

ART



"La palma real" by J. Innocent

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Special to the STAR

In last Sunday's article on the University of Puerto Rico Museum's Haitian exhibit, I tried to explain why Haitian primitive paintings are as attractive to the public at large as they are to art sophisticates.

It is the child-within-us, our primeval self, that makes us love a painted world in which all objects are constant and present and where the world stands out as once lovingly seen at the beginning of time. A painting is thus a nostalgic presentation of all the objects once inspected for the first time by the child's eye.

The Haitian primitive painters arrived at such a result spontaneously, as children also do. But how can such a precocious primitive style stand the natural growth to be expected if Haiti becomes industrialized? Plastically, how can Haitian painters learn to model space with full color as their trademark without exaggerating the use of linear and aerial perspective and yet remain both Haitian and modern too?

At the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture exhibit I searched for possible clues to the future development of Haitian art form. Arijac shows no solution in his "Woman's Portrait" with its broken color washes, loose textures and non-rhythmic scratched drawing lines. It is sophisticatedly sketchy, that's all, no more but such works come from many countries. Similarly, A. Montagliatelli's "Returning Home" with its sailboats is excellent international impressionism as is also

Hector's "Industria." Hector, at least, begins to fix optimistically on the shape of Haiti's future industrial climate as still full of light. His playful colors are cool and nice.

It is interesting to see how the primitives themselves are attempting to face the future changes. One possible development is the use of saturated almost luminiscent color as typified by Maurice Vital in his "Escena Callejera." The modern acrylic pigments are very efficient in tinting strength when applied transparently, with gel medium, especially the thalo blues, greens, purples and even some of the yellows. They are very risky colors, but Vital has used them logically. His houses are bright reds, oranges, yellows and light greens and blues. They stand out dramatically against the straight dark thalo greens and blues for foliage in both the foreground and the rear ground, negating aerial perspective. But the strong lineal perspective of the houses creates plenty of space, even in the fully-colored picture. A tour de force. But there's a falseness in the houses as if they were doll-houses or heavily lacquered Chinese boxes right next to our noses, not some street blocks away. There's no atmospheric involvement whatever, no distance.

A more discreet use of the above highly saturated colors can be seen in Andre Normil's "Dejad que los ninos vengan a mi" and "El Paraiso de Eva." The effect is still almost too warm but the saturated colors are interspersed with cooling neutrals. The

same neutrals add richness to the beautifully saturated yet light "La pesca milagrosa" by Jean Baptiste Bottex, a well designed piece.

If luminiscent colors were used by the five Obins in their historical and other normally pastel-colored realistic works, they would lose their credibility as "historians of reality." The works of the early Haitian primitives in the 40's and 50's most times were painted with industrial paints which have faded considerably. Even in Puerto Rico the 1950 murals by A. Torres Martino in the Caribe Hilton were painted with paints of almost industrial quality. The acrylics came to the market much later and the latest almost luminiscent pigments came even later.

A contrary effort to the above is the very light or chalky way typified by some works by E. Blanc and Bien Aime Sylvain. They seem to paint the shadows of most things with full-strength colors then they seek the lights with white pigment. The effect can be cooler anyway than the harsh mustards and browns produced by too many other pigment mixtures but it is timid.

A possible future development for some Haitian artists might be to do tapestries and embroideries with today's modern color yarns. Their compositional sense and even cosmivision is a closed one. A lot of their paintings even now look like tapestries. I already mentioned H. R. Bresil at the UPR exhibit last Sunday. His linear color strokes suggesting the warp and the woof in weaving

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from

HAITI

can also be seen in his work at the institute. Full-color embroidery, another modern craft, is patently visible in the charming flowered landscapes by Eam Dostaly, especially in his "Paisaje luminoso," with its round trees going from greens to blues to reds, purples and violets and its crisply drawn rather painterly figures who dance more than work in the fields. "Campo de siembra" by Raymond d'Orleans is almost embroidered in the fore and middle grounds but it is ominously denuded or empty in the distant hills, the sky and the trees. Both the sky and trees go dramatically from very dark somber colors to very light.

The somberness and emptiness in some parts of many recent Haitian works may be Haiti's future. It could also mean haste to finish the pictures for export. The once lovingly detailed backgrounds and middle grounds of the original primitives are disappearing. The presented "action" or figures are in the foreground now.

Notice Gerald Paul's "Ceremonia silenciosa del grand bois (patron de los magos y hechiceros.)" Against a dark almost black and empty background some painterly impastoed small figures stand, and a table in their middle stands out in an hallucinatory way. Nature is excluded as landscape, only man and his artifacts can be seen. Sometimes brightly against the night. We are faced with a cosmo-vision utterly apart from the nostalgic world of the primitive mind. There is child's vision here; we sense



At left, from left: "Graduacion" by Jean Baptiste Jean, "La primera comunion" by Wilson Bigaud and "Ceremonia silenciosa del grand bois" by Gerald Paul.

At right, "Fiesta en el pueblo" by Wilson Bigaud, left, and "Gloria al mundo" by Hector Hippolyte.

Part 2: at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture

NOTE: Of seven recent Haitian art exhibitions in San Juan, two are still on. The show at the Institute will continue until Jan. 2 and the exhibition-sale at Rattan Specialties on the Caguas Road will continue through December. Sale proceeds from the Rattan exhibition will benefit the Ponce Museum of Art.



"La vida en la aldea" by Bourmond Byron

an ominous silence among the figures.

A similar exclusion of nature's details and an emphasis on man and his artifacts and cultural goods and animals can be seen in the various works by Bourmond Byron which are dark grey all around but lightened in the center as if for a coming boxing match. He seems to use straight black for the shadows, which cools his pictures ominously too. Then he shows no details in the background as if he were in a hurry, or is it as if nature were excluded and he preferred to insist strictly on the props needed for his "La Vida en la Aldea" or "Juego de Canicas" both of which show a horse but as a prop, of all things.

I have been amazed at the lack of horses in these more than 200 Haitian paintings we have seen lately. Only two of the many "Paradises" (one by Andre Normil, the other by Edison Blanc) and one "Noah's Ark" by Byron show horses, insipidly, whereas lions, tigers, giraffes, zebras, serpents, owls, peacocks, cocks, birds, guinea hens, goats and even crocodiles show often.

The Obins do some few horses but quite placidly. The only spirited horses are those by Gervais Emmanuel Ducasse in his "La llegada del Senor Lemontre," drawing a military coach, and the corralled but unbridled horse in Bourmond Byron's "Juego de Canicas" in which the horse seems to neigh at the kite in the sky. Ominous is the sketchy "Lost Horse" by Beaumont Byron in the Franciscus collection. The horse may

be a jackass however and is hiding from the man who wants to rope him.

Amazingly absent too are ox carts and autos. There are only three multicolored "guaguas" and several burros carrying loads, two of them carrying people, and absolutely no plowing oxen show up in the 200 paintings which are so full of other loving details.

To complete the culture depicted in the paintings, Haitian men do not go on horseback as used to be quite common here in Puerto Rico, and Haitian men do not carry parcels, only hoes on their shoulders, or sticks. A boy does carry sombreros to the market. It is the women and few donkeys who carry the burdens in Haiti, to and from the markets and over the denuded countryside, according to the newer paintings. None of the paintings in the Haitian exhibits is dated, for life is timeless, man will die...

Very significantly, no picture of Duvalier is seen anywhere. But a profound sense of religion is shown or implied in more than half the paintings exhibited.

The hierarchical importance of the people depicted in ceremonies is solved with more variety than in Egyptian art in some Haitian works such as "Ceremonia vudu" by Gerard Valcin, "La Misa" and "La primera comunión" by lively Wilson Bigaud. Perspective is simply collapsed as desired to lengthen certain figures in comparison to others. It is easier to establish proper hierarchy in art than in life.

The hierarchical figure in Haitian art is Hector Hippolyte, (1894-1948)-reasonably represented here by "Gloria al mundo angeles." He dared use pigment as pigment in dramatic places, letting his brushmarks show impatiently. The present composition suggests a tapestry design; he dared use color locally in full saturation, wisely counteracting it with neutralized areas. He evaded impressionism as a technique maybe because he intuited that impressionism was only a necessary medicine for the excesses of European palettes. European painters had abused dark colors. Since they painted in isolated studios away from natural light they needed the laxative effects of natural light. But Hippolyte did not. Daily he lived as he painted under natural light and the light of his religious visions. What better lights than those?

Thus Hippolyte was ready for modern art, a leader for his people's art: ready for surrealism because of his visions, ready for fauvistic or nordic expressionism because of his impatience with the limitations of the painting medium and of the life lived on this earth, he a priest. He was ready for cubism in its resultant planarity or bidimensionality though not in its analytical stage. He synthesized forms spontaneously; he didn't need Juan Gris or Braque to teach him.

Prefet Duffaut's pictures combine surrealism with geometry particularly in his variations of the street scenes in his town. The streets go up in the sky surrealistically and cubistically,

reminding us of Piranesi's prisons at times, though I doubt Duffaut is an unwilling prisoner of the irregular geometry of his town of Jacmel.

T.B. Coachy shows a geometric abstraction called "City Lights" which seems to have been superimposed on an unresolved realistic figure composition. The figures peek out amidst the various simple but harshly contoured geometric shapes which are painted transparently with thalo blues, greens and purples. The result is raw in color but the idea of interplay between nature and geometry is pregnant provided Coachy learns to neutralize some color areas, not muddy them.

A much more refined use of color is shown in "Mercado de genero" by Antonio Joseph. The geometric planes break the realistic scene timidly, almost simplistically. The thalo greens are maybe too efficient and saturated but the interplay of nature and geometry is again pregnant for the future.

Rosemarie Desruisseau's use of planes in the foreground of her "Lavado en el rio" is OK but how can she be so sloppy in the blurred background? Calixto Henri's "La gran manzana" is a planarly schematic urban scene much too warm in the reddish browns.

Claude Jean Paul's strong "Campesino" seems to combine good saturated color with simple planal design with almost embroidered floral details in the fore and middle grounds and some chalky touches. The effect of the huge campesino is surrealistically hallucinatory. Thus he is another of those combining souls in Haiti who can be used by other artists as future art doctors, as Hippolyte still is. The dilemma of Haiti's art so that it doesn't turn too gray or too internationalized or sophisticated as it goes into an industrialized future, is in the hands of some of Haiti's own artists, beginning with Hippolyte.

It is strange and even rueful for me that Andre Breton's and Wilfredo Lam's selective taste in the late 40's is still vindicated. Hippolyte is good for Haiti even now, and his lessons more so for the future. If he isn't heeded, Haiti's art will be eclectic, as ours is. Its national and special quality will disappear into the gray smokes of the future. It does not have to happen.

