



# The Haitian Cultural Recovery Project

## An interview with Dr. Richard Kurin

*Dr. Richard Kurin is Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.*

*The interview took place on July 20, 2010.*

**Editor: Can you say a few words about what your project is and how it came to be?**

**RK:** Basically we are working with Haitian, American, and international organizations to help recover and restore Haiti's cultural heritage, and ensure Haiti's ongoing cultural vitality.

We became heavily involved because we had many cultural contacts in Haiti dating from our work with that country in 2003 and 2004. Haiti's art, music, foodways, and other traditions were featured at the 2004 Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall. (Dr. Kurin is the former director of the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.) When the earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, our first thought was, of course, to find out if our friends and colleagues were physically safe. Once we learned about their fate, our next thoughts were about what we could do to help. Given our contacts and resources, we thought we could feature Haitian arts and crafts in some of our museum shops where there were collections from or about Haiti. This might provide immediate income for Haitian artists and craftspeople and could be organized quickly and without much red tape. We thought about exhibitions and programs that would raise awareness of Haiti's cultural history and traditions, its contributions to the world of art, and its role in the fight against slavery and for independence in the Western hemisphere. (Ultimately, an exhibition about Haitian children's art was mounted by the National Museum of African Art in the S. Dillon Ripley Center, a Haitian concert and crafts demonstrations were produced as part of the 2010 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and

Haitian arts and crafts were sold in the Festival shop.)

A turning point came when Cori Wegener, Associate Curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and president of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield called a meeting in early February in Washington on the cultural devastation in Haiti. The Blue Shield is affiliated with international museum, library, and archives organizations and assists nations whose cultural heritage has been threatened by man-made or natural disasters. <http://www.uscbs.org/>

Hosted by the American Association of Museums, the meeting began with a survey of the cultural damage in Haiti. There was so much devastation, apparent from photographs circulated by ISPAN—Haiti's cultural heritage organization—and from emails and other communications received. Museums, galleries, libraries, archives, churches, and other buildings were destroyed, and their art, artifacts, documents, specimens, murals, photographs, recordings, video, and film lay in the rubble. I thought to myself—if the Smithsonian, the National Archives, the Library of Congress and the National Gallery had all collapsed, at some point, after saving survivors and pulling out the victims, wouldn't we want to try to save the Star Spangled banner? the Constitution and Declaration of Independence? Lincoln's hat? These valuable artifacts and documents represent our cultural history and identity. Having worked in Haiti, and with Haitians, I knew that they are fiercely proud of their history, their renowned art, music, and other cultural traditions. I knew we must do something to help them save these endangered

cultural materials, certainly for the Haitian people, but also for the rest of us who learn from and are inspired by them.

As we went around the table it became clear that agencies like the Department of Defense and Department of State, USAID and so on, were rightly focused on immediate survival needs, and while sympathetic to cultural needs, did not have programs in place to address them. While cultural organizations and institutions desired to help save historic buildings, important collections and cultural assets, it was clear that no one had the organizational capability or connections with Haiti to make such a desire operational. I was the last person to speak, and I knew that somehow the Smithsonian—along with others, had to step up to the challenge. On my mind was the destruction and looting of the Iraqi museum and other sites, and while that was caused by a different situation, it nonetheless attuned the world to the failure to stop the needless destruction of important cultural heritage. I thought we should and could do better in Haiti.

**Editor: What did you decide to do?**

**RK:** I spoke to my boss, Wayne Clough, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, who encouraged a strong response. He is a geologist and engineer with vast experience in earthquake and disaster situations, having worked on recovery projects in the wake of California earthquakes and Hurricane Katrina.



*National Cathedral, Port-au-Prince, March 6, 2010. Photo by Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution.*

He understood the devastation in Haiti and the fact that given our contacts, experience, and skills, the Smithsonian was in a unique position to take a lead role in a cultural relief effort and should do so. We convened a Smithsonian working group on Haiti and were in close touch with the State Department on possible responses.

Over the next few weeks, we organized the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project. Its goals were to work with Haitian and international colleagues to assess the damage; to aid in the rescue, recovery, preservation, and restoration of moveable art work, artifacts, paper documents, and audio visual materials; to train students and young



National Cathedral, Port-au-Prince, March 6, 2010. Photo by Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution.

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professionals in preservation and restoration work; and to help build capacity to safeguard and revitalize cultural heritage for the future.

**Editor: Those are ambitious goals. How did you go about setting this up?**

**RK:** One of the key Haitian leaders is Patrick Delatour, the Minister of Tourism who was appointed to chair its Presidential Commission for Reconstruction. A historic architect trained at Howard University, he was a former Smithsonian fellow who'd gone on to work on the restoration of the Citadel as a world heritage site, and also to serve as co-curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Haiti program in 2003. He understood the importance of culture in both Haiti's past and its future. I went to Haiti with Cori and Smithsonian curator Diana N'Diaye, where we met with Patrick and those involved in the Smithsonian Festival project and in cultural work, to see how we could organize the project. We developed a formal cooperative agreement between the Smithsonian and the Haitian Government, first with the Commission and then with the Ministry of Culture and Communication, as well as with FOKAL, a Haitian NGO with a track record of carrying out successful cultural and educational projects.

With government permission and a local Haitian partner organization in place, we then needed funds to proceed. As the Smithsonian serves on the U.S. President's Committee for the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), I briefed them on the project's goals. Rachel Goslins, the executive director, thought they too could help in mobilizing the support of fellow cultural agencies and the private sector. The Committee interested The Broadway League, a philanthropic organization for the arts, in the project. They donated \$276,000 to get the project going.

We needed a base of operations in Haiti. At first we were going to set up tents for a temporary cultural base, and while the U.S. Joint Task Force in Haiti tried to help us out, the shortage of tents and issues with generators and other supplies turned our attention to renting a building. Thanks to U.S. Navy engineers and a Smithsonian facility and engineering team led by Mike Bellamy (who'd served with the Navy in Haiti), we were able to find a building recently vacated by the United Nations Development Program that is centrally located between Port-au-Prince and Petionville. It had been well designed by a Haitian architect to resist earthquakes. It occupies 7,500sf on three floors and has climate

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control, bars on windows, and is in a secure gated compound. In the ensuing months we equipped the building—the Haitian Cultural Recovery Center—with furniture, equipment, and materials for separate labs for conserving paintings, documents, and artifacts. It also has areas for storage, registration, offices, and classrooms.

I hired two former colleagues who know both Haiti and the Smithsonian well. Olsen Jean Julien is a Columbia University-educated Haitian historical architect, who had worked as a program coordinator for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and recently served as Haiti's Minister of Culture and Communication. He became the Haitian Cultural Recovery Project Manager. Stephanie Hornbeck, a recently retired conservator from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, fluent in French, agreed to become our Chief Conservator and take up daily work at the Center. Others at the Smithsonian—Hugh Shockey, a conservator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Gail Joice, a registrar at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, traveled to Haiti to set up Center operations and work on conserving cultural materials.

Thanks to the efforts of the PCAH, the Institute for Museums and Library Science (IMLS), and the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities (NEA and NEH) came through with grants (of \$30,000 each) to the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) for work with the Smithsonian. AIC has the capacity to organize trained and experienced conservators and send them to Haiti, using the funds to pay for their travel and per diem. Our model for this initial effort was Doctors

Without Borders, getting trained professionals on the ground quickly to assess damage and provide emergency assistance. AIC identified conservators from different organizations across the U.S. and sent them to Haiti to help set up the Center. They carried equipment and supplies in their luggage. So did I—indeed on the last trip a few weeks ago, I carried in a microscope.

AIC and Smithsonian conservators have now been treating, saving, and restoring Haitian cultural treasures in a fully operational Center.



Mural at Holy Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Port-au-Prince, March 6, 2010. Photo by Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution.

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Conservator Hitoshi Kumora restored a painting by Celestine Faustin; Nick Dorman of the Seattle Museum of Art and David Goist of Raleigh, NC, restored two paintings by one of Haiti's foremost artists of the 1940s, Hector Hyppolite. Beverly Perkins, who travelled to Haiti from the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, WY, and Hugh Shockey restored pre-Columbian Taino sculpted figures, and Vicki Lee of the Maryland State Archives restored an important document of General Petion of the Haitian revolution. We now have a staff of 14 Haitian, American, and international experts who are working on a range of recovery and conservation projects in a variety of media. We continue to rely on the cooperation of numerous organizations. We have agreements with UNESCO, with the International Committee of the Blue Shield, and others, so that we can integrate and coordinate conservation efforts.

**Editor: Those initial funds from the Broadway League and from the IMLS, NEA, and NEH must have run out by now. How are you getting additional funding?**

**RK:** Broadway League head Paul Libin and IMLS acting director Marsha Semmel visited Haiti and the Recovery Center, along with Secretary Clough, Rachel Goslins, and other members of the PCAH to see that those funds are well-spent and to help figure out other sources of support. On that trip was an artist and patron Bill Hillman, who now through one of his foundations, Affirmative Arts, is also donating funds to the project. We are using Smithsonian funds and in-kind support for the project. And most of the conservators are volunteering their time. Additionally, the project is included in USAID support to Haiti, so that an additional \$2 million in federal funds

will also be available over the next year to assure the project's viability and success.

**Editor: You mentioned that the team is simultaneously working on a variety of projects and media. The destruction is so widespread. How do you decide what to work on, and what to address first?**

**RK:** We work closely with a number of Haitian cultural leaders and the directors of the Haitian cultural heritage agency (ISPAN), National Library, Bureau of Ethnology, Pantheon Museum, and other governmental institutions. There are also many private collections that are badly in need of assistance. We collaborate with all of these groups to try to prioritize needs, and you are correct, they are many. With these disparate agencies and collections, prioritization and focus can sometimes be difficult, but we are making headway. But also remember, we can work on a number of things at the same time, so we always have a few things going on. For example, we'd like to try to help save the three surviving murals from the original 15 murals at St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. These depict how Haitians accommodated Christianity in their experience. The church walls are in danger of collapsing, and the mural paint is peeling from the wall. The hurricane season adds to the danger. It has taken several months to get our project to the point where Church authorities are comfortable giving us the go-ahead to try to save these murals. While working on that, we have also been trying to demonstrate we can help preserve the paintings from the Centre d'Art and have just received delivery of a truck load of their paintings—maybe over 1,000 at the Recovery Center. Those paintings are currently being counted, catalogued, and triaged. Meanwhile the Sugar

Cane Museum and the Nader Museum have given us plenty to do.

**Editor: You mentioned training and capacity building as two of the goals of the Haitian Cultural Recovery Project. What are you doing in those areas?**

**RK:** In July we hosted our first training session for Haitians. Painting and mural conservator Viviana Dominguez gave a four-day workshop for Haitian conservators. We have a Haitian training coordinator, Jean Jeannot, on staff. In August and September we, in partnership with ICCROM (the International Centre for the Study and Restoration of Cultural Property) are running a three-week course in collections management and conservation for two dozen Haitian conservators in training. ICCROM, established by UNESCO in 1956 to protect and restore cultural properties and monuments worldwide, is preeminent in this field and is taking the lead under the direction of Aparna Tandon. She, along with French-speaking international conservation trainers—two from Canada, one from Serbia, will offer a practical, hands-on course, replete with field exercises, lab experience, and supplemental reading materials and manuals in French. The two-dozen Haitian trainees come from public and private cultural organizations and have been vetted for qualifications and ongoing commitment to managing and conserving their collections. Our goal is to provide them, as well as other prospective conservators, with further training and professional development opportunities through workshops and residencies over the next year. In all, we hope to train about four dozen Haitian conservators to do the important restoration work required in the coming years.



*Sculpture standing at ruins of Nader Museum, Port-au-Prince, March 6, 2010. Photo by Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution.*

**Editor: What's the future of this project? How long will it last? And what about future funding?**

**RK:** Our agreements with the Haitian government expire in November, 2011, which was the end date set for Delatour's commission. From the beginning we have looked toward the "Haitianization" of the project because there is so much to do, much more than can be accomplished by that date. We estimate that there are tens of thousands each of paintings, artifacts, historic documents, library books, video, and film records to be catalogued, treated, saved, and restored. And that is just the material culture. Beyond those physical items are the documentation, assessment, and safeguarding of what we call "intangible cultural heritage"—the living traditions of the Haitian people. Those too have to be understood and encouraged if Haiti is to truly



*Post-earthquake painting at the Nader Museum. There was a rumor of a coming tsunami in the aftermath of the earthquake, causing Haitians to look for trees to climb in order to survive. Port-au-Prince, March 6, 2010. Photo by Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution.*

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recover from the devastating earthquake. By the time we leave, we hope that our training programs have provided for a solid cadre of professionals to continue this important work. It will be the work of a generation at least. If we can see that this project is underway when we leave, we feel we will have made a lasting contribution. Of course, I would hope we can help our Haitian colleagues find ongoing support for the project and the Center, likely through some type of combination of funding from the Haitian government, international governmental and philanthropic aid, and donations from individuals of money and in-kind support.

Some may think that the value of cultural works pales beside the tremendous physical needs of Haiti since the earthquake, but those working on this project believe that there is great spiritual value in what we are doing. In

the days after the earthquake, the world saw on their television screens Haitians singing to get them through the night. We've seen notable Haitian artists as well as children painting scenes from the quake. We've heard songs, stories, and laments of the overwhelming loss of life, limb, and home from our Haitian friends. People, bereft of everything else, nonetheless have retained their culture as a source of strength, self-esteem, and national aspiration. The cultural heritage of Haiti must be preserved and extended as part of Haiti's healing process, for the future of Haiti's youth, and indeed for benefit of all of us. It does the U.S. well to say not only that we care about other peoples' culture but that we demonstrate it by action.

**Editor: What can our readers do to help?**

**RK:** Go to our website [www.haiti.si.edu](http://www.haiti.si.edu). The Smithsonian is accepting cash donations, which are tax deductible. Some museum conservators may wish to serve a volunteer stint at the Cultural Recovery Center, and we will gladly receive information about those possibilities. Additionally, some people are making artists' care packages and sending them to Haiti. Over 100 painters have already received much needed paints, canvasses and brushes. The contact person for all these offers is my assistant, LeShawn Burrell-Jones, and her contact information is given on the website. ✨