

Art and death in Port-au-Prince

Blog Post by [Steve Hauk](#) - Jan.14.2010 - 2:40 pm

DeWitt Clinton Peters arrived in Haiti shortly after World War II to teach English in a kind of early Peace Corps. Days off he rode his bicycle into the hills and villages and discovered a wonderful kind of folk art, free and joyous.

In 1944 he established the Centre d'Art in an old house in the center of Port-au-Prince. He arranged exhibitions in Havana and Paris and suddenly Haitian art was known and celebrated internationally.

Haitian art had been around for ages, but Peters brought it to the world, and from it Haitian artists gained fame and a bit of prosperity. The joy and recognition he brought to the now stricken country was, and is to this day, very real.

Peters was born in Monterey, California in 1902 to a gifted but tragic family. His father, Charles Rollo Peters (1862-1928), was a great artist who became famous for his nocturne paintings of landscapes and ruins and California adobes.

His work took a decidedly darker turn when his wife Kitty died giving birth to DeWitt and his twin sister. Two years later the little girl walked into an open fireplace and died. Charles Rollo Peters, a handsome, romantic figure, became a drinker and it may have been sleepless nights and wandering the streets of Monterey and nearby Pacific Grove that inspired the haunting paintings he is remembered for.

Another of Charles' sons, DeWitt's older brother, Charles Rollo Peters III, began as an artist then became a successful actor in New York, playing Romeo to Jane Cowl's Juliet, Antony to her Cleopatra. He also gained a formidable reputation for stage and set design. DeWitt's stepmother, Constance, also a talented artist, raised him, and likely inspired his love of travel.

DeWitt studied art in New York and Paris and, for a period, was a writer. He served in World War II, then came to Haiti to teach English and, of course, provide the impetus for a national art movement that became known as the Haitian Renaissance.

The first exhibition at the Centre d'Art displayed the work of 25 painters. Artists of all levels exhibited together, and being shown at the Center d'Art was a goal all Haitian artists worked toward.

Through the decades charitable foundations have used the country's art to draw attention to its culture, needs and wants. Its art has been sold in this country and internationally to raise money for food, education, medicine and housing in Haiti. Art's impact has been tremendous in Haiti.

Whether the building that housed the original Centre d'Art has survived the last few days is unknown. It probably didn't.

DeWitt Peters died in 1966. Because of him, a country had found pride in its art and through it a means to lessen its poverty. Not bad for a man born of a tragic family.