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Smithsonian Team Begins Removing Haitian Murals at St. Trinity Cathedral in Haiti

More than a year after a devastating earthquake struck Haiti, the famed murals at St. Trinity Cathedral in Port-au-Prince are coming down. A team of Americans and Haitians, led by conservators Viviana Dominguez and Rosa Lowinger and working under the auspices of the Smithsonian's Haiti Cultural Recovery Project, is carefully removing the three surviving murals from the ruined walls of the destroyed Episcopal church in order to preserve them for the future.

Fourteen life-sized murals depicting scenes from the New Testament were painted on the interior walls of the cathedral in the late 1940s and early 1950s by eight of Haiti's most celebrated artists associated with the Centre d'Art and its characteristic vernacular style. The murals were controversial at the time because they depicted Haitians in biblical roles, but many saw them as representing the way Haitians adapted Christianity. Only three murals survived the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake—"The Last Supper" by Philomé Obin, "Native Procession" by Prêfête Duffaut and "The Baptism of Christ" by Castera Bazile—and all were severely damaged. Initially protected from post-earthquake demolition by warning signs and tarps, the murals became a focus of preservation efforts by the Smithsonian, the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield and the Haitian government with the permission and cooperation of Episcopal Church officials.

The Smithsonian contracted wall paintings-conservator Viviana Dominguez from ArtConservationLA and Rosa Lowinger of the architectural conservation firm Rosa Lowinger and Associates to lead the effort. Dominguez and Lowinger visited the site last May to examine the walls—composed of a loose limestone rubble and concrete conglomerate—and to assess the condition of the murals and how they might be saved.

The conservators consulted with Olsen Jean Julien, former Haitian Minister of Culture who manages the Cultural Recovery Project, and Stephanie Hornbeck, the Smithsonian's head conservator on the project. The staff of the Cultural Recovery Project began on-site work at the cathedral's ruins Jan. 12, a year to the day after the earthquake.

In order to develop an effective way of saving the murals, Lowinger and Dominguez conducted off-site scientific tests on mural fragments to determine the types of paints used on the surface and the composition of the underlying wall mortar. Fragments from each mural were sent to the Getty Conservation Institute and the Smithsonian’s Museum Conservation Institute for analysis. Tests revealed that the murals were painted using egg tempera applied on top of a very thin mineral-based ground layer. The paint is extremely powdery to the touch and it crumbles easily. Conservators concluded that the best method for saving the murals was to detach the surface painting and the layers of mortar immediately beneath it from the wall, a method known as *stacco*.

Taking down the murals in this manner requires the use of fixatives—typically a liquid coating—and facing materials—typically cloth—to securely bind the paint and mortar and hold them in place during removal. Tests also were conducted to find fixatives and materials that would not harm the murals. Dominguez and Lowinger also closely studied drawings and photographs of the murals to determine where to make the cleanest cuts to avoid damage.

So far, the technique has been successful. The Duffaut mural has been fully removed, and Dominguez and Lowinger expect that by the end of February the Obin mural also will be removed. The Bazile mural will come down last, likely by the end of March.

Once the murals are removed, the conservators will have to repair and consolidate the mortar backing of each fragment to provide strong support for the surface painting. They also will remove the facing material to prevent any possible damage due to Haiti’s humid conditions. This conservation work is likely to continue into May.

Once the mural fragments are safely stored, the conservators will help design ways to reassemble the murals so that they can be installed on the site once a new cathedral is rebuilt by the Episcopal Church. Dominguez notes that she usually works on a piece to preserve its historical integrity. In this case though, she believes the reinstallation will give added significance to the murals. “The earthquake is also part of the history of the piece itself, so the fact that it is going to go to the same site where it was makes sense.”

Richard Kurin, the Smithsonian Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture who founded and oversees the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project and first saw the damaged murals weeks after the earthquake said, “We are proud to join with Haitians to help recover their cultural heritage from the rubble of the earthquake so that treasures like these murals, which have been so important in the past, can continue to inspire future generations.”

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