

B/N - MANLEY, EDNA

EDNA MANLEY

Tribute to a great artist

'Spirit, vitality, dedication'

EDNA MANLEY was not only one of Jamaica's greatest artists but sparked, on her arrival in Jamaica in 1922, what is today referred to as the Jamaican Art Movement. Her spirit, vitality and dedication will always remain a source of inspiration for anyone involved in Jamaican art and in Jamaica, itself.

Edna Manley was born in 1900 in Bournemouth (England) as the fifth child of Harvey Swithenbank and Ellie Shearer, who herself was a Jamaican by birth. She attended various art schools, including St. Martin's School of Art, London, and also studied privately with Maurice Harding, the animal sculptor.

In 1921, she married her first cousin, Norman Manley, and came to Jamaica with him the next year. They had two children, Douglas (1921) and Michael (1924):

The first work Edna Manley made after her arrival is the bronze figure "The Beadseller" (1922), a work that clearly expresses the intensity of her Jamaican experience.

In the Twenties and early Thirties, however, she exhibited primarily in England, since Jamaica then still lacked the vibrant art movement it developed in the following years, when other young and determined artists such as Koren Der Harootian, Alvin Marriot, Burnett Webster, Dennis Gick and, later, also the younger Albert Hule gathered around Edna Manley.

In 1931, she had her first exhibition in Jamaica jointly with Koren Der Harootian.

In 1935, she carved her major work, "Negro Aroused", a sculpture that soon became the icon of the social and political development that took place in the late 1930's in Jamaica.

"Negro Aroused" was, together with works such as "The Prophet" (1936), "Pocomania" (1936) and "The Diggers", part of her first one-person exhibition in Jamaica, at the Mutual Life Insurance Society Building in 1937. "Negro Aroused" was purchased by public subscription for the Institute of Jamaica and is, today, the nucleus of the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Jamaica.

In 1940, formal Art classes were started at the Junior Centre of the Institute of Jamaica, where already established artists such as Edna Manley, Alvin Marriot and Albert Hule were tutoring younger artists like Ralph Campbell and Henry Daley. Out of these Institute classes, later developed the Jamaica School of Art, officially founded by Edna Manley in 1950.

Between 1941 and 1942, Edna Manley produced her famous "Dying

God" series, a group of carvings representing the romantic, mystical and visionary side of her art.

In the following years, Edna Manley remained an active mentor to many young artists; although her own artistic career had become temporarily overshadowed by the many public duties of the wife of a major politician.

In 1969, her husband Norman Manley died and Edna Manley resumed her artistic career, expressing her feelings of mourning, together with a new ancestral vision of womanhood.

In 1974, she produced her last carving, "Journey", and from then on concentrated on modelling techniques. In 1977, she planned a second monumental version of "Negro Aroused" that was to be erected as a monument to commemorate the 1938 strikes. The clay model was destroyed and the project was

abandoned. In 1982, a third version — similar in scale to the original work — was cast in bronze.

Up to this year, the Hon. Edna Manley, O.M., contributed regularly to major exhibitions such as the Annual National Exhibition. Major recent works are "Ghetto Mother" (1980), a reflection of the anguish of the 1980 elections, and the two exquisite and rare paintings, "Birth" (1986) and "Worship" (1986), presently in the 1986 Annual National Exhibition, which can be considered as her last major works.

During her lifetime, Edna Manley received awards and honours, the major one being The Order of Merit (1980).

Her work is largely represented in the permanent collection of the National Gallery and in many leading private and corporate collections in Jamaica and abroad.

—National Gallery.

'She stands at the head of the stream'

Edna Manley, who died on February 2, 1987, was one of those unusual artists in this century who worked in an older tradition, and for this reason had not gained the wide recognition she deserved, though art historians of the future, having looked at our times in proper perspective, may well be of a different opinion and accord her a much higher place in the hierarchy of sculptors.

Nevertheless, she is the only Jamaican artist to be mentioned in **The Oxford Companion to Modern Art**, a highly-respected and reliable publication, compiled by experts, and her entry speaks volumes for her selfless disregard of her own interests and her devotion to Jamaica art.

After briefly tracing her career, the author of the entry says that she had dedicated her life to Jamaican art, and this is precisely what she had done, the best example being the fact that when in the Seventies she was offered a one-person show of her works at the Commonwealth Institute, London, she, after considering the matter carefully, turned the event into a group show and included in it other leading Jamaican sculptors. Can there be a more convincing display of loyalty to a cause?

Yet she was an excellent artist in her own right, but her output has not yet been properly assessed. When such time comes, I venture to predict it will be discovered that she was, above all, a great feminist who wanted passionately to improve the lot of women everywhere. It is one of the reasons why she supported her husband's political party, feeling that only in a more socially advanced society would women achieve full equality with men.

In relation to Jamaican art, she stands at the head of its stream, linking it, jointly with John Dunkley, to such names in the past as William Blake, Samuel Palmer and Henri Fusell, and bringing to it the stability and a love of tradition without which it could not have flowered as splendidly as it did. There is hardly an artist in Jamaica who has not been affected by her art, by her confidence in Jamaica's future, and by her profound religious faith; and she will continue to be the source of their finest inspiration.

— Andrew Hope

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