

# The Comité Artisanal Haitien: Local Crafts & International Marketing

Contemporary crafts production in Haiti is rooted in the society that emerged after a successful struggle against slavery and colonialism. When Haiti became independent in 1804, more than half its population was African born. Shunning the plantations that had enslaved them to produce crops exclusively for export, these Africans joined other people of color to create a different economy, one based on traditional village production for self-sufficiency and sale in local markets. They built a society of small-scale farmers, artisans, and market vendors. Almost 200 years later, this pattern remains. Even in the nation's cities – which today hold approximately 30 percent of the population – tinkers, artisans, craftspersons, and market vendors dominate the production and sale of items for the local market.

In this milieu, a group of religious and lay workers created the Comité Artisanal Haitien (CAH) in 1973 to help Haiti's grassroots artisans find external markets for articles long produced for domestic use. By that time, Haiti had become renowned worldwide for its vibrant "primitive paintings" and decorative art and for its profusion of utilitarian crafts, such as baskets, mats, and hats made from straw, reeds, banana bark, and other vegetable fibers. Seeing the revenue from these items go much more to export merchants than to the producers, the CAH established itself as a nonprofit organization pledged to return to producers all revenue from sales except that required to cover basic overhead costs.

Grassroots artisans throughout the country, alerted to the CAH's existence by church and nongovernmental organizations, were quick to affiliate with it. They began paying regular visits to the CAH's combination retail/wholesale storefront in Port-au-Prince, flooding it with samples of the furniture, household decorations, and utensils that had been produced by generations of artisans in and for their communities.

The CAH found ready markets for these items, mostly through an emerging network of Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) such as Oxford Famine Relief (OXFAM), the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and the Church of the Brethren (SERRV). Having found an international market, the CAH had to educate that market to accept and value the item-to-item variations that are part of vital folk crafts traditions everywhere.

Challenge has been central in the 21-year experience of the CAH. Today, in a country racked by terror, the CAH and its thousands of grassroots artisan affiliates face depletion of resource materials, extortion and intimidation from corrupt, all-powerful authorities, and international trade sanctions. Still, the CAH helps craftspersons find the means for maintaining and building upon traditional skills, and for using them to make a living.

— Robert Maguire



*Clair Sina Manuis, Haitian basketmaker, works with banana bark and white palm in a neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. As an associate of the Comité Artisanal Haitien, she can market her baskets at the retail storefront in Port-au-Prince or internationally through Alternative Trade Organizations. In spite of the difficulties involved in getting raw materials, her basketry skills are a valuable asset in difficult times. Photo by Mitchell Denburg, courtesy Inter-American Foundation*

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