

Transcript of Haitian Cultural Recovery Project Podcast

June 10, 2010

Hi. I'm Susan Blakney from Skaneateles, New York. I'm a Senior Level Painting Conservator and trained as one of the AIC-CERT Team. I think there are 64 of us and we're made up of both conservators and collection managers and museum personnel. The AIC-CERT Team is actually trained to help immediately evacuate the building – help evacuate the art, and stabilize it so that no further damage occurs. In this crisis, the crisis was so big it was obvious that human life had to take the first precedent of any action. I have been deployed in the past to both the Mississippi Gulf Coast and to Galveston after Hurricane Ike.

And so this time when we heard about the disaster in Haiti, I feel like I've been on pins and needles just waiting to get over there to help. They actually needed conservators there to imagine what can be saved and what can't be saved. And, you know, after 35 years of practice and seeing some pretty horrific damage, things that people think they should throw away, I know that can be saved.

So our trip was in Haiti from May 4th to May 8th and we went with a team made up of a book and paper person, Vicki Lee from the Maryland State Archives, Hugh Shockey from the Smithsonian Institution who was an objects conservator and myself, representing paintings. A coordinator of this was Cory Waggener who is President of U.S. Blue Shield Committee. It was three months since the event by the time we arrived.

So each of the museums had already rescued their collections as much as they possibly could. They've done a very good job of actually retrieving them from difficult situations. I saw in one instance, a stack of 75 paintings completely removed from their stretchers in a pile like pancakes needing desperate emergency care. They have no materials suitable for treating these paintings in the country right now. So what they've done, they've actually gotten them into a secure location as much as they can and are now waiting for the next phase of what to do to respond to this emergency.

Painting, of course, is one of the national loves and one of their largest exports, I believe, now in the country. The Haitian art movement really took off in the '30s and '40s when they formed a workshop at the Haitian Culture of Art and began training a group of artists who then went on to become some of the nation's more renowned artists today. These artists painted murals throughout the city. They painted works of art on Masonite and on canvas and it's a very vivid, colorful, and thematic tied in with their social history, their religion, and what's going on today.

Another collection that we visited was a private museum that had actually had had 12,000 paintings. This museum completely collapsed and an owner who owns "Net Art Gallery" which is one of the most beautiful galleries and was not damaged at all, personally retrieved over 3,000 paintings himself over a three-month period with some help, and he lost 14 pounds doing it. I actually saw another pile of 500 paintings off of their stretchers. Again, piled like pancakes.

He showed us hundreds and hundreds, row upon row, stack upon stack of paintings of all sizes on one of the four floors of this gallery. The bottom two floors were air-conditioned and ideal conditions. However, the top two floors were very warm and that's where he has had to store some of the worst paintings and the bulk of the collection. These paintings will require a lot of first-level remediation of getting off the surface dust, the concrete that seems to be flying in the air everywhere and then many of them are literally torn badly. They're flaking paint. They're going to take some serious senior level treatments to do.

However, many of the support paintings are also on Masonite and even cardboard. The Masonite paintings have suffered mechanical damage and are now in fragments. The art that I saw, I believe, can all be conserved and brought back to exhibition standards, but it will be a big project. And they are predominantly oil and there's many, many acrylic paintings. So this will be a big project to learn and to really hone some good skills on treating acrylic paintings which obviously are the newer paintings and we don't often get them through our hands.

There's no history of preservation in the country of Haiti. So right now, downtown in Port au Prince there were 80 historic buildings that were seriously damaged and have never ever been documented. The bulldozers are just waiting to knock those down and there's been a big plea to actually send some mentors in to train architectural students to go in and document these buildings before they're lost. And this is very important to happen for their culture.

The Haitians themselves are very anxious in saving this art and there has been a plan laid by the Smithsonian Institution to set up a regional conservation center to train Haitian artists to be conservation technicians, to begin to remediate this art themselves. The task is so large because of the number of pieces that are damaged. One of the most exciting collections that I saw was the Voodoo Collection. A Swiss woman has been collecting this Haitian Voodoo art for 30 years. So the collection is known as the Marion Lehman Voodoo Collection. And we were taken to see the bulk of the collection throughout two different buildings.

That collection came out pretty well. They actually had some of their sculptures topple over and get damaged, but the bulk of it was not damaged. They were an unusual mix of... almost like human effigies? Figures that were almost life-size with all kinds of mirrors sewn on them, chains wrapped around them. They were a mix of twentieth century objects – sometimes Nike shoes. But the object itself may have been much older. It's hard to say.

All of these things have certain religious tradition and ceremonial practices that have to go along with even considering touching or treating them. So it would almost be like working on the Native American Art Collection – very similar – to bring the Haitian Voodoo priests in to make sure that everybody knows exactly what's going on. But turns out that there are about 1,000 Voodoo temples across the country and these temples hold the earliest artifacts.

They actually are the first museums, we were told, because they have objects from the homeland and so they want to survey these temples and we suggested that possibly they start with a paper survey. Because traveling around the country is very difficult. It's dangerous. It's hard to get Haitian drivers and would be very difficult to get into all of these locations, no doubt. But I do

believe that the Voodoo Foundation or the foundation which is set up to maintain this collection will be a driving force to make sure that this is done with the help, possibly, of us.

I believe that this collection is a national treasure and that they will definitely be building a museum to house that and it will be a huge draw for the country. There will be so many years that we're going to need trained conservators to be visiting Haiti to continue with this good work. I mean this is their national patrimony. This is their social history. It's very, very important that this culture is not lost. We want to get the message out to the world that the Haitian culture is not all lost and there's a great deal of it left to come and visit the country and see.