



Fig. 1. MAN, 1958.
Woodcut,
7.5 x 2.75 in.
AP. Collection of
Louis K. Rimrodt.

DAVID C. DRISKELL

A VISUAL RESPONSE

Deborah Willis

Any black artist who claims that he is creating black art must begin with some black image. The black image can be the environment, it can be the problems that one faces, it can be the look on a man's face. It can be anything. It's got to have this kind of pinpointed point of departure. But if it's worth its while, it's also got to be universal in its broader impact and its presence.

—Hale Woodruff¹

What I've attempted to do is establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic.

—Romare Bearden²

There's a haunting aspect of image making that moves in and out of reality for me. I see it, I know it's there, and something inside says, "Do it. Don't you see it?" Then there's that compelling urge to do it as I feel it. So I think my work is a cross between the two.

—David C. Driskell³

Making art about black life is described in the words of Hale Woodruff and Romare Bearden and shaped in the prints of David C. Driskell. When I was asked to write about the prints of David C. Driskell, I was at once delighted and concerned. As a photo historian, my initial response was to ask, "Are you sure I'm the right person to write about this aspect of David's work?" My query was answered in the affirmative. But as I looked at Driskell's portraits—the works that speak most clearly to me—I began to think about the summers of my childhood. Portraits, the genre that most interested me when I was an art student, held a great fascination for me as a young child. Growing up in Philadelphia, I spent summers at camp or visiting relatives in central Virginia or rural Pennsylvania.

My days were filled with art—not just the art in the museums that I visited in the city, but also the art made by my aunts and uncles who lived in the rural areas.

The experiences were as diverse as they were the same. In Virginia, my aunts made paintings, quilts, and ceramic masks. In photographs I memorialized the women, who worshipped with hat-covered heads in their rural churches, cooked in kitchens, and created art—quilts, lacework, and doilies. In Atglen, Pennsylvania, about fifty miles west of Philadelphia, my cousin and I stayed at our grandmother's sister's house. My great-aunt Alice was an African Methodist Episcopal minister, a tall lady, well educated, fierce in her look and demeanor. She was highly respected in the local community. Photographs, prints made from woodcuts, and lithographs of church founders and leaders were displayed inside the church. Portraits of my aunt were also reproduced in church programs. Those images allowed me to place my aunt in various frames of reference.

Today I look at Driskell's prints and recall these experiences from my childhood. His prints reveal that he was inspired by beauty and spirituality in much the same way I was. I consider his work a visual response to his own communities, his own experiences from childhood to adulthood. I believe that David Driskell was influenced both by art history and by his own upbringing in the church; his prints are therefore spiritually, culturally, and aesthetically based. His portraits honor and signify everyday occurrences. *Woman with Hat (Grace)* (fig. 2) is one example. This portrait woodcut (c. 1969) personifies grace, elegant and proper. Driskell's delicate rendering forms the woman's face as her gaze looks away as if in contemplation. Her everyday hat is styled with folds and placed on her head. Her hair peeks out of the front and side. Her thick, arched eyebrows form a delicate frame around her tired eyes, offering the viewer insight into the mindset of this woman, who perhaps reflects upon an unfulfilled life.

Fig. 2. WOMAN WITH HAT (GRACE), c. 1969. Woodcut, 4.25 x 3.75 in. AP.

