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THE GENIUS OF THE ARTS IN JAMAICA

Jamaican art has over centuries addressed issues like slavery, race, nationalism and Rastafarianism while drawing inspiration also from the more traditional themes of love, family and the human form. Activity in the arts is vibrant and dynamic in multiple disciplines.

PERFORMING ARTS

Theater

Productions in Kingston's lively theater scene run the gamut from tropical comedies and cabaret to the sophisticated work of young Jamaican playwrights like David Heron. Trevor Rhone achieved international fame with his play *Milk and Honey*, and the works of the late Dennis Scott remain popular. Local theaters, both large and small, also have a long history of importing plays and actors from abroad; U.S. naval hero John Paul Jones made his acting debut here in 1768, when he was just a young, unknown sailor.

Jamaica's National Pantomime is a folk theater offering humorous family entertainment. Staged by the Caribbean's oldest theatrical ensemble, the Little Theater Movement, the Pantomime has been traditionally held in **The Ward Theatre** in Kingston, and more recently in **the Little Theatre**.

Replacing the European fairy tales of earlier years, West African characters, such as Anancy and Tacooma, and adapted versions of Jamaican folktales appeared on stage. The characters were brought to life

by popular leads of the “Anancy” series, cultural icon Louise Bennett and the late Ranny Williams.

The list of noted Jamaican actors who have graced the stage includes Charles Hyatt, Oliver Samuels, Lois Kelly-Miller, Leonie Forbes, Munair Zacca, Sheila Hill, Volier Johnson, Ronald Goshop, Carl Bradshaw, Paul Campbell and the late Reggie Carter and Bobby Ghisays.

Dance

Students train at the **National School of Dance**, established in the 1970’s by members of the **National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC)**, which is based at the Little Theatre. Additional dance groups include Movements, L’Acadco, The Company, Stella Maris Dance Ensemble, Ashe and Dance Theatre Xaymaca. NDTC dancers, musicians and singers perform a repertoire inspired by the island’s diverse ethnic influences. The internationally acclaimed company has wowed audiences around the world. Its style incorporates eclectic dance forms ranging from indigenous to classical and modern.

Music

Reggae rocks the island at all times, and Bob Marley made this music form a world favorite; the albums he recorded with The Wailers became hits on all continents.

The Bob Marley Museum and the **Jamaica Musical Theater Company** are in Kingston. Additional big names on the music scene include Jimmy Cliff, Toots and the Maytals, Sean Paul, Shabba, Elephant Man, Buju Banton, Black Uhuru, Inner Circle, Burning Spear, Gregory Isaacs, Lee Scratch Perry, Shaggy and Third World. The late Dennis Brown’s music continues to be popular.

Among Jamaica’s jazz greats are Monty Alexander, Ernie Ranglin, Sonny Bradshaw, Dean Fraser, Myrna Hague and Karen Smith.

Inspired by the country’s rich African folk heritage, Jamaica’s music spans a wide range, including mento, ska, rock-steady, roots music, and contemporary dancehall. In Kingston, recording studios pump out dozens of new reggae titles each month. Popular groups, over the years, include Byron Lee & the Dragonaires, the

Merritones, Fabulous Five, Jolly Boys, U Roy, King Stitch, Dreadlocks Fay, Big Youth, Michigan and Smiley, Yellowman, Buju Banton, Shabba Ranks, Sizzla, SuperCat, Beenie Man, Sister Carol and Patra. The late Garnett Silk is greatly missed. Among Jamaica's favorite folk singers are the Jamaica Folk Singers, NDTC Singers, University Singers and Cari-Folk Singers.

Celebrated gospel singers include Grace Thrillers, Claudine Stewart, Lisa Johnson, Junior Tucker and Carlene Davis. A mixed repertoire is presented by Alpha Boys Band and the National Chorale of Jamaica.

Jamaica also has a strong heritage in military bands, notably the Jamaica Military Band, which dates back to England's first West India Regiment in 1795.

The island hosts numerous music festivals and events throughout the year. The **Festival of the Arts** runs from spring through July. The **Jamaica Cultural Development Commission** (JCDC), with help from corporate sponsors, oversees competitions in dance, song, drama, speech, painting, sculpture, craft, culinary arts and photography, which are held at the parish, regional and national levels. Individuals, school groups, community theaters, professional performers, uniformed bands and church choirs all participate.

The **Fun In The Sun** gospel spring festival, **Red Stripe Reggae Sumfest**, the **Air Jamaica Jazz & Blues Festival** and the **Ocho Rios Jazz Festival** all attract big crowds.

VISUAL ARTS

Film

Jamaica has a long history in the film industry; **Palm Pictures** studio, headed by Chris Blackwell, is behind the production of many Jamaican movies. The island's natural beauty makes Jamaica a favorite location for film.

The Harder They Come (1973), starring native-born singer Jimmy Cliff as a struggling recording artist in Kingston's ghettos, was produced by Perry Henzell and quickly attracted a cult following. Also a major hit was *Dancehall Queen*, a tale

of redemption for a struggling middle-aged street vendor who finds a novel way of escaping the streets of Kingston through the erotic intoxication of dancehall.

Author Ian Fleming made a home in Jamaica. It was here that he created the James Bond character and wrote that compelling series of adventure novels, making the island a natural location choice for sequences in some of the James Bond movies.

Films shot in whole or in part in Jamaica include:

- *Treasure Island* (1950)
- *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954)
- *Dr. No* (1962)
- *Hammerhead* (1968)
- *The Harder They Come* (1973)
- *Live and Let Die* (1973)
- *Papillon* (1973)
- *Blue Lagoon* (1980)
- *Club Paradise* (1986)
- *Clara's Heart* (1988)
- *Cocktail* (1988)
- *The Mighty Quinn* (1989)
- *Lord of the Flies* (1990)
- *Going to Extremes* (1992)
- *The Lunatic* (1992)
- *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992)
- *Cool Runnings* (1993)
- *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1993)
- *Dancehall Queen* (1997)
- *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998)
- *Third World Cop* (2000)

The Jamerican Film and Music Festival is a four-day annual festival which takes place in Montego Bay in November; details are posted at

www.jamericanfilmfest.com.

FINE ARTS

Pottery and Sculpture

Ceramics: Cecil Baugh is an octogenarian potter on-island who uses Egyptian motifs. David Pinto is another ceramist of note, working from his base at Good Hope, Falmouth.

Pottery: Munchi is an outstanding fourth-generation potter, and is the daughter of the late Ma Lou, who was known for her handmade pottery done in the West Africa tradition.

The **Wassi Art Factory**, in Ocho Rios, has a stable of talented young artists. This colorful pottery is named for the female *wassi* wasp, or potter wasp, which makes a mud pot for each of its eggs, then stuffs the pot with a caterpillar as food for the hatchlings. Wassi artists are not all formally trained; instead, they rely on their ample raw talent and unbridled creativity. Drawing inspiration and learning techniques from each other, Wassi artists produce an array of handmade pottery decorated with brightly colored representations of tropical flora and fauna, bold African patterns, lively Caribbean faces and bodies, or whimsical scenes. These potters work with terracotta clay, the bulk of which comes from Jamaica's Blue Mountains.

Sculpture: Jamaica's foremost sculptor of the 20th century was undoubtedly Edna Manley, the multi-talented wife of National Hero Norman Manley, who served as Prime Minister and founded the People's National Party (P.N.P.). Her works, in wood, metal and stone, are displayed in the National Gallery in Kingston.

Internationally acclaimed Arthur P. Alexander is a painter and sculptor who lives and displays his art in a cave near Ocho Rios. Noted sculptors also include Alvin Marriott, Laura Facey, Fitz Harrack and Kay Sullivan.

Painting

Jamaican art is primarily influenced by events of the 18th and 19th centuries, when itinerant artists roamed the plantations and recorded the scene before them in an idealized light. Satirist William Hogarth was one of the few artists to portray the hypocrisy and savagery of plantation life. In the 1920's, Jamaican artists began to develop their own expressions shaped by the realities of island life, creating the **Jamaican School of Art**. Two main groups evolved, painters who were schooled abroad and primitives, or so-called *intuitives* – self-taught artists. In the latter group were:

- Bishop Mallica “Kapo” Reynolds (1911 – 1989), a leading revivalist cult leader whose focus was mystical landscapes and visions.

- John Dunkley (1891 – 1947), a Kingston barber who painted his shop in tangled vines, flowers, and abstract symbols before turning to canvas. Bars, shops, restaurants and rum shops island-wide copy Dunkley's Jungian style (usually with vines crawling along a black wall) or display whimsical alfresco *trompe l'oeil* cartoons dramatizing Jamaican life.

Raz Dizzy and Woody Joseph are among the modern intuitives.

Celebrated contemporary Jamaican artists include Gloria Escoffrey, Michael Escoffrey, Carl Abrahams, Ken Abendana Spencer, Barrington Watson, Osmond Watson, Petrona Morrison, Audrey Lynch, Margaret Chen, Heather Sutherland-Wade, Kay Anderson, Dawn Scott and Hope Brooks. Many local artists have been trained at the **Edna Manley School of the Visual and Performing Arts**. A significant number studied abroad in the 1960's and 70's and returned inspired by new ideas that they wedded to their nationalist spirits.

Yard art is named for the yards of Kingston ghettos, where powerful, politically inspired or cheery and humorous murals are painted in big, bold colors that can be absorbed at a glance. Rastafarians are common subjects, as are market hagglers (called *higglers* in Jamaica), animals and religious symbols merged with the myths of Africa. The intuitive works of Everald Brown and Albert Artwell especially concentrate on Rastafarian symbolism.

Among Jamaica's well-known female artists, some of whom are immigrants finding inspiration in Jamaica, are Judy Macmillan, renowned for the Rembrandt-like use of light in her portraits, and Australian-born Roberta Stoddart, known for her satirical humor. Elizabeth Roberts is a painter of tropical murals. Englishman Graham Davis is perhaps the best known and most influential of foreign-born male artists now resident in Jamaica.

Galleries and Museums

The **National Gallery** and the **Mutual Life Gallery** are both in Kingston. The National Gallery is part of the **Institute of Jamaica**, which was established in 1879 to encourage the island's literature, science and art.

Harmony Hall, built in the mid-1800's and situated east of Ocho Rios, is the premier gallery of Jamaican art and craft on the island's north coast. It has helped to jump-start the careers of several new artists while also showcasing the work of Jamaica's most renowned, including Kapo, David Boxer, Cecil Cooper and Gene Pearson.

The University of the West Indies in Kingston offers regular exhibitions and performances. The University Campus displays some of Jamaica's most famous works of art, including murals of Belgian artist Claude Rahir and a metal bird by the famous Jamaican sculptor Ronald Moody. An interesting collection is housed in the **Sculpture Park at the University of Technology**. Bolivar and Frame Centre are galleries well worth a visit. There are smaller galleries throughout the island, and visitors are welcome at many artist studios.

LITERATURE

The history of Jamaican literature begins with the tradition of storytelling, first by settlers, then by West Africans arriving on the slave ships, and passed down by subsequent generations. Early Jamaican literature tended to follow the conventions of European narrative traditions. Contemporary Jamaican literature emerged during the labor union movements of the 1920's and 1930's, which created strong nationalism. The ghosts of Jamaica's slave history, the impact of British colonialism and the pull of Africa have influenced many Jamaican authors.

Among the best-known Jamaican writers are Claude McKay, Victor Reid, Roger Mais, John Hearne, Anthony Winkler, Olive Senior, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, Colin Channer, Zadie Smith, Kwame Dawes, Erna Brodber, Ferdinand Dennis, Herbert de Lisser, Orlando Patterson, Perry Henzell, Michael Thewell, Victor Headley, Christine Craig, Patricia Powell, Michelle Cliff, Vanessa Spence, Russell Banks, Lorna Goodison and Rachel Manley.

Today, a generation of Jamaican writers and poets is busy creating avant-garde "dub" poetry and performance art monologues in *patois*, a dialect. Oku Onoura, Mutabaruka, Yasus Afari and the late Michael Smith have led the way.

The **National Library of Jamaica**, housed within the Institute of Jamaica, offers one of the region's most extensive collections of West Indian and Jamaican reference materials.

Every year for three days over Memorial Day weekend, Treasure Beach on Jamaica's South Coast hosts the **Calabash International Literary Festival**, directed by founder and Jamaican author, Colin Channer. Since its inception in 2001, this event has grown into a major international literary festival, attracting authors and listeners from around the globe.

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