

HAITIAN ART

Part I: at the

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STAR Art Critic

Three Haitian art exhibits were planned independently in Puerto Rico a long time ago: at the Institute of Culture since last year, at the University of Puerto Rico Museum since 1971 and at the Rattan Specialties showrooms since last summer.

President Rene Lopez Duprey of Rattan Specialties tells me their well known designer, Lawrence Peabody, who is also their partner in their recently opened wicker factory in Haiti, is a consultant to the Centre D'Art of Port-au Prince. Since 1944 the Centre has been the famous source of the Haitian Renaissance in painting. Peabody promotes Haitian art in Puerto Rico now, in Europe or wherever he travels on Rattan's business. The Rattan exhibit was planned last June in Copenhagen.

Ironically, the man who founded the Centre d'Art in Haiti was an American artist named De Witt C. Peters, who was sent in 1943 by the United States as one of a mixed "good neighbor" group to teach English to Haitians. The "Centre d'Art" evolved because De Witt Peters was an artist, the son of an artist, and in Haiti in his spare time he began to help artists spontaneously. The rest is art history, due to the energies of Haitian artists. I wish we Puerto Ricans could respond as powerfully in art as those artists did to such catalysts.

The Institute of Culture fulfills, among its other duties, those of a Centre d'Art. When a year ago it decided to exhibit the Haitian collection of Eugenio Fernandez Mendez, Maria Somoza, head of its Visual Arts Section, extended the idea to include the John Francisus' collection and some other Haitian cultural manifestations along with it. Anthropologist Fer-

nandez Mendez, who kept in touch with Haiti even before he published his nicely tri-lingual book, "Haitian Primitivism," suggested that the institute call for help at the Haiti consulate here.

M. Pierre Chavenet, Haiti's consul here since about a year ago, has enormous drive and tenacity. Only about 500 Haitians live here but his country's drive for tourism and industrialization is picking up speed. Chavenet has to sell the idea to Puerto Rican investors here and he enjoys doing it. The institute's request for help got his full attention and the "Month of Puerto Rican and Haitian Friendship" was thereby proclaimed by the Secretary of State. On Nov. 7 the plenitude of activities began, many at the consulate's expense, including most of the money for the nicely illustrated and informative catalog for the institute show. Which you shouldn't miss. It's open until the end of December.

As for the UPR show, it was put up by the Nader Gallery of Port-au-Prince, one of six galleries in that city, including the original "Centre d'Art." Three other galleries exist in Petionville and one in Cap Haitien directed by one of the Obins, the well known painting family. Several artists have showrooms for their and others' works, and many gift shops also feature art work, including some that are terrible.

The "Haitian Painting" exhibit which the Nader Gallery put up at the UPR Museum in August, 1971 contained the work of only 30 painters of which 22 do not appear in the present exhibit. They either died, as artists at least, or left the gallery. A fast turnover of artists is a primitivist symptom. Art is life to them, and life calls here and there, unprofessionally.

A reasonably printed catalog in

1971 listed only the last names of the Nader artists and no titles of pictures. The present 1977 show has no catalog at all, not even a mimeographed one, yet quite a few of the pictures have been sold. One single list on the wall has the complete names of the artists—about 47 of them this time—the price per numbered items—about 84 items—and no titles of works. It is strange within our UPR Museum which should have remedied the situation. Students should have at least a mimeographed catalog.

Why do people buy Haitian art if the Haitian artists' reputations are unknown and are not even hinted at by any catalog? The answer is chastening to artists here and to the established gallery systems where prices are sometimes not listed as if on purpose. Haitian artist reputations may be unpublished and unknown but Haitian pictures can be seen very well. Let us all learn from such simple facts. Can Puerto Rican pictures be seen as well? Ours are grey, less gay.

Of course, once a picture is made it is independent of the artist. But these Haitian paintings are more independent than normal. Even with the large signatures on each picture they remain as if anonymous. I believe we love them because they were made by the child within all of us, by our creative, spontaneous Id, our primeval self. It's the secret of their success in the international markets. People buy the pictures they themselves could and should have painted when they were young and innocent, as if at the beginning of the world when a forest was the sum of many individual trees, all things stood apart, individualized, and a picture was a display catalog of loved things.

The jaded appetites of sophisticates like Andre Breton are another kind of

explanation for the success of Haitian paintings. Critics give intellectual explanations about the various kinds of pictorial space, about the flatness or B1-dimensions of the modern picture plane—which these Haitian primitives get so easily by stressing every part of the picture with equal clarity, regardless of its position in the foreground, the middleground or way back into space.

Early Cuatrocento Italians had the same clarity, sharply defining contours all over and almost never using aerial perspective. But they did stress lineal perspective tremendously. The Haitian primitives do not use linear perspective at all, and aerial perspective very little. The result is naturally very colorful, something that Puerto Rican art is not. We are too austere in color normally.

Another Breton explanation was the esoteric subject matter and the mixture of surrealistic dreams which can be seen in the Haitian paintings with automatism as a technique. Primitives and children do design somewhat automatically, and schematically, as the Haitian voodoo priests seem to do in a trance, though they repeat known symbols or patterns in their ritual drawings.

Most Haitian primitives do seem to develop a repertoire of such signs, a repeated way of doing trees, or leaves, or flowers or Eves or lions. They may vary, yet they remain the same. This constancy of objects is another reassuring thing about the paintings. We were sure of many things and objects when we were young; now we remember them with nostalgia for they are gone. So we buy the paintings as souvenirs.

The Haitian critics seem to divide their art styles into primitive, which we have discussed, impressionist, sur-



by Julio Jean



by Antoine M. Maurice



by Jacques E. Gorges



by Emmanuel Doss

Photographed by Jose Garcia

University of Puerto Rico

realist and "modern." It's as good an arrangement as any, except for the "modern" meaning of "modern."

The "impressionists" paint in the academic international impressionistic manner, which we know very well in Puerto Rico from Oller, last century and Frade and Pou early in this century, to say nothing of countless young ones since then. Ernst Louizor is supposed to be representative of Haitian impressionism but his paintings at both the UPR Museum and the Institute are second rate so far as subject and composition go. They seem to be designed for calendars, except for his love for impastoed color pigment which saves him somewhat. I wish he could let his figures be as evanescent presences; but no, he has to contour them sharply, as an illustrator, negating impressionism.

Tops in Haitian so-called surrealism is J.E. Gourges. Both he and Louizor are shown at the UPR and the Institute exhibits. Gourges' single work at the UPR is better than his institute exhibits (he also is charging \$2,500 for it, tops for Haitian prices). The work centers on an ox skull, not as good nor as mysterious as the one by Georgia O'Keefe. A surrounding serpent drinks red while winding not very rhythmically around Haiti's neck, and its tail ends a midst corn cobs. It's a valiant but too complicated an effort at surrealism, an intellectual result. I wish he would simplify the rhythms of his forms: they intercept each other consistently at angles which are too acute for liberation or epic movement or real repose even. If he can find said epic liberty, he would really be tops in his field in Haiti even with his somber color.

Lyonel Laurenceau is presented by the Nader Gallery as representative of Haiti's "modernism." He is not shown



by Saint Louis Blaise

at the institute but at the UPR he has a small, heavily impastoed and austere gray, blue and ochre composition of two heads which I like for its looseness but not as a "modern" work. It's too old for that. His countours are happily evanescent, unlike the work of most of his colleagues.

It is very significant that the above three artists mentioned by the Nader Gallery as impressionist, surrealist and modern all stress tertiary colors, not the pure saturated colors typical of the "primitives." What straw in the wind is this? Since our Puerto Rican impressionists, surrealists and moderns are less gray and use more color than their Haitian counterparts, does it mean the Haitians feel guilty or ill at ease whenever they break with their well-known "Primitive" canons and colorful world? Is the child-within-us that lives in Haitian primitivism going to die if the younger artists study abroad and dare to bring with them the modern world? Is industrialism going to bring grayness to Haiti? It has brought much grayness to Puerto Rico already.

Can art change those omens?

Of course, muddy colors can be due to lack of expertise. Notice the Saint-Louis Blaise evolving composition at the UPR. It is primitive to start with but it seems to be drawn direct from life and is grayed thereby. And since it begins to be conscious of aerial perspective, it is grayed even

more. And since it begins to model the volumes of the face more than the primitives do, the flesh colors are muddled and too warm. The work reminds me of early 1950 works by our Eduardo Vera and Jose Manuel Figueroa. They were primitives but their vision was even then being changed by the influence of the sophisticated artists working around them.

Beyond the above ominous readings of those pictures on the UPR walls, let us now enjoy the rest of the show which will be open until Dec. 18th.

The two landscapes by Henry Robert Bresil are gay yellow-green tapestries. The lineal brushstrokes accentuate the warp or lengthwise threads in the loom, with here and there a touch of the wool, or cross threads. He should pursue the idea in yarns, start a nice family industry. Tapestries are a good medium for artists modern or not.

J.R. Chery's two colorful pictures of a happily intent line of children carrying huge fruits on their heads against a landscape of violets and greens is delightful as a cartoon. Also delightful is the fact that he seems to charge for his pictures per head, not so much per square foot: his \$750 picture has a file of seven children and 3 in his \$375 one.

Emmanuel Dostaly's flowered field in soft pastel colors is like old fine embroidery mellowed by age. Gervais Emmanuel Ducasse insists on long hand-lettered texts to reiterate what is

obvious in his colored drawings. Would he dare to really become a let-triste like our Homer or others in Europe and America? His line is too loose or even scraggly now, but he could practice.

Julio Jean shows a curious voodoo ceremony around a phallic old tree stump. Arab-like people in white are in trance as the vari-colored priest and helpers ritualize. Salnave Philippe-Auguste knows a good thing can be repeated, as so many primitives do. He has three similar pictures in the UPR and institute exhibits, all of them of a gnarled leafless tree bearing anywhere from 10 to 14 different large fruits and vegetables. The color is richly sophisticated.

Antoine M. Maurice could be a very modern painter. He has a sense of Hans Hoffman's idea of the "push and pull" effects of color. A primitive, he yet produces a profound sense of space but in full color. I wish the sophisticated representative painters I mentioned above could do their thing but not in the grayed color which results from conscientious modulations. They should study Antoine and Cezanne, to model forms freely in color.

Maybe Haiti's future painting won't fade into greyness if more Antoinettes learn Cezanne's secret with color.

NOTE: Some thoughts in this revue of the UPR Haitian exhibit will be finished in next week's revue of the excellent Haitian shows at the Institute of Culture and Rattan Specialties.



by Lyonel Laurenceau