Art expert Gérald Alexis explores the vibrant history of Haitian art, from the naïve and primitive to the abstract and contemporary

by Gérald Alexis

Unlike Haitian literature, fine arts in Haiti did not have much institutional support in the 1800s and early 1900s and suffered from the total absence of art schools, museums, and galleries. Haitians who were in the position to purchase art often praised the national awareness exalted in Indigenist prose and poetry, but they seemed totally insensitive to the creative abilities of the local painters. These intellectuals appreciated the poetry of Etzer Vilaire, Normil Sylvain, and Leon Laileau, and the writings of Jean Price-Mars, Jacques Roumain, and Jacques-Stephen Alexis, but their taste for the visual arts remained fashioned on traditional European trends, and they preferred the comfort of classical masterpieces, which they could enjoy only through prints and reproductions.

Right: *Eve in Eden, by Salvane Philippe-Auguste*
The wars that devastated the colony of Saint-Domingue during the second half of the eighteenth century had several important consequences, including the abolition of slavery and the independence of the new nation of Haiti in 1804. Then, even as the newly conquered territories were defended and the infinite tasks of nation-building began, new traditions in the arts gradually emerged, particularly in the field of portrait and historical painting.

Under the government of President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1818-1843) it was fashionable to have your portrait painted by professional artists, and Boyer commissioned different artists to make portraits of himself, his female companion, and his mother. Popular artists like Hector Hyppolite, however, were not concerned with photographic precision in portraits and remained aloof from the tradition of near perfect realism.

In Hyppolite's Portrait de Henri Christophe, the general who led the native army to victory against the colonial power is identified more easily by the inscriptions on the painting than by any resemblance to him. Naturally, costume and adornment indicate that the subject is a high-ranking military figure, and the fact that he stands out on a bright background encircled in a wreath of flowers at the center helps to emphasize his identity and importance. The presence of Republican flags in Hyppolite's picture also indicates that the subject is a head of state.

Written inscriptions are often included in Haitian historical paintings as a way of ensuring that the narrative is transmitted as accurately as possible. Although this narrative may reflect no more than the artist's own limited knowledge, it is always an accurate expression of the way the Haitian imagination was shaped by national history. Contemporary historical paintings attempted to relate several distinct events in a single picture. One example is Vakin II's La Recontre des Deux Mondes, devoted to the festivities of the quincentennial of the discovery of America. Vakin II made this mural-sized painting showing the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors on the right side of the mural and all of the events that followed in succession from right to left.

The tradition of portrait painting was maintained throughout the Second Empire (Faustin Soulouques, 1849-1859), but a shadow was cast over this great period in painting when the Emperor was

Some have even said that there were no fine arts in Haiti prior to 1944. That was the year the Centre d'Art was inaugurated as "a center where Haitians would come to paint and exchange ideas without having to follow academic lectures, fostering a state of mind favorable to artistic development."

The Centre d'Art was started at the initiative of Dewitt Peters, an American artist who came to Haiti to teach English in 1934 and who eventually contributed a great deal to the development of Haitian painting. The Centre was intended to be a meeting place for artists, a place where talented young men and women could find guidance. Its inaugural exhibition presented works by some twenty artists who had been struggling against all odds to get recognition. Soon after, those same artists were overshadowed by the unexpected arrival of popular painters who were creating an art that totally ignored western conventions. This art, coined "naive" by some and "primitive" by others, won high praise from American critics and well known personalities, like French poet André Breton and American novelist Truman Capote.

In 1946, Haitian art appeared outside the country for the first time in a Washington, DC gallery. The exhibition presented exclusively the works of the country's popular painters, however, which led Haiti to be known as "the only country in the world whose entire artistic output was represented by works of naive painters, primitive, not only in their approach, but also in their complete lack of academic training," according to a press release from the Carol Reese Museum of East Tennessee State University. Similar commentary followed. One article by Paul Waggoner published in the Contemporary Times suggested that Haiti "had no previous art tradition" and that Dewitt Peters had accomplished a miracle.

These critics overlooked the fact that such popular expressions had existed for years prior to the arrival of Peters. Haitian popular art has always been closely related to the popular religion—Voodoo—and it has been a constant presence in society due to the Haitian people's extravagant taste for decoration. The critics also overlooked the tradition of portraits and historical paintings that dominated the nineteenth century.
Critics overlooked the fact that such popular expressions had existed for years prior to the arrival of Peters. They also overlooked the tradition of portraits and historical paintings that dominated the nineteenth century.

Throughout its entire history, Haitian popular art has been tightly linked to Voodoo. Erzulie Danthor, opposite, by Lafortune Félix, conceals the Voodoo loa for motherhood behind the image of the Mater Dolorosa. Portrait de Louise Chancy Louverture, left, possibly painted by Séjour Legros in 1821, is one of the first portraits preserved from the early period. Louise Chancy was the niece and daughter-in-law of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution, who emancipated the slaves and briefly established Haiti as a black-governed French protectorate. A later example of portrait painting, Portrait de Henri Christophe, right, by Hector Hyppolite, is also realistic though largely based on the artist’s imagination.

accused of wanting to raise Voodoo to the rank of a semi-official religion. Neither the middle classes nor the Catholic Church were happy with the religious paintings commissioned by the imperial family because it had become common for Voodoo practitioners to represent their deities through images of Catholic saints. The growing fear of such syncretism reached its peak when a picture of Saint Faustin was endowed with idealized features of the Emperor.

The Concordat signed between Haiti and the Vatican in 1860 gave the Catholic clergy an important role in the Haitian education system, and foreign priests and nuns began teaching many of the courses at Catholic schools. In that context, the teaching of art was mostly restricted to copying imported reproductions. This reinforced a taste for naturalism among many Haitian youngsters and eventually started a new genre in Haitian painting focused on nature and daily life. Later on, Haitian artists embraced landscape painting as a means of expressing their national identity. More beautiful than realistic, these images are born of complicity between the painter and nature and are infused with seductive force.

In the mid 1940s, artists from the Centre d’Art regularly went on excursions to the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. Peters believed that painting from life was an essential stage in the training process of all painters. Surprisingly, a number of artists systematically rejected any form of imitation that they deemed “servile.” Instead, they internalized what they saw, injecting imagination and feeling into their knowledge of nature to render a more subjective reality by means of spontaneously and swiftly drawn lines. This was the case of Jacques Valbrun whose urban and marine landscapes are rendered in straight lines and in often vivid colors.

Meanwhile, the Voodoo practitioners’ habit of concealing their rituals behind Catholic practices and masking their deities behind Catholic holy pictures led to the creation of images like Lafortune Félix’s Erzulie Danthor, which is a portrait of the Mater Dolorosa, her heart pierced with a sword. Inscribed in a triangle at the center of the frame, the image is balanced in exactly the same way as in the image he chose as his model—a mass-produced picture imported to Haiti in the wake of the Concordat. Such holy images of Catholicism were commonly encountered in Voodoo temples and in family oratories and played a key part in the development of Voodoo iconography.

The encounter between Indigenist painting and Voodoo occurred at the Centre d’Art at the end of the 1940s, thanks to artists from the popular classes. This was a decisive step in the history of Haiti’s art because it introduced what Georges-Henri Rivière of the International Council of Museums termed “the most beautiful, most surprising, most diverse flowering: primitive, expressionistic, surrealist, abstract, whose varied tendencies express both Haitian and universal man.”

At the same time, all of the trained artists who supported Peters’ idea of a Centre d’Art were from the elite and middle classes. They expected his support as they attempted to define a true Haitian aesthetic that would allow them to preserve their identity while entering international modern trends. Their contact with the Cuban avant-garde artists who showed their works at the Centre in Port-au-Prince did in fact free them from the idea that images should be created only to represent things and allowed them to confront the various components of their identity.

These artists profited most, however, from the fact that they shared the same roof with their popular contemporaries. On the one hand, they appropriated and incorporated a modernist approach to their composition, contrast, and rhythmic structure. On the other hand, they were exposed to Voodoo as an inexhaustible
After the Concordat, the teaching of art was mostly restricted to copying imported reproductions. This reinforced a taste for naturalism among many Haitian youngsters and eventually started a new genre in Haitian painting focused on nature and daily life.

Sources of pictorial elements that they could capitalize on. The trained artists also helped the so-called “primitive” artists to accomplish what was considered impossible by some—develop technical skills without losing the vitality of their imagination and their keen sense of observation.

Ironically, in an attempt to “preserve the thrill of nostalgia that these primitives could bring” (Seldin Rodman “A Caribbean Chapter”), as well as to prevent their corruption by Western styles and protect them from the alienation felt at times by the trained artists, the Centre tried to separate the two groups. Racial and social prejudices may have also been a factor in the desire to separate them but in the end this did not occur. Had the separation happened, it would have excluded one of the most beneficial—if not the most beneficial—influences on contemporaneous Haitian art.

Under the influence of the Paris School, works by Lucien Price reflected social issues of the 1930s and 1940s. Charcoal drawings and dark lines were used to heighten his feelings, giving a strong, easily intelligible, and poetic expression to what he felt as a member of a well-to-do family who had discovered the moral and material wretchedness of the people. He inculcated his disciples with a sense of responsibility and the need to give expression to misfortunes that were hypocritically concealed in society.

In 1950, a number of artists, under the guidance of Lucien Price, Max Pinchinat, and Dieudonné Cédor, broke away from the Centre d'Art and founded the Foyer des Arts Plastiques. The artists at the Foyer practiced a realism totally devoid of narrative and centered on the struggles of the poor. In sharp contrast to the idyllic images of landscapes and composed genre scenes offered to tourists and to Haitians with a taste for such conventional images, the works of the Foyer artists depicted serious social issues. At times their art was considered offensive, and authorities often branded it as communist-inspired and thus unacceptable. The artists were subjected to intense political pressure that ultimately led to depression, exile, and even suicide.

Price, who had used nothing but charcoal until then, began to experiment with color in 1950. In his Etude, he uses blue and red, the colors of the national flag. A military epaulet tied to a geometric element leads on to a head wearing a cocked-hat which emerges from some disorderly motifs giving a general impression of chaos. It was painted at a time when a military coup had overthrown the civilian government.

Haitian artists did not live in total isolation as some have suggested. While artists like Max Pinchinat looked to Picasso to find resources to revolt against academic
tradition, he also believed that his encounter with his so called “primitive” contemporaries brought him the simplicity and straightforwardness needed to express himself as a Haitian modern artist. Artists like Pinchinat were able to make such choices because they had traveled to Europe. Others received their training from correspondence courses, and most kept informed through magazines and other publications.

People in Haiti, as in many other Caribbean countries, generally consider abstraction unsuitable for local artists. However, Price had already gone through his first abstract experiences when he taught Jean Claude Garoute—also known as Tiga—at the Centre d’Art. While Tiga in turn displays a penchant for abstraction, he nonetheless applied the recommendations of the “new school” by representing such figurative elements as eyes, circles, crosses, and symbols borrowed from the vodons, which are emblematic drawings made during Voodoo ceremonies. In 1948, Tiga developed the soleil brûle technique which allowed him to play on the representation of space in a suggestive rather than a narrative form. He wanted to impose a subjectivity which, in his view, is essential to any relation between man and art.

Tiga always displays a real concern with form conceived as “emotional signifiers.” Hence, referential images can never be considered mere illustrations. In the soleil brûles of recent years, color (primarily brown) is used to achieve a canine effect, and the form, nearly always allusive,
Adept's of abstraction have argued that Taíno motifs and Voodoo ritual drawings were mostly abstract. While artists draw on these sources for contemporary works, however, they were not artistic works in essence.

Etude, right, by Lucien Price, and Etude Masque, left, by Tiga, are abstract works by a painter and his disciple who placed Haitian art in the avant-garde of abstract painting in the Caribbean. Although apparently abstract, La Rencontre des Deux Mondes, opposite top, by Valcin II belongs to the historical genre, while Marine, by Jacques Vollarin, opposite bottom, is from the nature and daily life genre.

is strengthened and tied to the AmerIndian influences that have marked Tiga's work.

Adept's of abstraction have argued that Taíno motifs and Voodoo ritual drawings were mostly abstract. While artists draw on these sources for contemporary works, however, they were not artistic works in essence. Another argument is simply that rhythm—like sound and color—is an inherent part of the life of the Haitian people and that it is understandable that the rhythm found in Haitian dances would also be present in arts like painting and sculpture. And while such arts do not exclude figuration, they cannot exclude abstraction either, since music, which is made of rhythm, is the most abstract of all arts.

Many young Haitian artists are creating art that borders on abstraction. Whether self-taught or trained, their concerns are strictly and legitimately aesthetic. Their works are a play of referential forms, simple or elaborate harmonies of colors. Some of them call upon the symbols mentioned earlier that are drawn from pre-Columbian Taíno culture and/or from Voodoo ritual drawings. Tiga initiated this trend when he returned to Haiti from the First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966.

At that time, more and more Haitians were buying local art and their preference was for a more "modern" style of art. Their choice can be explained by two factors. On one hand, this clientele repudiated the art made with "primitive" forms for tourists. On the other hand, they were fascinated by the mysterious aspect of a modern art that satisfied their desire to be up to date. This art-buying public, often without much knowledge, fell for the audacity of artists who took on contemporary elements and applied certain theories, without really assimilating them, in order to appear "modern." Tiga criticized these Haitian modern artists for their main weaknesses: their unconditional submission to foreign influences and their total lack of faith in their own values. Such criticism was valid for artists whose abstractions were merely decorative and for those who were merely copying the European still-life style. It did not apply, however, to those artists who, in the tradition established by the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, dealt with the expression of inner feelings and social concerns.

Haitian contemporary artists continue to express social issues and physical and moral degradation as common themes. One example is the skillful imagery of the so called "neo-primitive" painters who depicted the plight of boat people. Their images are aggressive, disenchanting, and melancholic. It is particularly interesting to see how some Haitian contemporary artists have been able to alter a subject and turn it into a symbol in order to infuse it with a meaning that goes beyond the general understanding of the public. In a way, they have done what is commonly found in the Voodoo iconography established by popular masters like Hector Hyppolite or more recently, by Lafortune Felix. Their works must be considered beyond what appears on the surface. Critics who have failed to do so have categorized these artists simply as devotees of beauty, a judgment based solely on the elegance of the forms they have created on their canvases. But this alteration of the subject has become part of the intellectual knowledge of these contemporary artists and that of their followers.

Jean Price-Mars, one of the founders of the Indigenerve movement, said that "Haitians can properly be described as a people who sing and suffer, a people who suffer and rejoice, a people who laugh, sing, and resign themselves." It is to be expected, then, that the works of the younger contemporary artists are vigorous and constantly being renewed. They still carry universal truths that they want to share.

Gérald Alexis is an internationally known specialist in Caribbean art, with a special emphasis on Haitian art. He has taught at the Ecole Nationale des Arts, and is former Director of the Musée d'Art Haitien, College St. Pierre. He is the author of Peintres haïtiens, Editions Cercle d'Art, Paris ©2000. All images are from Peintres haïtiens.