

B/W - Manley, Edna

# The courthouse burned, but the art lives

**A**CCORDING to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust site the "sculpture of *Negro Aroused* was created in 1935, by Edna Manley and was first exhibited in 1937." In 1977, work began to enlarge the sculpture and to create a monument to the workers of Jamaica and the Workers' movement which was born in 1938.

Edna Manley was commissioned to recreate the work in bronze, at a scale three to four times that of the original. She was assisted by several young sculptors. Prior to its shipment to New York for bronzing, the seven-foot version was destroyed in a warehouse fire.

In 1982, Edna Manley produced a third

version, closer in size to the original, but it incorporated some of the subtle changes she had introduced in the destroyed sculpture. In 1991, the sculpture was posthumously enlarged by utilising the "scaling up" technique of bronze foundries for the enlargement of a sculpture."

"*Negro Aroused*, was trying to create a national vision, and it nearly killed me, it was trying to put something into being that was bigger than myself and almost other than myself," Manley told *Sculpture Review*. It's 2007, 20 years since the lady passed away and while I'm not too sure how long the site has been online, but on Edna Manley's birthday on



*Negro Aroused* created in 1935 by Edna Manley.

Thursday, the sculpture which nearly killed this woman, the work of art that was remade at least three times, the sculpture which was to be the first piece in the National Art Collection, has still not been photographed for the Jamaica National Heritage Trust site (check it out yourself at [www.jnht.com/kingston/negro.htm](http://www.jnht.com/kingston/negro.htm)). What a shame.

This column calls attention to the late Edna Manley (1900 - 1987) who would have celebrated her 107th birthday this past Thursday. I hope other media pay grand tribute to this great Jamaican, this brave soul, this mother of mainstream Jamaican art. I've wondered how this little old English lady could be credited as the force behind the creation of the Jamaican art movement, but her history, as it is written tells a mighty tale.

From *The Makers of the Caribbean* by James Ferguson, we learn that Edna Swithenbank was born on March 1, 1900 in Cornwall, the daughter of a Methodist minister and his Jamaican born wife. Edna studied sculpture in London, attending the Regent Street Polytechnic, the Royal Academy and St Martin's School of Art. She married her cousin, Norman Washington Manley and returned with him to his Jamaican homeland in 1922.

Her first success as an artist came in 1929, when she had a one-woman carving exhibition in London. Her real success came with her sculptural reflections of the social tumult in Jamaica, and depictions of the black working class. Her famous piece *Negro Aroused* (1935) is a dramatic depiction of an individual straining upwards against some form of constriction or oppression. Allegorically it reflects the aspirations and struggles of the Jamaican black majority.

In the context of colonial Jamaica, art was very much the preserve of a privileged few and tended to look towards the 'mother country' for inspiration. Jamaica's African roots were often dismissed or ignored, while the education system perpetuated British themes and concepts in all areas of self-expression. Edna Manley was opposed to this state of affairs and gradually began to nurture what she saw as a truly indigenous art movement.

She began to organise art classes at the Institute of Jamaica and encouraged several promising young artists and writers who formed a circle associated with her. Among her protégés, dubbed the Focus group after an arts magazine edited by Manley from 1943 onwards,

were the painter Albert Hule, the sculptor Alvin Marriott, and the novelist and painter, Roger Mais. Meeting together to discuss politics as well as artistic questions, Manley's circle of artist was instrumental in challenging the conservatism of the Institute of Jamaica. Manley and other volunteers began to expand their teaching and this developed into more formal training until in 1950, the Jamaica School of Art was finally established.

Edna Manley's contribution to the evolution of an authentic Jamaican arts movement was immense. She received numerous awards including: the Gold Musgrave Medal of the Institute of Jamaica in 1943, an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of the West Indies in 1977, and the Order of Merit, Jamaican 1980.

She produced the first monumental works of sculpture ever in the Caribbean. Works entitled *Whisper Into The Mist, Before Thought, Moon, Into The Sun, Growth, The Ancestor, The Mother, Diggers, Man and Woman, Beadseller* (1922) have been acclaimed by the critics "as probably the most radical modernist work created in the Caribbean at the time". In 1969, Norman Manley died. Edna's carvings after her husband's death reflected her pain and sense of loss; *Adios, lovers in a last embrace, and Woman, an agonised woman alone, Mountain Women* marked the end of this grieving period.

According to Leonard Hector, *Negro Aroused* is the undisputed high point in art of West Indian nationalism. And the profoundly national, as with all art, became the universal, as Edna Manley was exhibited with, and ranked alongside, the great Henry Moore.

Today her name is remembered in the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts. *Negro Aroused*, now the property of the National Gallery of Jamaican can be found at the Harbour Front.

In 1965 Manley created a statue of Paul Bogle to commemorate Jamaica's Morant Bay rebellion. The statue was highly controversial because it was the first public statue of a black man in Jamaica. 15 feet above the square, stands a statue of the Jamaican hero, arms akimbo, a sword like a cross held flat against his chest. Today, the art stands tall still, while the Morant Bay Courthouse has burnt to the ground. Someone needs to get the Jamaica National Heritage Trust photographer to take a picture of that sculpture too before something happens to it.

Happy Birthday, Edna.