

Artist of the people's world (Pt 1)

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Cooper

Alexander Cooper is an artist living and working at Cooper's Hill, St. Andrew. Today, he discusses his work with Jonathan Greenland, executive director of the National Gallery.

You are famous as a painter of the Jamaican people, is this important to you?

I do like the grassroots. I like to draw my people in their settings: Their settings in terms of the homes that they live in, the lifestyles that they lead and their attire. When I started [painting](#) I found this the most interesting material and I'm still doing it. I like to portray my people in their natural setting, for example, a Jamaican market scene is always a high-[energy](#), colourful visual spectacle. For the past three years I have been painting old Jamaican churches.

How do you go about making your paintings? Most of the subjects are outdoors and look to be painted from life.

Well, I would say they are painted from life in the sense they are based on observation at the scene. Some of these events like carnival and festival I am always present at them. I can stand to one side and observe the colour and the pageantry and then almost paint from memory. A good example is one of the first works I did - it won the first prize at the Institute of Jamaica in 1962. It is a painting of Port Royal and now it is at the National Gallery. I got 100 pounds for it.

Can you talk us through the painting?

I used to go over to Port Royal because it is not only a fishing ground for fish, but also for subject matter. And there were two towers there - the one you can see in the painting was for the custom officers to [survey](#) the harbour. I painted it from the other tower: you could go up in it and look down and see the whole harbour and the mountains beyond. This is a historic painting: this tower is still there but the other one was free to the public and I gather there were unpleasant things going on and so they had to take it down.

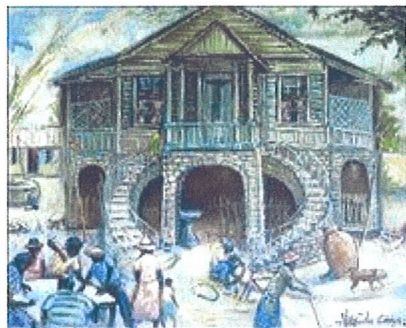
Did you make mental notes?

No, no, no, I virtually lived over at Port Royal. Every other day I would go over there at 7 or 8 in the morning with my breakfast, paint all day and leave in the evening. The place was so quaint and nice. It was wonderful place to meet people and talk. It was more exciting in the 1960s.

So your painting is also a historical document or record ...

There you are! This where I come in. I like to document things because many of the young people today don't know their historical past or their own story.

This is a recurrent theme: the educational or developmental side to your work. Do you always consider the next generation?



Oakton House by Cooper.

To me this is very important because you have a number of gifted artists coming out of the art school and many of these things they are not interested in. There are very few landscape artists. I don't know how their curriculum is set up today, but I don't think they would know about places like Ferry for example. Ferry is a wonderful place I used to go to a lot, myself and Osmond Watson used to go there during the week and upon Sundays on a bus from Kingston. We took the bus and paint for days and days.

The figures in your earlier paintings are a lot less defined, in the later works they are more solid, realized and less ornamental.

Sometimes, as an artist, you are not too conscious of these things. In some works I am interested in the building, but obviously there are people moving around and I jot down the figures as quickly as I can. But it's not that I couldn't have defined them better.

In many of your works nowadays the architecture is the background or the setting and the people are the subjects.

Of course, age and experience changes things - I am older now and have a different vision.

What many people love about your paintings is the humanity and humour.

I do try to capture that. In each one the paintings there is a little humour and history carefully realised.

The subject matter of ordinary people and humour is often called 'genre' and is often considered to be less significant than serious subjects, do you agree with this?

It is not less significant. I do not agree with this distinction at all. Take this work: this is a painting of Oakton House, a building located in Half-Way Tree. It is a very old colonial building with an extraordinary history. They restored it recently and it is now home to the Guild of Artists and a restaurant. This is a painting of what it looked like before - the people who were living there had actually captured this place. I like to go in and browse around and see how the people actually live. I make mental and visual notes, I carry around a little sketch book. So that when I get back in the studio it is easier for me to position these figures. You see there is more excitement and energy expressed in the ordinary people - take for example a working man who works in the sun and is actively moving from place to place or our local women out walking, there is an essence and a truth there don't you think?

How did your artistic career begin?

It began between the ages of 12 and 16. That was when I discovered I wanted to be an artist. By the time I was 16 my mother said to me (because she figured I was about to go out into the world): "What do you want to do?" and I remember replying, "I want to be an artist." Now, in the 1940s and '50s it was unheard of to make a living from art, so my mother said to me: "Why don't you do accounts?" and I said: "There's nothing pretty about figures." She said "If that is what you want, then yes." But the strange thing is it took me over 40 years to see that figures can be colourful too, especially when you look in your bank book.

They get prettier as you get older, especially the big figures.

Exactly. There was a gentleman in society at that time by the name of Mr. Robert Bennett, Bob Bennett. He was a very bright man, very helpful, and he liked my first painting and he sent me to Mrs. Vera Moody, principal at the Art School in the early days. She was a very Victorian type woman, if you see what I mean. When I went to see her she put me in front of her desk and she said nothing for about half an hour and then she looked up at me and said: "Oh, you're the person." Just that. And then she went on to ask me what I want out of art, etc. It never bothered me asking these questions, but I remember she said in a very stern way, "I'm going to give you one year and I want you to come into this place looking clean, no paint on the walls or the floor." It never bothered or perturbed me, because I couldn't make a mess at home either. Anyway, years passed. The one year lasted four years. Of course, you'll know that the infant stage of the Art School started at the DaCosta Institute, which was a small home and there was just a handful of artists.

The older ones had a little cubicle for themselves at the back - Ralph Campbell, Albert Huie, Cecil Baugh and Mrs. Edna Manley - they all had a little space for themselves. None of them was paid; they did it for the love of the work. Now the teacher whom I selected was Ralph Campbell. It was interesting during that early period of the Art School at Kingston Gardens. My fellow students Osmond Watson, Maurice DaCosta, Cleve Morgan and I were making waves at that time, we were "on the horizon" so to speak. Many of the older artists grumbled under their breaths that we were coming in and making 12 pounds and 15 pounds and 20 pounds for our paintings and when they were young they could only get five pounds in increments. If you look back, it was a sudden stage of awareness that you can make a living from painting, but the older artists felt we were moving far too rapidly.

What was the reason for this change? Was it economic change, Independence or a new artistic energy?

Certainly a new energy, and it was a period of development in the sense that all the arts were on the rise then: Rex Nettleford was the artistic director at the School of Dance. The Art School grew rapidly within four years, attracting talented people, so much so that they had to move to North Street. The building is a little crumbling now but it was bigger. This is when Barrington Watson came and did a great deal to move the Art School forward. Then it was Karl 'Jerry' Craig. The 1950's-1970's were interesting times in the movement's development. We rose to artistic power during those years and a number of the major artists came out of that era.

What were the most important things you learnt at art school?

I liked my teachers - Ralph Campbell, Albert Huie - they influenced me in the sense not only for their artistic abilities but also their drive to work and to achieve, especially Albert Huie - he was a work horse, he worked every day. I admire him for a simple reason: here is a big man who never gave up.

What artists are you looking at nowadays?

I like Barrington Watson's work a great deal: he is such an accomplished draughtsman. But there are many artists who are reaching great heights: Chris Gonzales, George Rodney and Osmond Watson. I like my local artists. As for foreign artists I like Salvador Dali for the simple reason that besides his mastery of drawing and draughtsmanship he can also see through things. He has a painting called 'Bust of Voltaire' and when you are looking at it you are looking through depth and depth, you have to look carefully and there are people and it is people who make up the work as a whole. Dali's work takes a man not only with great imagination but insight. They thought he was crazy and it's true he was a

bit eccentric but the man was a great. He does these works that are bits and pieces of things that create something else - like a landscape that becomes a dog. You see, he believed the world was made out of particles - this is something I believe in too - and it is adhesion and cohesion that makes everything up. If you look at photographic or digital images it is made up of dots, in the same way that paintings are made up of strokes. It reminds me of Colin Garland - who passed recently - we shall never see the like of him again. You'll never find another Colin Garland. But generally speaking I like Barrington Watson and Carl Abrahams.

I can see the influence of their work in yours.

Gonzales is also a tremendous artist. I like my local artists - for the simple reason that each one has his or her own individual expression and they have reached th of their work. And not only that they portray Jamaican people and Jamaica. You can take their work anywhere in the world and you can say 'This is a Jamaican artist or West Indian artist.'

How do you see Jamaican art developing today?

I think we're going from strength to strength. We have about 600 artists, maybe less, and we are moving forward. One of the things I am proud to say - I am happy to be alive to say - is that when I started there was just a handful of us; Jamaicans were not yet ready to buy paintings. It was tourists who came down to buy a painting or two in that early period. But now we have moved art to the stage where it is Jamaicans who are supporting us today, supporting 500-600 artists. Nowadays I see the young artists coming out of the art school and they are doing more abstract, less-representational work, which is still good and creative but you'll have to wait five or six years to see where the strength is coming from, or rather where that movement is going, don't you agree? It is hard to assess it now.

There are so many international influences and the visual culture of the modern age is so very rich and accessible, it is exciting to see what different directions the young artists will go in.

We have to wait another ten years.

Besides your folk work, you also paint great heroes like Bob Marley or Bustamante.

It is similar to what you said earlier: I strive to make a record of people who have made their contribution. I exhibited three works in the last National Gallery Biennial, one with about ten or twelve artists who are people I mix and mingle with and they have made a significant contribution. You'll see artists like Cecil Baugh, Colin Garland, Gonzales, Norma Harrack, Gene Pearson, Edna Manley etc. Mrs. Manley is one of the seers, so to speak, in the sense of her seeing where Jamaica was going and what it really needed in terms of culture. I remember at the Art School, she would ask if I had paints etc and I gather she went to the British Council and she brought me canvas and paints. She was the backbone of getting the art movement ahead. I don't care what anybody says. I don't know why they are having this controversy about it. The lady came from England, as you know, when the Jamaican nation was in its green stage. More than half the people were thinking of their economic condition, they weren't thinking about their art. Here a lady came and she opened their eyes to say now, your country needs to move forward. You don't want anything better than that, and she worked at it.

She understood that the cultural sphere was not some kind of luxury but vital to national development. Not every country has been blessed with that understanding of cultural development.

Has Jamaica been lucky with its politicians in this sense?

Ah ... yes, maybe, but I don't want to call names. I think abroad there are countries that make better provision for their artists wouldn't you say? They create incentives for artists in terms of tax incentives on materials and places to work. We don't have this here.

You seem a superbly relaxed man, is this true?

I try to be, I work on myself morning, noon and night not to be ruffled. When you have a strong sense of yourself it is hard for other people to ruffle you. Someone once said, "There's nothing so frightening as ignorance in action." An ignorant man can be a demon. I don't like people hurting others but people often do it out of sheer ignorance. It is usually because of financial pressure. But everyone has a Jeckyll and Hyde personality, but once they know themselves they can keep the good side up and the bad side down.

What are your favourite books?

Khalil Gibran is one of my favourite writers. But I like the Bible most of all, the Book of Proverbs. It has a good message for the life of man. I don't have a church, as such, but I do delve into various philosophical teachings and I am very interested in the mysticism of the Far East.

Where do you see your work in 5 years' time?

I don't know. I am working on restoring a cultural feeling so that in the near future, five, ten, twenty years from now, people can look back and say "Oh this is how people dressed, the buildings etc". I want people to say this man was a good artist and he left something for us to look back on. I shall continue to work as best as I can.

- Dr. Jonathan Greenland is Executive Director of the National Gallery of Jamaica.

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