



# Haiti's

## Unshakeable Spirit

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As the curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival program on Haiti in 2004, celebrating the nation's two hundred years of independence, I came to know Haiti not only as a nation of great cultural riches and indefatigable spirit, but also as a place continually beset by alarming contradictions and startling ironies. Traveling throughout the country, I could easily find powerful and imaginative expressions in architecture, crafts, language, music, painting, religion, and sculpture, in spite of the many challenges faced by the people.

Two months after the devastating earthquake of January 2010, I returned to Haiti as part of a Smithsonian delegation to assist with cultural recovery. My first impression was that the earthquake had literally touched Haitians at all levels of society and in incalculable ways. One friend, a high-level government official and one of my co-curators in 2004, lost both parents; a young college student whom I met

at a forum in Washington, D.C., reported the loss of fifteen relatives. The magnificent Cathedral of Port-au-Prince and the Church of the Trinity that once housed masterpieces of Haitian art were both reduced to rubble. Climbing over the bricks of the cathedral, I could see the remaining portion of a fresco of the Baptism of Christ and another of the Last Supper, both by Haitian masters of the twentieth century.

I came away shaken by the scope of the devastation and Haiti's many pressing needs. But my longstanding appreciation for the courage, strength, hard work, creativity, and resilience of the Haitian people was strengthened by what I had seen this spring. For every tent brought in from abroad, there were three times as many improvised shelters made of tarp and zinc, and covered with cardboard. On the streets of Port-au-Prince, the painters are back with impromptu galleries in front of tents and crumbling walls.





However, Haiti still needs our help. That is why the Smithsonian has joined in solidarity with the arts and cultural heritage communities of Haiti to bring artists, musicians, and nearly two thousand Haitian craft items to the Folklife Festival this summer. Sequined-flag artist Mireille Delismé and painter Levoy Exil are demonstrating their arts in the Festival Marketplace each day. The Haitian contemporary music group Boukman Eksperyans and guest artist Tines Salvant are performing Saturday, June 26. And who knows how far the sale of Haitian masks, bowls, recordings, or paintings at the Festival Marketplace can go in rebuilding Haitian livelihoods?

These Folklife Festival activities are only one part of the Smithsonian's long-term commitment to Haiti. In collaboration with the people of Haiti, several national and international agencies, and the President's Committee on

Henri-Jean Louis was one of the first artists in Haiti to begin painting immediately after the earthquake struck. He explained, "I want other countries to see the abyss in which Haiti fell."

Photo by Jean-Claude Coutasse

the Arts and the Humanities, the Smithsonian is coordinating an effort to salvage, restore, and safeguard art treasures damaged or endangered by the earthquake. Moreover, the National Museum of African Art is hosting an exhibition, *The Healing Power of Art*, which documents the earthquake through Haitian eyes.

We hope that the Haitian artists and musicians at the Festival will inspire you to learn more about the nation's history and culture. We also hope that you will enjoy everything you see, hear, and take home to share. Haitian art and music enrich us all. Now we can only begin to repay.