

Artist of the people's world (Pt II)

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Cooper

The following is the conclusion of an interview with Master painter

, Alexander Cooper, done with Dr. Jonathan Greenland, executive director of the National Gallery of Jamaica.

What was the reason for this change? (new vision for artists) Was it economic, independence or a new artistic energy?

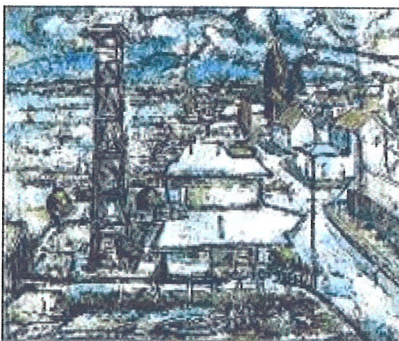
Certainly a new energy, and it was a period of development in the sense that all the arts were on the rise then: Rex Nettleford was the artistic director at the School of Dance. The Art School grew rapidly within four years, attracting talented people, so much so that they had to move to North Street.

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 1950s-1970s 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 learned 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 workhorse, 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?



Port Royal Tower by Alexander Cooper

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 the top 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?



Cooper's Hall of Fame. - Contributed photos

I think we're going from strength to strength. We have about 600 artists, maybe fewer, 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 10 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 10 or 12 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 five years' time?

I don't know. I am working on restoring a cultural feeling so that in the near future, five, 10, 20 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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