

Battered Haitian art shines through devastation

By Paul Adams BBC News, Haiti 11 Feb 10

In Port-au-Prince, art is everywhere. In the teeming capital - even in the midst of the chaos and suffering wrought by last month's earthquake - you are never far from a painting, a mural or a sculpture.

So it is no surprise that art, too, has suffered.

At the shattered Holy Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, only fragments remain of its frescoes.

On a portion of wall left standing, a vivid baptism of Christ offers a glimpse of former glories.

The figures are unmistakably Haitian, including a couple of women in skimpy clothes doing their washing.

In the primary school next door, a brightly coloured mural of children playing is cracked and a whole section has come away, showing the breeze blocks behind.

Plea to UN

Father Joseph Tancrel Diegue tells me they will salvage what they can of the frescoes, and will be looking to the cultural body Unesco for help.

He points to a sorry pile of coloured stones and says they will try to piece together the originals.

It is the sort of painstaking work that succeeded in restoring frescoes destroyed by an earthquake in Assisi in central Italy in 1997. But in poverty-stricken Haiti, such marvels seem a remote prospect.

The scene at the nearby Centre d'Art is similarly bleak.

The once proud mansion regarded as the home of Haitian art and crammed with paintings and sculptures has been reduced to a dangerous, teetering wreck.

Board member Henry Celestin shows me a gaping hole in an upper floor where staff risked their lives rescuing the permanent collection.

Amazingly, 3,000 works have been recovered, although many more



Frescoes were destroyed in the cathedral's collapse



Staff at the Centre d'Art risked their lives to save the collection

still lie buried.

But if the quake took so much away, did it also inspire?

"Artists are different people," says Mr Celestin. "They get ideas from everything. Even a blow like that."

At the Galerie Monnin in Petionville, in the hills overlooking Port-au-Prince, there is already plenty of evidence.

Reynald Joseph has painted an astonishing triptych depicting the moment the earthquake struck.

It is a chaotic street scene, with figures falling and a jumble of roofs that appear to be collapsing in on each other.

The softly spoken Joseph tells me he simply had to paint the scene, which echoes a similar pre-quake triptych.

"I decided not to include any dead people," he tells me. "This is the very beginning. If there is something to follow, it will be worse, because of what happened afterwards."



Reynald Joseph's triptych depicts the horror of the quake

Frantz Zepherin, is so inspired he cannot stop painting - 10 earthquake pictures so far and others taking shape inside his fertile imagination.

I meet him as he arrives at the gallery, with his latest work in a plastic bag.

He takes it out and shows me a scene of desperate faces, trapped in the wreckage of a building with a spider's web already covering the opening.

In another painting, a family of skeletons, he calls them "living dead", is parading through the streets, holding signs that ask for food, water, shelter - and condoms.

Mr Zepherin laughs mischievously and notes that in the chaos of post-quake Port-au-Prince, lovers still need to take precautions.



Musician Lolo Beaubrun (right)

The skeletons represent survivors, he says, who wander around like zombies, waiting for the international community to help. says the disaster will inspire Haitians

One of them carries a sign that reads: "Special thanks to the commander in chief and the American people".

And it is not just painters who are busy.

Lolo Beaubrun is one of Haiti's most famous musicians.

I meet him in his tree-filled garden, where he is joined by the youthful members of up-and-coming group the Four Stars.

One of them, Simon Widy, has written Crier pour Haiti, a lament for their battered country.

"It's going to inspire a lot of people, for sure," says Lolo in broken English.

"Because what happened to us... everybody lost somebody who died. A long time it's going to stay in our mind."