

## The Archive Collection of Le Centre d'art in Haiti

From Recovery to Valorisation after the 2010 Earthquake

LOUISE PERRICHON JEAN

---

### The Centre d'art: the reference point for Haitian visual arts since 1944

The Centre d'art is recognised by the Haitian Government as of “Utilité Publique” (public utility) since 1947 and operates as a not-for-profit institution. It was established in 1944 at the instigation of the American watercolourist, DeWitt Peters, and a group of Haitian intellectuals,<sup>1</sup> at a time when there were not yet any art galleries or a public art school in Haiti.

The Centre has operated at one and the same time as a space for training, a body offering support for production, and a channel to spread awareness about Haitian visual arts. It was the catalyst for the emergence of a new movement whose avant-garde was as much social as artistic.<sup>2</sup> In the seventy years of its history, the Centre d'art has brought to prominence many talented artists, including Philomé Obin, Hector Hyppolite, Antonio Joseph, Georges Liautaud, Jasmin Joseph, Wilson Bigaud, Préfète Duffaut, Lionel St Eloi, Edouard Duval-Carrié.

Visits from artists and well-known personalities such as André Breton, Wifredo Lam, Alfred Metraux and Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>3</sup> the development of a strong Caribbean and international network, the launch of great artistic endeavours, such as the murals for the Church of St Trinity (1949–51) or the establishment of the College of St Pierre's Haitian Art Museum (1972), have made the Centre d'art a reference point for Haitian artists, professionals and art-lovers up to the present day.

© ARCHIVES LE CENTRE D'ART



© ARCHIVES LE CENTRE D'ART



*Le Centre d'art before and after 12 January 2010*

© ROBERTO STEPHENSON



© ROBERTO STEPHENSON



*Before and after 12 January 2010*

The Centre d'art was also responsible for the launch of the first journal on visual arts in Haiti, *STUDIO No 3*. The first article on Haiti's art history by a Haitian writer, "A Panorama of Haitian Art", was published by one of the Centre d'art's founders, Philippe Thoby Marcelin, in 1956.

## Preserving the Centre d'art's heritage after the January 2010 earthquake

After several years of financial difficulties, stemming mainly from the political context in Haiti, the Centre d'art lost its building in the 12 January 2010 earthquake. Its director of more than forty years, Francine Murat, died a few weeks later. Despite this unprecedented crisis, the Centre's employees and the board of directors managed to save the archives and art collections that are testimony to a major part of Haitian art history. In the context of the post-earthquake emergency, the Smithsonian Institution set up the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project in partnership with the Haitian Ministry for Culture and Communications. The Centre d'art was identified as a priority site.<sup>4</sup> Collections and archives were sent to the place where the team assembled by the Smithsonian inventoried the collections and restored seventy-nine works of art.<sup>5</sup> The archives, preserved in cardboard boxes, all mixed up and sometimes damaged, were not included in the project.

The Centre d'art's collections and archives were given back by the Smithsonian in 2012 and returned to their historical location. Although the Centre was closed to the public, it built space to house and secure them.

## The archives: the heart of the plans for the Centre d'art's revival

In 2012, the Centre d'art, which already had the support of the Fondation Connaissance et Liberté (Fokal),<sup>6</sup> met with the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation.<sup>7</sup> These two partners enabled the Centre d'art's board of directors to set up a project for its revival, including rehabilitation of the work space and public visiting areas, as well as re-establishing the Centre's organisational structure.

One of the priorities identified by this huge programme was dealing with the

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*The archive container – before the intervention of Archivistes sans Frontières*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*The team removes the old boxes from the container*

Centre's archives. After the shock suffered by the Centre d'art and the loss of part of its team, it seemed indispensable to rebuild the organisation's memory through its archives. The Centre's archives and collection of works of art, built up since 1944, are a testimony to the importance of the place and are the material link between past and future artistic creation.

### Making an archive service sustainable

The major challenge with regard to dealing with the archives was that of identifying and mobilising skilled human resources, since the main problem in Haiti is the lack of archivist skills.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, achieving meaningful outcomes required intervention from international partners and drawing up a plan in various stages.

In January 2014, the Centre d'art got the agreement of the French section of the organisation *Archivistes sans Frontières (AsF-France)*,<sup>9</sup> two of whose archivists were on assignment in Port-au-Prince, to allow them to carry out an initial assessment of the Centre d'art's archives. This was done on the basis of a sample of documents taken from some of the boxes in its stores. They outlined



© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART

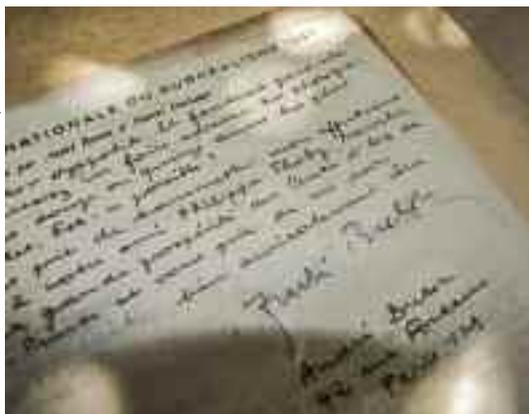
*Archivistes sans Frontières volunteers at work – first sorting*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*First restoration work on picture collection*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*Letter from André Breton*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*First restoration work on picture collection*



*The archive container, April 2016*

the main principles of archiving and their adaptation to the Haitian context so that an initial action plan could be drawn up and information crucial to the Centre d'art's revival could be made rapidly accessible. This stocktaking revealed a collection of archives of rare and exceptional historic value.

In March 2015, two professional archivists came on a short assignment, thanks to the conclusion of a partnership between the Centre d'art and Archivistes sans Frontières. The priority objectives during this phase were to improve the conditions for conservation and to ensure more selective visibility for the collection's content. Thus, in just three weeks, the storage space was fitted out. The hundred or so boxes were opened and were subject to an initial treatment. Archive and documentary (books, journals) collections were separated out. The outline of a filing plan for the archives and for organising the library were gradually developed. The image bank (photographs, negatives, slides) benefited from basic restoration work. At the end of their assignment, a report on their work set out recommendations and the prospects that might be envisaged over the longer term.

From November 2015 to April 2016, the Centre d'art hosted a professional archivist for a longer assignment, thanks to the support of its two partners, Fokal and the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation. The objective this time was to establish a "heritage management – research and publications" department, enabling the Centre to treat and analyse the archives and the library over the longer term. In March 2016, a young Haitian professional was recruited to take over the operations related to acquisitions, treatment and use of scientific and technical information. Six months later, she became a permanent member of the team and was given mentoring at a distance by the French professional archivist.

## Encouraging achievements in a precarious context

The Centre d'art has achieved the following to date:<sup>10</sup>

### 1. *Improvements in the physical conditions for conservation*

- a) Dusting, and application of anti-fungal treatment
- b) Replacement of the existing wood furnishings, with metal shelving (70 m length) given anti-rust treatment
- c) Modification of the system for opening doors and installation of an illuminated ramp
- d) Improvements to the ventilation system

### 2. *Treatment of the archives*

- a) Opening and dusting of approximately 100 boxes, representing a total volume of 70 linear meters (5 large fields)
- b) Separation of the various collections: archives, photographs, library
- c) Creation of a classification plan for the archives
- d) Sorting, classification and analysis of 2,112 files, leading to the identification of:
  - 527 artists
  - 700 exhibitions on the theme of Haitian art
  - 215 works of art belonging to various collections
  - 151 well-known figures who have contributed to the Centre d'art's operations

© LE CENTRE D'ART



*First post-earthquake patrimonial exhibition – February 2016*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*“Exposition éphémère” for Caribbean Studies Association annual conference and ACURIL delegation: sculpture from the artist KILLY – June 2016*

- e) taking charge of the deposit of archives tracing the history of the Saint Trinity Cathedral (Reverend Burrows collection): classification, digitisation and drafting of research tools
- f) Digitisation of nearly 3,000 documents (archives and photographs), all collections included (Centre d'art and donations)
- g) Drafting of rules for consulting the archives
- h) Drafting of a cession agreement for gifts (archives, photographs, artwork)

### 3. *Library management*

- a) Organisation of the library
- b) Incorporation of new entries made through purchase or gifts
- c) Registration of the books in a general file in accordance with key bibliographic details: author, title, publisher, year
- d) Provision of information about keywords to facilitate searches

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*Digital art workshop with John Rasmussen, 2016*



© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART

*Drawing class, 2015*

#### 4. Use of collections and returns

- a) Drafting of biographies for the Haitian art internet gateway<sup>11</sup> on the Centre d'art's website
- b) Use for exhibitions and artistic projects
- c) Delivery of a public lecture on treating the Centre d'art's archives (on 31 March 2016)

Today, the Centre d'art's team is able to use the information contained in its archives in the course of its activities aimed at making the best use of its heritage, as well as for its teaching activities. There are nonetheless considerable space limitations since the building has not yet been rebuilt and its teams, like its users, are functioning in temporary structures.

Significant challenges remain before the Centre is able to rebuild its infrastructure and reach its objectives. There are multiple risk factors for the archives in Haiti: natural disasters, climatic events, infestations, political instability. Some can be foreseen; others will be more unexpected. Prevention is one of the main concerns, especially since the country has no legal framework for archives.

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*Art workshop with artist Pascale Faublas, 2016*

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*Art contest with artist Ronald Mevs, 2016*

## Optimising use of the archive collection

An ambitious plan has been drawn up to make good use of the Centre d'art's archive collection. In parallel with the work on the archives, the Centre d'art has re-established a teaching and artistic programme. A variety of drawing, sculpture

and painting classes have been taking place daily since March 2015.<sup>12</sup> Heritage exhibitions have also started once again, and work on the collections, involving their full inventory and digitisation, is taking place. The Centre is continuing with the consolidation of its governance structures, and a scientific advisory board was established in November 2016. The Centre d'art has just finalised its framework for developing partnerships and raising funds for its reconstruction.

Under this plan, which outlines the Centre's mission to teach, preserve the country's artistic heritage and promote knowledge about it, the archives play an important role. Partnerships with Haitian and foreign universities will be developed in order to encourage publications about Haitian art, which are needed to stimulate scientific interest and revitalise the market. The Centre d'art's new building will also house a media library for visual arts, and access to the Centre's archives will become possible on the basis of an appointment.

The Centre d'art's archives house numerous documents that have been unused to date and reveal the greatness and potential of Haitian art. 

© WENDY DESERT, LE CENTRE D'ART



*Le Centre d'art today*

## NOTES

1. The Centre d'art's founders were DeWitt Peters, Maurice Borno, Albert Mangonès, Gérald Bloncourt, Jean Chenet, Raymond Coupeau, Georges Remponeau, Antoine Derenoncourt, Raymond Lavelanette and Philippe-Thoby Marcelin.
2. The Centre d'art was the founder of a new movement known as 'naïve' or 'primitive'. In March 1945, the first exhibition of Haitian paintings took place in Havana. On the advice of the Cuban painter and critic Jose Gomez Sicre, a majority of self-taught painters were displayed, including Castera Bazile, Rigaud Benoit, Wilson Bigaud, Jean-Baptiste Bottex, Hector Hyppolite, Antonio Joseph, Philomé Obin, and Louverture Poisson, thereby providing a further boost to Haitian painting.
3. André Breton visited in December 1945; Wifredo Lam visited in May 1944, and in 1945 held an exhibition at the Centre d'art; Alfred Metraux visited in March 1946, and purchased a painting by Jean-Baptiste Bottex for the Smithsonian Institute; Jean-Paul Sartre visited in July 1949 (Centre d'art archives).
4. See [http://haiti.si.edu/cultural\\_sites\\_fr.html](http://haiti.si.edu/cultural_sites_fr.html).
5. Report provided to the Centre d'art by the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project, Smithsonian Institution.
6. See [www.fokal.org](http://www.fokal.org).
7. See [www.fondationcarasso.org](http://www.fondationcarasso.org).
8. No certified training exists other than on-the-job training for senior public administration officials that was started in 2014 by the Director's office of the Haitian National Archives (ANH).
9. See <http://archivistessansfrontieres.net/>.
10. This information is taken from a March 2016 report by Veronique Parmentier, volunteer archivist at the Centre d'art.
11. See <http://www.lecentredart.org/portail-de-lart-haitien/>.
12. See <http://www.lecentredart.org/cours-activites/>.