

## Returning to Africa in Search of an Authentic Art: The Haitian Indigenist Movement

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In July 1915, the American army landed in Haiti with the purported aim of bringing peace to the country after a national uprising in which President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam had been lynched by an angry mob. US marines remained in Haiti for 19 years. This occupation was interpreted by intellectuals as an insult to both the country and Latin culture in general. Haitian intellectuals considered Haiti to be the cradle of Latin culture in the Americas and here it was being trampled under the jackboots of white Western society. From the 1920s, Haitian culture began to be questioned. The shock of the occupation brought debates on Haitian identity to the forefront among writers and artists. One of them was Jean Price Mars. In his best-known book, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, he advocates a return to Africa. In his eyes, literature and the arts should draw inspiration from the lives and beliefs of the ordinary population, immune to the 'collective Bovarysme' of the elites, who had always seen themselves as Westerners. Only the peasant masses had been able to preserve their African heritage intact. In order to reflect a Haitian aesthetic, literature and the arts should therefore seek to "gather up these sheaves of popular beliefs and draw from them the effects of realism and quaintness with which he [Frédéric Marcelin] has imbued several of his books" (Price Mars 1928: 57). According to Price Mars, the sole criterion for a Haitian aesthetic was "Haitianness" as inspired by the Haitian people's culture and customs, especially those of the rural world. The indigenist movement, as perceived by Price Mars, brought about a new understanding of the Haitian people. They no longer had a duty "to prove the moral and political aptitude of the Nigritic race" (ibid.), but to proudly accept their African roots. They were no longer seen as representatives of Black Africans in "the civilised world". As the birthplace to a number of major civilisations, Africa was no longer to be perceived as a place in need of *Civilisation*.

For the indigenist movement, all cultures were equal and the Haitian people represented a synthesis of both Western and African cultures. In Price Mars's view, this synthesis was best expressed by the country's population, especially those who worked the land and were best equipped to strike a balance between the two cultures. In order for Haitians to gain greater self-knowledge, they needed to immerse themselves in peasant culture. Peasants were "the Other within" to whom urban Haitians needed look to find their identity. The country's troubles were the product of peasants being overlooked in its cultural and social life.

Whilst Price-Mars was publishing his ideas, a group of young people were returning from Europe having witnessed the rise of Black culture (jazz, blues, the arts of the Harlem Renaissance, etc.) in the Western world; they set themselves to redefining literature and enhancing the status of writers. Through Jacques Roumain, Émile Roumer, Normil Sylvain, Carl Brouard and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, writing became a

true vocation. For the first time, a generation of young poets and novelists raised their voices to shout out to the world that their sole ambition was to produce literature. In 1927, this group of young people founded *La Revue Indigène*, in which they set out their agenda.

The revue marked a turning point in the understanding of literature and of civilisation more broadly. In his *Chronique-programme*, Normil Sylvain argued in favour of a regional literature. For him, Latin America was a new civilisation and Haiti's potential role in its emergence should be considered.

Although the movement is attributed to Jean Price-Mars by literary historians, the young people responsible for *La Revue Indigène* made a major contribution by changing the way in which writers and poets were perceived. Literature was no longer a substitute or a secondary affair. They argued for a regional literature while drawing on international literary heritage. Generally speaking, the writers who joined the movement considered it their obligation to defend the values of ancestral Africa and there was a fundamentally nationalist [or Pan-Africanist?] tone to their words. From 1930 to the mid-1960s, most Haitian art made reference to popular tradition, which governed what indigenist theoreticians termed "Haitian-ness" or the authentic identity of the Haitian people. In this way, Jean Price-Mars's wish was fulfilled and the population became the subject of art. Novels became more rural in focus, where they had been primarily engaged with the urban bourgeois in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Poetry, meanwhile, often spoke of Africa and its gods, celebrating Vodou and reclaiming the humanity of the Black race after it had been humiliated around the world. In theatre, which had always been a realist discipline, Vodou ceremonies began to be depicted on stage. Folk songs, music and dances unashamedly took over the National Palace.

The inspiration of the indigenist movement led to another, still more radical, revue: *Les Griots*, founded by François Duvalier, future President of the Republic, Lorimer Denis, Carl Brouard and Magloire Saint-Aude. In this revue, the focus shifted from purely cultural and artistic concerns to encompass political and social demands. This led to the emergence of a social and political Noirism, whose mission was to counter the mulatto class. The political triumph of Noirism and the dictatorship that followed prompted many writers in the 1950s and 60s to oppose indigenist theories, which were accused of endorsing what some referred to as "the downward spiral of Noirism". To transcend racism and nationalism, novelists and poets sought to create a more intimate or even Intimist art in response to this harmful direction that the nation was taking, opting for a new, universal humanism in Haitian literature. New methods were sought to express this humanism: language took precedence over subject. This goes a long way towards explaining the failure of Négritude in Haitian literature, as many of its tenets had been taken up by proponents of Noirism. As a result, many intellectuals were forced into exile, giving rise to a Haitian diaspora literature written outside the country.

Meanwhile, indigenist artists worked to establish a Haitian pictorial art. A lack of information about 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century painters and their works prompted some artists to celebrate the dawn of indigenist painting as the birth of Haitian painting itself, notably through the exhibitions of *Pétion Savain* in 1931-32.

Savain himself boasted of being the father of Haitian painting. However, he replicated much of what had been produced by painters in the previous century. Although indigenism did not bring about the creation of Haitian painting, it did encourage the emergence of an aesthetic that was more aware of itself, its vocation and its duty. This paved the way for popular painting in the 1940s, which took everyday life and the country's people as its main themes.

Unlike the writers, the painters' concerns were related to technical rather than thematic aspects. As Michel Philippe Lerebours has noted, indigenist painters sought subjects in the everyday lives of the Haitian people and in rural environments, but these themes were often a pretext for aesthetic experimentation. They also aimed to respond to the challenges posed by perspective in Western painting. However, the acclaim surrounding this style of painting was short-lived. A lack of public understanding, discouragement among artists and the deaths of several painters brought an end to one of the biggest pictorial adventures in Haiti's history. However, some less well-meaning critics insist that a pictorial revolution did not occur with the indigenist movement.

With the creation of the Centre d'Art in 1944 and the triumph of naïve art in international artistic and cultural circles in 1946, pictorial "Haitian-ness" was redefined. The people were now more than just the subject of art; they now played an active role in its creation. Emanating from the people themselves, this art was perceived by international critics and some marginal Haitian critics as the authentic Haitian pictorial expression, or the only genuine Haitian aesthetic. Theoreticians who favoured naïve art saw it as a manifestation of the African soul that had guided the Haitian people throughout history. André Breton was among the first to express this sentiment:

What gave the Haitian people the strength to first endure and then cast off their yokes, what represented the soul of their resistance, was the African heritage that they managed to transplant and harness here despite their chains. In my opinion, it is admirable and exemplary that the myths of African animism, whose oral traditions were transmitted to Haitian peasants, came to take precedence over the myths of the Christian religion belonging to the oppressor by simply embracing them (Breton 1965: 184).

Jean-Marie Drot expanded further: "without this Africa forever lost, always dreamed of and constantly visited, painting in Haiti would not exist". Other critics, who sought explanations for the emergence of naïve art in Haiti that went beyond the hypothesis of ancestral Africa, interpreted this art rather romantically with reference to "the innocence of the people" (Drot 1974). Michel Philippe Lerebours, meanwhile, attempted to explain naïve art in a way that took people's experiences into account but without focusing on racial memory, the magical dimension of Vodou or the people's innocence to the detriment of other aspects. The naïve painters were well aware that they owed their success to their purported innocence. They took full advantage of it, inadvertently sawing off the branch on which they were sitting. Lerebours notes:

Most of the primitive artists who became famous prior to 1960, arousing enthusiasm due to the spontaneity, poetry and shamelessness of their language, were slowly perverted as they played up their naïveté more than was necessary and

slid into vulgarity and lies. Some dealers went as far as to consider a lack of expertise as a criterion in art. Studios for mass production were set up under the supervision of renowned artists, who did nothing more than sign artworks on which the signature was the only authentic element. The same paintings were repeated identically *ad nauseam*. More striking artworks would pop up from time to time, but generally speaking, one had the sense that the artists were held prisoner by pre-set models and that nothing new could emerge from the primitive movement in either technical, thematic or iconographic terms. Despite the immense scale of production and the "discovery" of talents supposed to be exceptional, there appeared to be an almost complete block. Saint-Soleil, so full of promise, so enthusiastically acclaimed by André Malraux, was already showing unequivocal signs of fatigue and disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared in 1980, giving rise to a multitude of questions (Lerebours 1993: 280).

In the meantime, "sophisticated" or "erudite" painting emerged and became popular first with the Haitian public and then in international art circles. Nevertheless, naïve art remains the best-known form of painting in Haiti, albeit with some variations, as it was supported by authoritative figures in the Western art world. An entire mythology was created around naïve art and those who produced it, against the backdrop of Africa and Vodou. When reflecting on Haitian painting, some critics ignored all other forms of pictorial expression and took only naïve art into consideration, even if they did acknowledge several different trends within the style. One example is Jean Métellus in *Haiti, Une Nation Pathétique*, who describes Haitian painting and painters in the following terms:

It is important here to note that naïve painting and Vodou are inseparable from one another. Acknowledgement of this is vital, as Vodou is an integral part of the Haitian soul and the history of the Haitian people; it permeates our artists' every step and is omnipresent among painters (Métellus 2003: 157).

Haitian painting is surrounded by multiple narratives. However, many questions remain and others must be restated. Why, in most cases, have people sought to impose an essence on Haitian painting or on Haitian art in general? Is it purely to satisfy a certain art market or are more subtle motives at play? It is important that these questions are explored using new conceptual and methodological tools in order to grasp differing opinions on Haitian painting.

According to Jean Price-Mars, indigenist novelists and painters sought to depict rural life because peasants represented the authentic Haitian people and maintained the greatest proportion of African heritage. Observers have noted a reticence among Haitian writers and painters to create autobiographical works. In our view, this reticence is not innocent and is linked instead to an ideology or demand from the art market. In Lerebours's view, Haitian painting was enriched by autobiographical themes once attempts to make naïve painting its essence ceased and a different clientele emerged:

As the clientele changed, the repertoire used in Haitian painting had to be modified and the iconography reworked. Haitian painting had long remained loyal to an indigenism that became superficial, stereotypical and backward-looking

over time, for many years it had avoided addressing certain subjects or expressing sentiments deemed too personal, before finally overcoming these taboos during this period (Lerebours, op. cit.).

Marie-José Nadal corroborated this opinion:

Firstly, I would like to mention Dewitt Peters, my watercolour teacher, who taught me to love this art form so much. He opened the doors of the Centre to me and helped me become part of the great family we forged between 1944 and 1950. Although he once discouraged me by saying that my painting no longer had any "local colour", revealing his fascination for the naïve painters he preferred over modern artists, he redeemed himself in my eyes on the day when I was awarded second prize in the Esso Salon Competition at the American Institute in Port-au-Prince for my painting *L'Oiseau Noir*. He came over and embraced me, saying how proud he was of his pupil (Nadal et Bloncourt 1986: 34).

Although "naïve" or "primitive" painters prioritised certain themes prized by the art market, some of them, including Hector Hyppolite, Philomé Obin and Castera Bazile, made their own tragedy the true subject of their works. Before them, there were not many self-portraits in Haitian painting.

From the 1950s onwards, emerging literary and artistic movements countered indigenist conceptions of the Haitian people and did not hesitate to rethink cultural and artistic matters or re-consider Haitian artists' relationship with Africa. The emergence of surrealism in Haitian literature was crucial, representing something akin to a revolution. The writers in the Literary Haiti group reoriented poetry and novel-writing in the 1960s. Lerebours's words about painters in the 1950s-1970s are equally relevant to writers: "It is true that they [painters] did not refuse to bear witness or challenge, but they also spoke of their innermost heartaches, aspirations and tragedies" (Lerebours 1989: 270).

Changing understandings of literature and art obliged writers and artists to reconsider their understanding of themselves and others. Literature and art were no longer conceived as expressions of a whole society's soul. Although some continued to sing the praises of their island or town, they were aware that they spoke only for themselves. Numerous contemporary poets and novelists have refused to serve as spokespeople for the population. In their eyes, the act of writing is entirely individual and personal. They wish to be solely responsible for their creations. The "world-literature" movement led by Michel Le Bris was a great success in Haiti. Dany Laferrière's provocatively entitled work *Je Suis Un Écrivain Japonais* is also relevant as a reaction to being labelled as a writer from the Global South, with all the prejudices that accompany the label. Of course, the spectre of indigenism continues to haunt Haitian literature and painting, often among the very writers and artists who challenge it. This leads to the production of works that, unconsciously or involuntarily, fulfil indigenist recommendations to a greater extent than works created in the 1940s that deliberately sought to meet indigenist requirements. In truth, in a country such as Haiti, it is very difficult to separate literature and the arts from society, (popular) culture and politics. Under certain circumstances, a theory such as indigenism is bound to have a far-reaching impact.

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