

THE CENTER'S PAINTINGS LAB

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The paintings conservation atelier at the Haiti Cultural Recovery Center is up and running at full speed as if it has been this way for many years. It is hard to believe that this very well equipped lab was a timid almost empty room in June 2010.

Every single painting to be conserved in this lab was severely damaged in the earthquake and in need of urgent care. The overwhelming and scary sight of these wrecked paintings has never intimidated the fourteen paintings conservators who have worked in the lab. Their extraordinary efforts are reflected in the twenty-five Haitian paintings that have received major restoration treatment. They have been helped by three skillful and dedicated Haitian artists now trained in conservation techniques, and serving as conservation assistants at the Center.

I began to oversee activities in the paintings lab after completing the project to rescue the murals at Holy Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. I found Jean Ménard Derenoncourt and Franck Louissaint hard at work. These are two very dignified gentlemen and professional artists who teach at the Ecole Nationale des Arts (ENARTS). They were retouching a very large, five-foot by seven-foot portrait of an elderly Haitian woman. Her worried eyes, looking upwards, drew my attention to her earthquake-damaged forehead. One of the gentlemen handed me an old amateur photograph of the complete image. The woman's anguished expression made it seem to me that she'd anticipated the damage.



The painting by Mario Benjamin, one of Haiti's leading contemporary artists, was rescued in two separate pieces by Patrick Vilaire and his team from the rubble of the Presidential Palace. Kristín Gísladóttir, a paintings conservator from Iceland reassembled the painting and with Jean Ménard and Franck, patiently repaired the fifty-eight tears in the canvas. The team did a remarkable hand relining of this very large painting and re-stretching the canvas. They then in-painted damaged areas, bringing the piece back to life.

The color reintegration of the large lacunae on the forehead and background presented a real challenge. I had to solve an ethical dilemma of how to resolve the large missing area. On the one hand, we had to respect the historical integrity of the piece and the earthquake has become part of the painting's history. On the other hand the missing area was too predominant for a "purist" approach, which would imply applying a neutral color. So I found an alternative. I stipple painted hundreds and thousands of small dots like Seurat's "pointillism" bringing the image back together. This treatment was the most complicated and longest treatment undertaken at the Center's conservation studios. Chief Conservator Stephanie Hornbeck regarded this project as evidence that advanced conservation work can be achieved in Haiti.

[Upper left] Haitian artists Jean Ménard Derenoncourt and Franck Louissaint restore the Mario Benjamin painting. Photo by Richard Kurin/Smithsonian

[Lower left] The painting by Mario Benjamin hung in the National Palace and was badly damaged in the earthquake. Photo by Stephanie Hornbeck

[Right] Viviana Dominguez "in-painting" and completing the Mario Benjamin work. Photo by Lisa Mehlin

