

The Recovery of St. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Wall Paintings, Port-au-Prince, Haiti: An Assistant's Perspective

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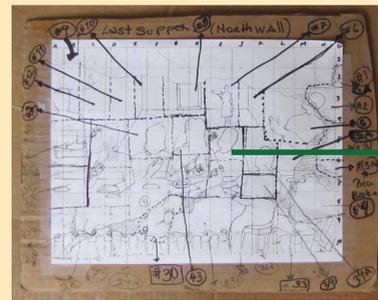
Most of the 14 wall paintings at the St Trinity Episcopal Cathedral were destroyed during the terrible earthquake of January 12, 2010. A year later among broken walls and piles of rubble, there were only three standing murals, "The Last Supper" by Philomène Obin, "Native Procession" by Préfète Duffaut and "Baptism of Christ" by Castera Bazile. The murals, painted on mortar, were severely cracked in many pieces and some fragments were lost. It was almost impossible for me to imagine that anything could be rescued from the devastated site, but our goal was to remove and salvage the remaining fragmented murals under the direction of mural paintings conservator Viviana Dominguez and architectural conservator Rosa Lowinger.

I was selected to work as an assistant for the Project after being interviewed by Stephanie Hornbeck Chief Conservator at the Haiti Cultural Recovery Center, established by the Smithsonian Institution. I became part of a team composed of four Haitian artists and two wood workers under Viviana and Rosa's direction and supervision. They took turns working with us and we had to continue on our own following their instructions when they were not on site. After more than a month of working together, the conservators selected me to supervise the project in their absence. It was a challenging task but I was very happy to do it.



We conducted the following process:

1. We cleaned and consolidated the painted surfaces, which were powdery to the touch.
2. We selected and subdivided areas of the murals to remove, using the deep cracks in the mortar (produced by the earthquake) and the design of the works as guides. Each section was then dimensioned and documented.
3. We photographed each piece before removing it, tagging each fragment with a number that identified its location within the mural on the wall.
4. We protected the surfaces of the painted walls with cotton gauze (tarlatan) which was adhered with acrylic resin, Paraloid B-72, dissolved in acetone.



5. Fragments were separated from each other either by chiseling around the cracks or by cutting using a grinder with a diamond blade.

6. Each piece was secured with wood slats that formed a grid over the surface, conforming to the size and shape of each fragment.

7. In order to separate the fragments from the walls, work began by chiseling the sides to get behind the piece, working with thin and flexible spatulas as well as chisels.

8. The fragments were removed, placed upside down on reinforced cardboard trays and stored on tables to remove the mortar or the stones from the reverse sides, as well as to reinforce the extremely fine fragments by adding mortar.

9. Finally the fragments were transported on wooden trays protected with foam to the Haitian Cultural Rescue Center where they were stored in containers.



This project was part of the **Haitian Cultural Rescue Program**, the Smithsonian Institution's initiative dedicated to the recovery and conservation of works of art and historical documents affected by the earthquake of January 12, 2010.