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Smithsonian Develops Haitian Cultural Recovery Project

Various Agencies Join in Effort

The Smithsonian is leading a team of cultural organizations to help the Haitian government assess, recover and restore Haiti's cultural materials damaged by the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake. A building in Port-au-Prince that once housed the United Nations Development Programme will be leased by the Smithsonian. The 7,500-square-foot, three-story building will serve as a temporary conservation site where objects retrieved from the rubble can be assessed, conserved and stored. It will also be the training center for Haitians who will be taking over this conservation effort in the future.

Haiti's Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Haitian President's Commission for Reconstruction will lead the effort for Haiti.

The "Smithsonian Institution–Haiti Cultural Recovery Project" is conducted in partnership with the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities with assistance from several other federal agencies—National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The project is also supported by contributions from The Broadway League, the international trade association for Broadway and the Broadway community.

The U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization dedicated to the protection of cultural property affected by conflict or natural disasters, is involved in the project as is the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Local Haitian cultural organizations and a number of international organizations will also be involved in the effort.

The rainy season in Haiti has already begun, and the hurricane season is on its way. Much of Haiti's endangered cultural heritage is in destroyed buildings and is at risk of permanent destruction.

"The highest priority of the Haitian government and the international humanitarian communities has rightly been to save lives and provide food, water, medical care and shelter," said Richard Kurin, Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture at the Smithsonian. "However, Haiti's

rich culture, which goes back five centuries, is also in danger and we have the expertise to help preserve that heritage.”

The long-term goal, according to Kurin, is to “rescue, recover and help restore Haitian art work, artifacts and archives damaged by the earthquake.”

Last week, six engineers from the Smithsonian and a conservator from the Smithsonian American Art Museum spent four days in Port-au-Prince checking the leased building that will be used for conservation in the coming months. Conservators from the American Institute for Conservation and the president of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield joined them.

The artifacts recovered and eventually conserved may include building features such as stained glass and historic murals as well as paper documents, photographs, artifacts and some of the 9,000 paintings from the Nader Museum, now in ruins from the quake.

“With this unprecedented inter-agency effort involving the major federal cultural institutions and the private sector, we express our collective belief that in times of great tragedy it is essential to help a country preserve and protect its cultural legacy for future generations,” said Rachel Goslins, executive director of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

In 2004, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, under the direction of Kurin, highlighted the country in the program Haiti: Freedom and Creativity from the Mountains to the Sea, which featured more than 100 traditional Haitian artists and crafts people, performers, cooks, writers, researchers and cultural experts in performances, demonstrations, workshops and concerts. That collaboration with Haitian cultural leaders resulted in an ongoing relationship with the Smithsonian.

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