

From the Manchester Guardian in the UK.

There's a video at this link:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/15/haiti-earthquake-art-destroyed>

Celebrated art of Haiti is buried under rubble

The earthquake that killed so many also demolished the island's galleries and destroyed thousands of paintings

Ton Phillips: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/tomphillips>

The Guardian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian>, Monday 15 February 2010

Number 18 Rue Bouvreuil was once a mecca for lovers of Haitian art. Outside the Musée Galerie D'Art Nader: <http://www.galeriedartnader.com/about-us.html>, perched on a hillside overlooking Port-au-Prince, a sign greeted visitors. "On top of the town, top in the arts," it boasted. Inside, the walls were plastered with thousands of paintings recording nearly a century of Haitian history.

Now the three-storey art gallery is gone, reduced to a dusty heap of rubble and torn canvases. Broken picture frames from irreplaceable local masterpieces poke from the gallery's ruins.

"My dad has about 12,000 paintings here and we are trying to save what is left," said Georges Nader, the son of Haiti's best-known art collector and the owner of the gallery, as he scanned the debris. "We have only been able to save about 2,000 of them."

The human cost of Haiti's worst earthquake in more than 200 years – at least 150,000 lives lost – has been well documented. But the disaster also struck a knockout blow to the heart of Haiti's vibrant arts community.

Several galleries were destroyed and thousands of paintings lost under the rubble of flattened government buildings and art museums.

The Cathédrale Sainte-Trinité, built in the early 1920s, was almost completely destroyed, taking with it a series of celebrated 1950s murals depicting scenes from the life of Christ. A painting by Guillaume Guillon Lethière, the 18th century French neoclassical painter, is thought to have been destroyed when the presidential palace collapsed.

"There are paintings from 1905 that have been lost," said Cedoir Sainterne, an artist from the city's Pétionville district. "It's terrible. We are going to have to start all over again."

Nowhere was the destruction greater than at the Musée Galerie d'Art Nader, Haiti's largest private collection of Haitian and Caribbean art.

"When it [the earthquake] started I said, 'What the hell is that?' And I ran out," said Nader, whose father, also called Georges, was one of the biggest patrons of the local art scene. "I was in an 11-storey building and I saw the building shaking and shaking and moving in all directions.

"The next day when I came here and I went downtown I saw everything. I don't think there is any word to explain that [what happened] to the world ... You have to be here to see what is going on."

Nader's parents, both 79, survived. When the quake struck they were sleeping in the only room of the museum that emerged unscathed.

Stunned, they fled to the neighbouring Dominican Republic, where Nader says his mother suffered a heart attack. They then headed to Miami. "The first day my reaction was that anything material was not that important for me. When you see your dad is safe and your mum is safe I was OK," said Nader.

"But when I came it was very sad. My dad loves Haitian art. He lives for Haitian art. His life is Haitian art. This is a guy that won't buy a house [because] he would prefer to buy Haitian art."

Nader quickly called in some Haitian friends from New York in an attempt to save some of the collection. Several paintings by Hector Hyppolite, Haiti's most revered painter, have already been plucked from the wreckage.

At the Musee Galerie d'Art Nader dozens of men were wading through the rubble. Occasionally they emerged clasping canvases depicting scenes of rural life or voodoo-ceremonies. Some of the paintings were by Alexandre Gregoire, one of Haiti's first generation of naive artists, whose work has been sold at Sotheby's in New York.

Also among the rubble was an information card from an exhibit by the Haitian artist Adam Leontus. "Leontus has taken part in many national and international exhibitions," it read in black typewriting. Leontus's paintings were nowhere to be seen.

Nader said the museum's losses, estimated at up to \$30m (£19m), could not be replaced with any amount of money. "We have lost the biggest collection of Haitian art, not only in Haiti but in the world," he said, clambering down from the roof of what was once his family gallery. "There are pieces that you won't be able to find any more. This is finished."

Amid the destruction and despair, some Haitian artists are seeking inspiration in the disaster. One graffiti artist has taken to daubing a map of Haiti on walls around the city: a weeping eye looks out from Port-au-Prince's location, above the words "We need help".

Artist Frantz Zephirin has painted more than a dozen canvases inspired by the quake, showing distraught faces trapped in ruined buildings and hands reaching up through a sea of blood.

Elise Francisco, an artist who has sold paintings to Nader's father, said it was important artists registered the -earthquake. "I'll paint the houses that have fallen, the buildings that are destroyed, the cracked land," he said. "We are going to show our children what happened here. This is our history."

Cultural wealth

Haiti may be the poorest country in the western hemisphere, but fans of its art say it is the Caribbean's most culturally wealthy nation.

From the intricately crafted tap-tap buses that clatter through Port-au-Prince to the explosively colourful paintings that once adorned the walls of its many art galleries, it is impossible to miss the creative spirit of the world's first independent black republic.

While there are records of art schools dating back to the early 19th century, Haitian artists only began to gain international recognition in the 1940s, following the creation of Port-au-Prince's Centre d'Art. Dozens of "naive artists", among them voodoo priests and small-time farmers, gathered there to depict Haiti's turbulent history in unmistakably colourful and often surreal paintings and patchworks of "voodoo flags".

The centre's role in promoting Haitian art is disputed. Some say it discovered and nurtured a generation of talented but untrained artists; -others say it merely helped already skilled artists make contact with overseas buyers, bringing much-needed funds to the local art scene.

Through the centre, Hector Hyppolite, a one-time shoemaker and voodoo priest, became Haiti's most internationally revered artist, leading a generation of local painters whose instantly recognisable canvases featured religious imagery and scenes of the country's life.

More than 60 years after his death, Hyppolite's works fetch six-figure sums while several other Haitian folk artists, including Philome Obin and Wilson Bigaud, have become well-known. The Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, a one-time collaborator of Andy Warhol, often alluded to his Haitian roots in his paintings, which have been sold for millions at auctions.