



ORGANIZACION DE LOS ESTADOS AMERICANOS  
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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Set No. 151

Haiti - Primitive Art

"Primitive" has been used in at least three senses - to define early manifestations of an artistic movement; to describe the arts of tribal peoples of Africa, Oceania, and the New World; and to characterize the arts of untrained members of European-American society who are not a part of the Western tradition of academically disciplined artists with skills of drawing and perspective. Folk art is another descriptive form, describing an unsophisticated level of rural expression not in touch with urban practices

The work "naive" brings to mind a sort of charm, since it suggests an artistic innocence, separate from "high art" tradition. It suggests independence from academic traditions and a spontaneous flow of personal feeling unconcerned with realism.

In 1943 an American by the name of DeWitt Peters came to Haiti to teach English to the French- and Creole-speaking Haitians. As a painter he became acquainted with the resources of Port-au-Prince and realized the lack of exhibition space and comingling artists. Consequently he established the Centre d'Art in an effort to encourage the artists and their individuality. He supported them in using their own imaginative experiences to draw upon and refrained from imposing any particularly strong academic views. He gave his approval through purchases and by providing materials as well as teaching various "levels" of artists at the Centre d'Art. Through his efforts the best Haitian art continues to express native values and traditional belief systems. In their works are described the events of Haitian history, depictions of heroes of history and myth, documentations of the events of daily life, and perhaps most important, they draw upon their religious experiences for themes of meaning and renewal.

The Haitian artist has African roots: ancestral beliefs, influences and mystical intuitions that shape his imagery. His expression is social as well as individual. The art examples of such early artists as Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit, Castera Bazile, and André Pierre live on in the consciousness of Haitian painters as both a model and a challenge. There is very little academic pressure in evaluating the styles, beliefs and philosophy of the Haitian artist. It is an externalization of the common awareness of the people, reflecting their intellectual and emotional spirit. The art of the people is intertwined in the social and religious practice of voodoo, a functioning and influential socio-religious institution plays an important role. The carved sticks and painted gourds serve directly in voodoo ceremony.

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One of the historical realities of the Haitian art achievement is that it developed in isolation. The earliest works were realized without commercial possibilities and grew out of serious art purpose. They were produced on an island by people without formal education and without visual training. Haitian artists paint out of their own resources, their own history and mythology, the double experience of voodoo and Christianity, the observation of earth, sea, and sky and their knowledge of human interaction. Their personal expression of creative imagination - a fundamental level of human consciousness - has preserved their art's authenticity and given the world a rich and intense experience of the will to creativity.

TEXT Extracted from the article "Haitian Art: A Western View", by Gerald Nordland

PHOTOGRAPHS: Angel Hurtado



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- A. One of the rooms of the Museum of Haitian Art of the College of St. Pierre. In the background a triptych by Wilson Bigaud.
- B. Detail of the same triptych. Left - Hell; Center - The Sermon on the Mount; Right - Jesus and the Little Children. This is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of Haitian art, demonstrating the extraordinary gift of the artist. His sense of color, his grasp of a well-balanced composition, and his deep sensitivity surface in these pictures.
- C. Paradise - Wilson Bigaud. Characteristic of his style is an emphasis on perspective and volume and an awareness of the effects of light and shadow.
- D. Closer view - detail of Adam and Eve.
- E. Maitresse Ezili - Hector Hyppolite, 1948. Oil. The most legendary figure in Haitian art has a style that is a free and bold and handling of both color and form. This is his most celebrated painting. The splendor of color and the strength of the artist's vision present the kind of spirit and world Gauguin sought in Tahiti. Erzulie is the divinity of love; as such she ranks high in the voodoo pantheon. Her sensuous beauty, refined taste, and extravagance are proverbial. Her vévé is the heart and her favorite color rose.
- F. Henry Christophe - Seneque Obin. Henry Christophe was an officer and self declared king who lived in the early nineteenth century. He is remembered most for his cultural achievements. Painted by Seneque Obin, a mason and painter like his brother, Philomé, whose style is closely related, he portrays the young Christophe as a king flanked by flowers, standing at ease, dressed in a splendid uniform. He is a symbol of dignity and strength.
- G. Ceremony - Rigaud Benoit. Rigaud Benoit is one of the few Haitian artists whose work has been consistently on a high level. Before becoming a visual artist, Benoit was a musician. One of his pastimes - decorating ceramics or china - brought him the invitation to join the Centre d'Art. The hallmark of his style is a preference for central composition and a painstaking concentration on detail that gives his work the flavor of enlarged miniatures.



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- H. Nude - Poisson L'Ouverture
- I. Adam and Eve - Salnave Philippe-Auguste. Painted at the Episcopal Church in Port-au-Prince. Best known for his jungle scenes filled with African animals, his paintings are clearly organized. His forms are always precisely outlined and meticulously filled in with color.
- J. Devil - Georges Liautaud. Devil sculpted out of iron sheet. Liautaud was the first artist connected with the Centre d'Art to work with metal. Through his example he developed what has become today a traditional art form in Haiti. His sculptures are usually rather small with exception to this piece which is human size.

All pieces are found in the collection of the Musée d'Art Haitien du Collège St. Pierre with the exception of Adam and Eve by Salnave Philippe-Auguste.