

## **WITHOUT A DOUBT, HAITIAN ART, ESPECIALLY PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, IS AMONG THE MOST APPRECIATED IN THE WORLD.**

### **The History of Haitian Art**

Without a doubt, Haitian Art, especially painting and sculpture, is among the most appreciated in the world. It continues to receive critical acclaim while at the same time enjoying some measure of commercial success. Yet, that success comes with a history of controversy, as Haitian artists, local and western critics have duelled over what form of artistic expression is more authentic and therefore worthy of consideration as characteristic Haitian art.

While most books on Haitian Arts conveniently begin their history of with the Centre D'Art in 1944, there is clear evidence of artistic activity dating back to the Pre-Columbian era. The Tainos Indians had a vibrant artistic everyday life which included making dolls, drawings, and signs that represented their deities. In the days after Independence, both Haitian leaders, Henri Christophe and Alexandre Pétion, were patrons of the arts. They regularly entertained European artists, and also founded some art schools. In Christophe's court, foreign and local artists alike found ample commission work.

Most of the main themes during this period were to the glory of the Revolution or the Royal family itself. One of those artists was Numa Desroches (1802-1880) who produced one of the most intriguing paintings of that time. It is a view of Palais Sans Souci with a spatial distribution that reminds one of the naïve paintings of the 20th Century. In the 1840s, the Emperor Soulouque founded an Imperial Academy of the Arts.

Further evidence of artistic activity comes from a photograph dated from c. 1900 that shows a shack adorned with religious paintings. Again the style of the paintings is close to the Primitive Art ("Art naïf") that would become popular from the 1940s. Both paintings

show that style of painting is a long tradition originating in Haiti.

In the early 20th Century an art legend emerged from the northern town of Cap-Haitien. His name was Philomé Obin, arguably among the top five Haitian painters in history. Obin was a self-taught painter whose main themes centered on scenes of everyday life, particularly in Cap-Haitien, as well as historic scenes of the Haitian Revolution. In many ways, his work is representative of the spirit of the 20's and 30's when the local manifestation of the Indigenist movement began in Haiti.

### **Indigenism and Modernism**

Indigenism meant returning to the African roots and finding new aesthetic values and a natural cultural identity. One of the first painters to respond to the call of the indigenist movement was Petion Savain. His style was realist and simple. Of the artists who were to follow his style, Georges Ramponneau is one of the notables.

Modernist movement was most influenced by Cuba and the Caribbean influences of the time. However, modernism was most mostly embraced by the "elite." Modernist painters of mention include Luce Turnier and Lucien Price who tried to adapt modern artistic theories to the local environment in the manner of Wilfredo Lam, the Cuban master. Oddly, and incorrectly, some books have suggested that Haitian artists learned to paint through the intervention of foreigners, but there has always been a solid showing of artistic activity and excellence well before 1940. Haitian artists have a wide variety of influences, many traditional, and have a solid body of work to show for it.

### **The Naive Art Movement and the Centre d'Art**

In the 1940s, Dewitt Peters, an American school teacher arrived in Haiti. Almost immediately he was struck by the raw artistic talent displayed by the many untrained and uneducated painters he would encounter. These

were people who never went to Art School, workers of all trades, who would come home and produce ingenious works of art.

In 1944, Peters founded the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince, and it became the champion of the art form that would be eventually be known as "Naïve Art", "peinture naïve" or also called "intuitive art."

Intuitive painting is characterized by vivid, raw colors, a spatial composition and use of proportions that does not follow any of the laws of modern aesthetics, but rather reveals spontaneity, freedom of expression and freshness. That art form attained notoriety on the world scale, especially with the arrival of co-director Selden Rodman. Selden Rodman rejected modernism, the leading art movement of the time, as being too post-war, too vanguard and therefore, too socially inclined.

Neither the Centre D'Art nor Dewitt Peters invented Naïve Art, but they are credited for their efforts in having brought it to the attention of the Western World.

**AMAZINGLY, THE FOUNDERS OF THE CENTRE D'ART UNCOVERED A WEALTH OF TALENT THAT WOULD FOREVER AFFECT THE HISTORY OF THE ART MOVEMENT IN HAITI.**

Amazingly, the founders of the Centre D'Art uncovered a wealth of talent that would forever affect the history of the art movement in Haiti. The first painter to gain recognition was Hector Hyppolite. He was a voodoo priest whose innate ability made him one of the greatest natural painters of modern times. Those early painters, known as the first generation of artists, included the now popular, Philome Obin, Rigaud Benoit, Castera Bazile and Wilson Bigaud. These men were completely artistically untrained.

They came to their canvasses as bookkeepers, truck drivers, and houseboys. Their subjects were most often

what they perceived in their everyday mundane existence and what they learned from their mythical religion, voodoo. Although they came from simple backgrounds, their paintings were full of passion and color. They managed to integrate what they saw, felt and believed and express it with intensity of emotion and a childlike innocence.

These men had no formal education, no visual training and basically developed their styles in isolation from the rest of the art world. These primitives are the first generation to receive worldwide acclaim for Haitian art. Critics and collectors consider this movement to be "authentic" and "unspoiled."

The cornerstone piece of the Primitive Art School was the mural project of the Cathedral of Sainte Trinité (Holy Trinity). For that mural, Obin, Benoit, Bazile and Bigaud placed traditional religious motifs like the Ascension of Christ in a very Haitian context. Characters were painted with black faces, while drums and sacrificial animals were featured in a few of the paintings. The Primitive Movement was accompanied by great controversy. Many other Haitian artists, the intelligentsia and the elite alike resented the seal of authenticity attached to Naïve Art.

They resented that only unschooled artists should be the recognized and authentic Haitian artists. And, even if for the wrong reasons, the generally reactionary Haitian elite of the time did have a point - what gave Western critics the right to decide who and what represented true Haitian Art? What gave the Centre d'Art the mandate to act as arbitrator, championing one movement versus other movements?

Haitian painters to this day have to deal with the preconceived notion that Haitian Art is to resemble work from that era for it to be authentic. Collectors attach high value to the works of the "masters" from that era while eschewing the work of even more accomplished artists displaying more contemporaneous trends, noting that they are unrepresentative of Haitian Art as critics,

or they, conceive of it.

**INTUITIVE ART AND ... THE CENTRE D'ART  
BECAME A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE HAITIAN  
ART INDUSTRY..BRINGING WORLDWIDE  
ATTENTION TO THE SMALL NATION**

For better or for worse, Intuitive Art and its champion, the Centre D'Art, became a driving force behind the Haitian Art industry as a whole by bringing worldwide attention to the small nation. For one, the Centre D'Art gave a chance to painters who otherwise would never be noticed by the conservative art establishment of the time. It allowed vaudou artists like Hector Hippolyte and Andre Pierre to express themselves, and made religious art more acceptable. It provided support and a market for generations of painters and made international celebrities out of many. Intuitive Art became very prized by tourists who kept alive a whole industry, even when the quality of the art work over the years, especially what is found on the streets, became quite questionable. Intuitive Art from the 1950's onward became a cash crop that even the elite cultivated by buying the best of the genre for display in posh galleries.

Therein lays the great irony, as with Haitian Art, success is often a double-edge sword. Whenever an art form gets any form of critical recognition then foreign demand and foreign backing automatically increase. In turn, artists who many times were employed by galleries would get specific demands and feedback such as "do more market scenes" or "landscapes are very hot now." That sort of feedback can ultimately become detrimental as it hampers the natural disposition of the artist and forces him/her to slant energies towards popular themes and styles, compelling them to mass-produce art work in line with what is popular, instead of what they were inspired to do.

## **Aftermath of the Naive Movement**

There were many offshoots to the Naïve movement. Philomé Obin would create the School of Cap-Haitien that included artists such as Sènèque Obin, his younger brother.

Second generation intuitive painters include Gerard Valcin, Wilmino Domond, Seymour Bottex, Gabriel Alix, Gesner Armand and Prefete Duffaut. The second generation is characterized by a certain departure from the style of the original masters of the 1940's. Many of those artists like Armand would, through their travels, learn other techniques and would use them to enrich and solidify their original style. For instance, Prefete Duffaut is especially famous for his mountainous landscapes where Heaven meets Earth and the laws of Gravity are nonexistent. Duffaut would later create the School of Jacmel in the country's south east. Other primitives of the second generation are famous for their depictions of jungles with lions and tigers in a local context, or oversized fruits.

The Poto Mitan (pole in the center of a hounfor, a vaudou temple) School of 1968 shows renewed interest in Vaudou and Pre-Hispanic themes. It featured Tiga (Jean-Claude Garoute), Maud Robart and Patrick Vilaire. Tiga and Robart would be at the origin of what Andre Malraux called the most striking experiment of magical painting he had ever seen. That was the Saint Soleil experiment.

In the early 1970s. Tiga and Robart, already famous painters who rejected the prevalent primitive movement, wanted to create a community of artists whose inspiration stemmed from pure unadulterated Haitian sources. They bought a property in the mountains where they distributed art materials to a group of peasants who had never painted to see what would come out of the experiment. The results were spectacular. The major artists produced by that experiment include Louisiane St Fleurant, Prospere Pierre Louis, Antilhomme, Levoy Exile, and later on,

Stevenson Magloire, son of Louisiane. Andre Malraux, the famous French writer came to visit the workshop and was amazed at the results. He devoted a whole chapter of his last book *l'Intemporal* to Saint Soleil.

There were other counteractions to Naïve Art. One of them, Modernism wanted to adapt more established painting styles to the local settings. In the 50s, many artists like Lucien Price and Dieudonné Cédor broke away from the Centre D'Art and founded the "Foyer Des Arts Plastiques" another academy of painting. However, the movement lacked focus and soon waned.

One of the few commercially successful reactions to Intuitive Art was the School of Beauty, with Bernard Sejourne, Jean Rene Jerome, Philippe Dodard, and Emilcar Similien. Their style was of a dreamy surrealism, where the individual was featured instead of the group; where personal feelings and thoughts received focus instead of the national consciousness. The School of beauty soon lapsed in to rich ornamental luxury and commercialism as soon as success came to its members.

There are of course other painters who seem to not fit in to any specific category, but who are surely worth mentioning. There is Bernard Wah, seemingly at the opposite end of the School of Beauty, although a key member, who displays a quasi-mechanical approach to his characters approaching the macabre or the fantastic. Another is Lyonel Laurenceau, master of the knife painting technique whose portraits of simple folk were popular from the late 1970's to today.

Then there is Georges Liautaud who started out by making funeral crosses in the town of Croix des Bouquets, Serge Jolimeau, and ended up achieving worldwide notoriety. And, of course many know of Jean Michel Basquiat, the brilliant young artist of Haitian decent whose fame in the 1980's did not end with his death. He was the quintessential modern artist whose work was part Andy Warhol and part NYC ghetto.

## The Future of Haitian Art

Finally, what of the present? The artistic production of Haitians has never been more alive with many branches existing now, with so many Haitians living in the diaspora. The young artists show great promise, while some of the old masters show extra life. But let us end by mentioning some of the accomplished artists of this generation: Henri Dubreuil, Ernst Louis Jean, Roosevelt François, Ernst Louizor, Valmidor... Just to name a few.

The first generation inspired a second generation of painters. These new painters had the good fortune to benefit from the numerous art schools that developed in Port au Prince and Cap Haitien. As the art world discovered the wonders of the naive Haitian art and the artists were exposed to different artistic styles, each generation of Haitian artist become more sophisticated and trained. Some of the third and fourth generation of artists still use what is known as the naive or primitive original style in their works, while others employ new materials and styles.

Whichever their choice of style, the Haitian artist will always represent a folk art expression of spontaneity and simplicity and yet an art form that is entirely unique and original.

**AUTHOR : Anjali Wilde** was born in Africa, schooled in Europe and America, and spent her young adult years in the Caribbean. Married, she now divides her time between Mexico and Europe with her husband, Pier Paolo, a photographer and artist. Anjali, a working artist and poet, has recently taken up freelance writing. Her articles cover a broad range of subject matter including travel, art, tourism, history and culture.

Email : [Anjali Wilde](#)