

Artist's 5-decade-long career on display at Roxbury museum

Edward Strickland

Lois Mailou Jones and Her Former Students at The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, 300 Walnut Avenue, Roxbury, through June 23.

Lois Mailou Jones has been an inspiration to African-American artists for more than sixty years. Now 91, she began exhibiting her work in the 1930s when in order to be shown she often had to hide the fact that

the art was done by a black person.

In 1930, Jones began teaching at Howard University and continued to do so for 47 years. Her work expanded from textile designs to landscape and figures. In 1938, while in France, she painted "Les Fetiches," based on African sculptures she saw in Paris. So began an eclectic range of artistic concerns that is reflected in the current exhibition.

The selection of Jones' own

pieces range from a 1930 academic sweet shorescape "Menemsha," a town on Martha's Vineyard where she summers, to the 1938 abstracted planes of "Les Fetiches" and back to fauve-like colors and cubist planes in the 1960 "Vielles Maisons Le Soir."

In 1963, she produced a striking, colorful essay on African roots in Haitian culture in "Veve Voudou III" where flat renderings of dolls, *continued to page 17*

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snakes, and leaves are integrated with masks in light and shadow. As late as 1994, at age 89, she painted "Le Chien Sophistique et Son Ami L'Oiseau." Here flat planes of color in rhythmic curvilinear shapes are a dance of masks against which the dog and its bird companion are posed.

The exhibition, organized by Edmund Barry Gaither, curator of the Museum of the NCAA, along with Mark Zuber with input from David Driskell and Floyd Coleman, is arranged by decades during which artists studied with Jones. There is work done in the '60s and '80s by artists who studied with Jones in the '30s and works through the '90s by students from the '40s through the '70s.

Many of Jones' former students have gone on to win international reputations and positions in university departments. Students of the

'30s show strong drawing and compositional structure with outstanding work by Elizabeth Catlett, Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, Delilah Pierce, and Malkia Roberts. Catlett's work is widely reproduced, but

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Gwendolyn Lawrence's portrait of her husband "Jacob" and Delilah Pierce's "Nature's Verticles" will be exciting discoveries for Boston audiences.

Students from the '40s show a greater variety of orientations. There is the strong realism of Percy Ricks' "The Trestle" and the eerily cool abstract moods of Frank Wimberly's "Night Bridge" and "Vo-daabe." Earl Hooks' "Transbluency: Ode To Duke Ellington" is a regal retainer of Jones's dedication to African motifs. Edith Strange's "Hope" is a dramatic collage of architectural ruins, with fathers, mothers, and children.

Students from the '50s include the richly colored abstractions of David Driskell and the highly textured "Shaman" by Georgia Jesseup. Lloyd McNeill's "Life Masks" reflects Jones's involvement with African

forms. Yvonne Pickering Carter's costume installation and artist's books are loosely gathered, floating amalgamations of fabric and paper held together by close harmonies of pale colors.

Works by students of the '60s include the elegant "Dance" by Robert Freeman, the dramatic installation "Dreamcatcher" by A. Michael Auld and Rose Powhatan and Akil Ron Anderson's AfriCobra inspired "Spirit Filled."

Also from this exciting decade are former students Stephanie Pogue, whose "Self Portrait: Cinnamon Toast," 1989, is a single hypnotic gestalt, and Leo Robinson's "Zi tall," 1982, a realistic oil portrait with strong drawing of a pensive subject. Art strongly influenced by abstract expressionism by Sylvia Snowden and Franklin White round out this decade.