finished, open the poem you ended with and share with a partner.

## UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)

Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

## ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include student willingness to engage with the material. The activity "Create a Pattern" can be used to assess critical thinking and thoughtfulness. The writing activity "Collaborative Poetry" can be used to assess writing skills and ability to articulate their reaction to the artwork.