

KARL CRAIG

RETENTIONS OF OUR PAST PRESENT POSSIBILITIES FOR OUR FUTURE

82

In presenting this paper, I wish to state that as a visual and tactile oriented person I shall be relying heavily on those two areas and not as much on the written word. As one whose main discipline lies in the plastic arts and with great empathy to the performing arts, I am best able to express myself in this way. I make no apologies for this approach as it is the way of our ancestors!

It is true to say that from earliest times man has made use of the things that he has had around him. Usually he made good use of these materials and it is out of this area of one's culture, along with the other expressive forms, that what we today call "the Arts" has grown.

The general term "art forms" can be broken down into various areas to more readily identify them as specific forms of expression. This Centre in which we are now sitting —The Cultural training Centre— houses four schools, each an area of many disciplines within one of the headings - Music - Dance - Drama - Art. Art here refers to the Plastic Arts and the three other areas, the Performing Arts. I shall be dealing here with the Plastic Arts and this covers the following forms: Sculpture, Textiles, Painting, Graphics, Photography, Ceramics and Jewellery. There are still further distinctions; for example, in textiles there is weaving, printing, dyeing, embroidery, applique, etc., each of these having within the general headings many forms and varieties of

techniques. In printing, for instance, there is screen printing, stencil printing, block printing, resist printing, direct printing, roller printing - to name but a few. Each area can be further broken down into many different sections, but we are here going to concentrate on the design aspects of these forms.

From the beginning, man has recorded the things around him - thus Cave Man drew, painted, scratched and carved images that were of great importance to his daily life. He discovered dyes and pigments and fibres, and made tools with which to use these. From leaves and fibres he developed the various areas of weaving. To this day we look to our surroundings for inspiration. Of course, as time has passed, we have improved on the quality of these tools. Decorative finishes ranged from very simple representations of indigenous flora and fauna to highly intricate symbolic representations of such universal forms as the sun, the moon, birth and death.

I still feel, however, that we are not yet drawing on the full wealth of inspiration open to us in the Caribbean. We live surrounded by the original Garden of Eden - amidst flora unsurpassed anywhere in the world. We are made up of many: my country's motto, "Out of Many One People" puts it in a nut shell - and I would like to believe a pimento (or allspice) nut shell because this is strong and represents a combination of flavours. We, too, are a melding, with many retentions still visible from our Arawak and Carib people and those that come later - the Europeans, Africans, Indians and Chinese — who also brought the wealth of their cultures, religions and customs. These make us what we are today — yet are we doing our heritage true justice?

83

Let us go right back to the beginning — the Arawak and Carib Indians. In some islands — Dominica, for example — they are fortunate and privileged to have living Caribs, and it is our duty to see to it that they never die and their customs and crafts remain intact and are not swamped and lost by outside influences. Their basket ware is truly beautiful and we should see to it that the fibre used for these is planted and replenished. I don't know if things have changed but in 1981 they had to go far into the hills to find the raw material as the plants that used to be growing on their reserves were all gone. Their methods of dyeing the fibre, the shapes and patterns that they weave, all must be preserved.

I have brought a few samples to share with you. Reuben King, a young potter of that Island whom I had the great pleasure

of meeting in 1981, and who attended the first course held by the O.A.S. for the crafts people of the Caribbean has, as a result of that course, started to combine the basket weaving with his ceramic utensils. His craft thus exhibits its valuable cultural retentions while being of practical use. The person buying his craft thus has a part of something very specially Caribbean and very specifically Dominican.

I have tried during my time at the Jamaica School of Art and at Things Jamaican to introduce to our students and craftspeople the urgent need to examine the wealth that surrounds us, not to be so keen to look and copy from what is being done in the so-called First World but to look in our own garden and use what is there. In the library of the Art School today I am proud to say there are many good studies by the students who have done just this - but yet in a commercial sense we still have a long way to go. Don't misunderstand me - I am not saying that there does not exist in our society master craftspeople who still practice the crafts of their forefathers. Good examples of this creative retention are the pots of "Ma Lou" as she is usually lovingly referred to. In looking at her pots one can see the retention of her origin in West Africa. A past student of the Art School did a delightful study on MaLou, which should be published.

84

Let us for a moment thank the historians and anthropologists for helping us maintain an awareness of our cultural past. Mr. Roderick Ebanks has for some time been involved with in-depth research on Ma Lou and I look forward to its being published as I know it will be good. I would also like to credit those doing research on the Amerindians of the Caribbean and sharing their information: such people as Dr. Jim Lee, Desmond Nicholson, Lennox Honeychurch, Alma Norman, Dennis Williams, and Douglas Hall. Too often people come, take, but do not leave or share. If I had my way a copy of every bit of research carried out in our islands would have to be left in the reference library of that country, so that the knowledge could be passed on to our people and not like, say, Jamaica's best Arawak finds, taken from our shores and housed across the seas in museum that most Jamaicans never visit. This is the kind of information that is for great value to our young designers, artists and craftspeople. There is so much to inspire, stimulate and motivate a creative soul into producing works with a root retention of the people that were the first inhabitants of our Islands. Indeed, we

at this very conference are privileged in having recently a First Class Honours Textile student from the Jamaica School of Art, Ms. Gloria Barzey of Montserrat who has used just such subject matter to inspire her creations as well as producing an excellent study on what can be gained from the past for the present. It gave me great pleasure to have been one of her recent examiners for she, like some others that have graduated from the Art School, gives one a sense of great satisfaction in having been associated with the School and the Cultural Training Centre.

Her work, for example, not only helps in the production of derivative design but continues to build an awareness of what we are and where we are coming from. This, indeed, is history in the making - our heritage being reborn and carried forward. This is nation building - this is Caribbean Identity. So also are the many beautiful ceramic works of, say, Ma Lou or our Master Potter of Jamaica, Cecil Baugh, with his yabbas, Spanish jars and Monkey jar retentions, an echo of Africa and Spain. True, some of our ancestors arrived in a more privileged way than others but all contributed - some the master, some the slaves - some not allowed to practise the skills of their lands freely but forced to labour in another way - but the African soul is strong and the retentions have withstood the "Inner Passage". Creation from surroundings is a human condition and in the Caribbean it is enriched with multi retentions. The yabba, the intricate designs of the fretwork on our houses and dresses, the weaves, patterns and shapes of our baskets, the originality of our donkey baskets in Jamaica or the cassave sieve of Guyana and the carvings in wood, are prime examples of this. Our incredible sense of colour, our rhythms and use of movement, are very live today. Our music has at this moment captured the world - Bob Marley and Rasta Reggae are words and sounds as commonly heard in Japan as they are in Jamaica and indeed I recently saw photographs of a shop in Japan that is wholly and solely devoted to the Rasta Reggae Cult. The Rasta influence - the link with Ethiopia — can be found in Munich, Germany, or Santa Fe in the heart of desert lands, forth in true Jamaican style - like a pin I was drawn to the magnet and met at the source of this sound an American painter who showed me around Santa Fe and its beautiful and, to me, unusual countryside. Two years ago in La Paz, Bolivia, this time from a record shop at a time of political unrest, again Bob's "No, Woman, No Cry" gave me a sense of "Peace and Love" and made me feel not just proud to be a Jamaican but so aware of the strength of our musical heritage. The pride that one feels from a Gene Pearson, so clearly influenced from African sources, a

Zaccheus Powell walking stick, a calabash carved cup. The Work of Stephanie Correia of Guyana and of her three sons which we will be privileged to see later, is illustrative of such retention. The Amerindian influence in her work and, in the case of at least one of her sons, with a touch of Africa, combines to produce unique and beautiful fusion, the melding of two cultures in a new world, the creation of a new style. These are the retentions of which I speak that become the soul of a people. I could go on and on, but know that so many of us in the plastic arts prefer to look and "see" of what I speak.

One more reminder — The Chinese, the East Indian, the Europeans all have come and all have left a bit of their heritage. Our "Port Royal Line" for instance, grew out of the English and Spanish pieces brought up from the depths of the sea around Port Royal. To the craftsmen and the designers of today, our heritage speaks. Our Eden, its opulence of design and *pote pourri* of people presents an ever flowing spring of creative possibilities, wealth and information to inspire and motivate us into a continuous identity all our own. Remember, we have our Zemis and Savacou to guide and protect us and to lead us to look and truly see the signs, symbols, shapes and forms that abound around us to stimulate our awakening into new realms of design consciousness and technical skills in our craftsmanship. Retentions of our past present possibilities for our future.

86

Government of Jamaica OAS Seminar on Craft Development for
the English Speaking Caribbean
July 9-13, 1984; Kingston, Jamaica. ○