

**THE ART OF HAITI IN HAITI, IN DIASPORA AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL ART
MARKET**

by

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The current definition of Haitian art is largely market-driven. Dealers, collectors and museums are the primary actors giving the market its extent and style. The margins of this definition and field may be permeable and somewhat labile, but in the main, the domain is stable and distinctive. It took its initial form around the middle of the fourth decade of this century, in Port-au-Prince. The shape of it had something to do with what Haitian artists were painting, printing, carving or weaving; but much more with tastes and desires of European and United States politicians, art directors, dealers and artists –almost in that order of influence.

Long before anyone spoke of “market forces,” there was art in Haiti. The Tainos who greeted Columbus made beautiful things for everyday or for sacred occasions. They say all the Taino died from hard work and disease, but that is not quite true.¹ Some of them trekked back into the forested mountains. They sequestered whole maroon villages there, making new plots of manioc; making new beautiful objects to use for everyday and sacred occasions. They were still there when the French gained the island in a diplomatic exchange; there when French planters began to put in sugar cane.

Sugar plantation work was too hot and laborious for the few Taino the planters could still find and press into service; too hard by half again for indentured Frenchmen. So they captured people from Senegal and Guinea, Ghana, Congo and submitted them into one of the most prosperous enterprises the world had known or would know. The Taino retreated father back into marronage. The new inhabitants, whether French masters or African slaves, brought to this Caribbean island the art and the ways of making they knew from home. In St.-Domingue from the beginning there were many threads.

Looking at the records and documents of their days, it appears that the planters, the managers and the merchants focused attention on their profits mostly.² But as they amassed fortunes, and felt homesick for Paris, they imported splendors of the *Ancien Regime*. Their later inventories show fine furniture and fabrics and table services of precious metals. Of books, the most frequent were illustrated veterinary science treatises: no works of Voltaire recorded. They sent slaves to Paris to study music and painting in the finest ateliers. Thus educated, the talented slaves returned to play for concerts and balls and to fashion devotional paintings in the churches. In the churches were also fine altar linens embroidered by French nuns and Haitian girls from the convent schools, and iron work copied from French imports by slave blacksmiths. The several French traditions in the arts and artisanal crafts flourished.

Apparently the French rarely saw the stitchery, the wall and door decorations, the preciously-guarded Qu'rans and amulets, or the Arada and Congo drums. When they did encounter the arts of their slaves, they disparaged it as barbaric.³ Sometimes they would

recognize its power and outlaw it. But it lived, sometimes sequestered far back into the forests with the Taino remnant. It lived, yes.

It would come back into visibility with a vengeance, for sequestered with it were the ideas and actions of a gathering revolution. The years 1791 to 1804 would see the first successful slave revolution in history, eventuating in establishment of the first Black republic, second independent nation of the Americas. Napoleon called the heroes of the Revolution “gilded savages.” That stung. After they turned St.-Domingue into Haiti, leaders like Pétion and Christophe, still wearing their swords, signed papers of state founding art and music academies.⁴

Napoleon was gone but Academie Française continued to rule the Western art world. Teachers in the Haitian schools, like those in Rome or London or Philadelphia had either studied in Paris or in a studio or academy elsewhere much influenced by those methods and styles. The painters of Haiti demonstrated they were not gilded savages, but civilized artists, entirely competent in portraiture and history tableaux. The few works remaining from this period manifest accomplished geometric and tonal perspective, anatomy, composition and color. Their paintings could be French: in their portraits people wear the latest Paris modes. Depictions of historical scenes arrange correctly drawn generals, flags and admiring crowds in a believable space. Only the dark skin against Chantilly lace or the royal palm shading the figure of Dessalines reveals this art is Haitian. The academies founded by the “gilded savages” extended the civilized tradition of the high art of the French Academy.⁵

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Meanwhile, beyond the urban studios, the other arts of Haiti also continued. No one outside Haiti took any notice. Educated Haitians took no notice. If they did it was to disparage it as barbaric. When they recognized its power, they outlawed it. But it lived. Yes.

The unnoticed art of the cities and the doubly unnoticed art of the rest of Haiti kept on happening through insurrections and coups, the rise and fall of kings and emperors and presidents. The élites continued to send their children to France for their education – just as Toussaint Louverture had. Their art and literature was French in style and even content. They lived their cosmopolitan lives insulated from the environment of what some call “that other Haiti,” speaking French to each other at home, in the government offices and churches but the common language –Kreyol – with their servants.

The servants told old stories and sang the old songs in Kreyol to their own children and the children of the affluent. The elite went to Catholic church when they did go; that other Haiti went to early Mass each Sunday, bringing to a close the Voudou ceremony of the night before. That other Haiti brought its stories and songs, its healing herbs and a portion of its everyday magic and superstition into the well-ordered homes of the enlightened affluent. They kept to themselves the wall paintings on the little houses

and the Voudou temples, the decorations and the sonorities of the drums, the sacred stitchery on the Voudou flags and libation bottles, the centuries-old woven designs in straw work. They knew that too much visibility nearly always called up the zeal of missionaries and civilizers to stamp out “savageries” and “barbarisms.” Too often they watched their carefully made cultural heritage, held in contempt by the educated, perish in bonfires of sacred arts.

The United State Occupation of 1915 shocked the Haitian élite. Francophonic Haitians once again felt the sting of being regarded and spoken to as though they were irrevocably savage. “Imagine,” said United States Secretary of State Hughes, “Imagine! Niggers speaking French!” The raw display of racism was worse than Napoleon’s failed attempts to restore slavery. Many Haitian intellectuals turned their Sorbonne-honed skills to the revalorization of the deeply-dyed African warp and woof of Haitian culture. Novelist Jacques Roumain and ethnographer, Jean Price-Mars exhorted their educated, affluent companions to look again with acceptance and appreciation at the worthy culture of that other Haiti –*Aiyti Toma*. In writings as effectively combative as the contemporaneous Caco guerrilla movement, they brought the arts and ways of doing and making that were “*Aiyti natif-natal*,” the native stuff, back into favor among many of those who had so assiduously rejected it. The US Marines had goaded elite and common, directors and servants into a greater degree of Haitian unity and common identity.

At the same time, Africans from many times and homelands invaded the museums of Europe. The bronzes and textiles, the basketry, the granary doors and dance costumes from sub-Saharan African polities, colonized by the Great Powers, colonized the artistic mentalities of Europe. The Haitians could make their assertive revaluation not as defenders of some minor provincial historical enclave, but as part of a change in attitudes that had already by 1914 become global in its scope.

Meanwhile, patronage for all the arts of the West, while still residing in the great metropolises of Europe, in palaces or former palaces given now to governments, had essentially lost the intimate relationship between patron and artist of the same or highly similar culture. The popular support for an accomplished and profound popular art the French revolutionary painter David had envisioned failed to emerge. Instead, there came into being an international art market, no different in structure from the international diamond market, or the trade in commodities like cotton and oil. Art would be more and more done on consignment, or on futures, in the hope that an unknown buyer would acquire the product from an artist probably from some other cultural world. Buying and selling was now done through a middle-man. An anti-traditional high taste arose for what was unique, original or exotic. The illusion of virtue in what was “naïve” and unspoiled by the industrial civilization that had engendered the new buyers became an actively-traded and exploited market for whatever was “folkish” or “tribal.”

The American Occupation of Haiti ceased in 1934, but the American presence continued. World War II saw the President of Haiti declaring war only hours after US President Roosevelt had done so. The American Embassy in Port-au-Prince was lively,

and there were several Americans sent to teach English or art in Port-au-Prince. Haitian artists of the upper classes had been attempting for several years to constitute a center for the arts comparable to those in the cities of France or the United States.⁶ With the vigorous and dedicated assistance of the artist-English teacher Dewitt Peters, and aided by the financial and diplomatic subventions of the Embassy, the Haitian group were able to persuade their own government to provide a locality and a modest amount of monetary aid. The Centre d'Art opened in 1944 with an exhibition of works by European-educated Haitians. Among them were those who had their eyes and minds and hearts open to the arts of that other Haiti.

As a result of their shift of vision that Haitian art historian Michel-Phillipe Lerebours calls the “nouvelle optique,”⁷ some incorporated African themes from textiles and pottery into their paintings in the style of Picasso's Cubism, which in turn owed as much to African artists as to the French painter, Cezanne. Some did their revalorization by painting market women rather than portraits of the elite, by rendering village scenes rather than Arcadian landscapes. The works met a mixed reception: the unreconstructed Europhiles saw in the new works an unfortunate giving over to the old despised barbarisms. They turned their backs.

Among those with the new vision at the Centre d'Art was Phillippe Thoby-Marcellin. It was he who discovered the artist Hector Hyppolite up in the village of Mont Rouis seated under a sign “Ici La Renaissance.” Hyppolite said he'd been to New York; indeed, the sign he painted for the little rural soda shop and bar echoed the grand marquee on the drugstore, “Renaissance,” in Harlem.

Soon the works of Hyppolite appeared on the walls of the Centre. History painter Philomé Obin sent his works to be admired also, shortly followed by Rigaud Benoit, Préfèt Duffaut and Castera Bazile. Hyppolite introduced the exceptionally talented young Wilson Bigaud to the activities there.

Outside Haiti a few took notice: the Cuban painters, who had embarked on a similar enterprise, the Mexican muralists likewise, and the Chilean, Matta. Above all André Breton, the French Surrealist, took notice and carried this attention back to Paris. Breton, as his name speaks, was from Brittany, the area of France that had sent uncounted numbers of merchant seamen and nearly two-thirds of all Catholic missionaries to Haiti for well over a hundred years. The seamen and the religious were partakers of a culture rich in legend, magic, and popular religious fervor and expression. Brittany as well as Surrealism surely were working on his imagination when he encountered the painting of Hyppolite. Breton recognized intuitively and immediately the vigorous spirit residing there.

To shorten the story radically, by 1946 there was a phenomenon one of the Americans at the Centre d'Art called, with a nod to Hyppolite's signboard, the “Haitian Renaissance.” Urban cosmopolitan artists and those from the other Haiti of the small cities, the villages and the working-class districts of Port-au-Prince (the “populars”)

converged at the Centre d'Art. The Cubans and the Surrealists were enchanted by the works of the populars. Breton claimed Hyppolite's painting would have changed the artistic sensibilities of Europe had it been seen there. Director of the Centre, Dewitt Peters, was not so sure at first, but he provided studio space for the "populars," and offered them lessons. They preferred to arrange their own space out in the yard of the Centre and declined the lessons as irrelevant.⁸ Foreigners began to buy their works. The international market, its collectors hungry for the "folkish," "primitive," or "naïve," was in those years lucrative. Some have claimed that Haitian art held the number three export value after sugar and coffee.⁹

The market flourished almost explosively. Foreigners buying in Haiti could easily finance their journey by selling one or two "Haitian primitives." The works, growing out of several esthetic and craft traditions of "that other Haiti," was truly skillful, thoughtful, sometimes even profound. The artists made calculated decisions about their works. The results were altogether different from the arts of the West, but they were scarcely "primitive" or "naïve." However, motivated by the success of their neighbors and relatives, suddenly "everybody" took up painting and iron work, even children. As a result some truly unskilled and naïve work appeared. In tandem with a Haitian government push to increase tourism, the streets of Port-au-Prince blossomed with hundreds, hundreds of vivid little rectangles of masonite painted with scenes of Paradise, Haitian markets and the battles and heroes of the revolution. The art business boomed in the Centre d'Art; in the several commercial galleries that opened in response to growing interest; in galleries in the United States, Canada and France; and out on the streets of Haitian port cities along the sight lines of tour boats and across from hotels. The art of the Haitian countryside, the art of the people as it truly had been once, became a hot commodity in the cities of the north. Defined by market value, "Haitian art." became a deracinated export commodity.

Many educated Haitians, especially some of the advanced cosmopolitan artists, resented the definition, especially since the words "primitive" or "naïve" seemed inevitably to be attached. For them this was not simply an unfortunately sentimental romanticism, but an insult to the intelligent, modern accomplishments of Haitian artists and intellectuals.¹⁰ For many it carried the same heavy freight of racism as Napoleon's sting or the American Secretary of State's waspish insult. Few Haitians bought works of the famous "populars." A major part of that genre went overseas, out of Haiti twice uprooted.

Haitian art left Haiti and after 1968 so did several thousands of Haitians of every social and economic and cultural layer. Do these people of Diaspora create "Haitian art"? Yes. They have redefined it. In part they do what commercial folk call "re-positioning for the market." That is, uprooted from Haiti and from the environment that supports Kreyol culture, they take on the modern artists' position of creating a personal expression they hope will please an unknown buyer.

But the Diaspora has a remarkable cultural integrity. It is perceived by those in it as a "*Haitian* Diaspora". Identity as a Haitian is greatly consequential for most of

overseas Haitians, including those born away from the homeland. A mark of this is that the Diaspora is frequently referred to as “The Tenth,” that is, another *Department* added to the nine on the island. “The Tenth” partakes of the general modern circumstance of uprootedness. It is not only these artists who are uprooted from their Francophonic-Creole or Kreyolophononic- Kreyol intertwined cultures. It is also the dealers, whose interests lie both in the art and in making a profit on it rather than in participation in the continuance of any tradition. It is also the buyers who almost universally are in one kind or another of exile from their own native cultures.

We are all in Diaspora. The international art market is our cultural exchange nexus. The Haitians work out of their own distinctive experience of the great global sea upon which we are all floating to and fro. They incorporate the signs and signals of the roots of their ancestors. They are political often, because the reality of Haiti for five hundred years is political. Look, these descendants of the slave revolt and the first Black republic reveal something out their memory as they float along with us now. Look, the mystical signs of the *mullahs* of Senegal and Old Mali are still in the stitcheries. Look, the street murals put Dessalines and Péralt and Aristide on one wide flag, the red and blue of that African immigrant Ogun, older than all of them. Look closely, the thunderstones and sacred pipes of the Taino are on the altars and in the paintings. Look, this Haitian expatriate, whose Chinese grandfather from Cuba painted cubist compositions with the mysteries of the Haitian countryside encoded, shows us the faces of the boat people in Guantanamo.

Look too at the artists who transformed their own work in response to Haiti: Jason Seley, Lois Mailou Jones. Laetitia Schutt, more recently Anna Wexler are just a few of many examples. Their works are doubly “Kreyol,” braiding their American or European notions together with what they learned from their Haitian teachers. One can see Haiti in their works just as in the previous century one could have seen the Academie Française in Haitian portraiture.

What the Haitian artists in Haiti or Toronto, Paris or New York or Boston know is how to use anything they see and can lay hands on as the material to make a country in Caribbea or Diaspora, an identity, an art. They teach us this can happen in the face of the direst adversities. From inside and from abroad the vigor of an continually redefined Haitian art continues. *What is Haitian art? Plus ça change, plus la même chose.* It lives, yes.

¹ Several historians have written on this topic. See especially “Ou, quand, et par qui fut choisi de redonner a notre patrie le nom indien d’Ayti,” by Jean Fouchard in *Christophe Colombe, les Indiens et leurs survivances en Haïti*, Christophe Phillipe Charles, ed. Port-au-Prince:CREDOH; Editions Christophe, 1992. Pp.219-223. Fouchard notes for example a legal notice in 1833 of the death of an Indian woman.

² Most inventories of goods and property of the colonial period are held in the Archives d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence. Those pertaining to certain holding by religious orders are at the Archive Nationale in Paris. These have been extensively consulted by the author.

³ The writings and documents of Moreau de St.-Mery, collected at the Archives d’Outre Mer Aix-en-Provence are the most-often cited reports. Brief references are scattered through travelers’ reports and pastoral letter of missionaries to their bishops.

⁴ See for example the “Chronologies de l’art haïtien,” by Pierre Monosiet and Marie-José Nadal-Gardère in *La Peinture Haïtienne*, Marie-José Gardère and Gérald Bloncourt. Paris:Éditions Nathan, 1986. P. 201.

⁵ Michelle-Phillipe Lerebours amply documents this, together with illustrations in *Hàiti et ses Peintres de 1804 à 1980*. Port-au-Prince: L'Imprimeur II, 1989.

⁶ Newspaper clipping and letters held at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince indicate there was much activity toward this end throughout the years just prior to the actual founding of the Centre.

⁷ Lerebours, "Une Nouvelle Optique," in *Conjonction; Revue Franco-Hàitienne*, No. 150, March 1981 and No. 151, April 1981.

⁸ Both the American sculptor, Jason Seley, who was on a Fulbright teaching fellowship during these years, and Albert Mangonés, one of the founding members have discussed this with the author.

⁹ This supposition has fairly wide currency. It seems originally to have been asserted by the American artist living in Haiti, Selden Rodman, but he does not provide documentation. In fact, documentation would be exceeding difficult to gather. Galleries were not required to state exports; moreover, most of the works seem to have been acquired by individuals who carried them back to their American or European homes duty-free as "Haitian crafts." Many of the galleries that showed such works no longer are in existence. Print notices of their exhibitions do indicate a lively trade, however. The difference between the asking price in Haiti and the selling price in the foreign galleries is disputed. Much of the work is said to have been given away by the artist, or sold for as little as \$5.00US. Recorded prices the works subsequently fetched cannot be tied to specific works, but the selling prices in general were several-to many-times greater than original prices.

¹⁰ This reaction continues. In the "Debats" section of *Cultura*, Port-au-Prince, Vol. 1, No.2, October 1992 under the title, "Introduction à une Réflexion sur l'Art Naïf," Albert Mangoné, who was a founding member of the Centre d'Art, together with Lilas Desquiron, Reginald Lally, Christianne B. Lally, Gérald Alexis and Gary Augustine discuss the application of words "Primitive," and naïve to Haitian art and its effects on the perception of Haitian culture.