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Haiti's quake-crushed artworks back on show after restoration

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NEW YORK // Composed with the childlike simplicity that is typical of Hector Hyppolite, the celebrated Haitian artist, the painting *Pot de Fleurs* was presumed lost under a toppled gallery when an earthquake ripped apart the Caribbean nation.



George Nader Jr examines a damaged painting in the Nader Museum of Fine Haitian Art. Dario Lopez-Mills / AP Photo

Now, thanks to a conservation project that is restoring thousands of paintings, sculptures and documents damaged in January's magnitude 7 quake, it will join 50 pieces in New York next month as a celebration of Haitian art.

Hyppolite's *Pot de Fleurs* is a textbook example of Haitian art naif, characterised by untrained artists producing simple, symbolic works, and a standout piece in a poverty-racked country's cherished artistic tradition.

The artwork, painted by Hyppolite, a voodoo priest, directly on to cardboard in the 1940s, was buried and broken into six pieces when its home, a private gallery in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, came crashing down on January 12.

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Yes, it should be exciting

7.02%

No, I am not interested

67.84%

I would but I am concerned for my own safety

25.15%

The tattered oil painting was among the first beneficiaries of the recently opened Cultural Recovery Centre, where experts from the US-based Smithsonian Institution repair torn canvases and touch up chipped paintwork.

Richard Kurin, the Smithsonian's head of arts, said: "It was like a jigsaw puzzle. One of our conservators literally put it back together. When you see the full painting, it is hard to imagine that it was in pieces."



Restoration teams working in three laboratories on the outskirts of the city have the makings of a rare success story in a chaotic nation that has yet to begin resettling the 1.6 million Haitians left homeless eight months ago in earnest.

Hyppolite's *Pot de Fleurs* is among only a few dozen pieces to be repaired and retouched at the centre. Other items include Célestin

Faustin's *Un Beau Rêve*, figurines of the indigenous Taíno people and a document from the revolutionary leader General Alexandre Pétion.

Olsen Jean Julien, a former Haitian culture minister who now runs the centre in Bourdon, says Haiti lost about 50,000 items, from paintings to pottery and manuscripts to mosaics, in less than one minute of destruction.

Others say any estimate is "wild guesswork" because gallery owners rarely kept inventories of collections, meaning nobody knows exactly how much, or what, is trapped under the mountains of debris still piled up across Port-au-Prince.

"We have lost a lot, but we're trying to save what we can," said Mr Julien, who describes gallery owners digging through twisted steel and concrete with bare hands to rescue buried canvases, testament to the importance Haitians place on their art.



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In an impoverished land that has endured decades of brutal and incompetent leadership, Haitian art tells the story of a people who defeated their French colonial masters to become the world's first black-led republic, in the early 19th century.

"Haiti is characterised by liberty and creativity," Mr Julien said. "We were liberated from slavery and celebrate our cultural diversity. That can explain our huge creativity. Creativity is a way of life here. It is just our identity."

Within weeks of the levelling of much of the capital, artists began working again, narrating the tragedy in oil paints and showcasing their wares on street corners, hoping to sell pieces to the influx of foreign-aid workers.

Disaster spawned a new Haitian genre, dubbed "rubble art", in which concrete chunks and splintered carpentry from toppled homes became unlikely canvases, bearing harrowing images of an event that claimed the lives of 300,000.

"Art has been a way to overcome the trauma left by the earthquake," Mr Julien added.

Hyppolite's pieces were pulled from the wrecked private gallery collection of Georges Nader Sr, a Haitian tycoon, where as many as 15,000 pieces worth about US\$20 million (Dh73.4m) were buried in a shower of concrete boulders. Only about 3,000 items have been salvaged.

The quake also levelled the Centre d'Art in central Port-au-Prince, which was founded by an American schoolteacher, DeWitt Peters, in the 1940s and became the creative hub for Hyppolite's contemporaries and a breeding ground for generations of Haitian artists.

Two cargo containers filled with artworks pulled from the toppled gallery have yet to be unloaded into the recovery centre, although conservators are concerned that Caribbean humidity and mould have further damaged the quake-torn canvases.

Few losses rival the importance Haitians afford the eight frescoes inside the capital's Cathédrale Sainte Trinité, which Haiti's best-known artists decorated with biblical murals of black characters to attract Caribbean congregations in the early 1950s.

Vibrant frescoes, including Philomé Obin's crucifixion scene with a mulatto Jesus, and Christ's ascension over a scene of football-playing villagers by Castera Bazile, were lost when the cathedral collapsed. Conservators are debating how to protect the three surviving works.

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Restoration workers are daunted by their task and predict that unearthing, repairing and safeguarding pieces will take years. They are already facing cash shortages, and few have begun raising money to rebuild collapsed galleries and showcase art once Haiti's reconstruction begins in earnest.

For the Smithsonian's Mr Kurin, Haiti's art scene is among the most lively and sophisticated in the Caribbean and could lure foreign visitors and make tourism an important revenue source, once roads, hotels and other infrastructure are built.

"Are we really going to build a car factory or a steel mill in Haiti? Artistic production could generate more money for Haiti than other industries," he said.

"Why not get people to experience Haitian culture, cuisine, art, crafts, music history and sights – employ Haitians and have people spend some money in Haiti? It could really drive the economy."

Government officials already plan to exploit Haiti's only listing on the UN's world heritage sites, a 19th-century citadel in the north of the country, and rebuild the historic district of the southern port town, Jacmel, which suffered extensive damage.

While such schemes are decades away, the first green shoots of Haiti's cultural recovery will appear on October 1, when the exhibition *Saving Grace: A Celebration of Haitian Art* opens at the Affirmation Arts gallery in Manhattan.

The gallery director, Maria Goldwasser, describing *Pot de Fleurs* by Hyppolite, who began his career painting with chicken feathers on cardboard canvases, says: "It warms your heart on so many levels."

"Just aesthetically, it's extraordinary. But when you think of its journey, how it was left for rubble and then, with such a tender hand, put back together."

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