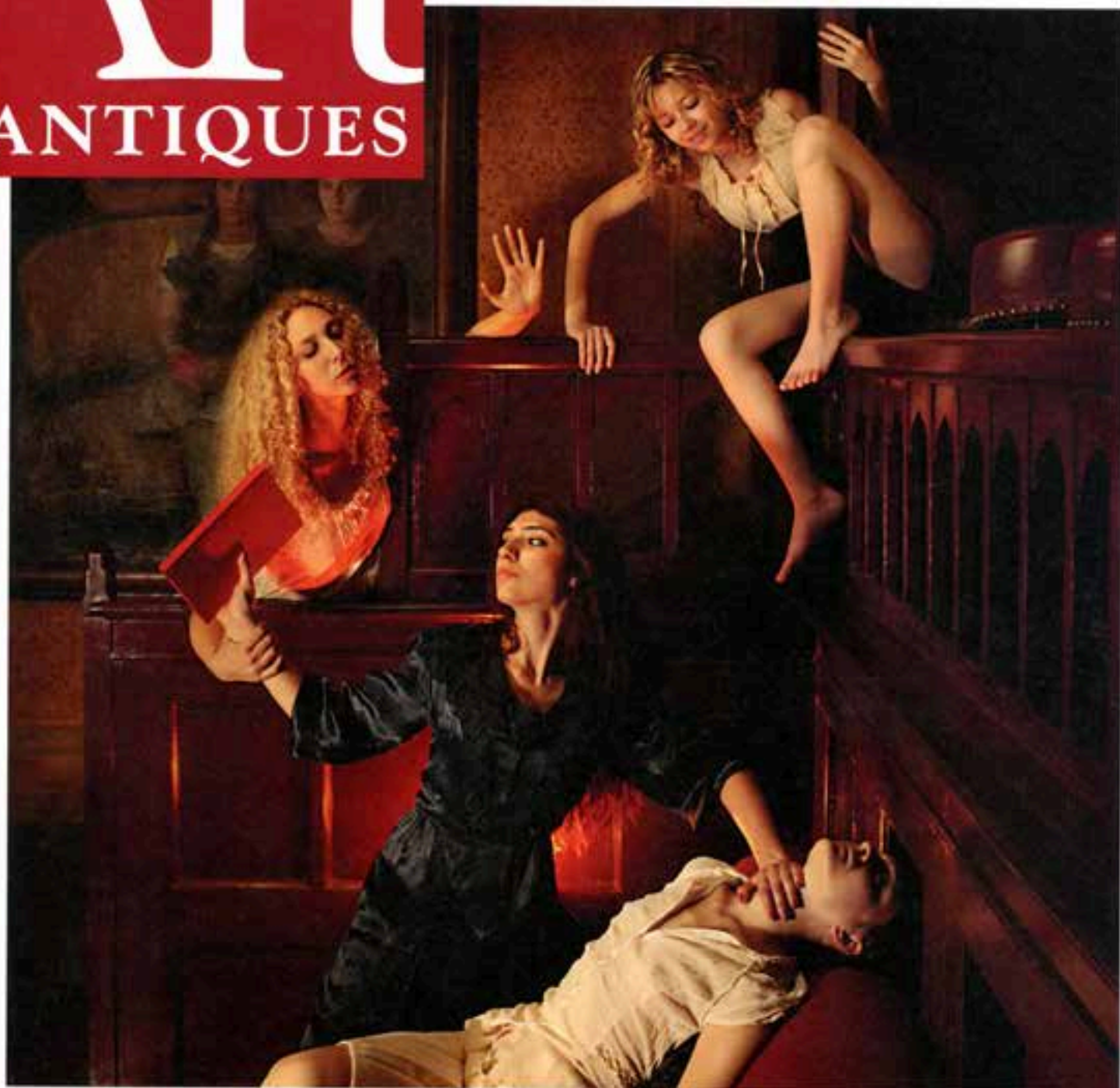


Art & ANTIQUES

DECEMBER/JANUARY 2010-11

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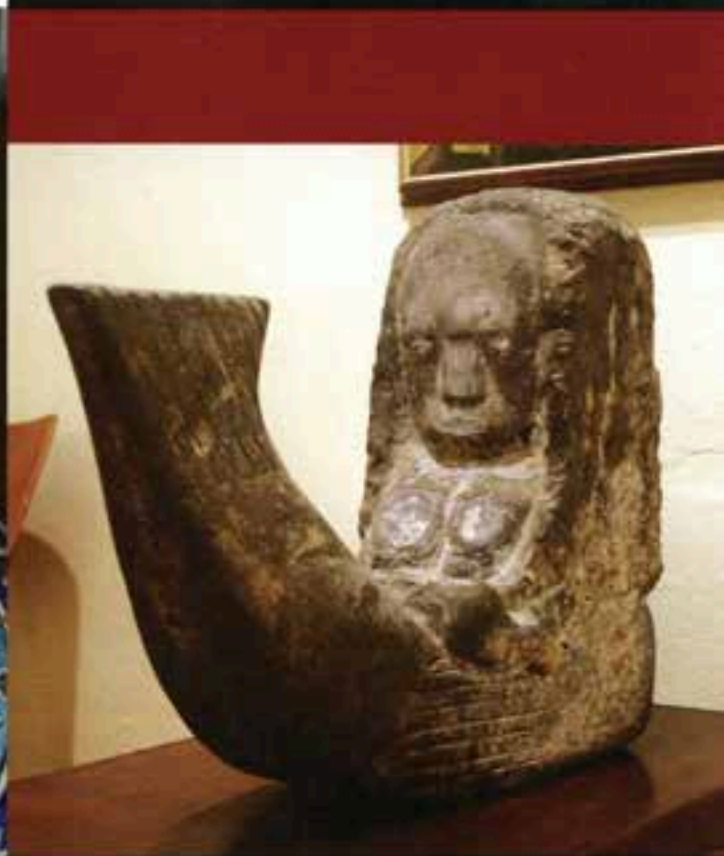
Patron

In Kingston, Jamaica, curator-artist David Boxer lives with an encyclopedic collection of his nation's best art.

By Edward M. Gómez

NOT TOO LONG AGO, A SLOGAN FOR JAMAICA'S tourism industry advised, "It's not just a beach. It's a country." Apparently, some visitors needed to be reminded that the sun-drenched island was, in fact, an independent state with a complex society and a vibrant culture. A British colony until 1962, Jamaica became world-famous for reggae music in the 1970s, but its political, business and cultural leaders wanted their homeland to be known for more than an irresistible, throbbing bass line.

That very goal was given a big boost in 1974 by the opening of the National Gallery of Jamaica, a government-funded repository of the country's visual-arts patrimony. The museum collects, conserves and displays the creations of academically trained and self-taught artists alike. Housed in a nondescript modern building on the waterfront in downtown Kingston, a district of low-rise blocks whose street plan dates



back to colonial times, the National Gallery has benefited almost since its inception from the contributions of David Boxer, an art historian, collector and artist in his own right who served as the museum's first full-time director and curator starting in 1975. Today he serves as director emeritus and chief curator. A Kingston native, Boxer earned an undergraduate degree in art history from Cornell and master's and doctorate degrees in the same field from Johns Hopkins.

After finishing his studies in the U.S., Boxer returned to Jamaica. It was Edna Manley, a well-known education-and-culture activist and modernist sculptor, who had recommended that the young art expert come back to take over the helm of the recently established National Gallery. The daughter of an English cleric and his Jamaican wife, Edna Manley was the wife

of Norman Manley, the political leader who had steered Jamaica toward independence. She had become a close friend of Boxer's when he made a documentary film about her sculpture in 1972. The two shared interests in music, Jamaican culture and art. Later, Boxer wrote a monograph about her work, which was published in 1990. "She was perhaps the most important cultural figure in the three decades leading up to Independence," Boxer observes, "and continued to play a key role as a cultural activist in post-Independence Jamaica."

In his own work as a painter, Boxer has assimilated such influences as surrealism, post-Cubist gestural abstraction and a vigorous *tachiste* mode of handling paint. His work shows some of the anxiety that pulses through the work of Francis Bacon; the romanticism of Joseph Cornell; and an interest in myth, archaeology

and the spiritual, especially in relation to subjects like slavery and Jamaica's colonial past. Boxer was one of the first Jamaican artists to create mixed-media installations, bringing together old photographs, his own paintings and found objects in art environments that evoked a poetic, psychologically charged sense of the past. As an avid collector of paintings, drawings and sculptures made by his countrymen, Boxer is someone whose sensibility has been deeply influenced by his consideration of what it means to be a Jamaican—the heir and representative, that is, of a tiny country with a multi-layered and multicultural but sometimes unsettling history.

With such a sensitivity in mind, Boxer's installation of the National Gallery's permanent collection highlights ways in which Jamaican modern artists—some of whom studied in Britain or the U.S.—



Previous spread, clockwise from top: drawings by a Jamaican artist known as "George," circa 1990s; Mermaid, carved alabaster, 1935, by John "Doc" Williamson; a box of tools that belonged to the self-taught Jamaican artists David Miller, Sr. (1872-1969) and his son, David Miller, Jr. (1903-78).

This page: The curator, art historian and artist David Boxer in one of the sitting rooms of his home in Kingston.



used modernist styles to depict such local subject matter as the landscape, Independence-era national heroes and urban or rural scenes. In part, they used art to both reflect and help shape a sense of an emerging country's national identity. Boxer has also supported the work of his country's contemporary art-makers and, in particular, of its distinctive outsider or self-taught artists, who are known locally as the "Jamaican Intuitives."

This term, which replaced the ill-fitting labels "naïves" or "primitives," came from "The Intuitive Eye," Boxer's title for the first of a series of influential exhibitions of this kind of art, which he organized for the National Gallery in 1979. Two more came later, in 1987 and 2006. All three examined in depth the work of these legendary artists—many of whom have died in recent years—including Mallica Reynolds (who was known as

Clockwise from top left: Various works by Albert Hule; *Sphinx*, a cast-stone sculpture, circa 1980, by Fitz Harrack; *Untitled neo-Cubist study* by Carl Abrahams; *Young Male*, oil on canvas, 1980, by Colin Garland; on the bookcase: *Forerunner*, 1941, by Edna Manley.

"Kapo"), Leonard Daley, Everaldo Brown ("Brother Brown") and Ras Dizzy (whose real name was Birth Livingstone).

"Since the late 1930s, when commentators began to articulate ideas about a 'Jamaican School,' the achievements of self-taught artists working outside the parameters of academic art were usually only footnoted," Boxer says. Later, his exhibitions "brought these artists to the fore" in discussions of Jamaican art. Their work is not about trendy art theories or styles, he explains. Instead, as he puts it, these autodidacts' main concern is with the content of their work, which addresses "the realities and surrealities of their daily and spiritual lives" and those of their communities. Boxer says: "Theirs is 'not art for art's sake,' but rather, as someone once described African art, 'art for life's sake.'"

Boxer began collecting the Intuitives' work in 1975. Today, he owns one of the most comprehensive collections of Jamaican art in the world. Much of it is on display in his large house in Kingston, where he has lived for many years. Surrounded by trees and enclosing a patio and other cozy, open-air spaces, it is the kind of languid-looking Caribbean pile that would not be out of a place in a novel by Graham Greene. "The original part was built in the 1920s, using materials, like the floor tiles, which were imported from Cuba," Boxer explains.

Each room of the house offers revelations and treasures, from some of Boxer's own early paintings and a group of wooden carvings by the Jamaican Intuitive William "Woody" Joseph in the ground-floor salon to *Forerunner* (1941), a bust of a young man carved from yucca wood by Edna Manley in the curator-artist's high-ceilinged study upstairs. Also on display in that room are a modern-style portrait of Boxer in oil on hardboard by Colin Garland and, on an easel, *Young Male* (1980), an oil-on-canvas by the same artist, who was born in Australia and made Jamaica

his home for much of his life. Garland, who brought a Surrealist or magic-realist mood to many of his subjects, was inspired by Haitian and Jamaican self-taught artists, as well as by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the 16th-century Italian painter who created fantastical portraits of heads made up of fruits and vegetables.

Just off Boxer's study, the wall of a side hall is filled with small works by various Jamaican artists, and a separate sitting room nearby houses his collection of African statuettes; carvings by the Intuitives;

artifacts from era of the Taino, a pre-Columbian people of the Caribbean; and assorted antiques, including a wooden-toy police constable with whirling arms.

Among his holdings of works by the Intuitives, Boxer owns several ballpoint-pen drawings on paper by Ras Dizzy, an itinerant poet who had no fixed address but instead showed up regularly at the homes of friends and admirers. They took the wandering artist in, offered him meals and listened to his tall tales of world travel. In Ras Dizzy's well-known blurring of fan-



From top: In Boxer's study, "Portrait of David Boxer," circa 1980, by Colin Garland, shares space with *Vier Madonna*, 1967, by David Boxer, and African sculptures.

tasy and reality, for example, he claimed to have gone head to head in the boxing ring with Muhammad Ali and to have ridden the range with John Wayne and his movie-cowboy cohorts. Ras Dizzy's Pop-flavored paintings in poster paint on illustration board depict race horses, palm trees, prize fighters, cowboys and fortune tellers. They have become increasingly rare—and coveted—since his death in 2008.

Boxer also owns enigmatic, mixed-media-on-plywood paintings from the early 1940s by John Dunkley, a Jamaican artist whose body of work, historically speaking, holds one of the earlier places in the Intuitives' canon. Dunkley's visionary works seem to recognize the presence of immortal spirits of rivers, forests and stones. Boxer says, "No Jamaican works move me as much as these dark canvases, with their quiet, brooding poetry from which emanate the stirrings of a sensitive but trou-



From top: View of the front exterior of Boxer's house in Kingston; in one of the sitting rooms, an untitled, enamel-on-plywood painting, circa 1975, by the self-taught Jamaican artist Albert Artwell.





From top: *Landscape with Huts*, oil on cardboard, 1980, by Mallica Reynolds; sculptures on display in a sitting room in David Boxer's home. In the background, various works by William "Woody" Joseph. In the foreground, *Prophet*, a lighter-colored, carved-wood sculpture, 1983, by Lester Hollett.



bled soul." In his art, the collector notes, Dunkley "presents a very personal dream world—slightly alien, otherworldly, but still intensely Jamaican."

Boxer's collection also features semi-abstract pictures done in house paint on board by Leonard Daley, an artist who lived in a single-room dwelling in the hills outside Kingston that was covered with his own hand-painted designs. Daley died four years ago. With their churning compositions filled with primordial-seeming birds, snakes, organic shapes and abstract forms, Daley's paintings bring to mind the Surrealist drawings and canvases of American modernists of the late 1930s and early 1940s that later gave way to the various styles of full-blown Abstract Expressionism. "We have to go back to Bosch and Brueghel to find an artist capable of conjuring up hybrid creatures of such imagination," Boxer enthuses, noting that Daley's compositions are marked by some "complex, intuitive spatial dislocations."

Despite limited resources in a belt-tightening era, the National Gallery of Jamaica still produces high-quality exhibitions. Last summer, Boxer oversaw a curatorial team that assembled "Young Talent V," a survey of work by up-and-coming Jamaican contemporary artists. Lately, he has been preparing a book about his collection of Jamaican photography from the 1845–1920 period, in collaboration with the British art writer Edward Lucie-Smith. Some 400 images have been selected for the book; they capture the look and atmosphere of Boxer's homeland during a time when aspects of the old, colonial-era infrastructure were giving way to modern industry, and when many Jamaicans' social customs and worldview had not yet been dramatically affected by influences emanating from the U.S., after their island's separation from Britain. A follow-up volume focusing on Boxer's collection of 20th-century Jamaican photography is being planned.

As the Jamaican newspaper columnist Norman Rae noted a few years ago, Boxer has "emerged from under the mantle of Edna Manley's encouragement...to rival and perhaps surpass [her] as the most influential figure in the development of the Jamaican art scene." The biggest "monument" to Boxer's achievements, Rae wrote, is the National Gallery of Jamaica itself, whose survival has often appeared precarious but whose mission has been vital to the cultural life of the country.

For Boxer, whose tastes and scholarly interests are wide-ranging, commitment to the visual arts unquestionably means recognizing both trained and untrained artists. "The greatest of the Intuitives have produced works that are uniquely theirs," he says. "For myself and other aficionados, they are among the finest artworks produced anywhere in the 20th century, and they have been for me life-enhancing antidotes to the acres of vacuous contemporary works that too often parade as 'high art' in the art centers of the West. I love this art." In the home of what is, in effect, a veteran curator's private museum, those works have found a passionate and caring custodian. **BJ**



From top: *The Angels are Weeping*, oil on canvas, 1977, by Carl Abrahams; *Horizontal Form*, wood sculpture, 1976, by Winston Patrick.

