

| First Aid for Haiti's Cultural Heritage

by Aparna Tandon

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Buried under the debris of collapsed buildings or hastily crammed into freight containers and other makeshift storage areas, exposed to multiple threats – such was the general state of Haitian cultural heritage collections, both public and private, six months after the earthquake of 12 January 2010. While meeting the needs of shelter, food, health and sanitation was – and still is – a priority, all that Haiti held precious in the form of its cultural wealth was at risk of being further damaged or completely lost. In the absence of sufficient resources and diminished capacity for recovery on the ground, which actions, and in what order of priority, could have changed the situation? The timing of the intervention was crucial, as the rainy season had begun and could have exacerbated the damage caused by the earthquake. Providing assistance to several institutions with weakened support structures in one go, was an added challenge. Thus the first

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response of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) to the cultural emergency in Haiti was to strengthen the capacity of the staff of Haiti's cultural institutions for creating safer storage conditions for the endangered collections.

Carried out in partnership with the Ministry of Culture of Haiti and the Smithsonian Institution (USA) within the framework of its Cultural Recovery Project,¹ the three-week course on First Aid to Cultural Heritage in Haiti was held from 23 August to 10 September 2010 in Port-au-Prince. The course took place at the Cultural Recovery Centre (CRC), a former UN building which now serves as a base of operations for the Cultural Recovery Project. It was led by a multicultural volunteer team of resource personnel from ICCROM and its partner institutions, including the Canadian Conservation Institute (Canada), the Central Institute for Conservation (Serbia) and the Smithsonian Institution.

The primary aim was to create a strong team of Haitian professionals who, within given means, could work quickly and efficiently to create safer storage environments and improve the general condition of their respective collections. The training was therefore mainly hands-on and focused on applying critical thinking to the problems at hand. Twenty-six persons from fourteen different Haitian cultural institutions participated in the activity. They had varied educational backgrounds and held different positions within their respective institutions, ranging from archivists, architects and curators to administrative personnel and volunteers. The collections represented were varied as well and were comprised of books, documents,

paintings, metal sculptures, textiles and other mixed ethnographic objects. The buildings and collections of most of the participating institutions had suffered damage due to the earthquake, some more substantially than others. In many cases, collection records were lost or simply did not exist. This made the task of assessing the damage all the more difficult.

What has been done since the earthquake? What is at stake? What needs to be secured first? Questions such as these were used to contextualize and structure the training. At the start, participants were asked to map their collections in terms of their current location (e.g., underneath rubble, in a container, in makeshift storage, etc), type of material and the estimated number of objects damaged. The initial discussions on narratives and values associated with Haitian cultural artefacts were used to develop a common understanding of critical issues such as what to conserve and how to conserve it. These became particularly poignant when a few participants presented the objects they had salvaged from the rubble – all the more precious now as they were the only tangible link with the past.

The first week was spent exchanging knowledge on the material composition of Haitian collections and the possible sources of threats to them – on documentation and on the handling of damaged objects, emergency treatment using locally available materials and the basic storage principles in the post-disaster environment. Teamwork, emergency preparedness and health and safety were some of the overarching topics discussed throughout the course. In order to learn how sectors other than the heritage or museum sectors organize



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24. Salvage exercise at the site of Centre d'Art: UN blue helmets assisting Haitian professionals in recovering artefacts that were buried under the rubble.



25. Documentation of the Centre d'Art collections involving the staff and members of the Board of Trustees.

themselves and respond to emergencies, guest lecturers from humanitarian aid agencies and Haiti's fire protection services were invited to share their knowledge and experience with the participants. Spontaneous discussions and the sharing of experiences, however, were the most satisfying aspects of the training. Often sessions ran overtime as additional topics such as integrated pest management, non-structural mitigation measures for safeguarding collections against earthquakes, storage furniture and so on were introduced at the

request of the participants. The programme was thus adapted to include discussions on the issues confronting the participants in their everyday work environment. As one of them said: 'The training gives me the courage to continue working.'

Temporary storage for the collections of the Centre d'Art

After eight intense days of lectures and hands-on practice, the participants had to apply the



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26. Opening of a container with Centre D'Art paintings.

knowledge and skills acquired to the specific case of the Centre d'Art.² At stake were about 3,000 works of art that had been retrieved from the collapsed building of the centre and put into two freight containers, thanks to the brave efforts of the staff. Sadly, the rest of the collection and all its records were lost in the wreckage – some artefacts and a few documents were later recovered through a salvage operation organized during the training programme.

In the absence of any other form of shelter, putting works of art in a container, on a temporary basis, seemed to be the most appropriate solution. However, the metal containers were not sealed properly, which allowed moisture to seep in. In addition, they were exposed to extreme weather conditions. Within six months several works of art inside the containers – mainly paintings on masonite and canvas – were infected by mould. Isolating the

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contaminated works of art and creating another temporary but safe storage for the rest of the collection were, therefore, the top priorities. The board of trustees of the Centre d'Art, however, expressed serious concerns over the security and the safety of the collection. Following several consultations and after having assessed possible threats and potential benefits, the trustees allowed the containers to be relocated and unloaded.

Handing over responsibility for a greatly cherished collection to others was understandably an emotional event and it was marked by a private Voodoo ceremony, which took place during the first week of the training. The Board of Trustees, staff members and the Cultural Recovery Project team attended. Soon afterwards, permission to open the containers and relocate the works of art was granted. This, however, allowed little time for planning the storage project and integrating it as a case study in the course programme. Nevertheless, in order to maintain the forward momentum, the learning objectives of the case study were adjusted.

As a first step, two 3 × 3 × 2 m rooms on the ground floor of the Cultural Recovery Centre were selected for as a temporary storage space for the Centre d'Art collection. Within the remaining five days the participants and the course team decided to equip one of the rooms with suitable shelving. In addition, a sustainable workflow for documenting, surface cleaning, packing and relocating the works of art was planned and tested. Since the collection in the containers was not documented, a system for documenting and numbering the works of art was developed through

focused group work, prior to unloading the containers. This system was developed in consultation with the staff of the Centre d'Art. In a short time, the participants and the course team managed to set up adjustable wooden shelving to accommodate the paintings of varied sizes. The decisive factors when choosing materials were their availability in the country and their cost. Nevertheless, appropriate measures were taken to mitigate the potential risks, such as a termite infestation.

After setting up the spaces, it was time to test the workflow. To begin with, about twenty paintings were unloaded. However, it soon became clear that documenting and cleaning mouldy paintings required more time than had initially been planned. This was later factored into the workflow, and thus through trial and error the programme was improved. By the end of the allocated time of five days over fifty paintings had been documented, cleaned and placed in the storage area. The participants were successful in developing procedures for handling, documenting and cleaning works of art, which were tailored to their working realities. This was perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of their collective effort.

The work of transferring the Centre d'Art collection continued after the conclusion of the training. Four course participants were appointed to a team of eight to complete the project. At the time of writing one container and approximately one-third of a second one have been unloaded. About 1,500 paintings have been stabilized and are now safely stored at the Cultural Recovery Centre.

Salvaging heritage from the rubble

At the time of the training, four of the fifteen participating institutions had parts of their collections buried under the rubble. Without the support of heavy equipment and appropriate safety gear, it was not feasible or safe to salvage the artefacts. The lack of building plans and maps for identifying the possible locations of buried artefacts added to the complexity of the task.

To explore a feasible way of moving ahead, ICCROM, with the support of the UNESCO Office in Port-au-Prince, requested the technical assistance of United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). The request was accepted, and consequently at the beginning of the final week of the training the participants, the course team and about twenty UN peacekeepers (representing the Japanese Force Engineering Military Section) gathered at the Centre d'Art site. The objective was to salvage works of art and important records of the centre still buried under the wreckage of the building. In preparation for the salvage exercise, a site inspection was carried out, and possible locations of artefacts or institutional records were identified. The participants were organized into an emergency team and were given specific tasks, ranging from documentation to first-aid treatments and the packing of works of art. While Japanese army personnel cleared the heavy rubble with machinery, the participants and the course team worked to recover the artefacts that had been trapped under the debris for more than six months. The rubble was cleared in sections and layers. Since this was the first time that MINUSTAH had been involved in an operation like this, the army

personnel working on the site considered it to be a great learning opportunity and keenly documented the techniques used in salvaging the artefacts.

Working in the intense heat for several hours was taxing for everyone, but the exercise proved to be one of the most rewarding experiences for those involved. There was considerable emotion on-site when several artefacts and important publications were unexpectedly recovered in one go. By the end of the operation over 150 artefacts and documents had been salvaged. The exercise also caught the attention of the local media. Later on, during a debriefing session, the participants attributed the success of the exercise to teamwork. Working with the UN peacekeepers had convinced them to seek their help in carrying out similar operations at other cultural sites. 'The training has given me hope', said Marise Desrosiers, a participant and staff member of the Centre d'Art, as she described her experience of the activity.

Outcomes

As a direct result of the training, over 1,500 works of art of the Centre d'Art were documented and saved from further damage. In addition, fourteen institutions were able to develop concrete action plans for securing their respective collections. During the final days of training, the participants worked together to develop scheduled action plans. Based on the strategies discussed during the course, they were encouraged to think of at least ten actions that they would implement without additional resources. Since the training, the participants have continued to work on their respective action plans. They remain committed

and have met several times at the Cultural Recovery Centre to share their progress with the Cultural Recovery Project team and with each other.

The most significant outcome, however, is the formation of a self-reliant and strong team of twenty-six professionals who are working together to recover Haiti's cultural heritage. Their motivation and team spirit are best described in the words of one of the participants, Colette Armenta: 'From now on we cannot live alone – the course has given me a fresh perspective on the value of teamwork.'

Future challenges

The experience of organizing the training and working with the Haitian cultural institutions was occasionally challenging but always highly rewarding. It also highlighted several key issues. Primary among them is that of understanding the current needs of the surviving cultural heritage in Haiti, which have moved beyond first response. The Haitian cultural institutions now require support in moving ahead with recovery, which entails reconstruction and the resumption of operations. In order to ensure the complete recovery of Haiti's heritage and to realize the full potential of that heritage in rebuilding the country, conservation efforts need to be placed within the overall action plan for reconstruction and development. To achieve this, a critical mass of Haitian heritage professionals needs to be created. Professional training is therefore indispensable to Haiti's cultural recovery. Moreover, at the time of writing, eight months after the earthquake, it is quite apparent that the cultural sector cannot

afford to work in isolation. A possible way forward could be to integrate efforts with the United Nations cluster system,³ developed primarily to provide humanitarian assistance. It allows various UN and other humanitarian aid agencies to work in coordination with each other and to scale operations up or down, as and when needed, thereby avoiding duplication of effort and 'donor fatigue'.

Sadly, at present, Haitians are struggling with yet another catastrophe: the cholera epidemic and the health of the nation must take precedence over safeguarding cultural heritage. To manage this emergency effectively and to consolidate the gains made over the previous months, the international community will have to reinforce its efforts to support Haiti and its culture at a time when they need it most.

| NOTES

1. Further information on the project is available at: <http://haiti.si.edu/index.html>.
2. The Centre d'Art was founded in 1944 and is dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art in Haiti. Several eminent contemporary Haitian artists have been involved in its training and promotional activities. As a consequence, the centre holds one of the finest art collections in Haiti. Its historically significant building was almost completely destroyed by the earthquake.
3. A more detailed explanation of the cluster system is available at: <http://unmit.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=760>.