

# “Cultural Recovery in Haiti: Conservation Efforts to Recover Patrimony Damaged by the January 12, 2010 Earthquake”

Stephanie Hornbeck, Chief Conservator, Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project

## **Author Bio**

Stephanie Hornbeck serves as Chief Conservator for the Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project. She is also Principal at Caryatid Conservation Services, a private practice in object conservation in Miami, FL. From 1998-2009, Stephanie was Conservator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC. She received her diploma in fine art conservation (objects) and M.A. in art history from the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, where she wrote her qualifying paper on 20<sup>th</sup> century Haitian art.

**Author contact information:** email: [shornbeck@caryatid-conservation.com](mailto:shornbeck@caryatid-conservation.com)

## **Abstract:**

The January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti yielded devastating humanitarian consequences, as well as wide-spread destruction of built heritage and dramatic damage to public and private collections. In partnership with the Government of Haiti, the Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project provides conservation expertise to support preservation priorities established by a steering committee of Haitian cultural institutions. While Haiti has an established, rich tradition of creativity in the visual arts, a systematic professional commitment to historic preservation and conservation of its cultural patrimony does not exist. Thus, the ability of its art professionals to adequately respond to the severe damage to cultural patrimony is inherently limited. Nevertheless, professionals in the culture sector recognized the critical need to recover and preserve the nation's cultural patrimony, while beginning to formally introduce Haitian art professionals to current conservation principles. The project operates at the Haiti Cultural Recovery Center in Port-au-Prince and has an 18-month duration (June 2010 - November 2011). This paper provides an overview of the project, describing its objectives, challenges, and rewards.

## **Introduction**

Works of art and patrimony are important signifiers of cultural identity, which in the wake of a national crisis become even more important, cherished documents of national history. The Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project aims to recover cultural patrimony damaged by the January 12, 2010 earthquake and to formally introduce Haitian art professionals to conservation principles.

The earthquake yielded horrific humanitarian consequences, as well as wide-spread destruction of built heritage and dramatic damage to public and private collections. In 35 seconds, the 7.1 magnitude earthquake killed an estimated 100,000 people, while razing cement-block architecture designed to withstand hurricanes, the more commonly experienced natural disaster in the region. The acute humanitarian crisis required an immediate and extensive first



Centre d'Art collapsed building and site, Port-au-Prince.  
Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

response. The response to the cultural devastation was secondary, although deemed of high importance, as well.

## **Haitian Art Overview**

Foremost among the islands of the Caribbean, Haiti is distinguished by an internationally-recognized, long history of creativity in the visual arts, literature, and music. A profuse flowering grew out of the *Noirist* period in the late 1920s, when writers and philosophers embraced the African roots of Haiti and rejected colonial influences. *Vodou* culture and rural existence were celebrated as having a pre-Colonial origin.

In the 1940s Haitian art gained international recognition when Americans DeWitt Peters and Seldon Rodman founded the Centre d'Art and invited self-taught artists from all over the island to work in studios in Port-au-Prince. These artists, primarily painter Hector Hyppolite and sculptor Georges Liautaud, achieved renown when French surrealist André Breton and Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam visited Haiti in 1946 and wrote admiringly of the art. Eventually, the artists would break out of the restrictions of the naïve tradition and evolve into several artistic collectives and movements. Today, Haitian contemporary art retains its vitality and a number of artists, such as Mario Benjamin, Eduard Duval Carrié, and Pascal Monnin have international reputations.

Yet, despite this established artistic tradition, a systematic professional commitment to historic preservation and conservation of cultural patrimony does not exist. Thus, the ability of Haiti's art professionals to adequately respond to the severe damage from the earthquake sustained by thousands of individual art works, public monuments and historic structures is inherently limited.

## **Project Concept Development**



A plaster cast of *L'Aïte d'Independence* arrives at the Cultural Recovery Center.  
Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

The Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project is a Haitian, American, and international effort. The conceptual foundation of the project was developed by Richard Kurin, Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, in collaboration with Corine Wegener, President of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield, Project Manager and former Minister of Culture Olsen Jean Julien and the Haitian Ministries of Culture and Communication and Tourism. The response effort also included the American Institute of Conservation for Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), relying on the support of Eryl Wentworth, Executive Director, and Eric Pourchot, Institutional Advancement Director.

The project mission aims to recover, stabilize, and conserve works of art, monuments, architectural features, and audio-visual materials damaged by the earthquake. American and foreign conservation expertise support preservation priorities established by Haitian cultural institutions. The role of determining what patrimony should be saved by the Smithsonian project rests with individual Haitian institutions; all decisions regarding prioritization by cultural value rest with Haitian professionals.



Broken paintings on hardboard, Centre d'Art collection.  
Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.



Conservation studio assistant Marc Gerard Estime examines a sculpture through the microscope. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

An estimate by the National Institute for Protection of Cultural Patrimony (*Institute de Sauvetage Patrimoine Nationale*, ISPAN) in Haiti places the damage at 50,000 works of art and a decades-long effort will surely be needed. An important early decision in the project's framework, determined that conservation work would happen in Haiti. A corollary decision of undertaking the work at facilities in Haiti, involves incorporating Haitian professionals into conservation activities at every possible opportunity. The project operates at the Haiti Cultural Recovery Center in Port-au-Prince and has an 18-month duration (June 2010 - November 2011). The dual objectives of establishing a local facility and training local professionals were developed with a sustainable future in mind.

## **Challenges**

Significant challenges have been encountered along the way. Our over-arching challenge involved mounting a recovery effort in a region where no infrastructure of preservation professionals exists. Thus, we have had to build a foundation at the same time as we responded to a disaster posing advanced structural conservation problems. Site visits to private and public collections demonstrated that basic collections care and house-keeping measures were largely non-existent, even pre-earthquake. A decades-long problem with electricity, means that even collections that have it cannot provide it continuously. Many institutions did not have screens on their windows, allowing for a build-up of dirt and exposure to pollution. Except in rare cases, most institutions do not have basic written or photographic inventories of their collections. Similarly, most collections have not been prioritized to identify the most culturally important art works. The absence of this information significantly impaired recovery and treatment efforts. Last, access to stable archival and conservation grade materials is very limited, and 100% of such supplies must be imported.

## **Building an Infrastructure and Training**

Our project has the good fortune to have a staff of professional Haitian colleagues who interface with knowledgeable colleagues working at public and private institutions in Haiti. Project Manager Olsen Jean Julien, Office Manager Joseph Jean Baptiste, Mentor Training Coordinator Fritz Berg Jeannot, Registrar Carmelita Douby, and administrative assistants Missely Michel and Robine Melse provide guidance and direction for our conservation efforts.

The conservation staffing model involved a chief conservator (Hornbeck) and staff conservators, who were contractors or volunteers. Contract conservators Viviana Dominguez, Rosa Lowinger, Anaïs Gailhbaud, Kristin Gísladottír, and Bernard Colla participated for periods ranging from six weeks to six months. Short-term volunteer professional conservators from the Smithsonian Institution and AIC provided a large contribution to the work force. With the aid of a \$90,000 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, 47 volunteer deployments of conservators contributed 410 days of time for an in-kind value of over \$205,000.

An important conservation objective has been to establish studios that have materials and equipment. The Cultural Recovery Center operates in a former United Nations office building. The offices have been retro-fitted to serve as studio and storage spaces. To date \$45,000 has been spent to purchase

microscopes, easels, digital cameras, computers, printers, vacuums, fabrics, papers, adhesives, artist supplies, fine hand tools and heavy tools, and personal protective equipment. These supplies have been hand-carried by conservators and other colleagues in over 65 trips.



Training session in object conservation with conservator Paul Jett. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

Building capacity via training is perhaps the most important and lasting legacy of the Cultural Recovery Project. Our training objective was not to create conservators, as that process requires years of formal study; our goals were to introduce concepts, ethics, and practical techniques to enable us to rapidly stabilize the highest volume possible of damaged works of art. Training has been offered via various modules, including courses, workshops, and on-the job practical experience; all initiatives have been offered without cost to the participants. Over 100 colleagues have participated in training initiatives. A corps of twelve studio assistants benefited from more involved study and aided in multiple projects.

## **Work Priorities**

After a disaster, especially where buildings are damaged, providing security for collections is a major concern. In Haiti, the collapse of buildings left collections and built heritage vulnerable to theft, a fear that motivated many culture professionals to intervene quickly themselves to save what they could. Indeed, some high profile thefts did occur, most notably at the National Cathedral, where the removal of remaining stained glass windows was undertaken in late December. To combat theft of national patrimony, Haitian professionals, affiliated with the International Council of Museums (ICOM) compiled and circulated a Red List of art and artifacts, vulnerable to international theft. However, the list was only circulated in September 2010, eight months after the earthquake.

Conservation objectives depend upon context. At the Center, our conservation context involves disaster response and recovery. Because of the volume of affected art works and the magnitude of their damage, the primary treatment objective is stabilization of the greatest volume of works possible. The response work flow has sequential stages. Condition assessments are performed before any treatment is undertaken. The assessment is a necessary stage which gauges the degree of damage sustained, the overall scope of work needed, and possible conservation strategies to apply. After the assessment-phase, interventions are undertaken based on identified priorities. Improving housing and storage conditions are the first steps and they are critical because many works can remain stable under good conditions until treatment can be undertaken in the future.



Byron painting (Centre d'Art Collection) before treatment. Photograph by Eloise Pacquette.

Byron painting (Centre d'Art Collection) after treatment. Photograph by Eloise Pacquette.

Treatments are the last phase to be implemented. Much of the damage to individual works of art is structural, manifested as tears and punctures in paintings and works on paper and breakage of three-dimensional objects. Surface damage frequently appears as mold and/or significant accretions of dirt. The emphasis is on stabilization, addressing mold, and surface-cleaning. For more extensive treatments, when only a small percentage of treatments relative to total number of



damaged works can be undertaken, priorities must be determined, because extensive treatments are very time-consuming. The goal is to treat the most valuable examples of cultural patrimony first. Approximately, 95 culturally important works of art have received advanced conservation treatment, some requiring more than four weeks of dedicated work to complete.



Detail of Mario Benjamin painting (Palais National Collection), during treatment (filling). Photograph by Jean Menard Derenoncourt.

Detail of Mario Benjamin painting (Palais National Collection), during treatment (inpainting). Photograph by Jean Menard Derenoncourt.

## **Projects and Results**

Over time, the Cultural Recovery Project realized meaningful progress leading to tangible conservation results, in stabilization of collections, storage improvements, training, and treatment of individual works. The project provided significant conservation assistance to nine public and private institutions, including the Centre d'Art, National Museum of the Pantheon, the Lehmann *Vodou* Collection, the Musée Nader, the Biblioteque National and the Archives Nationales d'Haïti.



View of part of Lehmann Collection of *Vodou* art. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

Assistance included site assessments, stabilization measures such as dry cleaning and treatment for mold, improved housing, and storage upgrades. Assessments and stabilization measures were performed at the Centre d'Art, the Lehmann *Vodou* Collection, St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, the Archives Nationales d'Haïti, the Biblioteque National, and the Corvington Library. Other institutions (Musée d'Art Haitienne, Galerie Flamboyant, and Rainbow Art Gallery) would benefit from complex treatments of individual, culturally important works of art.

## **Centre d'Art**



MINUSTAH troops recover art works in rubble at Centre d'Art site, Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.



MINUSTAH commanding officer, Marie-Lucie Vendryes and Stephanie Hornbeck support iron sculpture recovered from the rubble at the Centre d'Art site. Photograph by Dawne Steeie- Pullman.

The work undertaken to recover, stabilize, and treat the Centre d'Art collection of nearly 5,000 paintings, sculpture, and works on paper represents the largest conservation effort undertaken at the Cultural Recovery Center. Its dramatic earthquake story was emblematic of our cultural recovery efforts as a whole.

During the January 12, 2010 earthquake the Centre d'Art's gingerbread building suffered severe damage when the second floor collapsed onto the first. Out of a desire to recover the cherished collection and out of a fear of theft and vandalism, the Centre d'Art staff worked rapidly over the next month to recover as many works of art as

possible buried in the rubble. These were placed in two large metal containers, where they remained for eight months.

I developed a basic methodology to process the collection. The goals of the project included: to recover as many works as possible, to stabilize them via dry-cleaning and treatment for mold, to catalogue them, to create written and photographic records that can eventually be incorporated into the Centre d'Art's collection records, and to store the works in a stable environment.

Project manager Marie-Lucie Vendryes would guide a team of assistants to process the paintings and works on paper in the collection. I would later oversee the processing of the iron sculpture collection. A selection of the most damaged art works among the most culturally important received further conservation treatment.



Container with Centre d'Art Sculpture collection, before processing. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.



Processing Centre d'Art collection at Cultural Recovery Center, Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

### **St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral**

One large project focuses on built heritage: the stabilization and removal of the world-renowned wall paintings at St. Trinity Episcopal cathedral. The mural cycle of 14 New Testament images was painted in 1950-51 by master artists associated with the Centre d'Art. The cathedral was severely damaged when the earthquake caused the roof to collapse entirely. Three murals remain of an original fourteen: "The Last Supper" by Philomé Obin, "Native Procession" by Préfète Duffaut, and "the Baptism of Christ" by Castera Bazile.

The extant murals had serious and dramatic conservation issues. Large fissures were present across the murals and sections were vulnerable to complete collapse. Further, Haiti's annual rainy season allowed heavy rains to penetrate and widen fissures, while extracting soluble salts deposited on the painted surface as white streaks.



St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral collapsed building and site, Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Corine Wegener.



St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, view of damaged Castera Bazile mural, Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.



St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, conservator Viviana Dominguez assesses Obin mural, Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck.

This project was contracted to wall paintings conservator Viviana Dominguez and architectural materials conservator Rosa Lowinger and the project stages have spanned nearly a year. Four studio assistants, who are artists and graduates of the Ecole Nationale des Arts (ENARTS), Junior Norelus, Franck Fontaine, Wanglish Michel, and Junior Racine, were hired to aid the conservators with the stabilization and removal of the murals. The fragments are now stored in trays at the Center, awaiting a projected second phase to be assembled in the rebuilding of the cathedral.

## **Conclusion**

The Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project demonstrates that advanced conservation work is certainly possible in Haiti. As of July 2011, 21,000 works of art, books, documents, and examples of built heritage have been recovered and stabilized. Although much has been achieved, post-disaster cultural recovery requires an investment of years of dedication. To date more than 1.5 million dollars from federal and private funding sources have been spent on the Smithsonian's cultural recovery project. Perhaps a quarter century of work remains. The humid climate, an absence of adequate storage conditions, a dearth of professional expertise, the continuation of out-dated practices, the absence of locally-available archival and conservation-grade materials, and a real need of funding indicate an uncertain future for preservation in Haiti.

The critical determinations regarding the care of their cultural patrimony must by necessity be formulated by Haitian professionals. Now, colleagues in the culture sector need to determine if it will be possible to build and sustain a corps of local preservation experts to care for Haitian cultural patrimony. Perhaps the most pressing questions involve funding: is there room in the national budget or more likely, are there private funding sources to train and employ Haitian collection managers and conservators in years to come? I hope our early foundation-building preservation efforts will take root and eventually flourish in Haiti, where people so value their world renowned cultural heritage.

For more information, please visit our web site: [www.haiti.si.edu](http://www.haiti.si.edu).

## **Acknowledgements:**

A multi-national cultural recovery effort requires a large collaborative team effort and I wish to thank these colleagues for their remarkable guidance and sustained support:

Smithsonian Institution – Richard Kurin, LeShawn Burrell-Jones, Roberta Walsdorf, volunteer conservators

US Committee of the Blue Shield – Corine Wegener

AIC – Eric Pourchot, Eryl Wentworth, Aimee Primeaux, Beth Antoine, Karen Pavelka, volunteer conservators

In Haiti – Olsen Jean Julien, Joseph J.B. Mentor, Fritz Berg Jeannot, Carmelita Douby, Missely Michel, Robine Melse, Bernard Colla, Anaïs Gailhbaud, Kristin Gísladottír, Marie-Lucie Vendrys, Mireille Jérôme, Axelle Liautaud, Patrick Vilaire

In Miami – Viviana Dominguez, Rosa Lowinger, David Lombardi and Museo Vault Staff