

Artists

Manley, Edna

ARTISTS - EDNA MANLEY



Mrs. Edna Manley at work in her studio. Photo: Brian S. Juste.

EDNA MANLEY

Edna Manley is the undisputed mother of Jamaican art.

Individual pieces of her work have been centres of controversy at different periods over the years, criticized for style, for subject, for intent or perceived intent but her light shines on through, tempered by personal and national developments, inspired by the mountains and the people of Jamaica.

Edna Manley is overwhelmingly a sculptor, dealing in hard wood or stone, plaster or cement, fondu, moulding or chiselling the material until it yields under her hand and gives back the form and the feeling which she has perceived within the mass. At her most mystic, she is also a painter, using full blues and greens, or more translucent tones to represent the heavens and the earth, the winds and rushing water, and the elemental spirits which inhabit them.

Where, then, are the roots of this artist, where and what is she coming from?

Her mother was a Jamaican, Ellie Shearer, who married a Wesleyan,

clergyman, Harvey Swithenbank, and moved to England — there to raise nine children the fifth of whom, Edna, was born on February 29th, 1900. It was a rare enough birthdate for a spirited, highly individualistic child, whose interest in art showed up in early animal studies.

She was 14 when she met her Jamaican cousin, scholar and athlete Norman Manley, who was to become her husband and close companion.

In 1921, they were married, and in 1922 they sailed for home — she said later: "When I came to Jamaica, I just was totally and absolutely inspired. Don't forget that my mother was Jamaican, and I'd grown up with the most nostalgic stories of Jamaica. I just felt I'd come home."

She came, a strong personality, alive to the vibrations of her new country, trained as an artist and sculptor.

But artistic acceptance did not come easily.

"I was using a lot of distortion in my form, abstraction of form without being an abstract artist" Mrs. Manley explained. "And then they all said, 'Why do you do those big bellied

women, why must you do Negroes, why must you do coloured people' they would say... and I'm talking to a coloured person, a black person who's telling me that."

The great bulk of Mrs. Manley's work is sculpture, although her early bent was towards drawing.

"Anybody taking up sculpture knows that they are taking up hard, grinding work — when I finish in my studio, I'm a rag, I'm wet... Painting doesn't test you in that terrible way — the physical strain of it, the long hours.

Edna Manley's artistic development touches on, interfaces with, and sometimes reflects Jamaica's national awakening as well as her own personal development.

Her early work in Jamaica showed rapid growth and change — moving from the elegantly cubist Beadseller of 1922, to the massy, voluptuous forms of the mid-20's, and on to the slimmer though still curvaceous forms of the late 1920's and early 30's typified by "Eve", the 1929 mahogany carving of the strong, proud woman glancing behind her.

Affected by the intense nationalism and inter-linked social unrest of the 1930's Mrs. Manley began to move from more traditional themes to pieces which reflected the activity and feeling around her — activity which culminated in a national strike, and in the rise to prominence of labour leader Alexander Bustamante and lawyer/politician Norman Manley.

In 1937, Edna Manley held her first solo exhibition in Jamaica — a show which proved to be pivotal in local art development. One piece in particular, "Negro-Aroused", symbolized the yearnings of the black masses of Jamaica, and was so well received that it was purchased by public subscription as the basis of a National Art Collection.

The show and the public's response were elements prompting the inception of an annual National Exhibition, an unbroken tradition begun in 1938, and the introduction of art classes which eventually evolved into the Jamaica School of Art.

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