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Left to right: Ministry of Finance, Museum of Archaeology and Income Tax Office (all in Port-au-Prince) following the 12 January earthquake

Images of the Museum of Archaeology and paintings saved from the rubble at the Centre d'Art (second from left) in Port-au-Prince in the wake of the earthquake

Salvaging Haiti's heritage

ICOM News reports on how Haitians are salvaging their heritage from the rubble since the earthquake on 12 January

by Stanislas Tarnowski

The earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January, 2010 killed over 200,000 people and destroyed countless buildings and architectural symbols. In addition to the human tragedy and damage to the economy, the catastrophe struck at the very heart of the country, attacking the underpinnings of Haitian society and identity. In a matter of moments, precious records of Haitian culture and history including museums, archives, galleries and artists' studios were buried under tons of low-grade concrete.

If Haitians and organisations from all over the world have joined forces to rescue Haiti's

cultural heritage, it is because, in the words of Marie-Laurence Jocelyn Lassegue, Haitian Minister for Culture and Communication, that heritage is "the thing that binds Haitians together and will enable us to rebuild ourselves as a people".

The Heritage in Danger crisis unit mounted by ICOM Haiti, members of heritage organisations and arts professionals were amongst the first to act. Items from the collections of the Historical and Geographical Society library, the Haitian National Archives and private collections like that of archaeologist and academic Guy Dallemand were saved as a result of their bravery. "The build-

ing was very unstable. We had to try and work out how its weight was balanced so as not to upset its equilibrium. We went in one at a time, removing objects one by one, one from the right-hand side, one from the left, to make sure we didn't bring the whole structure crashing down on top of us," recounts Lewis Ampidu Clorméus, a member of Heritage in Danger.

Counting the damage

Public figures, NGOs and ordinary citizens have made huge efforts to retrieve anything that was salvageable. Fewer than 2,000 of the *Musée Galerie Nader's* 12,000 or so

art works—the biggest collection of works by Haitian artists in the country—could be extracted, and many of those were severely damaged. The *Centre d'Art*, a mecca for Naive artists since the 1940s, was ripped apart and it was only through the efforts of a team of volunteers that about 3,000 works, most of them in a wretched state, were retrieved and placed under protective cover.

"Most of the objects retrieved from the rubble are being stored in containers or cardboard boxes. Others, like the *Musée d'Art Haïtien du Collège Saint-Pierre* or the *Musée de l'Imprimerie*, are still exposed to the rain or buried underneath the ruins," explains Harold Gaspard, Chairperson of ICOM Haiti. "The most memorable thing about this impressive rescue operation is how dedicated everyone on the team is. No one gives a thought to the danger, as if our lives counted for little in comparison with the duty to save this heritage for future generations. That must have been what gave me the strength to climb nine metres of scaffolding with three broken ribs."

Further threats

Threats to Haitian heritage include the rain, looting and another earthquake. "Our biggest fear is that more and more people will think that damage is irreparable and will spread and allow demolition firms and bulldozers to move in," says Dinu Bumbaru, who heads the steering committee set up by ICOMOS. For example, Saint Louis Church was razed to the ground on the orders of its priest, although part of it could have been saved. Many of Haiti's typical gingerbread houses

suffered the same fate, until the government and our colleagues from ICOMOS managed to halt the destruction.

To assist these efforts, the Blue Shield has provided signs to mark buildings that are of cultural value or contain heritage items. These signs have been effective in preventing wanton destruction. They are distributed via ISPAN (the Haitian body in charge of monuments) and Heritage in Danger, and are being used on gingerbread houses, government buildings and other places of interest. But the Blue Shield has not stopped

there: it is setting up a Cultural Recovery Centre for threatened cultural property: books, archives and art works retrieved from the rubble are being stored, cleaned, dried and restored to prevent them deteriorating further. The centre is currently being fitted out—premises have been found for volunteers to work in—and the Blue Shield hopes that it will be operational some time in early June, before the hurricane season begins. Another encouraging piece of news is that the main institutions behind Heritage in Danger are working together within the newly formed Haitian Blue Shield Committee to make sure that national and international efforts are properly coordinated.

Living culture

In addition to these vital efforts to salvage and restore cultural property, the Haitians are endeavouring to save their living culture. To give just one example, the *Parc Historique de la Canne à Sucre*, which was damaged

by the earthquake, is trying to surmount its difficulties and organise activities in the region of Puerto Principe. Michaëlle Auguste Saint-Natus, who heads its Education Section, told us: "On 24 April, we managed to hold our first arts event since the earthquake. The great writer and painter Frank Etienne was able to perform his play *Melovivi*, which

partly foreshadowed the earthquake." She adds: "People were hungry for entertainment and we had an audience of over 1,200 people. The stage we set up on the plat-

form of the old treadmill was missing the big chimney, which we haven't managed to repair yet."

These laudable initiatives are being carried out with methods that are by no means commensurate to the scale of the task. "On the eve of International Museum Day, it's sad to see that, once again, heritage is being treated like a poor relation," comments Harold Gaspard. Nonetheless, he refuses to give up. "The most pressing priorities are to salvage objects that are still buried under the rubble, to stocktake, to carry out restoration work and to build capacity in state and private-sector heritage institutions." Gaspard and others are already doing their best to implement this vast programme. It is our role to support them. ■

If you wish to help salvage Haitian heritage, please send an e-mail to Stanislas Tarnowski at programmes@icom.museum

Emergency Red List for Haiti

In 2009, ICOM General Secretariat was approached by the National Committee of the Dominican Republic with a view to creating a Red List for the prevention of illicit trafficking in the Hispaniola Island's cultural heritage. In the wake of the disastrous earthquake in Haiti on 12 January this year, the Secretariat decided to give new impetus to this request. In line with its response to the precarious

cultural heritage situation experienced in Iraq in 2003, ICOM Secretariat is compiling an emergency Red List for Haiti in order to address the crisis situation there, where the risk of looting, theft, illicit trafficking and destruction has increased considerably since the tragic events. *The Emergency Red List for Haitian*



Cultural Objects at Risk will serve as a complementary, separate tool to the Hispaniola Island Red List. In response to explicit requests from world police organisation INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization, the Red List for Haiti will be developed as an informative and visual tool for humanitarian and military contingents on site in Haiti as well

as for police and customs officials worldwide, to assist them in identifying Haitian cultural objects in need of protection. ICOM plans to publish and circulate this tool to all relevant heritage professionals by summer 2010.

An editorial committee made up of local and international experts met in Paris and Port-au-Prince on 1, 2 and 3 June to assist in developing the Red List.