

HAITIAN ART

The Graham Collection



September 19 – October 26, 1989

**University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
University at Stony Brook**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I also want to thank Ute Stebich, noted Haitian scholar and owner of the Ute Stebich Gallery in Lenox, Massachusetts, for contributing the insightful essay published in this catalogue.

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Rhonda Cooper
Director

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Front cover: Salnave Philippe-Auguste
The Magic Fruit Tree
Oil on canvas, 23-3/4 × 19-3/4"
Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
Stamford, Connecticut

HAITIAN ART: *Past and Present*

“What can we learn from an artistic tradition that may be said, with some truth, to stretch back formally only to about 1944? What can we learn from an art that can be said, with some justification, to have embraced the aesthetics of the airport souvenir stand in less than a generation? What can we learn from an art form that has been trapped as ‘primitive’ in a superficial nomenclature?”¹

More than ten years have gone by since Michael Botwinick raised these questions in the foreword of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Haitian Art* at the Brooklyn Museum. Since then, we have learned that Haitian art is a valid art form, albeit young by the standards of other artistic traditions. We have learned to distinguish between the good and the bad by understanding where Haitian art comes from and what it is concerned with. We have learned that labeling an art form needs time so it can find its proper place within the history of art. Haitian art is now being taught as part of Afro-American art. It has already inspired contemporary artists such as Alison Saar, Mimi Gross, and Joyce Scott to draw for their own work on Haitian iconography and techniques employed by Haitian artists working with metal, beads, and sequins.

The truism that art is a reflection of time, place, and people is particularly valid for the art of Haiti. Haitian art can be subdivided into the three basic subject matters of history, daily life, and religion, thus opening our eyes to a unique culture.

Haitian culture begins with the arrival of the first group of Africans to the island of Hispanola as early as 1503. Abused as slaves, they were forbidden to

practice their own religion and were immediately baptized Catholics upon arrival; yet, misery reinforced the power of the African gods, which survived under the cover of Christian saints. A slave uprising and a thirteen year struggle for freedom resulted in a new nation, and Haiti was born in 1804. Isolated from the rest of the world, the Haitians reinstated many African traditions, which are, to this day, recognizable in architecture, the religion of Vodun, language, and customs. The memory of Africa is also kept alive through the art.

Haitian art started in 1904 when DeWitt Peters, an American artist coming to Haiti, fell in love with the beauty of the country, its colors and quality of light. Looking in vain for art, he opened an art school called Le Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. Students had to pay tuition and, consequently, only the wealthy, with an international lifestyle, could afford to attend. The opening was publicized with great fanfare in the newspapers and thus came to the attention of Philome Obin, a painter by passion rather than by profession. Living in Cap-Haitien, the capital of northern Haiti, where the revolution began, he painted historical scenes. One of these he sent to Le Centre d'Art. DeWitt Peters recognized the genius of this untrained artist and encouraged him to keep on painting. Philome Obin eventually became the master of historical painting. He inspired others to follow his example, and the school of the north developed with its own style and with history as its subject matter.

Through the discovery of Philome Obin's work, DeWitt Peters realized that similar talent might be found all over Haiti; indeed, his search met with success. Art existed where he least expected

it, namely among the common people: the shoemaker, the mechanic, the blacksmith, the Vodun priest. Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit, Castera Bazile, and Micius Stephane, were a few of the now famous artists to come from their ranks. Their art was fresh and unique, since they were untouched by knowledge of other art. They painted their own experiences in life, stemming from their own culture. Unlike the students at the Centre d'Art, they were creators rather than followers.

Exhibitions of Haitian art in Europe and America confirmed DeWitt Peters's discovery. The paintings by the untutored artists were highly acclaimed. Andre Breton wrote a poem to express his enthusiasm and Rene d'Harnoncourt, then director, bought Haitian art for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

So great was the success of Haitian art that other Haitians wanted to profit from it. Galleries opened overnight, and almost anyone who could hold a brush began to paint. The result was the emergence of the so-called "airport art" which, devoid of inspiration, copied recognized masters in style and theme. These products, though colorful and charming, lack the soul and vitality so applauded in the work of the originators of Haitian art.

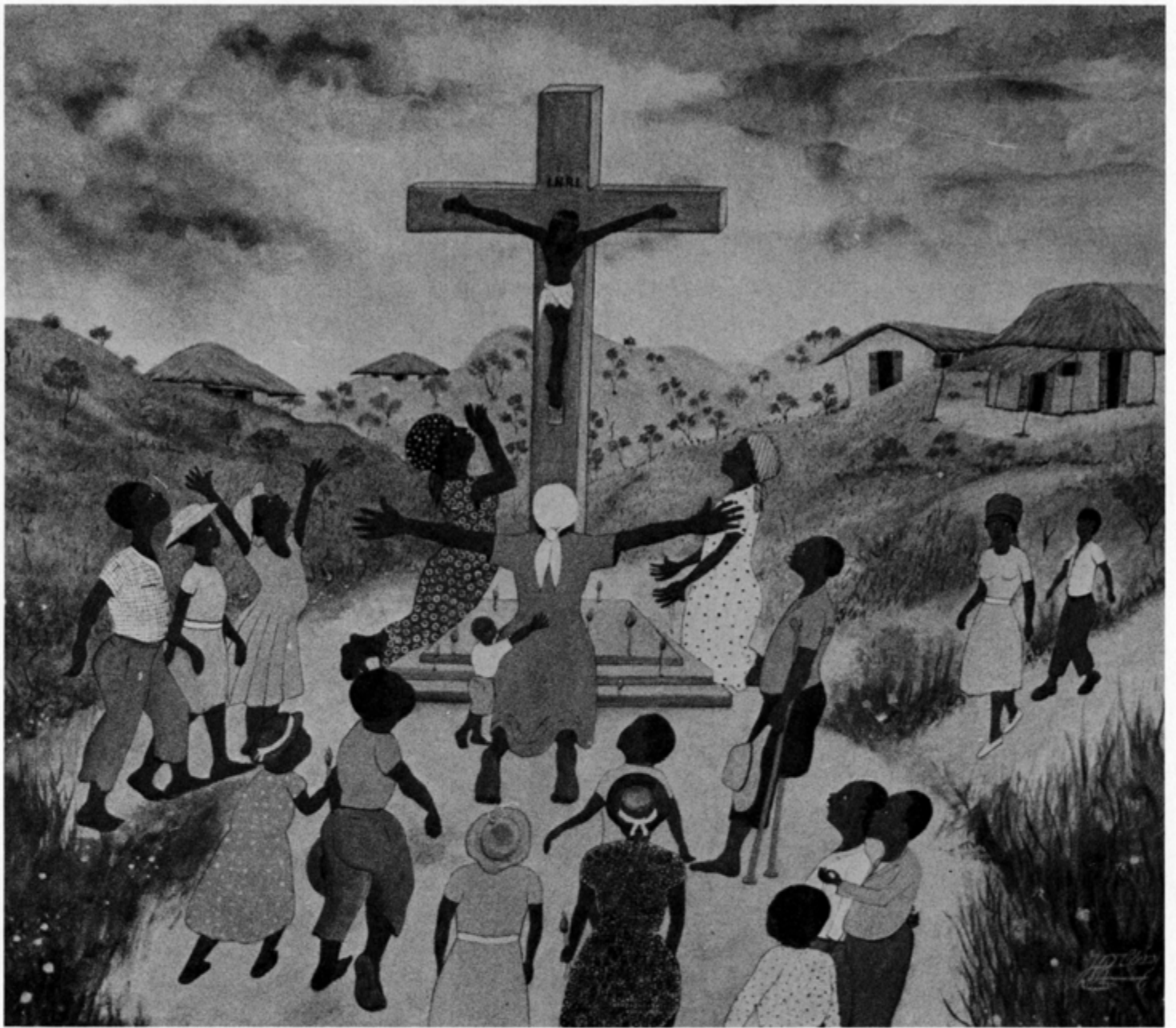
Although most of these masters have by now passed away, those still living, such as Andre Pierre and Salnave Phillipe-Auguste, continue to produce fine work. This is not to say that Haitian art is dead. A new generation of artists, working with metal from used oil drums, has emerged, and their sculpture is excellent. The Louis-Juste brothers, Serge Jolimeau and Gabriel Bien-Aime, for example, are among the new masters. Anthropologists have begun to pay attention to the ceremonial art of Haiti — that is, art connected to the Vodun temple, such as Vodun banners of beads and sequins. This

other original art form that has existed for many years is being discovered and exposed to the public. With the recent revolution in Haiti, the eviction of the Duvaliers, enthusiastic Haitians have painted political murals all over the capital.² Some of these show great talent. Haitian art is likely to draw new ideas from this event and continue to flourish with vigor.

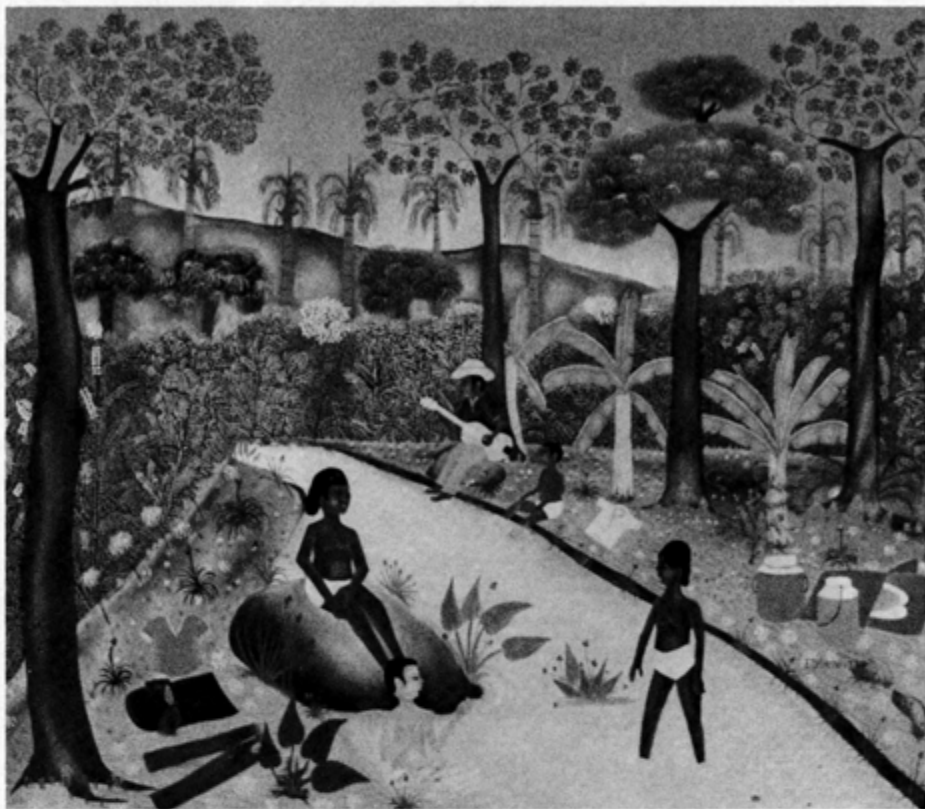
Ute Stebich

Footnotes

1. Stebich, Ute. *Haitian Art*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1978.
2. Barnett, Alan W. "Report from Haiti: Revolution on the Walls," *Art in America*, July, 1989, pp. 67-75.



J.R. Chery
Supplicants at a Christian Shrine
Oil on canvas, 20 × 24"
Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
Stamford, Connecticut



Eugene-Jean
Afternoon Bathing
Oil on canvas, 19 × 22"
Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
Stamford, Connecticut



Volvick Almonor
Deliverance 4 Zennas
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30"
Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
Stamford, Connecticut

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1975 | FACULTY EXHIBITION | 1983 | CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW |
| 1976 | MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION
OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO | 1984 | BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE |
| 1977 | MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION
OF ARTS EXHIBITION) | 1985 | LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN
SANCHEZ/INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
ABSTRACT PAINTINGS REDEFINED |
| 1978 | LEON GOLUB
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL | 1986 | KLEEGER: METAL SCULPTURE
TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
YANG YEN-PING AND ZENG SHAN-QING
EIGHT URGAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY
ARTISTS OF THE EAST VILLAGE
TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT |
| 1979 | SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN | 1987 | HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS
JUDITH DOLNICK/ROBERT NATKIN
MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE: THE HUMANITARIAN
VISION
MEL ALEXENBERG: COMPUTER ANGELS
STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA: THE WEST |
| 1980 | BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTON PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY | 1988 | THE FACULTY SHOW '88
ROBERT WHITE: SELECTED WORKS 1947-1988
LEE KRASNER: PAINTINGS 1956-1984
EDGAR BUONAGURIO: PERMUTATION AND
EVOLUTION 1974-1988
JOAN SNYDER COLLECTS JOAN SNYDER |
| 1981 | ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH | 1989 | THE M.F.A. SHOW '89
ROBERT KUSHNER: SILENT OPERAS
HERMAN CHERRY: PAINTINGS 1984-1989 |
| 1982 | FOUR SCULPTORS
CECIL ABISH
JACK YONGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY | | |
| 1983 | THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTORS: A CONTEMPORARY
OVERVIEW | | |



Andre Normil
Jungle
 Oil on canvas, 24 x 30"
 Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
 Stamford, Connecticut

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS
art gallery



J.B. Bottex

Le Signe de l'alliance

Oil on canvas, 20 × 24"

Collection of Mrs. Edith Graham,
Stamford, Connecticut