

Sirlin, Hannah. "Martha Jackson-Jarvis: Abstracted Lands and Lineage," *Petrucci Family Foundation*, 24 October 2025

PETRUCCI FAMILY FOUNDATION COLLECTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

Martha Jackson-Jarvis: Abstracted Lands and Lineage

by Hannah Sirlin



Early Life

Martha Jackson-Jarvis is an esteemed multimedia artist. Born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1952, she developed an early appreciation for the significance of place and space. Growing up in the South, Jackson-Jarvis often speaks fondly of her freedom to explore the forests from a young age. During this time, she began to understand that she was not alone in the world; nature and her surroundings carried an energy.

When she was 13 years old, Jackson-Jarvis' family relocated to Philadelphia, where she was introduced to the vibrant visual and performing arts scene within the city's cultural institutions, awakening her to the creative possibilities in various art forms.

Even with the bulk of her formative years spent in cities, the natural world is inextricable from Jackson-Jarvis' work. Many of her pieces are composed of foraged objects and a variety of natural materials with historic relevance, including terracotta, sand, copper, recycled stone, glass, wood, and coal. She explores the energy of these materials and translates them into abstracted, emotional landscapes.

Her early exposure to arts and culture led Martha Jackson-Jarvis to recognize her kinship to artists and creative thinkers, and she formally pursued her artistic studies at Howard University, where she was influenced by artists such as Elizabeth Catlett and Lois Mailou Jones. After her freshman year, she transferred to Tyler School of Art at Temple University, where she earned her BFA. She went on to earn an MFA from Antioch University.

Works in the Collection

My work engages issues of identity and symbols of belief that confront us in contemporary life yet are firmly rooted in historical traditions and culture. It challenges the viewer to see the place where they are as extraordinary.

Recently, PFF acquired two pieces by Jackson-Jarvis—*Red Mandala* and *Mandala Sky X*—from the body of work she produced for *What the Trees Have Seen*, her solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Jarvis stated that in developing these works, she bore witness to the story of her great-great-great-great-grandfather, a free Black militiaman during the American Revolutionary War. Through her large-scale abstract paintings, she tracks his physical journey through various landscapes, retracing his steps from Virginia to South Carolina.

The focus of Jackson-Jarvis' work spans beyond personal family reflections, as she also examines the larger relationship between human society and the natural world. An earlier piece of hers in the collection, *Blue Bloods IX*, explores the intersection of ancient biology and cutting-edge medicine. This series draws inspiration from horseshoe crabs, arthropods that have been roaming the Earth since the Triassic Era, earning them the nickname "living fossils." These creatures are prized in modern medicine for their blood, which is invaluable for testing the sterility of vaccines, IV drugs, and surgical instruments. Unfortunately, critical medical developments come at a significant cost to the health and survival of the horseshoe crabs that are used for testing.

The *Blue Bloods* series was created in response to this complicated relationship. In Jackson-Jarvis' words, "I marvel at the very best blue 'bloods' among us on Earth. My *Blue Blood* constructed painting series celebrates the unbroken thread of evolution that flows through us all due to the (*Limulus polyphemus*) Atlantic horseshoe crab."

I create imagined space and form that signify action, ritual, repetition, and innovation. My works are attentive to ecosystems, decay, rebirth, sedimentation, and transformative form.

A Career in Abstraction

When asked during an interview why she chooses abstraction over representational art, Jackson-Jarvis had a simple response: freedom. She explained that abstraction allows for endless possibilities, innovation, and complexity. It creates a sense of intimacy while maintaining its mystery. She expressed that she seeks to convey the energy of a subject rather than simply replicate it.

Throughout her successful career, Jackson Jarvis created numerous public and site-specific sculptures. She has received a number of honors, including the Creative Capital Grant, the Virginia Groot Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Penny McCall Foundation Grant, and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Travel Grant. In 2023, she received the James A. Porter Colloquium Lifetime Achievement Award. She has exhibited extensively around the country, including at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Studio Museum of Harlem, the University of Maryland, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia.