



*An artist emerges from a metalwork shop in the village of Croix des Bouquet. The village, just northeast of Port-au-Prince, is known for its artists who transform junk metal into ornate pieces.*

## IN HAITI, ANGST EMERGES AS ART

*By Larry Muhammad and Tonyaa J. Weathersbee*

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - The drivers are like maniacs along the Avenue Pan Américaine, an unruly procession of luxury sedans, SUVs, Japanese compacts, the wildly decorated public buses called “tap-tap” and rattle-traps ready for the junk heap. They stream 50 miles an hour bumper-to-bumper, past ragged kids playing around roadside vending stalls with music blasting from boom boxes, on into the congested maze of downtown traffic.

In the heart of this bustling, albeit blighted, capital city of two million people, all the intersections are snarled. Here and there an odd gendarme stands breathing exhaust fumes and sweating through his uniform in the blazing heat. Pedestrians clog the sidewalks and meander carelessly through traffic, flashing an open palm before onrushing vehicles, as if to signal, “Talk to

the hand”.

In Haiti, it seems everybody’s a traffic cop.

On Boulevard Jean-Jacques Dessalines, in front of an open warehouse, merchandise is sold from vending stalls outside in a raucous sidewalk commerce. There are plastic flowers, backpacks, shoes, belts, strollers, textiles, dried pasta, beans, live chickens, notepads, jewelry, CDs. Across the street is the Iron Market, a huge block-long bazaar also crammed with every imaginable household item.

But in the midst of all the farm-raised and commercial clutter, a force that is uniquely Haitian reigns supreme: Art.

There’s an endless selection of paintings, metalwork, Voodoo flags, wood carvings and papier-mâché

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masks. The stalls are a sweaty warren of narrow passageways; the bargaining is stomp-down and stressful. Insistent pitchmen accost me and my companions the minute we step inside.

"I have contracts - many young artists work for me!" shouts Louis Dominique, who sells sculpture, paintings and crafts.

At the same time Franck Ramonde is showing off intricately handmade native dolls, Oliene Marsenrt, a Voodoo flag artist, spreads out a 16-by-20 inch sequined textile with a red cat on a black background, saying, "The spirits give us protection if we call them."

Heading back into Petionville, Rue Pan Americaine becomes the main drag dotted with expensive galleries. Yet on the sidewalk outside an old lady sells metalwork crafts, and on the opposite corner a young man hawks wood carvings. For sale along many streets are ornate metalwork partitions, bootleg CD's, wood carvings, painting and various crafts.

This is Haiti. This is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. But poor though it may be, its arts traditions have not only enriched its own culture and day-to-day existence of its citizens, but the culture of the entire world as well.

Paintings by Haitian artists hang in museums and galleries all over the United States and Europe. "Paradise," a painting by renowned Haitian artist Wilson Bigaud, is on permanent exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Haitian art is auctioned at Christie's. The paintings, sculptures and metalworks are especially prized by collectors around the world. The paintings of African-American artist Lois Mailou Jones, who was honored by President Jimmy Carter in 1980 for outstanding achievement in the arts and whose works are in places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and in Haiti's National Palace, was also inspired by her travels to Haiti with her husband, Haitian artist Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel.

"What I consider amazing is that untutored hands have done things of such high quality," says Edouard Duval Carrie, a Haitian-born artist who lives in Miami

and whose sculptures and paintings have appeared in galleries around the world. "The purity and the honesty of it all is what resonates."

Haitian art and culture has also influenced the dance, music and literary spheres of the Americas.

But in spite of all that richness, in spite of a culture and heritage that began in the forest kingdoms of West Africa, was nurtured in Haiti and now touches all corners of the world, Haitians have little time to bask in it all. While many still do art for arts' sake, many also do it to survive.

When it came to art, things weren't always quite so desperate.

Years ago, Haiti once attracted boatloads of tourists for elaborately choreographed and very profitable buying expeditions. Chauffeured cars met them at the dock in Port-au-Prince, drove past monuments, stopped at the Centre d'Art, then on to the Petionville, where they'd be ushered through the galleries.

But the tourists don't come anymore, said Ragnar Amesen, who runs the Mapou Galerie, a storefront with rows of canvases by top names like Levoy Exil and Stivenson Magloire, and sculpture by Serge Jolimeau and other masters.

There are many reasons for that.

First there was the brutal, 40-year dictatorship of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc," whose fierce militia, the Ton Ton Macoutes, murdered and drove thousands into exile. Then Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a firebrand reformer, came. But his regime still grapples with frequent violence and politically-inspired turmoil.

Then there's the enmity between blacks, who make up 95 percent of the population, and mulattos, the five percent who historically control the country's wealth. The mulattoes, who also enjoy the advantages of education, jobs and health care, maintain the colonial structure for their own benefit.

All of that has led to staggering wealth disparities among Haiti's 7 million people. There are few jobs for the poverty-stricken masses, and wages are roughly \$3 a



day. Average per capita income is \$250 a year.

And if that wasn't enough, there was the stigma Haitians suffered after they were erroneously categorized along with homosexuals, intravenous drug users and hemophiliacs as a high-risk group for AIDS. That stigma, along with tourists' fears of being caught up in a violent conflagration, virtually decimated the industry, many Haitians say.

"There are very few tourists now, they are very rare," Arnesen said, "and sales are down 50 percent or more. The Duvalier era was good from the sales standpoint, but there were other problems. Even 15 years ago, sales were OK. But then there were military coups, political instability. Now everybody tries to make contact with foreign galleries, and that is one of the best sources of sales."

"I used to work at that old Chouneuet Hotel, and at that time there were lots of tourists," said Tony Jean, 63, a Petionville street dealer of contemporary paintings. "So I started selling art as a bellboy."

Jean said that selling art first presented itself as a way out of a dead-end job. Now on a daily basis, he has 200 paintings - cockfights, work scenes, portraits, still life, landscapes, and abstracts - displayed along the walled drive to the El Rancho Hotel in Petionville, by artists from Jacmel, Cap-Haitien and Jeremie.

Jean has three salesmen and moves about 300 canvases a month. Still, he's seen better days. But even though art no longer equals prosperity for most Haitians, it still thrives.

In the village of Croix de Bouquet, artists transform discarded oil drums and mangled bicycles into metal sculptures that inspire introspection. In Petionville, paintings can be found in stores selling everything from cloth to sundries.

Art seems congenial here, a virtue that is its own reward but also a necessary compulsion in a troubled land - like Earth, Wind and Fire sang, "If it ain't no beauty, you got to make some beauty."

"People that are in such dire conditions, people who are in the dregs of this planet are still managing to create things stylistically that are so beautiful," Carrie said.

"It's like a flower growing in the dung."

Every third person I met was connected to the visual arts, either as dealers, gallery owners, wood-sculptors and metalworkers, or makers of the sequined flags used in Voodoo ceremonies, but mostly as painters. The shoeshine man paints his box. The "tap-tap" buses and



*An art shop in Petionville. In Haiti, art is sold alongside everyday items.*

street vendors' stalls have colorful designs. Wilson Bigaud was once a cab driver who painted shaving mugs.

But centuries before artists like Tony Jean began plying his paintings in front of hotels, Haitians were beginning to pour their pride and their angst into art.

In 1817, years after the revolution that freed the slaves of San Domingo and led to the creation of Haiti, revolution leaders Henri Christophe, and Alexandre Petion, encouraged the development of art. According to scholars much of that art was focused on themes about the glory of the revolution, religion and portraiture - the



*Metal artworks in Croix des Bouquet. The art is created with mallets and tooling rods.*

same as it had been for the French.

One of the artists in Christophe's court was Numa Desroches, who painted a view of Palais San Souci that is reminiscent of the Haitian paintings of today. In 1816, Petion helped a French artist establish a school in Port-au-Prince. In 1846, Haitian emperor Faustin Soulouque helped to found the Imperial Academy of the Arts.

Then there were the Voodoo temples - with decorative murals honoring the Catholic saints and the West African Iwas.

"Even though many people believe that art in Haiti didn't begin until Centre d'Art was founded (by American Dewitt Peters in 1944), there was some kind of art in Haiti for a long time," said Ringo Cayard, director of the Haitian-American Foundation in Miami. "Today, in some places you can see some of the remains of paintings done by artists under Henri Christophe."

But Haitian art didn't go international until the 1940s. That was when Peters, who came to Haiti to teach English in 1943, reacted to the art as if he had found buried treasure.

Workers were creating paintings whose style came to be known as "naive" or "primitive," not as pejoratives, but by highbrow critics proclaiming its gift for colorful imagery and natural expressionism that completely

ignored the European perspective.

So Peters founded the Centre d' Art in Port-au-Prince. It exhibited the work of incubating artists, helped them develop their natural gifts, and eventually turned an indigenous custom of art for art's sake into a commercial enterprise of national scope.

In 1949, the Centre d' Art commissioned top native painters to cover the walls of Sainte Trinite' Episcopal Cathedral in Port-au-Prince with biblical murals. The church dates to 1861, when 110 African-Americans immigrated to Haiti. It was founded by James Theodore Holly of Detroit, and its magnificent sanctuary was built in 1928.

The artists who painted it included Castera Brazile, a native of Jacmel, the famous artists' colony, whose work now hangs in the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and Museum of Modern Art in New York; Philome Obin, so influential he started

a dynasty (his son Telemaque is also an accomplished painter), has work in the Brooklyn Museum, New Orleans Museum of Art, Hayward Gallery in London and elsewhere; and Wilson Bigaud. Besides "Paradise," Bigaud's painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "The Wedding of Cana," also known as "The Miracle of Cana" or "Feast of Cana") in the Episcopal Cathedral is considered his masterpiece.

The mural project was finished in 1951, and then-Bishop Alfred Voegeli, who was away during the actual painting, reportedly exclaimed on first sight, "Thank God they painted Haitians!"

The scenes are from the Bible, on panels 21 feet high, but set in a landscape of Haitian villages and thick with African spirituality.

Inside the cathedral, sunlight beamed through tall shuttered windows to put the powerful symbolism of its 900-foot painted dome on perfect display. "The Baptism of Christ," by Castera, is set in a replica of Saut d' Eau, a waterfall attracting religious pilgrims that is associated with the Voodoo spirit Danbala.

Obin's Christ is beardless in his "Crucifixion," and the action occurs in a Haitian village, witnessed by the prominent, all-seeing eye of God. Toussaint Auguste painted the devil as human in "The Temptation of Adam

and Eve," with snake-like Medusan hair and serpentine legs, and "The Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness" by Prefete Dufault, has spiders' webs in the temple, with Jesus in red robe and halo – the color of the Voodoo warrior saint Oqou – rebuking a prominently drawn Satan. Bigaud's "The Wedding of Cana" has an oil lamp typical of rural Haiti hanging above the wedding couple, people playing drums and bamboo flutes, and a seemingly unexpected guest - a malnourished child with an umbilical hernia.

The murals obviously needed restoring – were cracked in places, with spots of pale stone where colors were worn away – but just as plainly represented a masterwork, Haiti's greatest exhibition of its primitive painting.

And there is no other aspect of Haitian culture more indelibly marked by Voodoo than visual art.

Voodoo is its source, its inspiration. Before Haitian art became chic in the 1940s, coveted by galleries around the globe, Voodoo temples had decorative murals honoring the saints, and still today its most valued canvases and sculpture are representations of the supernatural.

Haiti's greatest painter, Hector Hyppolite, was a Voodoo priest. He painted houses for a living, and was "discovered" when the strange architectural decorations he'd painted on a café door in the village of Saint Marc caught the attention of Peters. Hyppolite painted a lot with chicken feathers and with his hands, as well as with brushes, creating pictures of surreal vision that first took the art world by storm at the UNESCO exhibit in Paris in 1947.

Peters also searched out Georges Liautaud, a blacksmith who fashioned intriguingly ornate crosses for cemeteries in the village of Croix des Bouquet, and persuaded him to try sculpture. Liautaud flourished, creat-

ing troves of imaginative pieces, trained masters of the form still working today – Gabriel Bien-Aime and Serge Jolimeau – and set in motion a national metalwork movement centered in Croix des Bouquet.

It's located northeast of Port-au-Prince, off Boulevard October 15 that Aristide built to commemorate his 1994 return from exile. The main workshops line Mal Passe Road, and passersby hear the interminable tapping of apprentices learning the craft, knocking designs into recycled car bodies and oil drums with mallets and tooling rods.

"When they first start, they get a lot of licks on the hand," said Jolimeau, who has trained over a 100 metalworkers in his shop. "But then they're more careful and gradually learn enough skill to make art."

A contemporary style more familiar in the United States is abstract expressionism practiced by Petionville painter Christian Beaulieu.

"I read books, looked at the old Haitian masters, went into the really modern American painters," said Beaulieu, 51. "Very often I would go to the Centre d' Art, look around, I loved to go there all the time. But basically, what I was looking for really in my own work was this African-ness...for me it's the African-ness that's there."



*Metal sculpture, Croix des Bouquet*