Article: The January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti: Building a conservation foundation from the ground up (expanded abstract)
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EXPANDED ABSTRACT

The January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti yielded devastating humanitarian consequences, as well as wide-spread destruction of built heritage and dramatic damage to public and private collections (fig. 1). While Haiti has an established, rich tradition of creativity in the visual arts, a systematic professional commitment to historic preservation and conservation of its cultural patrimony does not exist. Thus, the ability of its art professionals to adequately respond to the severe damage from the earthquake sustained by thousands of individual art works, public monuments, and historic structures is inherently limited. Nevertheless, professionals in the culture sector recognized the critical need to recover, stabilize, and restore the nation’s cultural patrimony, while beginning to formally introduce Haitian art professionals to current principles and methods of collections care and art conservation practice.

Fig. 1. Centre d’Art, Port-au-Prince: view of collapsed building and rubble (Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck)
In partnership with the Government of Haiti, the Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project provides conservation expertise to support preservation priorities established by a steering committee of Haitian cultural institutions. The conceptual foundation of the project was developed by Richard Kurin, Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution in collaboration with Corine Wegener, President of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield and the Haitian Ministries of Culture and Communication and Tourism. The response effort involves the American Institute of Conservation of Artistic and Historic Works (AIC). Together with AIC’s Eryl Wentworth, Executive Director, and Eric Pourchot, Institutional Advancement Director, an American partnership was formed as part of a larger international effort to respond to Haiti that also included UNESCO and ICCROM.

Fig. 2. Painting conservator Viviana Dominguez assesses damaged wall paintings at St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral (Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck)

The project is a Haitian, American, and international effort funded by American federal and grant funds, as well as private donations. It operates at the Cultural Recovery Center Haiti in Bourdon, Port-au-Prince. The project has an 18-month duration, running from May 2010 – November 2011. The response of the American conservation community intimately involves the American Institute of Conservation, as AIC-CERT conservators, AIC Fellows and Professional Associates, and the AIC Executive Director and Institutional Advancement Director work in
concert to provide critical conservation expertise to a region that previously had none. AIC and Smithsonian conservators in various specializations deploy as volunteers from the United States for short periods to staff the Center (fig. 2).

The project mission aims to recover, stabilize, and conserve works of art, monuments, architectural features, and audio-visual materials damaged by the earthquake (fig. 3). To this end, American and foreign conservation expertise support preservation priorities established by Haitian cultural institutions. The role of determining what patrimony should be saved by the Smithsonian project rests with individual Haitian institutions; all decisions regarding prioritization by cultural value rest with Haitian professionals. Once an institution decides to work with the project, several documents are signed which give formal permission for the project to take cultural property to the Center where work is undertaken and where works are stored securely. The response work flow has sequential stages. Because of the volume of affected art works and the magnitude of their damage, the primary treatment objective is stabilization. It is important to emphasize that after a disaster, stabilizing the greatest volume of works possible is the priority; restoration may follow at a later stage, after urgent interventions have been undertaken.

Fig. 3. MINUSTAH Unit Commander, Project Manager Marie-Lucie Vendryes and Chief Conservator Stephanie Hornbeck support an iron sculpture recovered from the rubble (Photograph by Carmelita Douby)

Significant challenges have been encountered along the way. Our over-arching challenge involves mounting a recovery effort in a region where no infrastructure of preservation professionals exists. Thus, we have to build a foundation by first identifying potential colleagues at art institutions and at fine art and chemistry programs and then provide training and on-the-job practical experience (figs. 4, 5) at the same time as we respond to a disaster that poses advanced conservation problems. These latter include: paintings that are torn, punctured, or broken; works on paper that are badly torn and crumpled; sculpture that is broken, badly deformed or corroded. In addition, mold growth has been present in many instances, due to Haiti’s tropical climate.
Fig. 4. Object Conservator Paul Jett demonstrates surface-cleaning (Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck)

Fig. 5. Assistants catalogue recovered paintings stored in a shipping container (Photograph by Stephanie Hornbeck)
Haitian professionals have limited exposure to contemporary preservation concepts and so it has been important to introduce conservation concepts like assessment, intervention, stabilization, repair, restoration and the importance of documentation and ethical practices.

Site visits to private and public collections demonstrated that basic collections care and house-keeping measures were largely non-existent, even pre-earthquake. Except in rare cases, most institutions do not have basic written or photographic inventories of their collections. Similarly, most collections have not been prioritized to identify the most culturally important art works. The absence of this information significantly impaired recovery and treatment efforts.

Access to stable archival and conservation grade materials is very limited, and 100% of such supplies must be imported. Such supply challenges are significant and they hinder rapid response efforts greatly.

An important early decision in the project’s framework, determined that conservation work would happen in Haiti. A corollary decision of undertaking the work at facilities in Haiti, involves incorporating Haitian professionals into conservation activities at every possible opportunity. The dual objectives of establishing a local facility and training local professionals were developed with a sustainable future in mind, after the current 18-month project finishes. The combination of the effects of the disaster and its lack of qualified local responders presents a crucible. The aid of conservation professionals and the application of contemporary standards of practice may yet yield the rise of the first generation of Haitian preservation professionals.

To date more than 1.5 million US $ from federal and private funding sources have been spent on the Smithsonian’s cultural recovery project. Perhaps a quarter century of work remains. The humid climate, an absence of adequate storage conditions, a dearth of professional expertise, the continuation of out-dated practices, the absence of locally-available archival and conservation-grade materials, and a dire need of funding indicate an uncertain future for preservation in Haiti. Now Haitian professionals in the culture sector need to determine if it will be possible to build and sustain a corps of local preservation experts to care for Haitian patrimony. Perhaps the most pressing questions involve funding: is there room in the national budget or more likely, are there private funding sources to train and employ Haitian collection managers and conservators in years to come?

Post-disaster cultural recovery requires an investment of years of dedication. Hopefully, our early foundation-building preservation efforts will take root and eventually flourish in a country that so values its world renowned art. Additional information about the Smithsonian Institution Haiti Cultural Recovery Project may be found at www.haiti.si.edu.

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