Jamaica art shows an evolution

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

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In the United States, Jamaica is famous for its reggae and rum; its beaches and bauxite, but its reputation for art lags far behind that of another Caribbean island, Haiti. Fortunately, the National Gallery of Jamaica has done something about this by organizing "Jamaican Art: 1922-1982", in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute Travelling Exhibition Service. Fortunately, too, for Connecticut, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford was the host of the show, having examined Haitian art a year or two ago.

Haitian art, predominantly naive, flowered almost overnight in 1946, upon the founding of an art centre in Port-au-Prince by an American, Dewitt Peters, and because it also attracted the attention of both the surealist Andre Breton, and the writer and cultural authority, Andre Mal......Jamaican art owes its existence partly to the anti colonialist movement that culminated in independence from Great Britain in 1962, and partly to the example set by Edna Manley, as a sculptor and as the wife of the late barrister-politician, and National Hero Norman Manley.

Mrs. Manley, who was Jamaican on her mother's side, was born in 1900 in England, where she attended St. Martin's School of Art, and where she met her husband to be, a cousin, during his term as a student at Oxford. The couple settled in Jamaica, and Mr. Manley became prominent in the 1930's as the founder of the socialist People's National Party. Their son, Michael Manley, was Prime Minister during the 1970s and remains president of the party.

Mrs. Manley arrived a figurative sculptor with Cubist leanings; hers essentially the style of the period that, with some help from the Mexican Muralist, Diego Rivera, became the vehicle for socialist Realism.

Jamaica was for all practical purposes art-less, but the young sculptor continued to work, exhibiting in England. Then, as other arti s began showing in Jamaica, she followed suit, in 1937, with a display of her figures that by now clearly reflected her sympathies with the struggles of working Jamaicans. A notable example in the Atheneum show is "Negro Aroused," a recent bronze version of a 1935 wood carving that is the torso of a man seated, his head straining upwards. The exhibition was well received at home and in England.

With some of its contributors trained abroad but most of them self-taught, Jamaican art developed quickly, encouraged by Mr. Manley, who believed that "political awakening...always goes hand in hand with cultural growth." Art was being taught at the Institute of Jamaica by 1940 and, aided by fresh infusions of talent from abroad, there now exists a very vigorous scene. This has been touched by post World War II trends, including Abstract Expressionism, although it has remained mostly figurative.

With all her achievements as catalyst and mentor, Mrs. Manley was rooted in the European tradition, along with such near-contemporaries as Alvin Marriott, creator of two beautifully carved wood heads. This leaves the self-taught but not necessarily naive artists speaking most eloquently of Jamaica. Of these, John Dunkley (1891-1947), a sailor turned barber, is probably the most outstanding.

His landscapes look nocturnal with their vegetation — banana trees and sugar cane — that is inhabited by birds, a rabbit, a land crab, painted in silvery green tinged occasionally with russet and orcher. This colour scheme must signify Jamaica as much as its flag, for it turns up in the landscapes of several painters, regardless of their age or approach.

Another major figure of the older generation is David Miller Sr. (1872-1969), who taught himself to carve and, beginning in his 50's produced works such as "Talisman," a very African figure of wood, dancing with outstretched arms, its head possessed of four faces and crowned with feathers. His son, David Miller Jr. (1903-1977), is perhaps even more accomplished and certainly more sophisticated. His two wood portraits of men with narrow heads are first rate.

Leader of the religious group, the Revivalists, Mallica Reynolds is an artist in his 70s who mines his African inheritance effectively in carved wood figures that are the sums of tubular and rounded forms and in figure groups and landscapes that are also exercises in subtle patterns and beautiful colours.

Then there is the 64-year-old Everald Brown's tree limb, carved with animals and figures, that is so like the walking sticks still make in Africa.

Of course, not all the laurels rest with the older artists or the self-taught. Born in 1934, Osmond Watkins, who trained in England, is represented by a handsome tall relief of figures singing and stomping as they soar heavenwards, and by a portrait of a woman selling mangoes, Bible in hand, that is beautifully painted in a manner akin to Stanley Spencer's.

Also, the scene of figures at a table by Milton George, a painter in his early 40s who studied in Jamaica, is remarkable for the handling of its lush red and orange impasto and for the James Ensor-like grotesqueness of the faces.

But there is no escaping the fact that, for all the strength and character the show as a whole projects, Jamaican art is much less Jamaican that it was at its inception. The European influence that in early times released talents now tends to inhibit them.

As a result, a non-Jamaican audience is put in the position of preferring the art "uncontaminated" by European influence. The problem is one faced by all Third World countries — how to advance economically while maintaining an authentic cultural voice.

Mrs. EDNA MANLEY

B/N Manley, E

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