

2011 SRX CROSSOVER

LEARN MORE

BUILD YOUR OWN

News MutualArt

September 28, 2010

Saving Haiti's Priceless Works of Art Devastated During Quake



Imagine 50,000 items, from paintings to pottery, manuscripts to mosaics, destroyed in less than one minute of destruction. The devastating earthquake that rattled Haiti in January of 2010 has taken a heavy toll on all aspects of life, including the country's rich cultural heritage: relics from Haitian culture now lie in the remains of destroyed buildings, in grave danger of being irrevocably damaged.

In order to help the Haitian government assess, recover and restore Haiti's cultural materials, the Smithsonian is leading a team of cultural organizations. A 7,500-square-foot, three-story building in Port-au-Prince serves as a temporary conservation site where objects retrieved from the rubble can be assessed, conserved and stored.

From October 1--November 24th, Affirmation Arts Gallery in New York is exhibiting "Saving Grace: A Celebration of Haitian Art," featuring 50 works by Haitian artists, most of which have never before been seen outside of Haiti. The event will showcase a variety of works of different genres and mediums, including paintings, sculpture, and works on paper. Two paintings included in the exhibition, Hector Hyppolite's "Pot de Fleurs" and Célestin Faustin's "Beau Rêve," were pulled from the wreckage and restored by art conservators working in the Port-au-Prince lab.

MutualArt.com spoke with **Stephanie Hornbeck**, Chief Conservator for the Smithsonian on the project, about the challenges, achievements and logistics of such a formidable task.

MutualArt: What was the background of the project and your involvement? What is the ideological goal of the project? At what phase is the project operating?

Stephanie Hornbeck: We have a memorandum of understanding with the government of Haiti, and about 10 other partnering institutions, including UNESCO. Over an 18-month period we're working to recover and restore Haitian cultural patrimony damaged in the January 12th earthquake. Haiti, though it has a rich artistic tradition, does not have a group of professionals trained in conservation, so a really important aspect of our work is training in conservation and preservation. Our project will go through November 2011, so we are just finishing the first annual quarter. We worked really hard to establish professional connections and we have 30 partnering organizations, public and private collections, and it's their role to determine the large project priorities, so the decision-making aspects are handled by the Haitian professionals, and we are there to support and offer expertise.



Send Feedback

Print Article

ARTICLE PROVIDED BY MutualArt

Europe one way from £49 including taxes

book now on lufthansa.com

Lufthansa

MOST POPULAR

Artists Articles Lots

- Paul Gauguin French, 1848 - 1903
- Jean Michel Basquiat American, 1960 - 1988
- Pieter Brueghel the Elder Flemish, Circa 1525 - 1569

See all popular artists

MUTUALART IN NUMBERS

8698 MA members follow at least 5 artists

Follow more artists

SUNSATONAL SAVINGS AT MEXICO'S BEACH RESORTS

- 4th and 7th NIGHTS of your stay are FREE!
- UP TO \$300 CREDIT on food and beverage
- ROOM UPGRADE subject to availability

BOOK NOW

MERIDIEN WESTIN

THE LUXURY COLLECTION

Restrictions Apply. See terms and conditions

TODAY'S FEATURED VIDEO

Donald G. Fisher on collecting ...



Does being on-site affect your work? What does this mean for the work? Are outside conditions and access to materials an issue?

We have an office complex that has been converted into conservation studios, and it's a nice, climate-controlled facility, and we do most of our work there. We sometimes do site work, like I recently helped excavate some works still trapped in rubble, and also at Holy Trinity Cathedral, we're working to recover 3 murals that survived out of 14.



Detail of Philome Obin's damaged mural "The Last Supper" at Holy Trinity Cathedral. Conservation treatment to stabilize the mural is planned for fall 2010. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck

As far as materials, we've had to bring in 100% of our materials and supplies from the US so the conservators that are deployed all bring checked luggage, and the checked luggage has our supplies. Over about 22 trips we've managed to outfit our labs in this way. We'll probably soon need to ship a container with some larger equipment. That's an ongoing challenge because we're trying to establish a new generation of Haitian conservators, and ideally you want to be able to find some of your materials locally, because it becomes very expensive if you have to import everything. So part of what I'm trying to do is identify local distributors of supplies.

Have you set any long-term goals for how much you would like to achieve within the breadth of time and funding?

Our goal right now would be for the center to be self-sustaining and to exist after the Smithsonian commitment has finished, so our hope is that it will continue after our project.

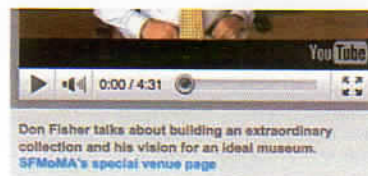
Because of the vast destruction in Haiti and the eclectic range of damaged objects and materials, how many conservators and specialists do you have on staff?

It's a real challenge. I am the only conservator on staff, we are at the moment relying on volunteer deployment of conservators, from the US for 10-14 days, and we've had at the moment 16 conservators come down and join us. We're also working to identify Haitian restorers and art students to train in the lab as technicians and project assistants, and right now we have 6 of those who are helping us with a big project. And for the Holy Trinity Church we hope to bring out another 4 Haitian fine art painters, and we recently had a training session where we worked with 24 collection managers. So the conservation staff is almost 100% volunteer at this point, and I'll probably bring on another 2-3 people on contract, so our staff is quite small.



What type of relationship do you have with local arts organizations and authorities?

We have a steering committee, made of five of the partner institutions, we meet with them every week to guide our project, and we are hopeful to come up a project for each of the five, and we provide oversight. Our project director at the center was the Minister of Culture in Haiti from 2008-9, so he's closely tied in with the ministers in Haiti, as well as directors for museums and cultural institutions, so I feel like we have a good connection with local art professionals. In fact, I've heard from a colleague in UNESCO that our project is the furthest along in terms of the culture sector, in that we have a facility, staff, funding, and have begun working, so we've had some real tangible outcomes.



What is the attitude, the feeling from those conservators from Haiti working alongside you and your team?

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, the Haitians are very enthusiastic, very eager to learn, and were very engaged in our 3-week training course we just finished. It was obvious to us instructors that there is such a lack of training opportunities there, the participants were just soaking up the information and everyone expressed an interest in future training opportunities, and that is something we hope to continue with, as soon as within the next couple of months. Many people have personally expressed how important it is for them to preserve cultural identity through works of art. When I first visited in June I was worried how people working in cultural preservation would be perceived in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, but I was pleasantly surprised. It's encouraging to people to see works that seem beyond repair and hope, to be brought back to life, people have found that very heartening, and that's rewarding for us too.



Were you shocked by the destruction, even though it had already been several months since the quake?

Yes, it's dramatically shocking still. First of all there are tent cities everywhere, some 1.3 million people, and collapsed buildings and rubble everywhere. And also on the streets you see UN military vehicles, so there's very much a sense of a city that's in extremes, and dire conditions for many people, it's just inescapable in your day, so it is still shocking.

How do you weigh the importance of objects in order to determine which ones you conserve first?

[The steering committee] mainly chooses them based on curatorial importance, the value of the artworks, the artist who fabricated it, the rarity...and then we help them determine the conservation priorities, based on degree of damage, if it's structural or surface, if treatment can wait...so we weigh in with our expertise, and then together we prioritize.

Has media attention helped your cause in terms of donations or conservators volunteering their time? Was there a huge response to the auction which recently closed for example?

Well, I can only comment in the conservation aspect, I mean we have gotten a lot of media attention for our project, but I don't have a sense of how it's translated into donations. Our association of conservation professionals received grants to cover expenses for the project, so members of our organization, just over 3,000 conservators, are very aware of our work and I think many of them have been inspired to volunteer their time, for two weeks without pay, and it's very generous; it recalls the 1966 floods in Florence where a generation of conservators flew out to Florence and became known as the "Mud Angels" and this is our time's appendage to that.

Written by MutualArt.com staff